

Friday Times

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NEW YORK: Medical workers take in patients outside a special coronavirus area at Maimonides Medical Center as the U.S. surpasses 100,000 fatalities from COVID-19 . — AFP

US passes dire milestone of 100,000 COVID-19 deaths

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Local

Closed schools



Local Spotlight

By Muna Al-Fuzai

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There's a huge debate over when kids should go back to schools, not only in Kuwait, but worldwide. Several news reports have said reopening has begun in numerous countries around the world, with many countries lifting their lockdowns. But various measures have been imposed, including wearing facemasks, social distancing and school timings. These basic steps are meant to keep students safe and reduce the transmission of the virus.

For example, Denmark eased its coronavirus lockdown in mid-April by reopening schools and daycare centers. Teaching staff are under instructions to maintain social distancing between children. Some teachers took pupils outside and wrote with chalk on the playground instead of a blackboard. I think this is a good way to continue the process of education and learning in a balanced and sustainable manner.

In Switzerland, parents are dropping their kids off at a distance and classrooms are half full to reduce crowding, with desks spaced two metres apart. Also, schools in Australia's biggest state, New South Wales, allow students to attend once a week on a staggered basis. In Shanghai, students and staff are required to enter the school building through a thermal scanner and the walls are papered with posters on measures to tackle the coronavirus.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced that British primary schools will partially reopen as of June 1. Johnson said in a press conference that the return to places of study will be confined in the first stage to students between the ages of four and six and between 10 and 11 years.

I am opposed to stopping or preventing kids from learning under any circumstances, especially as this is not a case of war and weapons but illness that can be stopped by keeping a distance and your hands clean all the time. How difficult is that?!

In Kuwait, schools are still closed. The Cabinet has suspended studies until August due to the implications of the coronavirus. The new school year should start on Dec 1. I think this date seems logical, even though some people have demanded the cancellation of the entire school year until the virus ends around the world. I don't think this is sensible for several reasons, as no one can determine when this virus will end globally. I believe win-win solutions are always possible to address the situation.

For example, the school week can be reduced to only two days a week, with limited numbers of pupils and spaced hours. The goal is to keep students in contact with their schools and continue the learning process. Leaving things unresolved is not correct because electronic games cannot replace school.

PHOTO OF THE DAY



KUWAIT: A man and a child play on swings at a park in Kuwait during the two-hour outdoor exercise period on Tuesday. — Photo by Fouad Al-Shaikh

Unseen enemy, known defenses



IN MY VIEW

By Abdellatif Sharaa

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What a paradox – ever since the coronavirus took prominence on the news and all types of media, people of all backgrounds started to talk about what the virus is and how to avoid it, and all the so-called experts agreed on certain measures to keep us from being infected. Some of the measures included a term that was not used much before – social distancing, and they started asking people to stay a meter apart, then the distance kept increasing until it reached two meters at the moment.

Now plans are for a gradual return to government business in phases, but I am sure that when people are allowed to go to government departments to process their papers, there will be huge numbers standing at counters. As an example, residency departments will be having unbelievable numbers, because not all transactions can be processed online.

The awqaf and Islamic affairs ministry said it will reopen mosques for worshippers and mentioned a few guidelines, such as keeping copies of the Holy Quran out

of reach. An arrangement was made for the imam regarding where he will stand and markings were made behind him indicating where each person should stand maintaining the two-meter distance, besides having to wear masks, using sanitizers, etc.

Now, it is our turn to act and behave correctly as required to keep the virus away from us and others. I say this because scenes of queues at co-ops, cooking gas outlets, bakeries and other places are not promising, so we are still in need of people of authority to be around to organize the lines and make people comply with instructions. We have to bear in mind that a large number of the current cases of coronavirus are caused by contact between people. So please put this type of behavior aside and be smart enough and well aware of what to do for each person's wellbeing and to safeguard everybody's health.

Final word: "Trust yourself. You've survived a lot, and you'll survive whatever is coming." – Robert Tew

What to do if you feel sick

Self isolation for mild symptoms, medical attention for severe symptoms

By Faten Omar

What should you do if you feel sick, have symptoms and suspect you may be infected with the coronavirus?

First, call health ministry hotline at #151 and explain your symptoms. You will be asked several questions about your symptoms, age, and if you have been in contact with a sick person. Citizens and residents must provide their civil ID numbers to be followed up.

You will be asked to isolate yourself at home if the symptoms are mild. You should keep track of your symptoms. Wear a mask any time you are interacting with people, wash hands frequently and follow your doctor's prescribed treatment.

If you have severe symptoms or are elderly, you will be asked to visit the nearest clinic for an examination and possible COVID-19 test.

People with mild symptoms such as fever, cough and tiredness will be asked to stay

home and self-isolate as with regular flu. Only people with severe symptoms such as trouble breathing, fever of 39 C or higher, loss of the sense of taste or smell, headache or dizziness, persistent pain or pressure in the chest, inability to wake up or stay awake, or bluish lips or face should seek medical help immediately.

Patients must download the Shlonik app to keep the medical team updated over their health condition.

Earlier, Assistant Undersecretary for

Technical Affairs at the Ministry of Health Dr Abdul-Rahman Al-Mutairi said in a statement that the results of previous tests demonstrated that the largest percentage of patients showed minor symptoms of the disease, which caused the health system to adapt to new mechanisms and work protocols to give priority to clinical cases. Mutairi affirmed that the ministry has put in place strategies to maintain community health, and this protocol has helped ease some pressure on the health system.

Stay safe. Stay home. Stay informed

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KUWAITI ACTORS PERFORM ONLINE THEATRE FOR EID AUDIENCES

By Nawara Fattahova

The total curfew and home quarantine have helped encourage the development of many new, creative ideas. Since we all ended up spending Eid at home, a group of actors came up with the concept of staging an online play, *Al System Wagif* (The System is Down), produced by Richter Creative Office.

"After about six weeks of using the Zoom application for some online activities, we gained the knowhow of this application and we became experienced. Eid al-Fitr was approaching, and we noticed that there were no entertainment activities available for Eid. So I contacted popular director and actor Mohammed Al-Hmeli and asked the playwright to come up with something, and the idea of *Al System Wagif* came to life," Bader Al-Essa, one of the actors in the play, told Kuwait Times.

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The storyline for the online play was inspired by the common refrain by public sector employees: 'The system is down' – an all too common facet of ageing bureaucracies. "Most people in Kuwait have faced this situation when they have gone to process their paperwork at any ministry. Lazy employees always say the system is down in order not to work, even if it isn't true," Essa explained.

In this show, the main characters hold an official press conference through Zoom, but the system freezes, which forces them to take their discussion directly to the public. The main characters are public officer Bu Najeeb, a businessman who was negatively affected by the coronavirus, a co-op volunteer who is always nervous, a doctor, and a

Local



Kuwaiti girl who doesn't respect expats and is criticized for that.

The online play ran during the three days of Eid - one show daily with an hour of live music and entertainment by

a DJ, split into two 30-minute segments. Audience numbers were limited due to the use of the Zoom app, so they stopped selling tickets after reaching this number. "But we noticed the show was missing interaction with the audience, so on the third day we added this function through poll questions and live chat, which was very nice and funny," said Essa. "We received very positive feedback and reactions beyond our expectation, and our hashtag became a trend on Twitter," he added.

The audience was not only from Kuwait, as many people had booked from other GCC states, who enjoyed watching the play from their homes in their countries. "So we may repeat this experience in the future after the end of the curfew, but we must improve it more with better decor, outfits, sound effects and so on, as now we only had limited resources due to this situation and short time of preparation," concluded Essa.

Hmeli, the writer and director of the show, said he is very satisfied with this new experience. "In fact it was hard work and was no easier than regular theatre plays performance-wise, in training and preparing, time constraints, outfits and

so on. Our only obstacle was that we didn't hear and see the audience reaction. So we were imagining and expecting that the audience was laughing. We worked based on a mix of theatre and soap opera, as in soap operas we shoot first and then see the reaction of people," he explained.



Firemen train doctors at quarantine site

By Hanan Al-Saadoun

KUWAIT: Kuwait Fire Service Directorate (KFSD) personnel trained doctors at the Ministry of Public Works' quarantine site on how to use fire extinguishers in case of emergency.



Local

Woman suffers burns in Doha home blaze

By Hanan Al-Saadoun

KUWAIT: A woman sustained burns after an explosion that took place in a Doha home caused by a butane gas leak, Kuwait Fire Service Directorate (KFSD) said. The woman was taken to hospital as firemen evacuated the building and battled the blaze. Investigations are ongoing.



Firemen remove metal piece from girl's finger

By Hanan Al-Saadoun

KUWAIT: Salmiya firemen removed a metal piece that got stuck around a girl's finger, after her parents made an emergency call when their attempts to free her finger failed. Firemen used special equipment to cut the metal piece out without harming the child's hand.



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Local

Kuwait Amir's envoy delivers letter addressed to Saudi King

Amir receives phone call from Iraqi Sadrist Movement Chief



KUWAIT: Kuwait's Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser A-Mohammed Al-Sabah meets with Saudi minister of state His Royal Highness Prince Turki Bin Mohammad Bin Fahad Al-Saud. — KUNA



Kuwait's Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser A-Mohammed Al-Sabah hands over a letter from His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah to Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud.

KUWAIT: Envoy of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser A-Mohammed Al-Sabah, on Wednesday, delivered a written message from His Highness the Amir to Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud, related to means of bolstering further the solid brotherly relations between the two countries. The message, content of which also addressed issues of joint concern, was handed over by Sheikh Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad during a meeting with His Royal Highness Prince Turki Bin Mohammad Bin Fahad Al-Saud, the Minister of State and cabinet member, and Prince

Faisal Bin Farhan Al-Saud, the kingdom's foreign minister. Other senior Saudi officials also attended the meeting. Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser delivered the letter during an official visit he paid to Riyadh Wednesday. The meeting between Sheikh Dr Ahmad and the Saudi officials was also attended by the State of Kuwait Ambassador to the kingdom, Sheikh Ali Khaled Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, Ambassador Najji Haji Al-Muzain, the assistant foreign minister for GCC affairs and advisor Ahmad Abdulrahman Al-Shuraim, the deputy foreign minister for the foreign minister bureau affairs.

In other news, His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-

Jaber Al-Sabah received a phone call on Wednesday from Sayyed Moqtada Al-Sadr, Chief of Al-Sadrist Movement in the brotherly Republic of Iraq. Sayyed Al-Sadr has expressed heartfelt congratulations on Eid Al-Fitr, hoping the happy occasion may recur with abundant blessings and grace for the two countries and peoples, as well as for Arab and Muslim nations. He also wished His Highness the Amir full health. His Highness the Amir expressed gratitude to Sayyed Al-Sadr for the gracious gesture that depicted depth of bilateral relations between the two brotherly countries, also wishing him all wellness, as well as prosperity and promotion for the brotherly Republic of Iraq. — KUNA

Kuwait calls for protection of civilians in armed conflicts

KUWAIT: Kuwait called on importance of protecting civilians in armed conflicts and promote compliance with international law. This came by Ambassador Mansour Al-Otaibi, Kuwait's permanent representative to the UN, in a written speech during an open virtual session of the Security Council Wednesday about protection of civilians in armed conflicts. Otaibi supported concrete measures tabled by member countries and relevant parties aimed at protection of civilians, particularly amidst spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19).

"The meeting is held amidst unprecedented circumstances as the UN and the international community continue their global battle against the coronavirus pandemic, which poses a great threat to our wellbeing," he said. The virus, he added, threatened security and safety of civilians in armed conflicts which increased importance of their protection more than ever.

Kuwait, said Otaibi, has been supporting UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres' call for a ceasefire of armed conflicts around the world, in order to focus on the fight against the pandemic.

Kuwait participated in the session for the first time since its non-permanent 2018-19 UNSC membership ended last December, during which it so-drafted resolution 2417 regarding conflicts and hunger.

Kuwait, he added, also submitted resolution 2474 regarding missing people in armed conflicts. The resolution, he noted, was based on a painful experience many Kuwaiti people still suffered from. He was referring to many Kuwaiti citizens still missing since the 1990-91 Iraqi invasion and occupation of Kuwait. Resolution 2474 is the first UNSC document specifically dealing with missing people in armed conflicts, calling for prosecuting people responsible for missing people and making sure international law and international humanitarian law were implemented, he said.

UN Secretary General's report about civilians' protection, said Otaibi, was worrisome because there were large numbers of civilians killed and injured worldwide, in addition to rising number of displaced persons. Kuwait calls for compliance with international law during armed conflicts, he said. He added delivery of humanitarian aid was mainly hampered by armed conflicts and violence, urging UNSC member countries to convince warring parties to allow delivery of assistance for civilians.

The UNSC, said Otaibi, should not veto draft resolutions related to delivery of relief supplies for people trapped within armed conflicts. It is important "we unite our collective efforts and rally the political will to improve protection of civilians amidst endless conflicts around the world, and we reaffirm the State of Kuwait's readiness to support these efforts," he said. — KUNA

National Guard opens new quarantine facility



KUWAIT: Undersecretary of the Kuwaiti National Guard Lieut. Gen. Hashem Al-Refaei yesterday opened a new quarantine center for the body's personnel infected with novel coronavirus (COVID-19). The fresh facility is part of the National Guard's efforts to back the efforts of health authorities and to ease out pressure on hospitals and quarantine buildings, he told reporters. The general commended the agency's personnel for having completed and equipped the new facility in line with relevant health criteria in a record time. — KUNA



Local

Employees to return to work gradually from Sunday

MPs file law to cut expats by some two million



KUWAIT: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah speaks during a government-parliament meeting to discuss Kuwait's plans to restore normal life gradually. — KUNA photos



His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah and National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem arrive to attend the meeting.

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: The government explained to lawmakers its guidelines of easing the total lockdown in the country from Sunday including the gradual return of employees to offices while abiding by strict health measures.

Speaking on Wednesday, National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem said the government has decided to move to partial curfew from Sunday but its duration was to be determined by the council of ministers yesterday.

He said that Kuwait was at the fifth phase when authorities decided to impose the total lockdown on May 9 but now we have reached the third and fourth phases which require easing restrictions.

MPs said the health ministry insisted that employees should observe social distancing of at least two meters with each employee given at least 10 square meters of space. Employees must take all necessary precautions while dealing with the

public and must wear face masks at all times. In the beginning, employees who are below 50 years old and who are healthy can return to work while keeping with distancing. Group eating at offices is totally banned.

The government told lawmakers that it will allow the gradual reopening of commercial activities while applying strict measures, which will be reviewed on the basis of health developments. The health ministry said in a presentation that the main coronavirus centers included Mirgab, Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh, Bnaid Al-Gar, Farwaniya, Mahboulah and Khaithan.

The ministry also said that one of the main reasons for the spread of the disease is overcrowding of laborers in some residential areas and that ministry workers found that in some cases 16 or 20 workers living in the same room which means observing social distancing is impossible.

The ministry also said that the return to normal life depends on the compliance of people with

health guidelines. A number of MPs however demanded that the government should scrap the school year and others insisted that the assembly should resume holding regular sessions to decide on key issues.

Quota system

In the meantime, a number of lawmakers Wednesday filed a draft law calling to adopt a quota system for various expatriate communities in the country in a bid to reduce the number of foreigners and rebalance the demographic structure.

The draft law stipulates a certain percentage for the main communities in the country depending on its current size as follows (the proposed percentage is from the Kuwaiti population of 1.4 million at present): Indians 15 percent, Filipinos, Sri Lankans and Egyptians 10 percent each, Bangladeshis, Nepalese, Pakistanis and Vietnamese 5 percent each and the rest of communi-

ties a maximum of three percent each.

This would mean that the number of all expatriates will be almost equal to citizens or 1.4 million, meaning a reduction of almost two million expats from their current number of 3.4 million.

It also means that the main reduction will be from the key communities mainly Indians who must be cut by around 800,000 to make them within the allotted quota of 210,000. Egyptians also would have to be reduced by at least 550,000 to make them around 140,000 which is their quota. There will be massive reductions from the Filipinos, Sri Lankans, Bangladeshis and others.

The implementation of the proposed legislation on the ground appears to be impossible because there are more than 250,000 Indians working as domestic helpers which is already above their proposed quota. The bill proposes penalties of 10 years in jail and a fine of up to KD. 100,000 for any public employee who violates the law.

Rules set for gradual work resumption

KUWAIT: Kuwait Civil Service Commission on Wednesday published guidelines for public sector personnel and executives on how to resume work gradually for paving the way toward full resumption of duties "in the coming period." The four-chapter guidelines booklet sets objectives of policies, measures and rules for phased resumption of work, in addition to mechanisms for gradual work hours, as well as how to perform and act in various sectors on part of personnel and service applicants. It also mentions public safety requirements, terms, preventive and precautionary measures that must be adhered to by personnel and people seeking services in various departments and sectors.

Moreover, it touches on some professional and financial rules, in light of prospected circumstances for facing the novel coronavirus

(COVID-19), along with instructions to abide by precautionary measures set by relevant health authorities. The Civil Service Commission noted in the brochure necessity to ensure uninterrupted work in the public sector and necessity of working out a mechanism that ensures phased resumption of work that conforms with the current crisis and surrounding circumstances. There is a need, it notes in part, for providing multiple work options and shifts' systems, along with ensuring public safety, maintaining health of the employees, the citizens and the residents, in addition to full abidance by the precautionary and preventive measures.

In the first phase, it says, some employees should be relieved of work and granted "rest days," including the pregnant, mothers nursing babies, employees who suffer from some illnesses, the handicapped, those aged 55 — except for those serving as leaders or supervisors. Some work can be done by long distance (online), at home partially or fully, it says, noting necessity to keep social distancing among the employees at work places. — KUNA

Ministry examines 65 cooperatives, supermarkets

KUWAIT: The Ministry of Commerce and Industry revealed that its teams have inspected 65 cooperative societies, supermarkets and pharmacies to ensure the flow of purchases and food de-

liveries and price stability. In a press statement yesterday, the ministry pointed out that its teams also visited 78 subsidised food outlets and vowed that it will continue to dispatch its inspection teams around the country during the coronavirus lockdown measures. Some 131 consumer complaints were received by the ministry on its 135 hotline. The need to comply with laws and regulations amid these unprecedented circumstances was strongly underlined, and the ministry warned it would be on the lookout for those seeking to take advantage of the current situation. — KUNA

Kuwait, Ethiopia discuss repatriation

KUWAIT: Deputy Foreign Minister Khaled Al-Jarallah received on Wednesday a telephone call from the Ethiopian Minister of State for foreign affairs during which the two sides discuss repatriation of Ethiopian workers who violated residency law in Kuwait. The Kuwaiti Foreign Ministry said in a statement that the two sides examined bilateral relations, development on the regional and international arenas. — KUNA



US passes dire milestone of 100,000 deaths

Bill Gates conspiracy theories echoing through Africa

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DUBAI: Men gather to fish at the creek in the Gulf city of Dubai, after the Emirati authorities eased some of the restrictions that were put in place in a bid to stem the spread of the novel coronavirus. —AFP

Gulf virus cases surpass 200,000

Yemen faces coronavirus catastrophe

DUBAI: The number of coronavirus cases in the six Gulf Arab states doubled in less than a month to surpass 200,000, according to a Reuters' tally, at a time the region's two biggest economies move to resume activity. Coronavirus infections in the energy producing region, which crossed the 100,000 mark on May 11, had initially been linked to travel but then spread among low-income migrant workers in overcrowded quarters, prompting authorities to increase testing. Saudi Arabia, which has the most infections, said restrictions would be lifted in three phases, culminating in a curfew completely ending from June 21, with the exception of the holy city of Makkah.

