Virus crisis could remain until yearend

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: The health ministry yesterday reported 55 new coronavirus cases, a big drop from the past few days, raising the total to 910 cases. Of the new cases, 37 are Indians, six Bangladeshis, six Kuwaitis and the rest from different nationalities. The ministry said of the 798 cases receiving treatment at hospitals, 22 of them are in intensive care units, eight in critical condition.

Health Minister Sheikh Basel Al-Sabah yesterday said that the coronavirus crisis could last longer than initially believed and may continue into next year