Saudi Arabian airlines will operate some domestic flights from Sunday. Government sector workplace attendance, suspended since March 16, will resume gradually on May 31 and state media said on Wednesday private sector employees could go to offices. The Haj and Umrah pilgrimages, which attract millions from around the world, remain suspended. In United Arab Emirates, business and trade hub Dubai removed restrictions on movement and business operations between 6:00 am and 11:00 pm. It allowed cinemas, gyms and some entertainment attractions to reopen after permitting malls and dine-in restaurants to do so last month. Workplace attendance in Dubai is now permitted at 50%.

The UAE's capital Abu Dhabi has so far maintained a nationwide curfew from 8:00 pm to 6:00 am, but has also allowed malls and dine-in restaurants to operate with limited capacity. The UAE government would allow minimum 30% of workplace attendance

in all federal ministries, authorities and institutions, starting from May 31, state news agency WAM reported late on Wednesday. It was not yet clear whether other Gulf states that tightened restrictions would follow suit. Qatar, which has the second highest infection count, halted all commercial activities from May 19 to May 30. Kuwait imposed a 24-hour curfew on May 10 but said it would return to a partial one at the end of May.

Virus catastrophe

Six years of war have wrecked Yemen's health system and left it facing a "catastrophe" from the coronavirus pandemic, international medical charity Doctors Without Borders (MSF) warned. Dozens have already died in the government's interim capital Aden, according to MSF, even though the country has officially registered fewer than 200 cases and 30 deaths. The city, which is home to 550,000 people, has taken virtually no preventive measures and there are no quarantine facilities for those who test positive.

Yemen's health system has all but collapsed since fighting broke out in 2014, with more than two-thirds of the population dependent on aid for survival, according to the United Nations. MSF said the number of patients being admitted to its Aden treatment centre - the only dedicated COVID-19 facility in the whole of southern Yemen - "speaks to a wider catastrophe unfolding in the city". In the first half of May, MSF said at least 68 virus patients had died - more than double the official figure for the entire country since the start of the

pandemic. "Many patients are arriving at the centre already suffering from acute respiratory distress syndrome, making it hard to save their lives and suggesting that many more people are sick at home," MSF said.

The charity added that burial statistics suggested as many 80 people had been dying in Aden every day for the past week, up from a pre-outbreak rate of 10. Health sources have told AFP that many doctors in Aden have deserted their posts because of a lack of access to protective gear. "What we are seeing in our treatment centre is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of the number of people infected and dying in the city," said Caroline Seguin, MSF's operations manager for Yemen. "People are coming to us too late to save, and we know that many more people are not coming at all: they are just dying at home. It is a heart-breaking situation."

She said the United Nations and donor states had to do more - including finding a way to mobilize health workers and get supplies of protective equipment. The government, backed by a Saudi-led coalition, is fighting Houthi rebels supported by Iran in a conflict that has killed tens of thousands - triggering what the UN has termed the world's worst humanitarian crisis. The Houthis stormed the capital Sanaa in September 2014 and Aden was set up as the government's interim seat months later. But tensions between the central government and another group of rebels in the south have further muddied the waters, with the self-proclaimed Southern Transitional Council declaring self-rule on April 26. —Agencies

International

As Iraq's lockdown chokes off imports, local businesses thrive

'Virus crisis has allowed us to prove ourselves'

BASRA: In Iraq, a national lockdown to halt the coronavirus pandemic has found some unexpected fans: local businesses who no longer have to compete with Turkish, Iranian or Chinese imports. Those countries, as well as Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Kuwait, typically flood Iraqi markets with inexpensive products at prices local producers can't compete with. That includes everything from cars and computers to frozen chicken and even Iraq's national fruit, dates, which in recent years were more often imported from the Gulf than plucked from local palm trees. Local producers were left in the dust, struggling to compete given their expensive raw materials and low outputs compared to the enormous quantities being imported.



Experts warn Iraq to diversify its economy

Not anymore, said Amin Qassem, who has operated an ice cream factory in the oil-rich province of Basra since 2006. "The coronavirus crisis has allowed us to prove ourselves on the Iraqi market," he said, relishing the sweet moment. Qassem's 3,000 employees across six factories pack 144,000 ice cream cones and wafer sandwiches every hour. "When there was cheap ice cream coming in from Iran, I had to lower my prices to sell so that my ice cream wouldn't be stuck melting in storage," said Qassem. "Now, I can sell at higher prices. We were able to win back the same markets where imports once crushed us."

Out with the imports

Experts have long warned that oil-rich Iraq must diversify its economy to insulate it from the swings of the energy market. As OPEC's second-biggest oil producer, it relies on oil exports to fund more than 90 percent of its state expenses. This year, with oil prices crashing to around a third of their 2019 prices, Iraq will struggle to keep its government running, pay salaries or import essential goods. The International Monetary Fund projected Iraq's imports of goods and services would drop from \$92 billion in 2019 to \$84 billion this year and to \$81 billion in 2021.

Diversification has been a tall order for a country with a fledgling private sector, under-developed banking system and a weak customs regime that makes it cheaper to import than to produce. But with coronavirus restrictions, all that could change. As part of Iraq's lockdown measures put in place in March, it has officially closed its federal border posts with Iran, Turkey and Kuwait to both people and goods. Imports through Um Qasr, the southern port through which Iraq brings in crucial food and medicine, have dropped. As a result, Iraq is importing less according to data from its trade partners. It bought \$973 million worth of Chinese goods in December but that dropped to \$775 million by April, according to the Chinese General Administration of Customs. Imports from Iran also fell from \$450 million per month before



AL-FAW: A youth poses while holding two fish before his face in Iraq's southern port city of Al-Faw, 90 kilometers south of Basra near the Shatt al-Arab and the Gulf. — AFP

the coronavirus pandemic to \$300 million currently, according to Hameed Hussein, a member of the Iran-Iraq Chamber of Commerce. Iraq is also taxing imports more stringently. Its Customs Office attributed "the notable rise" in customs revenues - from \$2.5 million in the first half of April to \$7.3 million in the first half of this month - to "tougher monitoring measures". Higher duties force Iraqi retailers to bump up the prices of imported goods, so local businesses can better compete in the markets.

Fishermen catch a break

Hadi Abbud, who owns a plastics factory in

Basra, has already seen an exponential surge in orders for plastic tubing, usually brought in from China. His factory has been working 24/7 to mould, cut and polish thick plastic cylinders proudly stamped "Made in Iraq." "These days, I'm getting new orders for plastic tubes faster than I can even produce them," said Abbud, his white hair meticulously combed back. Sales are so good he is planning to recruit another 50 workers for his 100-man factory. "The situation has really changed," Abbud said, his smile barely concealed by the face mask he wore as part of mandated social distancing in his factory. Even at sea, the difference is notable. — AFP

Pandemic puts up to 86 million kids at risk of poverty

UNITED NATIONS: The economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic could push as many as 86 million more children into poverty by the end of 2020, a joint study by Save the Children and UNICEF showed Wednesday. That would bring the total number of children affected by poverty worldwide to 672 million, an increase of 15 percent over last year, the two aid agencies said in a statement. Nearly two-thirds of those children overall live in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. But the pandemic-driven increase is expected to occur mainly in Europe and Central Asia, according to the study, which is based on World Bank and International Monetary Fund projections and population data from some 100 countries.

"The scale and depth of financial hardship among families threatens to roll back years of progress in reducing child poverty and to leave children deprived of essential services," UNICEF executive director Henrietta Fore is quoted as saying in the statement. With immediate and decisive action, "we can prevent and contain the pandemic threat facing the poorest countries and some of the most vulnerable children," added Save the Children head Inger Ashing. They are "highly vulnerable to even short periods of hunger and malnutrition - potentially affecting them for their whole life," she warns in the statement. The two organizations call on governments to rapidly expand their social security systems and school feeding to limit the effects of the pandemic. — AFP

Iranians outraged by dad who killed teen daughter

TEHRAN: The killing of an Iranian teen by her father after she eloped with an older man sparked outrage on Wednesday, with local media denouncing "institutionalized violence" in "patriarchal" Iran. Iranian media covered the apparent "honor" crime extensively, with Ebtakar newspaper leading its front page with the headline "Unsafe father's house".

According to local media, Romina Ashrafi was killed in her sleep on May 21 by her father, who decapitated her in the family home in Talesh in northern Gilan province. The reports said her father had refused her permission to marry a man fifteen years her senior, spurring her to run away, but she was returned home after her father reported her. The legal marriage age in Iran is 13 for women. Iranian media reported that after authorities detained the teenager, she told a judge she feared for her life if she was returned to home.

But what most outraged public opinion was the lenient punishment the father is likely to face, Ebtakar wrote. The newspaper notes that Iran's normal "eye for an eye" retributive justice does not apply to fathers who kill their children. Accordingly, he is likely to face three to 10 years in prison, a sentence that could be reduced further, the newspaper wrote, denouncing the "institutionalized violence" of Iran's "patriarchal culture". With the farsi hashtag #Romina_Ashrafi focusing outrage on Twitter, President Hassan Rouhani "expressed his regrets" in a cabinet meeting on Wednesday, pleading for the speedy passing of several anti-violence bills, his office said.

On Twitter, Vice President for Women and Family Affairs, Masoumeh Ebtekar, said a bill on the protection of young people was in the "final phase" of validation by Iran's Guardian Council. The council, which vets legislation to ensure compliance with Iran's constitution and Islamic sharia law, has thrice previously called for changes to the law after it was passed by lawmakers, Ebtekar newspaper wrote. The publication fears that if the council sends back the bill, it will be buried by Iran's new parliament, which held its first session Wednesday and is dominated by conservatives and hardliners opposed to Rouhani. — AFP

International

South Africa migrants face hunger, xenophobia during lockdown

Many foreigners have no work, are hungry

JOHANNESBURG: The car approaches the gates of the small parish church, where an army of hands await. The precious food is swiftly taken from the car boot and back seat and lined up in bags in the courtyard, rather like a military parade. It is time for the handout. In the eyes of the waiting women and children, there is relief: a gleam that comes from the prospect of having a full belly. The scene, in the parish of Mayfair just outside the centre of Johannesburg, has become grimly familiar across South Africa's largest city. Even as a strict lockdown to slow the coronavirus pandemic is eased, many foreigners living in this country have no work and are hungry. South Africa is the continent's second-largest economy and a magnet for millions of refugees and migrants from elsewhere.

But the vast majority of them depend on day-to-day work - and this informal source of income catastrophically dried up from one day to the next because of the lockdown. In a country considered by the World Bank to be the most unequal in the world, many of these luckless people now have nothing. "I see a lot of community members suffering because of this lockdown,"

said Alfred Djang, a 50-year-old lawyer who left the Democratic Republic of Congo 19 years ago. Some had been working in shops, "they were selling things on street corners, but they are not allowed to do it anymore," Djang said. "They don't have permits so they need to beg for food here and there," he added.

'Hunger has no color'

Amir Sheikh, head of the African Diaspora Forum, said his non-profit group had been swamped by requests for help. "Since the beginning of the lockdown we have initiated a process of cooking food for the migrants," the Somali said. Funded by religious organizations, his network provides 3,500 parcels and 750 meals each week. "It is very important because those people have been neglected... hunger has no color, but unfortunately the government of South Africa has discriminated against us on the basis of our country of origin," he said.

As part of an unprecedented emergency plan, President Cyril Ramaphosa announced food distributions and a monthly allowance of 350 rand

“
Most unequal
country in
the world
”



JOHANNESBURG: Lucky, 55, brews some tea to warm up in the bitter cold in Wilgespruit, Johannesburg. — AFP

(\$20 / 18 euros) for the most destitute. Neither Ramaphosa nor his ministers have mentioned any conditions for the nationality of people receiving the aid. But migrants and non-governmental organizations insist that in de-facto terms, the help goes to South Africans. While the "rainbow nation" Nelson Mandela dreamed of has some four million foreigners, most of them do not have a residence permit - a document with the value of gold.

In Lenasia, a township in the remote outskirts

of Johannesburg, 49-year-old Edward Mowo relies on his Lazarus hands for a living. He brings dead televisions, radios and telephones back to life. Under the corrugated iron roof of his shack, the Zimbabwean admitted to having difficulty feeding his wife and three children. "Most people don't work anymore, so they don't get paid. So how can I be paid?" he said. "My kids were born here but they don't get anything because we are not South African nationals," Mowo said. —AFP

Trump plans new arms sale to Saudi

WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump's administration wants to sell arms to Saudi Arabia again, one year after pushing through a controversial \$8.1 billion contract despite congressional opposition, an influential US senator revealed on Wednesday. "The administration is currently trying to sell thousands more precision-guided bombs to the President's 'friend,' Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman," New Jersey Democrat Bob Menendez said in an op-ed published online by CNN.

The government wants to conclude the sale, the details of which have not yet been made public, "even though the Saudis seemingly want out of their failed and brutal war in Yemen," he added. Menendez, the top Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, recalled how the previous contract to sell various arms to Saudi Arabia as well as the United Arab Emirates was blocked by Congress after the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. US intelligence services had concluded that the murder had been ordered by the crown prince, "a capricious Saudi despot who thinks he can butcher his critics without consequences," Menendez wrote.

When Congress blocked that sale last year, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo invoked an obscure "emergency" procedure to push it through. "Today, a year later, there is still no justification for the US to sell bombs to Saudi Arabia," stated Menendez. "That is why I am particularly troubled that the State Department has again refused to explain the need to sell thousands more bombs to Saudi Arabia on top of the thousands that have yet to be delivered from last year's 'emergency,'" he continued. He called on Congress to block the new sale. — AFP

Pakistan intel uses militant-tracking tech to hunt virus

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan's intelligence services are deploying secretive surveillance technology normally used to locate militants to instead track coronavirus patients and the people they come into contact with. In a program publicly touted by Prime Minister Imran Khan, the government has turned to the powerful Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI) for help in tackling the virus, which still is spreading at an accelerating rate across Pakistan. Details about the project have not been released, but two officials told AFP that intelligence services are using geo-fencing and phone-monitoring systems that ordinarily are employed to hunt high-value targets including home-grown and foreign militants.

A lack of awareness, stigma and fear have contributed to some people with symptoms not seeking treatment or even fleeing hospitals, while others who've had contact with virus patients have flouted self-isolation rules. Speaking on condition of anonymity, a senior security official told AFP that agencies are now "quite effectively" using the technology to track coronavirus cases. "The government has been successful in tracing even those who tested positive but went into hiding," the security official said. Geo-fencing, a discreet tracking system that alerts authorities when someone leaves a specific geo-

graphic area, has helped officials monitor neighborhoods on lockdown.

Authorities are also listening in to the calls of COVID-19 patients to monitor whether their contacts are talking about having symptoms. "The trace-and-track system basically helps us track the mobile phones of corona patients as well as anyone they get in touch with before of after their disappearance," an intelligence official said. Khan recently praised the program, which has come up against little public debate or scrutiny over its use in the virus fight. "It was originally used against terrorism, but now it is has come in useful against coronavirus," he said. Nearly 60,000 people in Pakistan have tested positive for the disease and more than 1,200 patients have died. But with testing still limited, officials worry the true numbers are much higher.

Concerns

Pakistan's intelligence services and military hold vast sway over many aspects of cultural and political life, with the US and India accusing Islamabad of backing insurgents fighting in Kashmir and Afghanistan - claims denied by officials. Rights groups worry authorities might abuse their sweeping surveillance powers to trace political dissidents. Leading rights activist and ex-senator Afrasiab Khattak told AFP that involving the ISI would spread unnecessary fear among the population. "The task of tracking and tracing the patients and suspected cases should be dealt with by provincial governments and local communities - let intelligence agencies do their actual job," he said. Countries across the world have employed track-and-trace methods to control the virus's spread, raising privacy concerns. — AFP

International

Scientists unravel secrets from 'faults in our genes'

Scientists harness a massive database of genetic info

TOKYO: Imagine the body's instruction manual, the genome: here words are genes, letters are DNA, and the equivalent of typos can have disastrous consequences. In recent years, scientists have grown increasingly fluent in the language of genome, but much remains mysterious, including the function of many of our genes. Discovering what these genes are for, and how they work, is key to understanding what happens when they malfunction, causing disease and sometimes death.

Now a group of scientists is harnessing a massive database of genetic information from over 140,000 people to better understand which of our genes are important, and how we might better target medicines to treat genetic disease. The database itself is something of a landmark. Known as the Genome Aggregation Database or gnomAD (pronounced nomad), it contains over 15,000 whole genome sequences - the equivalent of a full-length instruction manual - and over 125,000 whole

exome sequences, akin to key points in the set of guidelines for the human body.

In seven papers published Wednesday in the journals *Nature*, *Nature Communications* and *Nature Medicine*, scientists combed through gnomAD data, focusing on a type of spelling error that effectively breaks the gene. We all have some of these errors, known as loss-of-function variants, in our genome. But in most cases, they switch off or break a gene without ill-effect. We might end up with a diminished sense of smell, for example, but otherwise be healthy. But when these mistakes occur in more important genes, they can result in serious illness.

People with these variants in important genes

often don't pass them on because they die young or can't have children. That means scientists can search a giant dataset like gnomAD, looking for genes that have fewer variants than expected. They

can extrapolate that these genes must be important to our health, because variants in them have not been passed down due to natural selection. "With 144,000 people we start to have big enough numbers that if we don't see loss-of-function variants in a particular gene that

tells us that people carrying broken copies of this gene are being lost from the population, probably as a result of severe genetic disease," said Daniel MacArthur, who led the gnomAD project. "We can't tell exactly what that disease is, but this tells

us that this particular gene is likely to be important in some way," added MacArthur, senior author on six of the seven papers, who carried out the research at Harvard and MIT's Broad Institute.

Knowing which genes are important in disease not only offers targets for new drugs, but can also suggest whether a new treatment will be safe. That was the focus of research by Eric Vallabh Minikel, who is studying a rare illness called prion disease at the Broad Institute. The research is personal for Minikel. His mother-in-law died from the disease and his wife, a fellow scientist, carries a genetic mutation that means she is likely to develop it too. He and his wife want to find a drug that prevents the disease, and examining naturally occurring gene inactivation offers insights into what side effects such a new treatment might have. "The effects of DNA changes that inactivate a gene can help to predict what might happen if we treated people with a drug to target that gene," he told AFP.—AFP



The Genome Aggregation Database

Virus takes toll on mental health of Europe's medics

LONDON: Steve, a paramedic in northeast England, contracted the coronavirus two months ago. Then his wife fell ill. Both recovered but throughout they were concerned about passing it on to their two young sons. "On my return to work, I couldn't sleep properly, as I was worried that I could still bring the virus home and that I could still get it again," the 46-year-old told AFP. "I never thought I would ever have to work on the front line in a pandemic. I do wish it was just a dream and when I wake up the world will be back to how it was." Doctors, nurses and paramedics in full protective clothing have become an enduring image of the pandemic. But stress and anxiety brought on by dealing with the high levels of serious illness and death have become commonplace on the medical frontline.

Now, professional bodies and experts in Europe's worst-hit countries want more support to tackle the psychological impact on staff - particularly if a second wave strikes. "We've got all the ingredients for a major risk of post-traumatic stress disorder," said Belgian mental health expert Xavier Noel. Noel, a clinical psychologist in Brussels, singled out nurses as of most concern, given their proximity to seriously ill patients and the dying. "They've faced a totally unusual death rate and way of dying, in a more dehumanised context, without the presence of families to support them," he said.

Europe has officially seen nearly 175,000 deaths from more than two million cases, and across the continent the battle to save lives has taken a punishing toll. In Belgium, studies indicated that more than twice as many healthcare workers than usual had thought about quitting the profession, and levels of unhappiness were four times higher.

Another found alcohol consumption highest among healthcare professionals. In France, one healthcare workers' support association said it was receiving more than 70 calls a day from medics about the crisis. Some seven in 10 were from women and a handful of calls were even deemed to indicate "an imminent risk of suicide". In Spain, more than 50,000 healthcare workers have tested positive for COVID-19



MADRID: Residents of the Grupo 5 Mirasierra residence for people with mental disability take part in a discussion on the impact of the Covid-19 disease in their lives in Madrid. — AFP

- 22 percent of the total cases in the country, according to the health ministry. Anxiety is rife, a study by Complutense University of Madrid found, adding that just over half of the 1,200 medics it questioned had "depressive symptoms". A similar number (53 percent) showed signs "compatible with post-traumatic stress", the study said. "We believe an urgent psychological intervention is necessary for this group if the much-feared second wave materializes," said the report's authors, Lourdes Luceno Moreno and Jesus Martin Garcia. "We are going to see professionals emotionally damaged and a health system without the capacity to respond."

The Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan similarly found seven in 10 healthcare professionals in the worst-hit regions of Italy were exhausted. Nine in 10 had suffered psychological stress. Many reported increased irritability, trouble sleeping and night terrors, as well as emotional breakdowns. Researcher Serena Barello said the normal stresses of the job had been exacerbated by the increased workload, difficult working conditions and the raft of unknowns about the virus. That had put their health "seriously at risk, not just physically but also emotionally and psychologically", she added.

In the UK - whose death toll is second only to that of the United States - the country's only charity offering mental health support for first responders is also warning of a looming crisis. —AFP

A World Redrawn: Re-think the gender roles, says feminist

TUNIS: During Tunisia's coronavirus lockdown, feminist activist and former lawmaker Bochra Hmida has been worrying about family violence, rethinking gender roles - and crocheting. Tunisia's lockdown, which has seen men and women confined to the domestic space together, offers a chance to rethink gender roles in a traditionally patriarchal society, Hmida told AFP in an interview.

"It's a subject that we don't talk about, and we can't have real change if we don't explore these questions in depth," she said. Now is the time for people to reflect and speak out about family relations and domestic violence, she said, stressing that "we cannot continue like this". Tunisia is seen as a forerunner for women's rights in the Arab world and Hmida - who helped found the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women in 1989 - a pioneer. The North African country, birthplace of the Arab Spring protests that ousted several autocratic rulers, adopted a new constitution in 2014 which guarantees equality between men and women.

Hmida, a lawyer who was elected to parliament in 2014, chaired the commission charged with integrating into law the values of freedom and equality that characterized the 2011 uprising. She has since stepped back from politics but maintains her concern for Tunisian society, where around half of women say they have been subject to at least one form of violence in their lives. During the lockdown, Hmida has had the chance to re-engage with traditional home life, but on her own terms. "In the morning, I start with the gardening. And I've discovered I still know how to crochet," she said. "It's not very feminist of me but I've realized it's a pleasure and not an obligation. Today men are sewing and cooking, we can't have complexes about these things. If it's done for pleasure, it's a luxury."

The lockdown has made Tunisia's youth more open to challenging gender norms, Hmida said, with young people the most receptive to taking up housework normally assigned to the other gender. —AFP

International

Coronavirus apps expose tension between privacy and 'data need'

Deep-rooted tension thrust into the spotlight

PARIS: As more governments turn to tracing apps in the fight against the coronavirus, a deep-rooted tension between the need for public health information and privacy rights has been thrust into the spotlight. Track-and-trace technology is being touted as a silver bullet that will allow economies to reopen and people to emerge from home confinement, with health authorities keeping tabs on the virus's spread. But many fear personal data gathered by governments or companies in the name of pandemic control will be abused for political or commercial gain, or outright oppression in authoritarian states.

"If we are not careful, the epidemic might mark an important watershed in the history of surveillance," Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari wrote in *The Financial Times* at the height of the coronavirus outbreak. While fast-improving technology may be a welcome aid for public health officials caught off guard by the scale of the coronavirus crisis, the "downside is, of course, that this would give legitimacy to a terrifying new surveillance system", Harari argued. Many countries have already introduced smartphone apps to track people's infection status and movements with the intent of alerting people who may have been in close contact with a carrier of the virus. In some countries participa-

tion is voluntary, but in many it is not.

Asian countries, first hit by the pandemic that has claimed more than 350,000 lives, also led the way with tracing apps, often on a non-voluntary basis. China, where the outbreak was first detected, rolled out several apps using either geolocation via mobile networks or data compiled from train and airline travel or motorway checkpoints. Their use was systematic and compulsory and credited with playing a key role in allowing Beijing to lift its lockdown and halt the contagion. South Korea issued mass mobile phone alerts announcing locations visited by infected patients and ordered anyone placed in quarantine to install a tracking app.

In Thailand, which has delayed passing a law on protecting personal data, people use an app to scan a barcode when they enter or leave a shop or restaurant - if someone who later tests positive goes to the same place, everyone else will receive an alert and a free coronavirus test. The only problem: the government, having already gathered vast amounts of information on millions of app users, has had to concede that the alert function does not work. "The COVID-19 pandemic has offered a convenient rationale for Asian governments seeking to enhance or sustain their authoritarian capacities to do so for a lengthy period," Paul Chambers, a political sci-



PARIS: An employee of a fast food outlet talks to men working for the delivery company Deliveroo in Paris.—AFP

entist at the University of Naresuan in Thailand, told AFP.

Similar debates are raging in the West. More than half of 2,000 people surveyed by the Brookings Institution in the United States feared contact-tracing apps would violate their privacy. "Our analysis points to the need for public edu-

cation campaigns that clarify what the tools are and, especially, what they are not doing," the think-tank said of its survey, carried out between April 30 and May 1. Public trust is important given that experts say a track-and-trace app must be used by at least 60 percent of any population to be effective.—AFP

Gates conspiracy theories echoing through Africa

JOHANNESBURG: As the novel coronavirus wreaks global havoc, Bill Gates is the new bete noire for conspiracy theorists worldwide including in Africa where a Kenyan politician's false online post has added major fuel to the spread of misinformation. While Gates's vaccine programs on the continent have long provided ample fodder for speculation, the bogus claims have gained new traction amid the pandemic.

On March 15, Nairobi governor Mike Sonko published an old video of Gates warning about the consequences of a future pandemic, with the caption "Bill Gates told us about the corona virus 2015 (sic)". While the clip shows the philanthropist telling an audience that the world was unprepared for global outbreaks in his TED talk five years ago, he made no mention of the coronavirus. Sonko's post generated so many interactions among his two-million plus Facebook followers that it remains the most prolific global post about Gates in the COVID-19 era, according to social

media analysis tool CrowdTangle.

So far, it has been shared more than one million times and has garnered 38 million views on social media. The post highlights the role played by local public figures in spreading false or misleading claims in different parts of the world, according to the Washington-based Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab), which studies disinformation globally. "They typically travel beyond... niche communities when an influencer, such as a prominent celebrity, or even mainstream media source, amplifies them," DFRLab's Zarine Kharazian said. "Once they've achieved this level of spread, they migrate across languages."

Rumours about links between Gates and the current pandemic have enjoyed particularly broad appeal among different conspiracy communities worldwide since the virus erupted in the Chinese city of Wuhan in December 2019. Since January, more than 683,000 posts globally from public Facebook pages and groups mentioned Gates, producing

nearly 53 million likes, shares and views. "One commonality of conspiracy theories that seems to span borders, languages, and cultures is a mistrust in 'all-powerful elites' and institutions," Kharazian said.

"Gates's prominent profile, outspokenness and active engagement in international public health work has made him a prime target for this particular strain of conspiracy." Among the most popular claims in Africa is the idea that Gates wants to control mankind with the use of microchip implants or digital tattoos. Conspiracy theorists have also alleged that Gates stands to profit handsomely from an eventual vaccine and that his foundation patented a treatment years ago before unleashing the novel coronavirus. Others again believe he created the virus for population control — a sensitive point in Africa where much of the visible push-back online has focused on the issue of a COVID-19 vaccine and experimental trials on local test subjects.—AFP

France: Do not prescribe HCQ for COVID-19

PARIS: The French government said Wednesday that doctors should no longer prescribe hydroxychloroquine (HCQ) for COVID-19 patients, an unproven and potentially harmful treatment for the disease nonetheless promoted by US President Donald Trump. The move came after two French advisory bodies and the World Health Organization (WHO) warned this week that the drug, a treatment for rheumatoid arthritis and lupus, had been shown to be dangerous in several studies.

Europe's Discovery programme of hydroxychloroquine trials in several countries to gauge its effectiveness in the coronavirus fight have also been suspended since Sunday, France's Inserm research institute said. The urgency of the coronavirus outbreak prompted some doctors to prescribe the drug despite a lack of research to demonstrate its effectiveness against the new coronavirus. A French infectious disease specialist in particular insists he has successfully treated some 4,000 patients by using hydroxychloroquine with the antibiotic azithromycin.

The doctor, Didier Raoult, has caught the ear of Trump, who stunned his own administration last week by revealing he was taking hydroxychloroquine as a preventive measure against COVID-19. Raoult has already rejected a comprehensive study published last week in *The Lancet* medical journal, which found that administering hydroxychloroquine or its related compound chloroquine actually increased the risk of dying for many patients. Under the new French rules, the drug should be used only in clinical trials.—AFP

International

US passes dire milestone of 100,000 COVID-19 deaths

Pandemic tightens its grip on Latin America

WASHINGTON: Unthinkable just a few months ago, the United States on Wednesday surpassed the grim milestone of 100,000 coronavirus deaths, as the pandemic tightened its grip on Latin America. With the European Union unveiling a massive recovery plan to step up its emergence from the crisis, the US figure was a sobering reminder of the devastation being wreaked around the globe by a virus that only emerged late last year.

Confirmed US deaths stood at 100,396 late Wednesday, with nearly 1.7 million infections, according to the tally compiled by Johns Hopkins University. The 24-hour toll shot back up after three days of sharp declines, to 1,401. Nevertheless, most US states moved toward reopening restaurants and businesses, cheered on by President Donald Trump, who is eager to see the economic pain of the crisis mitigated as he seeks re-election. The US capital Washington will ease its lockdown from Friday. Grim news came from across the Americas, as Brazil saw its death toll pass 25,000. President Jair Bolsonaro is facing mounting criticism over his response to the health crisis. The far-right leader has downplayed the seriousness of the pandemic and railed against stay-at-home measures, arguing the economic fallout risks causing more damage than the virus itself. "The so-called second wave is coming; recession. It will affect everyone, without exception," he wrote on Facebook. Peru meanwhile registered a record 6,154 new cases in a 24-hour period. "Difficult days, difficult weeks are coming because people are going to get sick," said Pilar Mazzetti, who is helping to coordinate Peru's coronavirus response.

US states, cities cry out for aid amid pandemic

WASHINGTON: In the decentralized American system, the COVID-19 pandemic is draining public finances in many cities and states, and without help from the federal government, experts say the consequences will be lasting and the recovery slower. "There cannot be a national recovery if the state and local governments are not funded," New York's Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo said Wednesday. The states that have borne the brunt of the pandemic, including New York, account for a third of GDP in the world's largest economy, Cuomo said at a press conference after he met with President Donald Trump to discuss the economic impact of the pandemic. "How can you tell one third of the country to go to heck, and then think you're going to see an economic rebound... There is no nation without the states," Cuomo said.

Many cities and some states had not fully recovered from the 2009 recession, and now the widespread lockdowns to stem the spread of the coronavirus have deprived them of sales taxes from stores, hotels, bars and restaurants, which represent around 30 percent of their income. At a time when health spending and demand for unemployment benefits spiked with nearly 40 million workers becoming jobless since mid-March, the annual deadline for filing income taxes was pushed back to

Huge EU aid plan

In Europe, business have slowly started reopening as outbreaks on the continent slow, but Italy and Spain lack the firepower of richer European nations to rebuild their economies. The EU unveiled a historic, 750-billion-euro (\$825 billion) recovery plan to get the continent back on its feet. It follows other unprecedented emergency measures introduced around the world to rescue economies shattered by the virus, which has claimed more than 354,000 lives globally as infections top 5.6 million. "This is Europe's moment," EU Commission chief Ursula Von der Leyen said, urging solidarity. "We either all go it alone, leaving countries, regions and people behind... or we walk that road together." The proposed package is expected to kick off tough negotiations, as backers try to win the support of some northern EU states that oppose paying out grants to nations already under mountains of debt. The proposal comes as the continent - which has lost at least 173,000 people to COVID-19 - grapples with the human tragedy and economic destruction.

'Next steps'

Spain on Wednesday began 10 days of official mourning for the more than 27,000 people who died there, with all flags on public buildings at half-staff. While desperate to kickstart their economies, most governments in Europe are also trying to move cautiously, afraid of a second wave of infections. In Cyprus, the badly-hit tourism sector inched back to life as beaches opened again - but with sunbeds and beach umbrellas spaced apart to avoid crowding.

July 15, meaning states have to wait longer to collect revenues.

State and local governments, which employ teachers, police and firefighters, "are suffering from a pretty toxic combination of less revenue... and more spending," said Robert Maxim, a researcher at the Brookings Institution, a Washington think tank. Unlike the federal government, which can run a deficit, most states are required to have a balanced budget and generally can only borrow to finance specific projects like schools and parks, not for emergencies. As a result "they don't have any way to maintain their spending levels," said Nathan Favero, an assistant professor at American University. Without federal help, the choices states face are to raise taxes - difficult in a recession - or slash spending on teachers, police and services, as many were forced to do during the global financial crisis. Governors like Republican Larry Hogan of Maryland told the Trump administration in April that states would be unable to absorb the shock caused by the economic shutdown once their "rainy days funds" are drained. Cuomo warned that without federal aid, the cuts in New York could be as high as 20 percent. The state's fiscal shortfall due to the pandemic has been estimated at some \$13 billion.

California's Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom said he will be have to drop spending on programs for the poor or immigrants, and cut subsidies to public education. Dan White, research director at Moody's Analytics, calculated that without federal assistance, more than three million public jobs could be lost, which would slash two percentage points off the national GDP. "There is no plan B," White warned in a recent analysis. "They can't just issue a bunch of long-term debt and move on to the next year." Time is running out, with most state and local governments facing a June 30 deadline to adopt their budgets for the coming year. —AFP



NEW YORK: Bodies are moved to a refrigeration truck serving as a temporary morgue at Wyckoff Hospital in the Borough of Brooklyn in New York. —AFP

"We're here, we're having a good time... we're taking our safety measures," said Georgios, a young gym trainer. Elsewhere in Europe, Poland scrapped a rule calling for face masks in public, while Switzerland said it would drop its virus restrictions by June 6. In Moscow, shops will reopen and people will be allowed out for walks from June 1 as the Russian capital announced the easing of its lockdown. "Today we can already talk about the next steps out of the crisis situation," Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin said.

The United States remains the hardest-hit nation, with President Donald Trump weathering heavy criticism for his handling of the crisis - and for not wearing a mask in public despite his administration's recommendations. Trump's principal preoccupation has been for a quick turnaround of the badly battered US economy, and he has pressured local and state leaders to ease lockdowns. But his top infectious diseases expert Anthony Fauci warned against "leapfrogging" guidelines in order to open more quickly. —AFP

Coronavirus creating 'lockdown generation'

GENEVA: The COVID-19 pandemic has caused surging unemployment worldwide, but has hit young workers especially hard, forcing more than one in six people aged under 29 to stop working, the UN said Wednesday. In a fresh study, the International Labor Organization warned that the novel coronavirus crisis has disproportionately affected young people, and could impact upon their work opportunities and career options for decades to come. "I don't think it is giving way to hyperbole to talk about the danger of a lockdown generation," ILO chief Guy Ryder told a virtual press conference.

"As we recover from the pandemic, a lot of young people are simply going to be left behind. Big numbers," he said, warning that "the danger is... that this initial shock to young people will last a decade or longer. "People will be permanently scarred by the immediate effects of the pandemic." Even before the crisis, the global youth unemployment rate stood at 13.6 percent in 2019 - far higher than for any other group - while some 267 million young people were neither employed nor in education or training (NEET). —AFP

International

Trump threatens to 'close down' social media after tweets tagged

Republicans feel Social Media silence conservatives' voices

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump threatened Wednesday to shutter social media platforms after Twitter for the first time acted against his false tweets, prompting the enraged Republican to double down on unsubstantiated claims and conspiracy theories. Trump will sign an executive order "pertaining to social media", aides to the president said, without offering more detail about its contents.

Twitter tagged two of his tweets in which he claimed that more mail-in voting would lead to what he called a "Rigged Election" this November. There is no evidence that attempts are being made to rig the election, and under the tweets Twitter posted a link which read: "Get the facts about mail-in ballots." For years, Twitter has been accused of ignoring the president's violation of platform rules with his daily, often hourly barrages of personal insults and inaccurate information sent to more than 80 million followers.

But Twitter's slap on the wrist was enough to drive Trump into a tirade - on Twitter - in which he claimed that the political right in the United States is being censored. "Republicans feel that Social Media Platforms totally silence conservatives' voices. We will strongly regulate, or close them down, before we can ever allow this to happen," he said. He plunged right back into his narrative that an increase in mail-in ballots - seen in some states as vital for allowing people to avoid

crowds during the COVID-19 pandemic - will undermine the election.

"It would be a free for all on cheating, forgery and the theft of Ballots," wrote Trump, whose re-election campaign has been knocked off track by the coronavirus crisis. His torrent of angry tweets earned a top-10 trending hashtag: #TrumpMeltdown. Facebook chief Mark Zuckerberg also waded in to the row, telling Fox News that his social network - still the biggest in the world - has a different policy. "I just believe strongly that Facebook should not be the arbiter of truth of everything that people say online," Zuckerberg said in a snippet of the interview posted online Wednesday by Fox. "I think, in general, private companies, especially these platform companies, shouldn't be in the position of doing that."

Twitter founder and CEO Jack Dorsey fired back on his own platform Wednesday night, saying that the website's effort to point out misinformation did not make it an "arbiter of truth." "Our intention is to connect the dots of conflicting statements and show the information in dispute so people can judge for themselves," he tweeted. He doubled down on the new policy, writing: "Fact check: there is someone ultimately accountable for our actions as a company, and that's me. Please leave our employees out of this. We'll continue to point out incorrect or disputed



VIRGINIA: In this photo illustration, a Twitter logo is displayed on a mobile phone with President Trump's Twitter page shown in the background. —AFP

information about elections globally. And we will admit to and own any mistakes we make."

'Blatant lies'

Kate Ruane, at the American Civil Liberties Union, said that Trump has no power to regulate Twitter. The constitution "clearly prohibits the president from taking any action to stop Twitter

from pointing out his blatant lies about voting by mail," she said. For all his protests, Trump is a political giant on social media. By contrast, his Democratic election opponent, Joe Biden, has only 5.5 million Twitter followers. Social media suits Trump's unorthodox communications style and his penchant for conspiracy theories, rumors and playground-style insults. —AFP

Coronavirus toll on Italy's elderly strains 'nonni' safety net

MILAN: Paola Berardi, 70, and her husband Mauro have taken care of their two grandchildren every weekday for the past decade while their daughter went to work in a chemical company. Every summer, they decamped with the twins to a seaside resort on the northern Italian coast. After the COVID-19 epidemic detonated in Italy in late February, Paola only saw her 11-year-old grandchildren online, helping them with their daily homework via zoom. As the country emerged from a rigid, 10-week lockdown this month, the family reunited, but Paola worries about the physical contact. While the new coronavirus has proved deadly for elderly people across the globe, it has dealt an especially crippling blow in Italy where grandparents play an outsized role in caring for children and are at the centre of a vital social safety net for the fragile economy.

As Paola and other older Italians isolate themselves to avoid a virus that could kill them, the epidemic has begun to tear at the unique bond between "nonni" and grandchildren—a tight, economically-beneficial relationship that has defined Italy for generations. In Italy, grandparents spend on average 730 hours a year looking after their grandchildren, according to research for the World Bank published in 2016 by Marco Albertini, a professor of economic sociology at the University of Bologna. —Reuters

US protesters fume over police brutality

MINNEAPOLIS: Demonstrators clashed with police and set a store alight during a second night of protests in the US city of Minneapolis Wednesday over the killing of a black man by an officer who held him to the ground with a knee on his neck. Police fired tear gas and formed a human barricade to keep protesters from climbing a fence surrounding the Third Precinct, where the officers accused of killing George Floyd worked before they were fired on Tuesday.

They pushed protesters back as the crowd grew, a day after firing rubber bullets and more tear gas on thousands of demonstrators angered by the latest death of an African-American at the hands of US law enforcement. Outrage has grown across the country at Floyd's death Monday, fuelled in part by bystander cellphone video which shows him, handcuffed and in the custody of four white police officers, on the ground while one presses his knee into the victim's neck. President Donald Trump in a tweet called Floyd's death "sad and tragic", and all four officers have been fired, as prosecutors said they had called in the FBI to help investigate the case, which could involve a federal felony civil rights violation.

Minneapolis police chief Medaria Arradondo cautioned protestors Wednesday to remain peaceful. But by 10:00 pm an auto parts store across from the precinct had been set alight and a nearby Target was being looted, according to US media. Police continued to hold the crowds back from scaling a fence into the precinct's parking lot, where their cruisers contain guns. Protesters remained peaceful at two other locations in the city. At the place where Floyd was first taken into custody by the officers people chanted and barbecued, carried placards and spoke out. Bouquets were set out as tributes to Floyd, and there was no vandalism.

Calls for justice came from around the country. "I would like those officers to be charged with murder, because that's exactly what they did," Bridgett Floyd, the victim's sister, said on NBC television. "They murdered my brother.... They should be in jail for murder." Minneapolis mayor Jacob Frey said he could not understand why the officer who held his knee to Floyd's neck on a Minneapolis street until the 46-year-old restaurant worker went limp has not been arrested. "Why is the man who killed George Floyd not in jail? If you had done it, or I had done it, we would be behind bars right now," Frey said. "Based on what I saw, the officer who had his knee on the neck of George Floyd should be charged," he said.

'I can't breathe'

The case was seen as the latest example of police brutality against African Americans, which gave rise six years ago to the Black Lives Matter movement. Floyd had been detained on a minor charge of allegedly using a counterfeit \$20 bill to make a purchase at a convenience store. In the video, policemen hold him to the ground while one presses his knee to Floyd's neck. "Your knee in my neck. I can't breathe.... Mama, Mama," Floyd pleaded. He grew silent and motionless, unable to move even as the officers told him to "get up and get in the car."

He was taken to hospital where he was later declared dead. Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden said the FBI needs to thoroughly investigate the case. "It's a tragic reminder that this was not an isolated incident, but part of an engrained systemic cycle of injustice that still exists in this country," Biden said. "We have to ensure that the Floyd family receive the justice they are entitled to." Democratic Senator Kamala Harris called the policeman's using his knee on Floyd's neck "torture." "This is not new, it has been going on a long time... what our communities have known for generations, which is discriminatory implementation and enforcement of the laws," she said. "He was begging to be able to breathe," she said. "It was a public execution." —AFP

International

India's perfect storm: Heat, water woes and coronavirus

'Every drop of water is a luxury for us'

NEW DELHI: Bollywood stars and political leaders have urged Indians to wash their hands to protect against coronavirus but that's a pipe dream for slum-dwellers like Bala Devi, now sweltering through a summer heatwave. The 44-year-old widow and her family of eight are among tens of millions of people facing months of torrid weather while stuck at home, in lockdown, without regular access to clean water to keep cool and wash. "It is so hot the children keep asking for water to drink. How can I give them water for washing their hands when we don't have even enough water to drink?" Devi said at her cramped home in New Delhi. "Every drop of water is a luxury for us. We can't afford to spend it on bathing," she told AFP, pinching her nose at the waft of clogged drains as unwashed children milled around her.

Outside it is around 45 degrees Celsius but her one-bedroom tenement house has just an improvised ceiling fan to keep its occupants cool. There is a piped water connection but the supply is extremely erratic and a pump connected to the groundwater mostly spews air. Her family uses a common public toilet and their "bathroom" is a bucket behind a curtain. "If we can't wash and clean and there is filth everywhere, obviously the virus will attack us, but what can we do?" asked Devi's neighbor Anita Bisht. "Already our children are falling sick," she added, her half-naked toddler hanging from her arms.

Even before the coronavirus pandemic, water was in short supply for the 100 million people living

in India's urban slums. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has listed water infrastructure as a key priority, promising to reach 145 million rural households by 2024. But currently roughly a third of the country's 1.3 billion people cut back on washing and bathing during summer as taps run dry. Trucks deliver water to areas suffering shortfalls during the summer months but fights regularly break out in long queues to the tap. Last year the southern city of Chennai ran out of water entirely.

Heatwaves are increasing in frequency, and this week the mercury hit 50 Celsius in western Rajasthan state. Parts of Delhi recorded their hottest May temperatures in almost 20 years. Heat stress has killed around 3,500 people around the country since 2015, according to government figures, while farmers have killed themselves because of droughts ravaging their crops. Only around seven percent of Indian households have air conditioning, despite rising incomes making the luxury more affordable for some. Tarun Gopalakrishnan from the Centre for Science and Environment think-tank said India must brace for frequent periods of extreme heat in the future. "When we look at the seasonal averages we sometimes miss the picture that the extremes are increasing, causing massive social disruptions," he said.

India's coronavirus lockdown is slowly being eased but the restrictions have compounded the miseries of the current heatwave. In Delhi, a sprawling city teeming with 20 million people, demand for water outstrips supply by an estimated 200 million



Customers riding a motorbike (left) buy 'taati munjalu', also known as palmyra palm fruit or ice apple at a roadside during a hot day on the outskirts of Hyderabad yesterday. — AFP

gallons (760 million litres) per day. The daily wait for water trucks in the capital has become even worse since the pandemic hit the city. Lining up for hours with plastic buckets and bottles, slum dwellers are now meant to stand a suitable distance apart - if the government truck ever comes. Lakhpat, a resident

of the Sanjay Niwas slum settlement, recently waited in vain for over two hours with dozens of others for the scheduled water tanker to arrive. "Because of the water problem we can't follow social distancing rules. People stick together closely in the mad rush to get their buckets filled first," he said.— AFP

Malaysian launches a test case against Islamic gay sex law

KUALA LUMPUR: A Malaysian man has launched the country's first legal challenge against Islamic laws banning gay sex, a test case supporters said Wednesday could help combat growing persecution of the LGBT community. He was charged last year for allegedly attempting to have "intercourse against the order of nature", and several others in the same case have already pleaded guilty and were caned as a punishment.

Critics say the climate is worsening for the gay community in Muslim-majority Malaysia, with several states enacting their own Islamic laws banning gay sex. But campaigners believe victory in a challenge at Malaysia's top court could help halt the trend of local sharia authorities introducing harsh legislation targeting gay people. "The case could discourage state overreach in terms of law making," Thilaga Sulathireh, from campaign group LGBTIQ+ Network, told AFP. The immediate impact of a victory would likely be to halt ongoing cases under Islamic law only in Selangor

state, where the plaintiff was charged, but campaigners may then bring cases against other states.

The man, who has not been named, is challenging accusations levelled against him in an Islamic court at Malaysia's Federal Court on the grounds they breach the constitution, his lawyer Surendra Ananth told AFP. He said the court has given the green light for the case, the first such challenge in Malaysia, although it has not yet started. Malaysia has a dual-track legal system, with Islamic courts handling some matters for Muslim citizens, and sharia laws set by individual states. Selangor state, outside Kuala Lumpur, has enacted its own law against gay sex, so-called "intercourse against the order of nature".

But the man will argue that local authorities have no power to criminalize gay sex, as a state cannot enact a law when it already exists at the national level. Sodomy is already a crime under Malaysia's national penal code - a legacy of British colonial rule - although the statute is rarely enforced. The man was among 11 arrested for allegedly having sex at an apartment in 2018. Four of them admitted to the offence before an Islamic court and received six strokes of the cane, a fine and jail terms of up to seven months. In another high-profile case, two women were caned in a sharia court in 2018 after being found guilty of having sex in Terengganu state. About 60 percent of multi-ethnic Malaysia's population is Muslim.—AFP

First poverty, now pandemic threatens access to electricity

BARCELONA: One in 10 people lack electricity and the pandemic will likely make it harder still to meet a global goal of getting power to everyone by 2030, international organizations said yesterday. An annual report tracking progress on sustainable energy said more than a billion people have won access to electricity since 2010, with 90% of the planet connected in 2018.

But that still left 789 million people without power. And even before the outbreak of COVID-19 threw up new obstacles, the report estimated 620 million people would remain without electricity in 2030, 85% of them in sub-Saharan Africa. "Even before today's unprecedented crisis, the world was not on track to meet key sustainable energy goals. Now, they are likely to become even harder to achieve," said Fatih Birol, executive director of the International Energy Agency (IEA).

"We must redouble our efforts to bring affordable, reliable and cleaner energy to all - especially in sub-Saharan Africa, where the need is greatest

- in order to build more prosperous and resilient economies," he added in a statement. The report said disruptions caused by coronavirus lockdowns and their economic fallout would likely affect electrification, slowing and in some cases reversing advances. Some utilities and off-grid providers are expected to face financial difficulties, said the report from the IEA, the International Renewable Energy Agency, the U.N. Statistics Division, the World Bank and the World Health Organization.

COVID-19 has also disrupted supply chains and limited the ability of many to pay for their services, it added. "Governments, hand in hand with the international community, should be prepared to mitigate these adverse effects to safeguard the gains in (electricity) access," it said. The crisis has shown the need for reliable and clean energy at hospitals, for schools to prepare children for the digital economy, and for communities to pump clean water, it added.—Reuters

International

US revokes Hong Kong's special status as anger grows over China

Congress ramps up China pressure over Uighur camps

WASHINGTON: The United States has revoked Hong Kong's special status under US law, opening the way for the city to be stripped of trading privileges, as Washington accused China of trampling on the territory's autonomy. The decision came as China's rubber-stamp parliament was set to vote Thursday on a new Hong Kong security law, a move that has triggered renewed protests.

Under legislation passed last year to support Hong Kong's pro-democracy protesters, the US administration must certify that the city still enjoys the freedoms promised by Beijing when it negotiated with Britain to take back the colony. "No reasonable person can assert today that Hong Kong maintains a high degree of autonomy from China, given facts on the ground," said Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, adding the trade hub "does not continue to warrant" its special status. The determination means that Hong Kong could lose trading privileges - including lower tariffs than the mainland - with the world's largest economy.

President Donald Trump will ultimately decide which actions to take, said David Stilwell, the top State Department official for East Asia. "The steps will be considered and they will be as targeted as possible to change behavior," Stilwell told reporters, while acknowledging it was unlikely Beijing would change course. He said the United States did not want to hurt the people of Hong Kong, adding: "This decision was made by the government in Beijing, and not by the US." China's National People's Congress is expected Thursday to take another step on the security law that would ban secession, subversion, terrorism and foreign interference — a step that Hong Kong activists say abolishes basic freedoms.

China's treatment of Hong Kong has provoked rare bipartisan support during the divisive tumult

Hong Kong courts groan under weight of protest trials

HONG KONG: Hong Kong's courts are clogged with a backlog of protester trials nearly a year after an explosion of huge pro-democracy rallies, with hundreds of mostly young demonstrators facing the prospect of lengthy jail terms. Nearly 9,000 people have been arrested since the often-violent protests kicked off last June with 1,600 proceeding to trial so far, according to police. The result is a judicial system struggling under the strain as Hong Kong lurches through a political crisis that shows no sign of ending.

"This caseload is unimaginable," said Jonathan Man, a veteran rights lawyer on a team working pro bono to defend around half of those facing charges. "Each case is only rationed a very small amount of resources from the prose-

of the Trump administration and ahead of November's presidential election. "The United States must take a stand against China's crackdown in Hong Kong," the campaign office for Democratic rival Joe Biden said, welcoming Pompeo's announcement.

Hong Kongers are now waiting to see how the decision will affect the city. The Hang Seng Index on the city's stock exchange was down 1.8 percent around lunchtime. Joshua Wong, a prominent pro-democracy activist who has lobbied for trade sanctions, said Beijing could not expect foreign countries to ignore what is happening to such an important global trade hub. "Hong Kong is not just a Chinese city, it's a global metropolis where the international community is a stakeholder," he told reporters. But Holden Chow, a pro-Beijing lawmaker, said Beijing's national security laws would make the city safer for businesses after last year's unrest. "The United States should not intervene in our internal affairs and should stop intimidating us," he said.

Anthem law

Washington's decision came as fresh protests broke out in Hong Kong on Wednesday - this time over another controversial proposed law that criminalizes insults to the national anthem with up to three years in jail. Police surrounded the city's legislature where the bill was being debated, fired pepper ball rounds at protesters and arrested more than 300 people, mostly for unlawful assembly. "It's like a de facto curfew now," Nathan Law, a prominent pro-democracy advocate, told AFP. "I think the government has to understand why people are really angry." China is determined to avoid a repeat of massive protests last year, triggered by an unsuccessful bid to fast-track ex-

ecution and judiciary, which results in investigation and trial delays," he said. A three-month closure of most of the court system during the coronavirus outbreak compounded delays. A university student who asked to be identified as Windy has been on bail for the last seven months.

She is one of almost 600 people charged with rioting, a colonial-era law that carries up to a decade in jail. "I have to change my life plan as I can't get a job in a large company if I get convicted," she told AFP. Her case illustrates the volume passing through the courts. She is one of 95 people who were arrested one afternoon in September by police during clashes near the legislature and who are now all on trial together.

Earlier this month, the defendants appeared in a single courtroom for a mammoth procedural hearing that lasted hours as some 30 lawyers shared microphones to talk to the judge. Defendants filled the public benches as anxious family members packed the hall outside, some catching naps as the hearings dragged on. Those denied bail were brought up from the cells below after months in custody. — AFP



HONG KONG: Police stand guard on a road to deter pro-democracy protesters from blocking roads in the Mong Kok district of Hong Kong. — AFP

traditions to the mainland, in which the Hong Kong legislature was trashed by demonstrators.

Growing unrest

Under the "one country, two systems" model agreed before the city's return from Britain to China, Hong Kong is supposed to be guaranteed certain liberties until 2047 that are denied to those on the mainland. The mini-constitution that has governed Hong Kong's affairs since the handover obliges the territory's authorities to enact national security laws. But an effort to do so in 2003 was shelved after huge protests by Hong Kongers. China is motivated by fear of a younger Hong Kong generation that "does not agree with the political system of the Communist Party," said Hua Po, an independent political commentator based in Beijing. "If they lose

control over Hong Kong, the impact on the Chinese mainland will be huge," Hua said. Beijing has been infuriated by Hong Kongers - especially football fans - booing the national anthem to signal dissatisfaction with China.

Uighur camps

Meanwhile, the US Congress on Wednesday authorized sanctions against Chinese officials over the mass incarceration of Muslim Uighurs, ramping up pressure on another front in the troubled relationship between the Pacific powers. The House of Representatives voted with just one dissent in favor of the Uighur Human Rights Act, hours after Secretary of State Mike Pompeo took a major step to press China on another major issue — the autonomy of Hong Kong. — Agencies

Britain closes its embassy in North Korea

SEOUL: Britain has shuttered its embassy in North Korea and all its diplomats have left the country, its ambassador said yesterday as Pyongyang maintains strict entry controls to try to prevent a coronavirus outbreak. The North has closed its borders and insists it has not had a single case of the virus that emerged in neighbouring China late last year and has since swept the world. The closure was a temporary move and came because Pyongyang's "restrictions on entry to the country have made it impossible to rotate our staff and sustain the operation of the Embassy", a Foreign Office spokesperson said.

Ambassador Colin Crooks tweeted: "The #BritishEmbassy in #Pyongyang closed temporarily on 27 May 2020 and all diplomatic staff have left the #DPRK for the time being." The

Swedish embassy - which remains open - replied that they would miss him and his team "and hope they can return soon". The specialist news site NK News said the British diplomats crossed the border into China overland on Wednesday. Britain intends to maintain diplomatic relations with the North "and will seek to re-establish our presence in Pyongyang as soon as it is possible to do so", the Foreign Office said.

Early in the outbreak Pyongyang imposed tight quarantine restrictions on all resident foreigners, including a virtual lockdown in their own premises that Russian ambassador Alexander Matsegora described as "morally crushing". Those rules were later eased and dozens of diplomats and other foreigners were allowed to leave the country in March, when several missions in Pyongyang closed, among them the German embassy and France's representative office - Paris does not maintain full diplomatic relations with the North. Hundreds of foreigners remain in the country. Analysts say that the North is unlikely to have avoided infections, and that its ramshackle health system could struggle to cope with a major outbreak. —AFP

Lifestyle

Friday Times

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FRIDAY, MAY 29, 2020

Hello Dolly! Stylish mannequins liven up Vilnius restaurants

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A temple monkey eats an ice cream at the Rangiri Dambulla Rajamaha Viharaya Buddhist pilgrimage site in Dambulla.—AFP

Japan insect enthusiast puts cricket ramen on the menu

See Pages 20- 21

Japan insect enthusiast puts cricket ramen on the menu



In this picture Yuta Shinohara poses next to boxes filled with crickets, to be used as ingredients in cricket ramen home-cooking kits, at a kitchen in Tokyo. —AFP photos



A pot of crickets in boiling water, used as an ingredient as part of cricket ramen home-cooking kits.



Yuta Shinohara fries crickets.



Dried crickets (top), cocoons (left) and grasshoppers, ingredients as part of cricket ramen home-cooking kits, are seen in pots at a kitchen in Tokyo.



Yuta Shinohara cooks dried crickets.



Kento Sekine blends dried crickets, used as an ingredient as part of cricket ramen home-cooking kits.



A sample bowl of cricket ramen at a kitchen in Tokyo.

In a steamy Tokyo kitchen, a roasted scent wafts through the air as Yuta Shinohara prepares soup stock for ramen, derived not from pork or chicken, but crickets. "In this pan, we have 10,000 crickets, making stock for 100 bowls," Shinohara explained, as he stirred a large silver pot. The bowls of ramen produced by Shinohara and his team look and smell like those at restaurants across Japan: fine white noodles sit in a savoury soup, topped with a juicy slice of pork and fat pieces of pickled bamboo shoots.

There's little to give away the fact that 26-year-old Shinohara uses crickets in the broth, oil, soy sauce and even noodles. Except, that is, for the deep-fried insect perched next to a mitsuba leaf garnish on the soup's surface. Shinohara isn't a professional chef, in fact his preferred description of himself is "earth boy." And it's his love of all things nature-

related that led to him insect-based food. "I want to introduce the joy of insect eating, so that insects will be respected equally to animals and plants," he told AFP.

Shinohara's love affair with insects began as a child, when he spent most of his time in fields and bushes, catching grasshoppers and cicadas. He was so fascinated by creepy-crawlies that he eventually even tasted them—but only secretly. "I couldn't tell anyone that I love insects or I eat insects until I was about 20 years old," he says shyly. "I was afraid of becoming the odd one out or being bullied for it."

'Like a delicate sweet'

Humans have been eating insects for thousands of years and they remain a common food in many countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America and Oceania. But for many in the West and elsewhere, a cultural bias against insects as food remains



This picture shows crickets to be used as ingredients in cricket ramen home-cooking kits.



Yuta Shinohara ladles cricket sauce into plastic bags as part of cricket ramen home-cooking kits.

strong. Environmental and agriculture experts have been trying to break down those barriers, promoting insects as an environmentally friendly rich source of minerals and protein. But while Shinohara is a strong proponent of eating insects, he dislikes the idea of bugs as a “last resort” food.

He sees them instead as a delicacy that should be savoured. Take *phalera flavescens*, for example. The moth’s white-tufted caterpillar is regarded as a nuisance in Japan because of its penchant for cherry blossom trees. Shinohara however views the caterpillars as a treat. “They are really delicious. They taste like a delicate Japanese sweet,” he said. “The caterpillar only eats the leaves of cherry trees, so they carry the scent.” He is similarly fond of other caterpillars, including some that he says have a citrus flavour from their preferred trees. “Behind the flavour, you can imagine how the caterpillar savoured its life. That is so amazing.”

Cricket beer, silkworm tea

Shinohara and his team had planned to open an insect cuisine restaurant named Anticada in downtown Tokyo in April, but were forced to put it on hold because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Instead, they have designed a pack of cricket ramen that can be cooked at home, and have sold 600 sets online as of mid-May. “Thankfully, the latest batch sold out in three hours or so,” Shinohara said. His team is also experimenting with a variety of other dishes including an insect-based version of a popular Japanese side dish called *tsukudani*, usually made from seafood, meat or seaweed simmered in soy sauce.

Ayumu Yamaguchi, the team’s fermentation specialist, is overseeing the dish’s development. “We have tried different combinations of flavours to cook with these insects,” the 24-year-old said. “We found pistachio and cardamom go very well with silkworm cocoons.” Kazuhiko Horiguchi, who ordered a ramen pack complete with whole fried cricket, told AFP he was pleasantly surprised by the experience. “It was a very unique flavour, the kind I like. I was very impressed,” he said.

“I think many people can eat insects as food once they are cooked and served in dishes, even though they don’t want to see the insects in their original forms,” he said. “Cricket ramen could be a starter for insect cuisine for many people.” Shinohara has high hopes for a range of additional insect-based products, including beer made from crickets and a tea made from silkworm excrement. “I see so much potential.”—AFP



Hiromi Toyonaga (left) and Shota Shiratori (right) prepare cardboard boxes for delivery of their cricket ramen home-cooking kits.



Yuta Shinohara prepares to cook dried crickets.



Dried grasshoppers are seen in a pot before being cooked as a dessert side dish as part of cricket ramen home-cooking kits.



Yuta Shinohara smells frying crickets.



Mannequins are placed to provide social distancing at a restaurant in Vilnius, Lithuania on May 21, 2020 amid the novel coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic. – AFP photos



Mannequins are placed to provide social distancing at a restaurant in Vilnius.



Designer Rimante Rimgailaitė prepares mannequins to provide social distancing at a restaurant in Vilnius.

Hello Dolly!

Stylish mannequins liven up Vilnius restaurants



Some wear bags over their heads and others stylish black fedoras but all are dressed to the nines as they silently wait in restaurants and cafes across Lithuania's capital Vilnius. Seated at tables spaced four metres (yards) apart, dozens of elegant mannequins are intended to help clients dine at a safe social distance, and perhaps, also to up their style. Owners of Vilnius restaurants and fashion boutiques hit upon the idea after authorities further eased lockdown measures and allowed eateries and bars to operate indoors from Monday.

Mannequins are placed to provide social distancing at a restaurant in Vilnius.



Mannequins are placed to provide social distancing at a restaurant in Vilnius.



A designer from ANOTHER UNICORN poses with a mannequin used to provide social distancing at a restaurant in Vilnius, Lithuania.



Mannequins are placed to provide social distancing at a restaurant in Vilnius.

But customers have since been slow to return indoors after dining al fresco resumed earlier this month. "Under regulations, we can serve every second table but that created a feeling of emptiness in the restaurant," Bernie Ter Braak, the owner of "Cozy" restaurant, told AFP. "At first, I thought to put dolls or teddy bears but then I thought of well-dressed mannequins. "I reached out to nearby fashion boutiques to showcase their collections, and they happily joined the initiative," he added. Designer Diana Paukstyte said it was a winning combination. "I'm glad that more people will see my avant-garde clothes, hopefully the mannequins will also attract more customers to restaurants: we support them, they support us," she told AFP.



Mannequins are placed to provide social distancing at a restaurant in Vilnius.



Mannequins are placed to provide social distancing at a restaurant in Vilnius.

Over 60 male and female mannequins dressed up in fashions from 19 local boutiques will have round-the-clock reserved indoor seating at 14 of the capital's restaurants and cafes, according to Vilnius city hall. At each table, clients can also find business

cards letting them know where to buy any new threads that might catch their eye. Mayor Remigijus Simasius called the initiative "a perfect match of communal spirit and creativity working side by side which also brings us some tangible material benefits."

Lithuania, a Baltic state of 2.8 million people, has only 1,593 coronavirus cases, including 61 deaths. It joined neighbours Estonia and Latvia to reopen shared borders last Friday, allowing citizens to move freely for business and pleasure in a travel bubble after two months of coronavirus restrictions. -AFP



Mannequins are placed to provide social distancing at a restaurant in Vilnius.



Designer Diana Paukstyte prepares a mannequin to provide social distancing at a restaurant in Vilnius.



Mannequins are placed to provide social distancing at a restaurant in Vilnius.

Lifestyle | Feature



Grab motorcycle riders and volunteers taking part in a first aid class by Grab motorcycle rider Pham Quoc Viet's SOS Angels team in Hanoi. — AFP photos



Grab motorcycle rider Pham Quoc Viet (center) helping a traffic accident victim on a street in Hanoi.

RIDING TO THE RESCUE: HANOI MOTORBIKE TAXI DRIVERS TURN FIRST AIDERS



Grab motorcycle rider Pham Quoc Viet's helmet, Grab jacket, first aid medical kit and reflector strap at his house in Hanoi.



Grab motorcycle rider Pham Quoc Viet (center) teaching Grab riders during his SOS Angels first aid class in Hanoi.



Grab motorcycle rider Pham Quoc Viet riding his motorcycle during a night patrol to help traffic accident victims on the streets of Hanoi.

On the tarmac of a dark Hanoi street, motorbike taxi driver Pham Quoc Viet mops the bloodied knee of a fellow rider, one of the hundreds of traffic victims he's tended to in the chaotically congested Vietnamese capital. By day, Viet, 33, works for Southeast Asian ride-hailing firm Grab, scooting along the tree-lined boulevards and winding alleys of the city. But from 9.30 pm until 1.30 am, he is an unofficial emergency responder, a red flashing light secured to his handlebars as he patrols the streets on two wheels. "When I first came to Hanoi to work, I thought about what I could do to help those I saw injured in accidents," said Viet, who moved to the city in 2017.

The year before, he had been involved in a serious motorbike crash that saw him sprawled on the roadside, glimpsing passers-by too afraid to come to his aid. "I remember that desperate feeling when someone walks on by... I didn't want anyone else to get into the same situation and feel abandoned," he told AFP. There are six million motorbikes in Hanoi, their dominance and numbers so great that pedestrians struggle to cross roads and minor scrapes are an everyday hazard. Although more serious accidents are now relatively rare in the capital, victims often face a challenging wait for help as congestion blocks the path of medics and fear of litigation prevents onlookers from offering a hand.

After starting his rescue work alone, Viet now has a team of close to 50 volunteers, most of whom work in Hanoi. Two-thirds are ride-hailing drivers, but there are engineers, mechanics and students too who form a network of eyes on the ground and social media. Many of the team have been trained in first aid, largely by Viet at weekly sessions, and they keep each other up to date via Vietnamese messaging app Zalo.

Nguyen Le Giang, 34, who worked in a

textile workshop before starting as a Grab bike driver three years ago, pushed her husband and mother to help around the house and with caring for her two children so she could join the nightly patrol. "The first time I gave first aid I was a bit scared," she said. "The man told me his foot was painful but

isolation order was lifted at the end of April, ride-hailing drivers suffered considerably during the pandemic. "We earned much less money... it was very difficult but all of us have overcome it," said Viet, explaining that most continued to patrol and buy supplies despite their reduced income. And there was no dis-



Grab motorcycle rider Pham Quoc Viet (left) teaching first aid to Grab riders during his SOS Angels class in Hanoi.

there was no blood and the bone wasn't broken. He could not stand up or walk, though. "I hadn't seen anything like that before so I had to make a video call to Viet."

Viet and his team are currently helping around 100 people a month, with each member spending up to \$2 daily on equipment such as bandages, usually around a 10th of their income. Although Hanoi's streets are once again bustling after a weeks-long social

crimination when it came to who they treated. "Some members asked me 'if the injured are not motorbike taxi drivers, why should we care about them?' I told them: 'Imagine those people were your relatives, your friends, would you still say that?'"—AFP



A handout photo made available on May 27, 2020 by the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam shows “The Body of Christ Supported by Angels” (1587) by Flemish 16th-century master Bartholomeus Spranger which was donated to the museum by Dutch art collector and dealer Bob Haboldt. —AFP

Rijksmuseum given unique painting to remember virus victims

Amsterdam’s Rijksmuseum will display a famous 16th-century painting donated to commemorate victims of the coronavirus when it re-opens next week, almost three months after closing its doors, the museum said Wednesday. The 1587 painting by Flemish master Bartholomeus Spranger called “The Body of Christ Supported by Angels” was given to the museum by Dutch art collector and dealer Bob Haboldt. “In the first place, it is a gift to everyone to commemorate the victims of COVID-19,” Haboldt said in a statement, released by the Rijksmuseum. “It also serves as an example, encouraging everyone to do good for museums.”

Haboldt said the donation was to make a contribution “and on how we could best memorialise this period.” “Coronavirus has affected me, in the first place emotionally,” said the art dealer, who has offices in Amsterdam, Paris and New York. Made around 1587, the oil-on-copper painting depicts angels supporting the body of Christ, illuminated by heavenly light as they remove the body from a tomb. Also called an “imago pietatis” or image of compassion, the painting was originally made for private devotion.

It became famous after another Dutch painter, the German-born Hendrick Goltzius copied it as a print that was reproduced and distributed in large numbers, the Rijksmuseum said. Haboldt

originally sold the painting at the European Fine Art Fair, commonly known as TEFAF, in the beginning of March, Dutch media reported.

However, organisers cut short TEFAF, one of the world’s premier fine arts fairs after one of the exhibitors tested positive for the new coronavirus. The painting’s sale was annulled shortly afterwards and Haboldt decided not to put it up for sale again, the authoritative daily NRC newspaper said on its website. Neither Haboldt nor the Rijksmuseum put a price on the painting but a larger work by Spranger carried a tag of 5.5 million euros (\$6 million) at TEFAF, the NRC said.

Rijksmuseum director Taco Dibbits said the famous institution was “deeply grateful to Bob Haboldt for his generous gesture.” “In these difficult times we have seen how art can offer solace and be a source of hope and reflection,” said Dibbits. Amsterdam’s famous Rijks and Van Gogh museums as well as restaurants around the country are reopening Monday under strict conditions, following almost three months of lockdown because of the coronavirus pandemic which has claimed 5,781 lives so far.—AFP

France names first indigenous director of top museum

Emmanuel Kasarherou made history Wednesday as the first indigenous person ever to head a major French national museum when he is named director of the Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac museum in Paris. A Kanak from New Caledonia in the Pacific, the expert in Oceanic cultures—whose treasures form a major part of the museum’s collection of indigenous art from Africa, Asia and the Americas—is a former head of the breathtaking Renzo Piano-designed Jean-Marie Tjibaou Cultural Centre in the New Caledonian capital Noumea.



In this file photo taken on October 14, 2013 Emmanuel Kasarherou, curator of the exhibition “Kanak, l’art est une parole” (Kanak, art is word), poses at the Quai Branly museum in Paris.—AFP

Kasarherou, 60 — who has co-curated two major exhibitions at Quai Branly including “Kanak: Art is a Word”—has been the museum’s deputy head of collections since 2014. He was the founding director of the much-praised museum which opened in his homeland in 1998 and was

named after a Kanak leader killed in 1989. With restitution of looted artistic and cultural treasures now a political hot potato for many major ethnographic collections, Kasarherou could find himself having to navigate a minefield.

Colonial hangover

He has said that he was committed to a “dialogue between cultures” and would continue to cooperate with African countries, some of whom are demanding the return of artefacts taken during the colonial era. Although a hit with the public, the Quai Branly museum was hugely controversial when it opened 14 years ago both for its architecture and for the way it displayed indigenous art, with some critics calling it “colonialist” and “regressive” for the way it seemed to fetishise indigenous by exhibiting it in cabinets of curiosity style.

Initially called the Museum of First Arts (or primitive art), the name was changed before it opened in 2006 to its address alongside the River Seine in a bid to calm sensitivities. Former French president Jacques Chirac, himself a fervent collector of indigenous art, bulldozed the project through by merging two previous collections, despite a fierce rearguard action by some academics. But Chirac said it was time to give non-Western art its proper place in the canon.

Having made sure it would be generously funded, his name was later added to its title. The French minister of the country’s far-flung overseas territories, Annick Girardin, was among the first to hail Kasarherou’s appointment, tweeting, “It’s a first. No other Kanak has ever led a major museum in mainland France. Bravo, much deserved for such a prestigious post.” He replaces Stephane Martin, the Quai Branly’s founding director who left his post last year to join the French national audit office.—AFP

‘Blasphemy’ and satire spell trouble for Morocco actor, Tunisia student

A Moroccan movie star has been prosecuted over “blasphemous” remarks against Islam, a court official said, while Amnesty International called Wednesday for similar charges to be dropped against a student in Tunisia. Moroccan actor Rafik Boubker, 47, stands accused over a video on social media in which he appears “in an abnormal state, making blasphemous remarks against Islam and attacking the sacredness of worship”, said the national security force DGSN. In the video, he appears to insult imams, call for making religious ablutions with “whisky and vodka” and praise the benefits of alcohol for “connecting with God”.

Islam is the state religion in Morocco, and while drinking alcohol is forbidden for Muslims, it is largely tolerated. Alcoholic drinks are available in some shops, bars and restaurants, except during the Muslim holy fasting month of Ramadan, which has just ended.

The DGSN said in a statement published overnight that it had opened a judicial investigation after receiving “a number of complaints” and the actor was taken into custody Tuesday evening. A judicial official later said he had been charged over “blasphemous” remarks against Islam, and a prosecution spokesman told AFP he had been freed on bail of 5,000 dirhams (450 euros) pending a July 14 court hearing.

Boubker, who has had roles in several hit Moroccan films including “Road to Kabul”, apologised for his “inappropriate remarks” in a new video on Instagram on Tuesday. “I was not in a normal state. I just wanted to make a joke,” he said. He risks being sentenced to between six

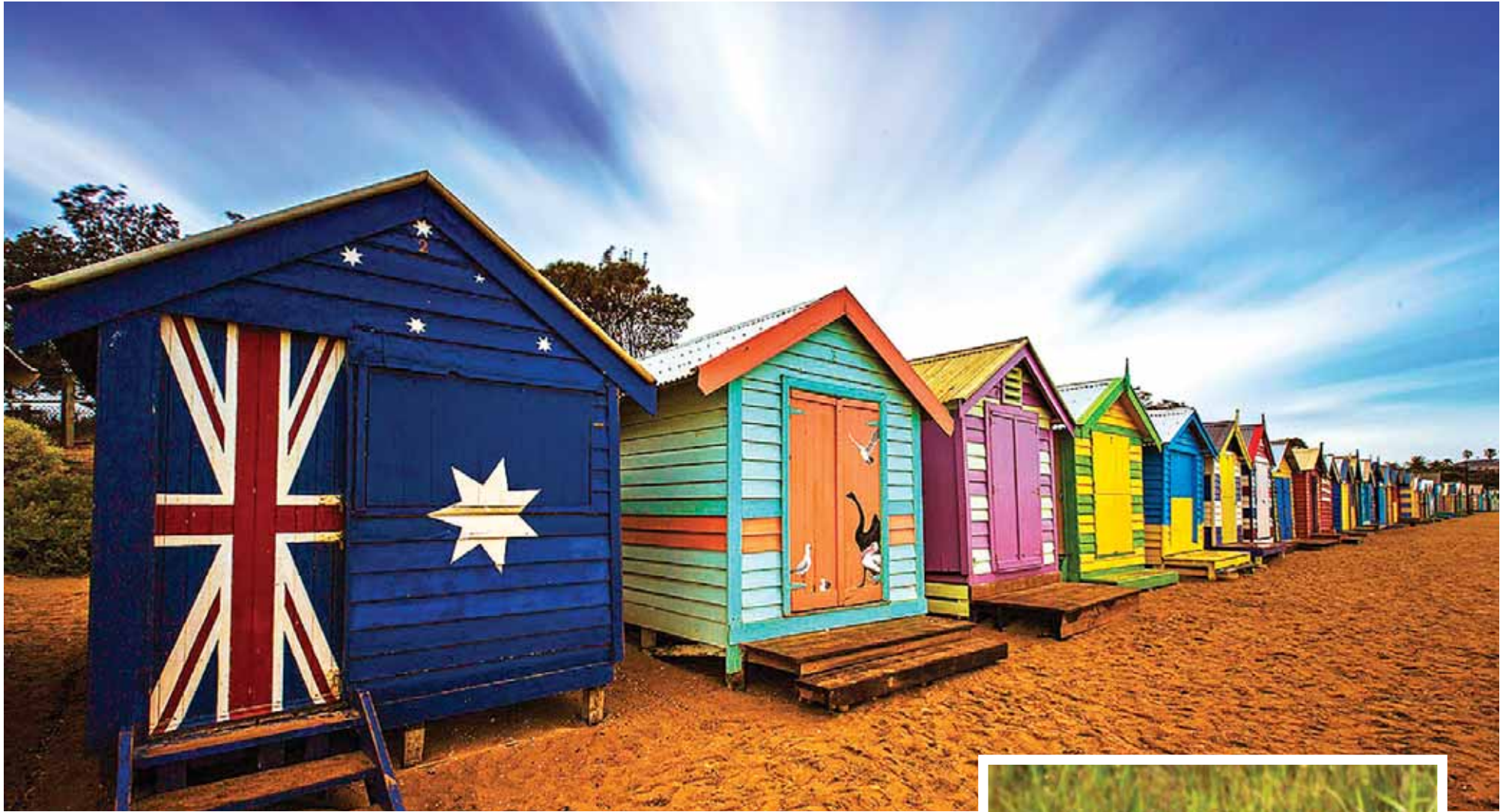
months and two years in prison and a fine of 20,000 to 200,000 dirhams (\$2,000 to \$20,000).



Moroccan actor Rafik Boubker

Satirical Facebook post

Also on Wednesday, rights group Amnesty International urged Tunisian authorities to drop all charges against student Emna Charki, facing trial for attacking Islam on Facebook. Charki, 27, was prosecuted after she shared a post about the novel coronavirus, satirising the style of the Quran. She was due in court on charges of attacking the sanctity of religion, attacking morality and inciting violence, lawyer Ines Trabelsi told AFP earlier in May. Amnesty said the student has received threats against her life and accused the Tunisian authorities of failing to act. “What’s happening to me is not normal,” Charki told AFP. “For sharing a post that was not even mine, I’ve been prosecuted and received death threats.”—AFP



Tourism is restarting in *Australia's Victoria* state following bushfires and coronavirus

By James Gabriel Martin, Lonely Planet Writer

The past year has seen Victoria struggling with bushfires and COVID-19, but there is good news on the horizon for the Australian state. With coronavirus cases staying low, the area is beginning to function in a more familiar way, as restrictions are lifted and tourism is preparing to once again start up. In a statement, Premier Daniel Andrews addressed the changes coming in the next few months, saying that the plan is to reopen Victoria in phases with safety in mind. "With the rate of community transmission remaining low, and the rate of testing remaining high, we're in a position to make a number of additional changes. Just as we can ease some restrictions, some of our other measures must remain in place," Premier Andrews said.

The state has seen a return to face-to-face learning in schools, while outdoor playgrounds, skate parks and communal gyms have reopened. From 31 May, home gatherings of 20 people will be allowed, while outdoor gatherings will also be limited to the same number. This will also see overnight stays becoming available at both

private residencies and hotels, with a view of getting the tourism industry started again. The premier said that campgrounds and caravan parks without communal facilities such as kitchens and bathrooms will also be able to reopen.

31 May will also see entertainment and cultural venues like galleries, museums, drive-in cinemas and historic sites opening their doors along with zoos and outdoor amusement parks. Physical distancing and a limit of up to 20 patrons per space will apply, and indoor venues will be required to keep customer contact details. Swimming pools will also open with limits of 20 people and additional safety requirements in place. The message to Victorians also stated that those working from home should do so until at least the end of June. Depending on community transmission and testing rates, Victoria will look to further relax restrictions from 22 June. From that date, up to 50 people will be permitted in restaurants, cafes, galleries, museums and for the first time, cinemas and theatres. The ski season will also open on this date.—www.lonelyplanet.com





A balloon vendor wearing a facemask walks with his merchandise next to Yangtze River in Wuhan, China's central Hubei province on Wednesday. — AFP

Air corridors can kickstart post-virus tourism: UN agency

So-called air corridors allowing tourists to travel between countries at low risk of coronavirus contagion could help to restart the global tourism industry, a UN agency said on Wednesday. The corridors would represent the “first steps” towards re-establishing international links, said Zurab Pololikashvili, secretary-general of the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO).

The idea has already gained traction in parts of Europe—officials in Spain’s tourism-reliant Balearic Islands have suggested German travellers should be allowed to fly back as soon as possible. The number of tourists worldwide could fall by between 60 and 80 percent in 2020 as a result of the pandemic, according to UNWTO forecasts published in early May.

Countries with large tourism sectors in Europe and beyond have suffered badly as

travel restrictions have decimated visitor numbers and left many businesses that rely on the trade struggling to survive. Attractions including Italy’s buried city of Pompeii and Bethlehem’s Church of the Nativity have reopened in recent days, but travel restrictions have seen many sites remain virtually empty.

Pololikashvili said the UNWTO had opposed the travel shutdowns from the start and criticised the coordination of lockdown measures as chaotic. He called on the European Union to reopen not only to tourism within the bloc but also to external countries such as Turkey, arguing that it was “impossible to have 100 percent security” from the virus. Measures such as so-called health passports, better communication, rapid COVID-19 tests and temperature checks could all help to reduce the risks, he said.—AFP

Kids Page

Daily SuDoku

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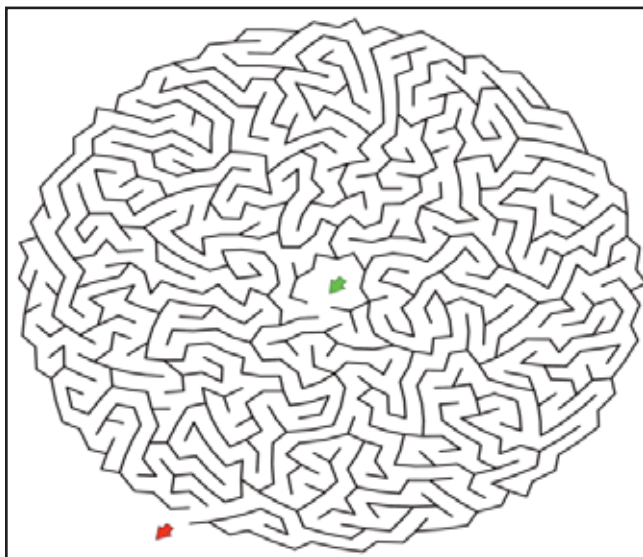
very hard

Yesterday's Solution

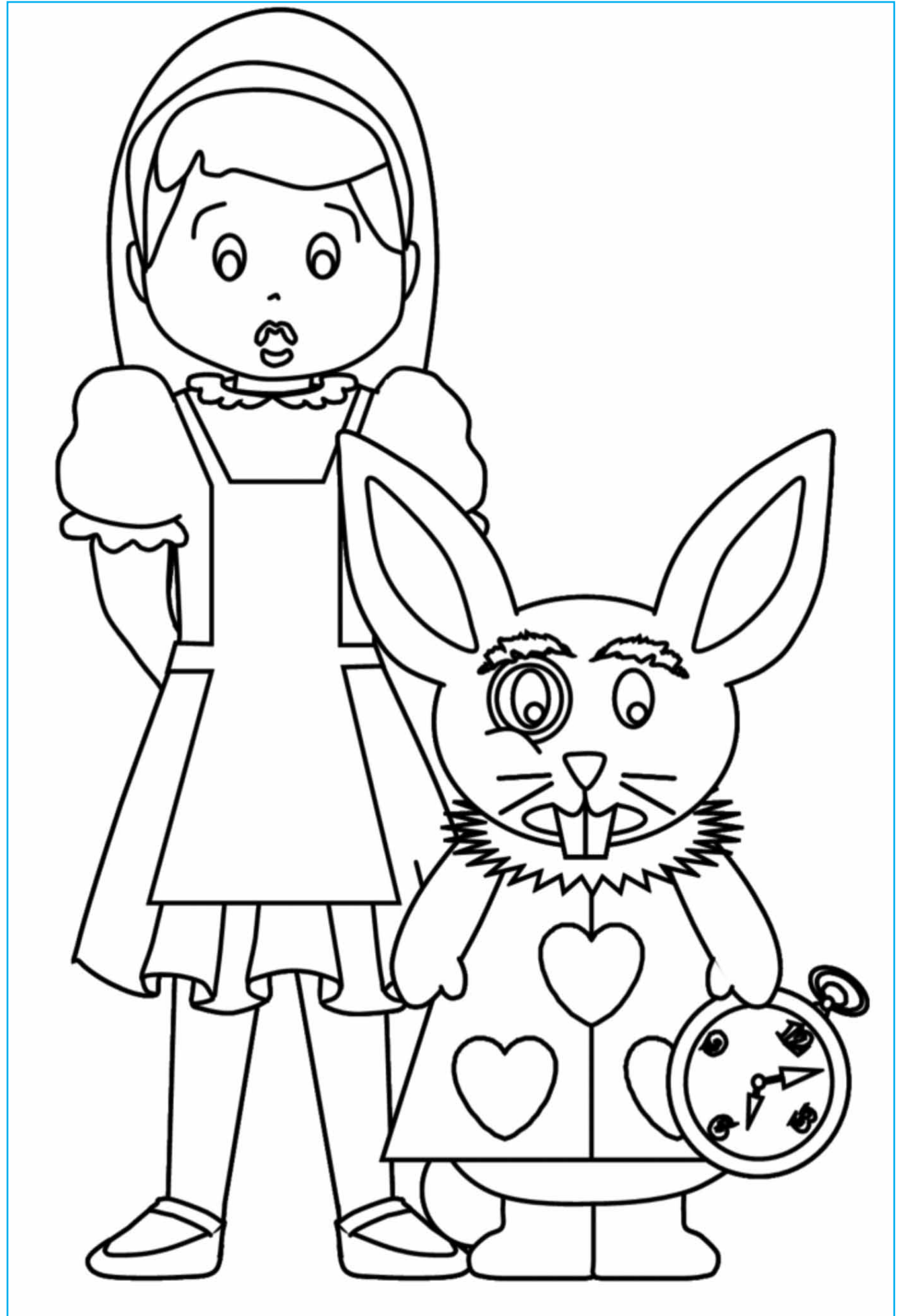
7	6	5	8	3	2	4	1	9
8	1	4	6	9	5	7	2	3
9	3	2	7	4	1	8	6	5
3	2	8	9	7	6	1	5	4
1	4	9	2	5	3	6	8	7
6	5	7	4	1	8	3	9	2
4	9	1	5	6	7	2	3	8
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easy

Kids Mazes



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Flower Power

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R	L	G	D	I	H	C	R	O	L	J	B	Q
H	E	A	E	L	Q	B	U	G	X	I	B	X
H	Y	W	V	R	O	V	Q	S	Q	Y	L	I
Q	S	F	O	E	A	G	M	P	F	S	Y	Y
U	L	U	S	L	N	N	I	R	Q	N	X	A
M	R	Q	W	X	F	D	I	R	O	A	C	S
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| ASTER | HONEYSUCKLE | ORCHID |
| CROCUS | LAVENDER | PANSY |
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Stars

STAR TRACK

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

This is a good day for getting out of the trenches and into the air for a fresh, new perspective on a situation, Aries. Don't dwell on things beneath or behind you. Keep looking up. Pick up the phone and call a close friend you haven't spoken with in a while. There may be a great deal of catching up to do. In times of global uncertainty, we need to remember the importance of maintaining contact with old buddies.

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

Don't twiddle your thumbs today waiting for someone else to make the first move, Taurus. The burning restlessness inside you is a clear sign that things have to happen. Don't wait any longer to quench this thirst for adventure. There are important things to be accomplished, so get off the couch and move. Delegate tasks to others, whether at home or remotely, to speed up the process. You can work this from many angles.

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

Keep yourself open to all the possibilities that the day brings, Gemini. You'll be surprised at the incredible opportunities that come your way when you stop judging people and their actions. This is a time to be humorous and social (from an appropriate distance). Keep things light, and remember to keep a healthy perspective on any situation. Words will go a long way today, so make sure to use them with great care.

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

Make sure there's an equal amount of give and take in your day, Cancer. Sometimes when you love someone, you just want to keep giving and giving to demonstrate your incredible love. Be sure that you aren't draining yourself of valuable energy that you need for yourself, because maintaining your health is absolutely critical now. Also be sure that the people on the receiving end are also giving their fair share in return.

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

You may be at a point where you just want to stop and rest, Leo. This is the time to do so. You deserve a break, so take this day and enjoy yourself. While there's often more fun to be had in numbers, the current reality of social distancing translates this into conference calls and online parties, so plan accordingly. The more of yourself that you share with others, the more respect you'll gain from them.

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

Don't let things bother you, Virgo. Have confidence that you're on the right track. Your strong will and erratic habits will prove quite effective on a day like today, when things are floundering and indecision abounds. It's your opportunity to grab the reins where other people have dropped them. If this puts you center stage, you're good with it. You know exactly what to say.

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

Frolic in a wide-open field today, Libra. Pick some wildflowers and put them in a vase on your kitchen table. If you can't leave the house or go beyond the back yard, do something equivalent to frolicking and picking. Small things can bring sunshine and hope to a stagnant situation. Clear your mind of unnecessary clutter and open it to new possibilities. Nature remains your best friend, coronavirus notwithstanding.

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

Tap into the electrifying energy of a day that encourages safe, appropriate social interactions and activities, Scorpio. You'll find plenty of oxygen to keep your internal fire raging. You'll find plenty of oxygen to keep your internal fire raging. Take the lead and others will follow eagerly. The chords struck within you today will surely resonate with larger plans that you've been secretly brewing in the back of your mind for some time now.

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

Social contact may be limited to Zoom conversations and waving to masked strangers on the street, Sagittarius, but the factors of risk and reward are still in play. From the remove of safe social distancing, the "dangerous stranger" myth is more about fear of the unknown than about imminent physical threat. By taking that risk today, you may be rewarded with a wonderful experience. Either way, you'll be safe and healthy.

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

Take off to the stars today, Capricorn, and keep your mind and heart open to all that's possible when you have faith in yourself and the work you do. Mastery of a skill comes when you have the guts to always take it to the next level. Consider different areas of your life that require more of that confidence at this time. Balance courage with common sense as you implement this attitude in as many ways as possible.

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

The masculine and feminine sides of your personality should be working together well today, Aquarius. The key is to keep the energy moving. Try not to stagnate on any one issue. Use your words and nurturing abilities to soothe others' worries. Actively direct your energy outward with the tender sensitivity that you possess within. Your inner strength is one of your most valuable resources.

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

There is power in your words today, Pisces, along with a great deal of emotional self-confidence. Things may be moving rapidly, but you have the strength and swiftness of mind to keep up. You can seize great opportunities when you team up with others. While safely sheltering in place tends to limit your social contact, you can still proudly display your elegant attire by way of video or pics posted to social media.

Country Codes

Afghanistan	0093	Iran	0098
Albania	00355	Iraq	00964
Algeria	00213	Ireland	00353
Andorra	00376	Italy	0039
Angola	00244	Ivory Coast	00225
Anguilla	001264	Jamaica	001876
Antigua	001268	Japan	0081
Argentina	0054	Jordan	00962
Armenia	00374	Kazakhstan	007
Australia	0061	Kenya	00254
Austria	0043	Kiribati	00686
Bahamas	001242	Kuwait	00965
Bahrain	00973	Kyrgyzstan	00996
Bangladesh	00880	Laos	00856
Barbados	001246	Latvia	00371
Belarus	00375	Lebanon	00961
Belgium	0032	Liberia	00231
Belize	00501	Libya	00218
Benin	00229	Lithuania	00370
Bermuda	001441	Luxembourg	00352
Bhutan	00975	Macau	00853
Bolivia	00591	Macedonia	00389
Bosnia	00387	Madagascar	00261
Botswana	00267	Majorca	0034
Brazil	0055	Malawi	00265
Brunei	00673	Malaysia	0060
Bulgaria	00359	Maldives	00960
Burkina Faso	00226	Mali	00223
Burundi	00257	Malta	00356
Cambodia	00855	Marshall Islands	00692
Cameroon	00237	Martinique	00596
Canada	001	Mauritania	00222
Cape Verde	00238	Mauritius	00230
Cayman Islands	001345	Mayotte	00269
Central African Republic	00236	Mexico	0052
Chad	00235	Micronesia	00691
Chile	0056	Moldova	00373
China	0086	Monaco	00377
Colombia	0057	Mongolia	00976
Comoros	00269	Montserrat	001664
Congo	00242	Morocco	00212
Cook Islands	00682	Mozambique	00258
Costa Rica	00506	Myanmar (Burma)	0095
Croatia	00385	Namibia	00264
Cuba	0053	Nepal	00977
Cyprus	00357	Netherlands (Holland)	0031
Cyprus (Northern)	0090392	Netherlands Antilles	00599
Czech Republic	00420	New Caledonia	00687
Denmark	0045	New Zealand	0064
Diego Garcia	00246	Nicaragua	00505
Djibouti	00253	Niger	00227
Dominica	001767	Nigeria	00234
Dominican Republic	001809	Niue	00683
Ecuador	00593	Norfolk Island	00672
Egypt	0020	Northern Ireland (UK)	0044
El Salvador	00503	North Korea	00850
England (UK)	0044	Norway	0047
Equatorial Guinea	00240	Oman	00968
Eritrea	00291	Pakistan	0092
Estonia	00372	Palau	00680
Ethiopia	00251	Panama	00507
Falkland Islands	00500	Papua New Guinea	00675
Faroe Islands	00298	Paraguay	00595
Fiji	00679	Peru	0051
Finland	00358	Philippines	0063
France	0033	Poland	0048
French Guiana	00594	Portugal	00351
French Polynesia	00689	Puerto Rico	001787
Gabon	00241	Qatar	00974
Gambia	00220	Romania	0040
Georgia	00995	Russian Federation	007
Germany	0049	Rwanda	00250
Ghana	00233	Saint Helena	00290
Gibraltar	00350	Saint Kitts	001869
Greece	0030	Saint Lucia	001758
Greenland	00299	Saint Pierre	00508
Grenada	001473	Saint Vincent	001784
Guadeloupe	00590	Samoa US	00684
Guam	001671	Samoa West	00685
Guatemala	00502	San Marino	00378
Guinea	00224	Sao Tome	00239
Guyana	00592	Saudi Arabia	00966
Haiti	00509	Scotland (UK)	0044
Holland (Netherlands)	0031	Senegal	00221
Honduras	00504	Seychelles	00284
Hong Kong	00852	Sierra Leone	00232
Hungary	0036	Singapore	0065
Ibiza (Spain)	0034	Slovakia	00421
Iceland	00354	Slovenia	00386
India	0091	Solomon Islands	00677
Indian Ocean	00873	Somalia	00252
Indonesia	0062	South Africa	0027

Business

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LOS ANGELES, CA: A shop advertises a job opening while holiday beachgoers head to Venice Beach. The number of people filing new claims for state unemployment benefits likely totaled a seasonally adjusted 2.1 million for the week ended May 23, down from 2.438 million the prior week.— AFP

A second wave of US layoffs feared

Fed: Economic outlook highly uncertain, businesses 'pessimistic'

WASHINGTON: Job cuts by US state and local governments whose budgets have been crushed fighting the COVID-19 pandemic and more second-wave layoffs in the private sector likely contributed last week to a 10th straight week of more than 2 million Americans seeking unemployment benefits. The Labor Department's weekly jobless claims report yesterday, the most timely data on the economy's health, is also expected to show the number of people on jobless benefits hitting a new record high in mid-May.

The report is being watched to assess how quickly the economy rebounds after businesses shuttered in mid-March to control the spread of COVID-19 and almost ground the country to a halt. While non-essential businesses are starting to reopen, claims have stayed at astonishingly high levels. "I am concerned that we are seeing a second round of private sector layoffs that, coupled with a rising number of public sector cut backs is

driving up the number of people unemployed," said Joel Naroff, chief economist at Naroff Economics in Holland, Pennsylvania.

"If that is the case, given the pace of reopening, we could be in for an extended period of extraordinarily high unemployment. And that means the recovery will be slower and will take a lot longer." The number of people filing new claims for state unemployment benefits likely totaled a seasonally adjusted 2.1 million for the week ended May 23, down from 2.438 million the prior week, according to a Reuters survey of economists.

The number has fallen steadily since hitting a record 6.867 million in late March, but have not registered below 2 million since mid-March. State governors have requested \$500 billion to help cover public health expenses and lost tax revenues, underscoring the devastating impact of COVID-19 on the economy.

The Commerce Department was expected to

confirm in another report yesterday that gross domestic product contracted at a 4.8 percent annualize rate in the first quarter, the deepest decline in output since the 2007-09 Great Recession. The second wave of layoffs could grow bigger, with Boeing announcing on Wednesday it was eliminating more than 12,000 US jobs and also disclosing it planned "several thousand remaining layoffs" in the next few months.

Outlook clouded

After weeks of economic shutdowns, the outlook for a US rebound remains "highly uncertain" and businesses nationwide are gloomy about how quickly things can return to normal, the Federal Reserve said Wednesday.

At the same time firms worry that generous unemployment benefits make it difficult to retain workers or to bring them back to their posts once they are able to reopen, according to the Fed's

beige book survey of economic conditions.

The survey showed activity in the world's largest economy continued to fall sharply in recent weeks in all regions, with auto sales falling sharply and tenants unable to pay rent.

The Federal Reserve's Beige Book comprising anecdotal information on business activity from contacts nationwide on or before May 18, was equally grim. Its depiction of the labor market said "employment continued to decrease in all districts" and "continued to fall sharply in retail and in leisure and hospitality sectors." In addition to the spill over to segments of the economy not initially impacted by the closure of nonessential businesses, some economists said initial claims were staying elevated also because of backlogs from the flood of applications that overwhelmed state unemployment offices. But this was dismissed by many who argued these backlogs should have been eliminated by now. —Agencies

Business

BoE's Andrew Bailey: UK risks 'longer and harder recovery'

Fresh efforts may be needed to boost growth

LONDON: Bank of England Governor Andrew Bailey said Wednesday Britain's economic recovery from the coronavirus pandemic could be "longer and harder" than anticipated and fresh bids to boost growth may be needed. Bailey hinted that further interest rate cuts and quantitative easing—which sees the bank buy government bonds, printing new money in the process—could be in the pipeline.

"The Bank stands ready to do whatever we can to support UK households and businesses during this period of economic disruption and get through this together," he stated in an article in *The Guardian* newspaper.

"In view of the risks we face, it is of course right that we consider what further options, such as cutting interest rates into unprecedented territory, might be available in the future. "But it is also important that we consider very carefully the issues that such choices would give rise to."

Britain's economy shrank in the first quarter at the fastest pace since the global financial crisis as the country went into coronavirus lockdown in late March. The Bank of England had already cut its benchmark interest rate to a record-low 0.1 percent from 0.25 percent to tackle the coming

"economic shock" from the pandemic. Earlier this month, it predicted UK output would crash by 14 percent this year due to COVID-19, as it left the rate unchanged.

The British government has launched state-backed micro-loans of up to £50,000 (\$61,200, 55,700 euros) for small businesses and a costly "furlough" jobs retention scheme under which the government is paying the bulk of wages until October. But Bailey noted Wednesday that about one in five companies in Britain had still reported temporarily closing or a pause in trading, while nearly a quarter had seen their turnover halve. Meanwhile, welfare claims have surged and the unemployment rate is now likely around 10 percent, he said.

"No one can be sure exactly how the pandemic will unfold," Bailey added in his article. "There are reasons to believe that economic activity will return at a faster pace than in many past recessions, but this depends on how the measures continue to be eased, what degree of natural caution is shown by people, and how much longer-term damage is done to the economy."

"The risks are undoubtedly on the downside for a longer and harder recovery." The government



LONDON: People adhere to social distancing guidelines as they queue to enter a Lloyds bank in Barrow-in-Furness, north west England. Bank of England Governor Andrew Bailey said Britain's economic recovery from the coronavirus pandemic could be "longer and harder" than anticipated and fresh bids to boost growth may be needed. — AFP

said Tuesday it was ready to support coronavirus-ravaged companies whose collapse would harm the economy, stressing any funds would be given on a "last resort" basis.

The business support plan—dubbed Project Birch—would only apply once a company had exhausted other sources of funding such as existing investors and banks. — AFP

Lufthansa board rejects \$10bn EU bailout

FRANKFURT: Lufthansa's \$10 billion government bailout was thrown into doubt on Wednesday after the German airline's supervisory board refused to accept the conditions attached by Brussels.

The board, which had been expected to sign off on the aid, instead refused EU requirements that Lufthansa permanently give up take-off and landing slots at Frankfurt and Munich airports, where it commands a two-thirds market share. The bailout plan nevertheless remains "the only viable alternative" to insolvency, Lufthansa said, and negotiations will continue over EU demands that would "lead to a weakening" of its airport hubs as well as its ability to repay loans.

The European Commission had "no comment on the specific case", a spokesperson said.

Terms discussed with Brussels included the forfeiture of 72 slots used by 12 of 300 jets based at the two airports, a source familiar with the matter said. But whereas Lufthansa wanted to reclaim the slots after repaying aid, the Commission sought permanent concessions, the person said. Airlines including Air France-KLM and the main US carriers have all sought government aid to ride out the



MUNICH: Planes of the German airline Lufthansa are parked at the "Franz-Josef-Strauss" airport in Munich, southern Germany, on Wednesday. —AFP

coronavirus crisis, which has brought air travel to a near-halt.

The bailout deal announced on Monday would see the German government take a 20 percent stake in Lufthansa in return for a 6 billion euro injection of new capital, most of it non-voting, combined with 3 billion in state-backed loans. The Lufthansa group employs around 138,000 people, according to its website. Economy Minister Peter Altmaier said after the board announcement he still expected Brussels to approve the package.

"It's not only in Germany's interests but also in the European Union's interests to avoid a sell-off of strategic interests in the industrial sector as a result of this pandemic," Altmaier added.

Some rival airlines disagree. Low-cost carrier Ryanair's Chief Executive Michael O'Leary vowed on Tuesday to challenge a bailout package he said would "mas-

sively distort competition" in the German market for the next five years.

"It is deeply ironic that the German government, which lectures all other EU countries about respecting EU rules, has no difficulty breaking the State Aid rules when it comes to Lufthansa," O'Leary said in a Ryanair statement. But the German Cockpit Association, a pilots' union, also warned that giving up slots to budget rivals would threaten European jobs and labor standards. "Some airlines in the low-cost segment have large financial reserves because they have disregarded the rights of employees for years and ... passed on their business risk to their employees," the group said.

"It cannot be the goal of German and European rescue policy to save companies from insolvency with billions in cash and at the same time put them at a severe disadvantage." — Reuters

India may pump \$20bn into virus-hit banks

MUMBAI/NEW DELHI: India may need to inject up to 1.5 trillion rupees (\$19.81 billion) into its state-owned lenders as their pile of soured assets is expected to double during the coronavirus pandemic, three government and banking sources told Reuters.

The government initially considered a budget of around 250 billion rupees for bank recapitalizations but that has risen significantly, a senior government source with direct knowledge of the matter said, with loan defaults likely to rise as businesses take a severe hit from nationwide lockdowns to tackle the coronavirus.

"The situation is very grim," the source said, adding that banks would require fresh funds soon. All the sources asked not to be identified as the discussions are private. India's finance ministry did not respond to a request for comment during working hours on Wednesday.

The capital plans were still being discussed and a final decision could be taken in the second half of the fiscal year, a second government source said. India's fiscal year runs from April 1.

Indian banks were already saddled with 9.35 trillion rupees of non-performing assets at the end of September 2019, or roughly 9.1% of their total assets at the time. Reuters reported earlier this month that bad loans would likely rise to 18-20% of total assets by the end of the fiscal year next March, as 20-25% of outstanding loans are considered at risk of default.

A nationwide lockdown entering its third month is expected to lead to a contraction in economic growth in the current financial year, according to several global rating agencies, which have also changed their outlook on the banking sector to negative. Economic recovery is likely to take a long time. — Reuters

Business

Why US energy CEOs will get big payouts despite oil meltdown

CEOs get millions for negative, middle-of-the pack returns

BOSTON/NEW YORK: National Oilwell Varco Inc (NOV) has had a rough few years: Since 2017, the Houston company, whose drilling equipment is in major oilfields worldwide, has lost two-thirds of its value, costing shareholders a combined \$9 billion.

Despite that performance, Chief Executive Clay Williams pocketed \$3.3 million in stock in late February, solely because his company's total shareholder return over the three years ending in 2019 was not as bad as most of his beleaguered peers. US energy executives have retained such lavish payouts even as they have struggled for years to deliver shareholder returns - despite massive growth in domestic shale oil production.

Now executives' compensation is being insulated from the pain of the worst energy crisis in four decades, caused by the coronavirus pandemic. Stay-at-home orders to fight the virus have crushed demand for fossil fuels worldwide, forcing companies to cut thousands of jobs, slash billions in capital spending and, in some cases, fight for survival. On Thursday, NOV suspended its dividend to conserve cash.

Company spokesman Blake McCarthy said NOV has recently worked to make executive pay terms more "shareholder friendly," including a new cap on payouts for negative returns, which the company disclosed in an April filing.

Williams and his peers, however, are in line for

another round of big payouts. CEOs at energy companies in the Standard & Poor's 500 index are sitting on \$140 million in performance-based share grants made in 2019 that are scheduled to vest in 2021 and 2022, according to a Reuters review of their latest pay disclosures.

The reason? Energy companies, more than any other sector, measure performance only against other companies in the same industry, who tend to suffer at similar times. They use a metric called relative total shareholder return (TSR) and benchmark it against a pre-determined group of peer companies - making it possible for executives to get big payouts even if their companies' stocks lose value. That system means the heavy shareholder losses expected this year will likely not translate to big reductions in CEO stock awards because the pandemic hit all oil companies in roughly equal measure.

Winning for losing

With relative TSR as a key component of pay packages, energy company CEOs have been winning for losing for at least a decade. Investors, meanwhile, have just been losing. The total return of the S&P 500 Energy Index is 1 percent over the past decade, as of May 26, a period when the broader S&P 500's total return rose by 243 percent.

Slightly more than one-third of S&P 500 companies benchmark relative TSR against a



HOUSTON: US energy executives have retained such lavish payouts even as they have struggled for years to deliver shareholder returns - despite massive growth in domestic shale oil production. —Reuters

broad index of firms. No energy companies do, according to compensation research firm Exequity LLP.

Some of the worst performers in the energy sector recently awarded executives multi-million dollar payments as motivation to stay put and manage through the downturn. Chesapeake Energy Corp, for example, handed out \$25 million in

cash bonuses to executives just before it disclosed in May that it was considering bankruptcy. Chesapeake did not respond to requests for comment. Ben Dell, managing partner at investment firm Kimmeridge, said oil and gas firms are telling investors to be grateful the system works because, in some cases, CEOs are not getting 100 percent of their performance-based payouts. —Reuters

EasyJet axes almost third of staff

LONDON: British no-frills airline EasyJet said yesterday that it will axe up to 4,500 jobs, or almost a third of its workforce, as coronavirus ravages demand and grounds global air travel.

"We are planning to reduce the size of our fleet and to optimize the network and our bases. As a result, we anticipate reducing staff numbers by up to 30 percent across the business and we will continue to remove cost and non-critical expenditure at every level," said Chief Executive Johan Lundgren in a statement.

The job cuts will impact up to 4,500 of the carrier's 15,000 staff, a spokesman told AFP. A consultation process will be launched in the coming days. The COVID-19 outbreak has devastated the global aviation sector, with passenger numbers slumping during lockdown measures as air travel demand evaporates.

EasyJet follows competitors British Airways, Ryanair and Virgin Atlantic, which have all slashed staff numbers to save costs. "We realize that these are very difficult times and we are having to consider very difficult decisions which will impact our people, but we want to protect as many jobs as we can for the long-term," added Lundgren.

"We remain focused on doing what is right for the company and its long-term health and success, following the swift action we have taken over the last three months to meet the challenges of the virus." —AFP

Google Maps boosts support for businesses

SAN FRANCISCO: Google's popular map service on Wednesday added more ways for people to engage with local businesses struggling to survive the economic hit of the coronavirus pandemic.

The Google Maps enhancements were touted as part of an effort to help small shops and restaurants. They come a week after Facebook unveiled free tools for retailers to create online storefronts on the social network and Instagram.

Google searches for "how to help small businesses" rocketed to an all-time high in March, according to Google Maps senior vice president Jen Fitzpatrick.

"People across the world are looking for ways to continue supporting corner bookstores; local watering holes; beloved dance studios and other businesses that give their neighborhoods character—even if it's from a distance," Fitzpatrick said in a blog post.

New features at Maps include being able to check by name whether local businesses have donation or gift card links at their online profiles. In the weeks ahead, Maps will make it possible to use its search tool to find all nearby restaurants asking for financial help to endure the crisis, according to Fitzpatrick.

Google has protocols to check whether businesses reaching out for support are legitimate operations, the Maps team said. In response to financial disruptions caused by the pandemic, Maps recently began allowing merchants in a half-dozen coun-



tries to add links to make donations or buy gift cards.

Google on Wednesday added another 18 countries including Italy, Spain and Japan.

Maps is also ramping up tools for customers to tune in to online sessions or appointments. "Merchants who normally provided in-person services are now pivoting to connect with their customers virtually—from yoga studios offering online classes to salons hosting virtual hair styling classes," Fitzpatrick said.

"We're making it easier for customers to discover online classes and book virtual appointments."

Maps is also expanding the roster of restaurant meal delivery services and working on making it easier for eateries to specify which service they prefer be used, according to Fitzpatrick. Other new attributes—such as whether curbside or "no-contact" pickup, or dining in, are options—appear in restaurant descriptions in the free navigation service. "Today people are deciding where to grab food not only based on the menu, but also on how easy it is to pick up safely," Fitzpatrick said.

"Some restaurants are even ditching dining areas for good." Since March, more than 3 million restaurants have added or edited their dining attributes, according to Fitzpatrick. —AFP

Business

Don't write off London yet, says Canary Wharf manager

Mothership model for offices is accelerating

LONDON: The coronavirus crisis is accelerating a move to a new type of office which will be more of a “mothership” model with people working from multiple locations, though it is too early to write off mega cities such as London, Canary Wharf’s manager said.

As well as causing more than 350,000 deaths, the novel coronavirus outbreak has stalled the global economy and turned business models upside down in everything from the media and advertising to airlines, hospitality and commercial property. Financiers trade trillions of dollars a day from the gleaming Manhattan-style skyscrapers of Canary Wharf, which along with the City of London, vies with New York for the title of the world’s financial capital. The district, built on derelict docks that once served the British empire, has plans to bring back up to half of the 125,000 people who usually work in the area while adhering to government advice on tackling the coronavirus.

But the office of the future may change, Howard Dawber, managing director of strategy at Canary Wharf, told Reuters. “I think in the future you will see the office much more as the sort of mothership of the business with people working from multiple

locations elsewhere, possibly business locations, possibly home,” Dawber said.

There will still be “a core that provides a really great environment for that point where everybody has to be together. So I think we will see some long-term changes, but it’s really things that are already happening that have been accelerated.”

Dawber said, though, that talk about the end of mega cities such as London was premature, despite the short-term changes in behavior due to the coronavirus.

The modern Canary Wharf was built in the 1980s and 1990s in East London, on the ruins of what was once the world’s largest port which processed the imports of an empire including bananas from the Canary Islands. Soaring above some of London’s poorest social housing blocks, Canary Wharf now serves as a symbol of Britain’s only remaining non-military card of substance at the top table of world politics: its dominance of global financial services.

London is by far the world’s biggest hub for foreign exchange trading, home to more international banks than any other city, and the largest center for trading interest rate swaps.



LONDON: A no entry sign is seen in a shopping center in Canary Wharf, following the outbreak of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), London, Britain, on Wednesday. —Reuters

Canary Wharf is owned by Brookfield Property Partners, a unit of Toronto-based Brookfield Asset Management, and Qatar Investment Authority,

Qatar’s sovereign wealth fund. Don’t write off London, founded as Londinium by the Romans in AD 50, just yet, Dawber said. —Reuters

Czech card transaction volume jumps

PRAGUE: Card transactions at the Czech Republic’s second largest bank Ceska Sporitelna show consumer activity recovering to levels seen before the country’s coronavirus lockdown in March.

Bank data showed the volume of card transactions, including payments and ATM withdrawals, rose around 9 percent year-on-year in the last two weeks after dropping as much as 24 percent in the weeks after shops, restaurants and much of daily life shut in mid-March. The Czech government has gradually lifted restrictions as new coronavirus cases stabilized below 100 a day through May and the death rate did not spike.

David Navratil, chief economist at Ceska Sporitelna said the card data showed swings across segments, including a 112 percent jump in hobby markets and a 91 percent drop at travel agencies, while electronics grew 47 percent and furniture 62 percent. The bank, part of Austria’s Erste Group Bank, has 2.9 million active cards in the country of 10.7 million.

“It is positive Czechs did not fall into some depression, that they are not putting off purchases of necessary things and are not significantly increasing savings,” Navratil said.

A Statistics Office survey showed on Monday consumer confidence rebounded in May. The Czech central bank has forecast the economy will shrink by a record 8 percent in 2020 before rebounding by 4 percent in 2021.

Czech unemployment, the lowest in the European Union going into the crisis, reached 3.4 percent in April, from 3.0 percent in March, but is expected to rise as factories struggle, which will hurt consumer demand. —AFP

AfDB chief hits back over graft

ABIDJAN, Ivory Coast: The president of the African Development Bank (AfDB), Akinwumi Adesina, hit back on Wednesday at accusations of corruption and vowed to continue working.

In a press statement, Adesina slammed “unprecedented attempts by some to tarnish my reputation” and declared “I will... continue to work with each and every one of our shareholders.” The United States is pressing for an independent probe into charges by whistleblowers—declared as unfounded by an internal inquiry—of alleged embezzlement and favoritism under Adesina, who is bidding for a second five-year term at the helm.

“I maintain my innocence with regard to trumped up allegations that unjustly seek to impugn my honor and integrity, as well as the reputation of the African Development Bank,” Adesina said.

He cited “my heroes, Nelson Mandela and Kofi Annan, whose lives have shown that through pain we grow.”

“I am confident that fair, transparent and just processes that respect the rules, procedures and governance systems of the Bank, and rule of law, will ultimately prove that I have not violated the Code of Ethics of this extraordinary institution,” he said. Adesina is the first Nigerian to be in charge of the AfDB, one of the world’s five largest multilateral development banks.

The former Nigerian agriculture minister is known for his bow ties and flamboyant manner, but also for a managerial style that critics say is authoritarian.

‘Blatantly false’

The bank was shaken by a string of high-level departures soon after his arrival. The 60-year-old is the only candidate in an election which was set for late May but which has been postponed



Akinwumi Adesina

until August because of the coronavirus pandemic.

His bid has received the backing of the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). On May 22, US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin sent the bank’s board a letter expressing “deep reservations” about the outcome of an internal inquiry clearing Adesina, and urged the appointment of “an independent outside investigator of high professional standing.”

“We fear that wholesale dismissal of all allegations without appropriate investigation will tarnish the reputation of this institution as one that does not uphold high standards of ethics and governance,” he wrote. The bank’s ethics committee had totally exonerated Adesina, saying the whistleblowers’ 15-page complaint “rested on no objective, solid facts”.

Adesina himself has previously dismissed the allegations as “spurious and unfounded” and “blatantly false.” In October 2019, the AfDB raised \$115 billion (105 billion euros) in fresh capital, an operation deemed a personal success for Adesina. —AFP

Sports

World Rugby rejects post-virus international cup fund-raiser plan

Australia's rugby league football to kick off as COVID-19 cases slow

LONDON: World Rugby has dismissed an idea for a major international tournament to be held in England next year designed to ease the financial impact of the coronavirus crisis less than a day after it was made public. Francis Baron, a former chief executive of England's Rugby Football Union, put forward a scheme to stage a 16-team invitational tournament to be staged in Britain and Ireland next June and July based on the 2015 World Cup hosted by England.

Baron, in an interview with the Daily Telegraph published late Tuesday, forecast the World Cup-type event could generate a net profit for distribution to unions of £200-250 million (\$245-306 million, 223-278 million euros). This would be in addition to the £80m World Rugby support funding package already in place for a global game shut down by COVID-19.

But Baron's plan would also have needed the 2021 British and Irish Lions tour of South Africa in July and August to be postponed by a year. And a statement issued by rugby union's global governing body on Wednesday said of his scheme: "World Rugby does not intend to pursue such a proposal.

"All stakeholders continue to progress pro-

ductive discussions regarding the immediate global COVID-19 financial relief strategy and international rugby calendar optimisation, both of which will further the success of Rugby World Cup 2023 in France."

Meanwhile, Exeter chief executive Tony Rowe said he wanted the interrupted English Premiership season played to a finish after the British government recently gave the go-ahead to a return to contact training.

"I don't mind saying, last week I was pretty depressed as I couldn't see any light at the end of the tunnel," said Rowe.

"At that time, we were not sure when we could get back to training and what the future told. This announcement this week has changed

things and now I'm more confident that we will return to playing again soon."

Earlier, Australia's National Rugby League football competition, a bruising body contact sport, will resume after a two-month hiatus as the number of coronavirus cases in the country slows and social restrictions are eased.

Australia's more than 7,100 COVID-19 infections and 102 deaths are low compared to many other developed countries, but the measures imposed to contain the disease have

“
NRL can
take over
”



BRISBANE: Queensland Reds head coach Brad Thorn (L) and prop Jack Straker attend a rugby training session in Brisbane on May 25, 2020. — AFP

pushed the economy to the brink of its first recession in 30 years.

Declaring Australia must now get out from under its doona - a local word for quilt - Prime Minister Scott Morrison has urged locals to

begin transitioning back to normal life. The National Rugby League (NRL) competition will be one of the world's first contact sports to resume after COVID-19 shredded the global sporting calendar. —

Oly chief consults with IOC members over virus fallout

LAUSANNE: Olympic chief Thomas Bach on Wednesday held a series of talks with International Olympic Committee members on the potential consequences of the coronavirus pandemic that has seen the Tokyo Games pushed back a year to 2021, sources said.

Bach was to address the 100 IOC members in three different sessions decided by language and local time zone.

"The IOC held today a series of internal consultations with IOC members to hear from them in preparation of the IOC Session which will be prepared by the IOC executive board in its meeting on June 10, 2020," said an IOC statement later Wednesday.

Bach's aim was to canvas the members for

their view on "how to handle the consequences of the coronavirus pandemic", a source told AFP.

The IOC president wants to hear "thoughts, ideas and experiences of all members across the globe", it added.

While Bach addressed all Olympic actors on March 24 when announcing the postponement of the Tokyo Games, it is the first time since the COVID-19 outbreak that he has specifically consulted IOC members.

Bach was backed up by Olympic Games executive director Christophe Dubi, IOC sports director Kit McConnell, IOC director general Christophe De Kepper and chief operating officer Lana Haddad.

The IOC's medical and scientific director, Richard Budgett, also took to the floor to discuss "the issue of a vaccine", according to a second source.

Bach warned last week 2021 was the "last option" for holding the delayed Tokyo Games, stressing postponement cannot go on forever. — AFP

LeBron among US athletes outraged at black man's death

LOS ANGELES: NBA superstar LeBron James was among the US athletes taking to social media in outrage over the death of a black man in Minnesota after a white policeman kneeled on his neck for several minutes.

Four Minneapolis police officers were fired Tuesday as a video showing one of them kneeling on the neck of George Floyd, a handcuffed black man who later died, sparked protests.

Los Angeles Lakers playmaker James contrasted the incident with the kneeling protests of former NFL star Colin Kaepernick in 2016.

Kaepernick was ostracised by the NFL for kneeling during the playing of the national anthem in a protest against police brutality and racial injustice.

"This... .. Is Why," James posted on his Instagram feed with side by side photos of the

white policeman kneeling on Floyd's neck and Kaepernick kneeling on the sideline.

"Do you understand NOW!?!?!?!" James wrote. "Or is it still blurred to you? #StayWoke".

Other figures from the sports world speaking out over the Minneapolis incident included Golden State Warriors coach Steve Kerr.

"This is murder. Disgusting," Kerr tweeted. "Seriously, what the hell is wrong with US????"

Warriors star Stephen Curry lamented yet another death involving an unarmed African-American man at the hands of law enforcement. "I've seen a lot of people speak up and try to articulate how fed up and angry they are," Curry wrote on Instagram. "All good and well but it's the same same reality we live in. George Floyd. George Floyd. George has a family. George didn't deserve to die."

Retired Los Angeles Lakers legend Magic Johnson also hit out, saying Floyd had been "clearly murdered." "How many times do we have to see black men killed on national television? This has been going on for entirely too long," Johnson said. — AFP

Sports

Roland Garros planning for fans, not empty seats

For players, 'the prize money is very important'

PARIS: Roland Garros chiefs insisted on Wednesday the French Open, delayed until September due to the coronavirus pandemic, will have fans attending even if they still have to abide by social distancing rules.

The claycourt Grand Slam, which should now have been into its first week under its traditional schedule, was pushed back by four months because of the outbreak.

However, tickets bought for the event in its May-June slot were reimbursed rather than transferred, prompting fears the tournament, now due to start on September 20, would be played behind closed doors.

"In the autumn, we will play Roland Garros with an optimum spectator capacity which allows fans to respect social distancing," Jean-Francois Vilotte, the director-general of the French Tennis Federation (FFT), told AFP.

A working group has already been created consisting of the ministries of sports and foreign affairs as well as Roland Garros officials and health bodies.

"The aim is that there will be spectators but we will have the capacity to organise Roland Garros whatever the option decided, including behind closed doors." For the players, "the prize money is very important" as is the eco-system of tennis in France for which Roland Garros accounts for 80% of revenue.

If fans are to be welcome at the rescheduled tournament, then tickets would have to go on resale. "We have set ourselves a deadline (for resale) ... but you will not know it," added Vilotte.

"It will be an exceptional tournament anyway," he said, adding the organisation was working on holding a "postponed tournament" and not a "downgraded" version.

In other words, juniors, singles, doubles and wheelchair tennis events will still be staged. International tennis has been suspended globally since mid-March while Wimbledon was cancelled for the first time since World War II.

The US Open in New York, due to start on August 24, is still under a cloud with organisers due to decide its fate in mid-June.

Officials in Paris have played down hosting a Grand Slam outdoors in a European autumn. They point to Roland Garros having eight floodlit courts, including all three showpiece arenas — Philippe Chatrier, Suzanne Lenglen and Simonne Mathieu.

"The point is not to schedule matches late at night but to finish the matches started," said Vilotte, pointing out that night sessions will not start until the 2021 edition when the tournament slips back into its usual May-June home.

The risk of rain is greater in the autumn in Paris. However, the Philippe Chatrier court at Roland Garros now has a roof, bringing the tournament into line with the other three majors.

"From the start, the objective was to respect the outdoor nature of the tournament," said Vilotte. "It is not a closed court, contrary to what exists at Wimbledon, at the Australian Open and even at the US Open where the roofs hermetically seal the stadiums to air condition them."

The new roof on Chatrier has 11 metal and



PARIS: French Tennis Federation (FFT) general director Jean-Francois Vilotte, wears a protective face-mask as he answers questions of a journalist during a visit to show the newly built roof of the Philippe Chatrier central tennis court at the Roland Garros stadium, in Paris. — AFP

canvas sections, weighing 350 tons each for a total area of 10,000 square metres.

It can cover the sport's most famous clay court in 15 minutes, while allowing air to pass through the sides. The efficiency of the roof, which cost 55 million euros (\$60.45 million), was tested during torrential rains that lashed Paris a

few weeks ago.

"It was baptised," said Vilotte. "The roof was absolutely not affected by these rains and the water drainage channels worked without any of them overflowing." The Suzanne Lenglen court will also have a roof installed in time for the 2024 Olympic Games. — AFP

Surrey learning from Dolphins, hope for Oval matches in 2020

LONDON: Surrey are "copying the homework" of American football's Miami Dolphins as they draw up plans to stage county cricket at their Oval headquarters this season despite the coronavirus.

Next week should have seen the south London ground hosting the first Test between England and the West Indies. But the COVID-19 outbreak has seen that series, and the start of the English season, delayed until July at the earliest. Surrey have several England players on their books, including batsmen Rory Burns and Ollie Pope, sibling all-rounders Sam and Tom Curran and wicketkeeper Ben Foakes.

But it now looks as if The Oval will miss out on any international cricket this season, with all those fixtures played at 'bio-secure' venues such as Lancashire's Old Trafford and Hampshire's Ageas Bowl that, unlike Surrey's headquarters, have on-site hotels.

This week, however, plans emerged that would see

The Oval reopening with a capacity reduced from 25,000 to 6,000 to meet social distancing guidelines.

Surrey chief executive Richard Gould, asked Wednesday about the origins of the scheme, told a conference call: "To be honest, we were copying the homework of the Miami Dolphins.

"You see a lot of businesses doing this sort of war-gaming now." Earlier this month, the Dolphins revealed details of a plan to play games before a reduced number of spectators and still meet social distancing guidelines, including timed entrances and exits per sections, cutting capacity at their stadium from 80,000 to 15,000, face masks for all spectators and food being ordered from and delivered to seats.

Although no decisions have yet been announced by the England and Wales Cricket Board, there are fears this could be the first season since the Second World War without any county cricket at all.

Surrey are well-placed financially, at least initially, to survive such a campaign after declaring a pre-tax profit of £6.3million for the 2019/20 financial year, with Lancashire the only other county not to have to put its players on the British government's 'furlough' job retention scheme. And just as Miami owner Stephen Ross declared Tuesday the NFL will definitely stage a season, Gould said: "We're optimistic there will be a season. Not just an international season, but a county season." — AFP

US women's soccer league plans first team sport return

NEW YORK: The National Women's Soccer League is set to become the first US team sport league to return from the coronavirus pandemic, announcing plans Wednesday for a tournament starting June 27.

The nine-team circuit will stage the NWSL Challenge Cup at Utah's Zions Bank Stadium, home of the NWSL Utah Royals, with the semi-finals and final at Rio Tinto Stadium, home of Major League Soccer's Real Salt Lake.

The suburban Salt Lake City venues will host a 25-game tournament without spectators, each team playing four preliminary round games to determine seedings. Eight advance to the quarter-finals for a knockout event with a champion to be decided in a July 26 final.

"As our country begins to safely reopen and adjust to our collective new reality — and with the enthusiastic support of our players, owners as well as our new and current commercial partners — the NWSL is thrilled to bring professional soccer back to the United States," NWSL commissioner Lisa Baird said.

NBA, MLS, Major League Baseball and National Hockey League seasons have also been shut down by the deadly disease outbreak, but have not finalized comeback strategies. None are expected back before July.

National governing body US Soccer backed the NWSL plan. "US Soccer is supportive of the NWSL's decision to bring professional women's soccer back to the field," it said in a statement, saying it worked with the league and players union to "focus on the health and safety of the players." — AFP

Sports

Nagelsmann slams ten-man Leipzig after Hertha draw

Fortuna boost survival hopes with 2-1 win over Schalke

BERLIN: Julian Nagelsmann slammed 10-man RB Leipzig for defending like “a school team” in Wednesday’s 2-2 draw at home to Hertha Berlin behind closed doors which cost them the chance to go second in the Bundesliga.

Hertha forward Krzysztof Piatek equalised with a late penalty to seal the draw and save the blushes of goalkeeper Rune Jarstein who had made a blunder for Leipzig’s second goal.

However, Nagelsmann was furious that Leipzig conceded a weak goal from a corner with only nine minutes gone when Hertha midfielder Marko Grujic, on loan from Liverpool, fired home unmarked.

“We started well, but fell behind because we defend a set piece like a school team,” fumed Nagelsmann. “We simply did nothing, everyone is standing in position, yet he (Grujic) could finish with his foot, in the box.

“This is the second time in a row in a home game that we conceded from a set piece,” said Nagelsmann whose team drew 1-1 against Freiburg in their last home game.

“We have to blame ourselves for this. We’re happy that we scored another point, but I’m not happy at all.”

Piatek, who joined Hertha in January for around 25 million euros (\$27 million) from AC Milan, netted his second goal in nine Bundesliga matches when he fired home a penalty on 82 minutes. “I was feeling good, it was an important goal for me and the team,” said Piatek, 24, who came on for the final twenty minutes, replacing

35-year-old striker Vedad Ibisevic. Piatek stepped up to take the penalty just after Ibisevic had been substituted.

“I’m not happy, I want to play. He is in great form, but I hope to play some more minutes,” added Piatek when asked about his under-study role to Ibisevic. The Polish striker slotted home after team-mate Matheus Cunha was fouled in the box by a rash challenge from ex-Everton winger Ademola Lookman. Piatek’s penalty snatched a point, stretched Bruno Labbadia’s unbeaten record as Hertha head coach to three games and spared the blushes of Jarstein.

The Norwegian shot-stopper was embarrassed when he parried an effort by Leipzig striker Patrik Schick but allowed the ball to roll over his flailing arm and into his net to make it 2-1 on 68 minutes. Leipzig had just been reduced to 10 men when defender Marcel Halstenberg was sent off for a second yellow card after a late foul on Brazil Under-23 striker Cunha, who was playing against the club he left in January.

The first-half finished 1-1 after Hertha took an early lead when Grujic, on loan from Liverpool, volleyed into the top corner with nine minutes gone. The hosts fought back and equalised when defender Lukas Klostermann headed home a corner with 24 minutes gone.

The result leaves Leipzig third in the table, two points behind Dortmund, who lost 1-0 on Tuesday to leaders Bayern Munich who are seven points clear and on course for an eighth straight German league title.

Later on Wednesday, the Premier League announced four more positive findings from 1,008 tests of players and club staff. That meant there had been just 12 cases detected from a total of 2,752 tests. The small number of positive tests has raised hopes of a return next month.

In the second-tier Championship, just two positive tests were registered from 1,014 tests.

A series of issues including the restart date and plans in the event of a curtailment will be discussed when the 20 Premier League clubs gather again later.

A targeted return date of June 12 — behind closed doors — was described by Premier League chief executive Richard Masters last week as a “staging post”.

Players and coaches have argued they will need more time to reduce the risk of injuries after such a long lay-off.

And some players have voiced fears over their safety and that of their families due to the virus.

Watford captain Troy Deeney has not returned to training after three positive cases were registered by the Hornets. He fears he could spread the virus to his five-month-old son.

French World Cup winner N’Golo Kante has also been given permission by Chelsea to train at home.

Germany’s Bundesliga, the first of Europe’s big five leagues to resume, will complete its third round of fixtures behind closed doors on Wednesday evening and there has been little player opposition to La Liga’s plans to return in Spain from June 11.—AFP



LEIPZIG: Leipzig’s English forward Ademola Lookman (C) and Hertha Berlin’s Norwegian goalkeeper Rune Jarstein (L) vie for the ball during the German first division Bundesliga football match RB Leipzig v Hertha Berlin on May 27, 2020 in Leipzig. — AFP

“Today it (three points) was on a silver platter and we didn’t take it,” added Nagelsmann.

Earlier, Fortuna Dueseldorf boosted their hopes of avoiding relegation from the Bundesliga as goals from Rouwen Hennings and Kenan Karaman helped them come from behind to beat Schalke 04 2-1 at home in a scrappy contest on Wednesday.

The result left Fortuna 16th, the relegation

playoff spot, on 27 points from 28 games, one behind Mainz who stayed in the safety zone with a 1-1 draw at Union Berlin. Schalke, who extended their winless league run to 10 matches, stayed ninth on 37 points. The match was played behind closed doors due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the first half only produced a long-range effort at either end as both sides applied a cautious approach.—Agencies

Premier League vote to resume contact training

LONDON: Premier League clubs voted unanimously on Wednesday to resume contact training as the English top-flight took a significant step towards restarting in June.

The Premier League was put on hold in March due to the coronavirus pandemic, with Liverpool just two wins away from sealing the title.

Clubs returned to training in small and socially distanced groups last week but they have moved to stage two of the “return to training protocol”. “Premier League shareholders today voted unanimously to resume contact training, marking another step towards restarting the Premier League season, when safe to do so,” the league said in a statement.

“Squads are now able to train as a group and engage in tackling while minimising any unnecessary close contact.”

The decision was made following consultation with clubs, players, managers and the government.

Clubs that have already completed the necessary risk assessments are expected to move to the new phase soon.

Hearts owner push for Scottish league reform

LONDON: Scottish Professional Football League clubs are to discuss on Monday reconstruction proposals put forward by Hearts owner Ann Budge, a league spokesman has announced.

Budge has suggested changing the top of Scottish football’s structure from four to three divisions, each with 14 clubs, for two seasons — a move that would spare Hearts, who finished bottom of the curtailed Scottish Premiership this term, from relegation. Following an SPFL board meeting on Wednesday, a league spokesman said: “The board has now received Ann Budge’s paper to clubs on the topic of league reconstruction.

“As these matters are ultimately decided by clubs via a democratic process, we will now facilitate a series of divisional meetings, starting with the Premiership on Monday, at which all 42 clubs will have the chance to discuss the proposals in detail.” After the Scottish campaign at all levels below the Premiership was cancelled because of the coronavirus — the top-flight eventually followed suit — a task force was established to look at creating a new three-division system with Budge as one of its co-chairs.

But their plan failed to attract sufficient support at a meeting of Premiership clubs earlier this month. Afterwards, Budge issued a statement accusing Premiership clubs who voted against expansion before reading a paper on the topic she had prepared for them of being “appalling disrespectful to everyone on the task force”.—AFP



LEIPZIG: Leipzig's Austrian midfielder Konrad Laimer (L) and Hertha Berlin's Belgian forward Dodi Lukebakio vie for the ball during the German first division Bundesliga football match RB Leipzig v Hertha Berlin. — AFP

Nagelsmann slams 10-man Leipzig after Hertha draw

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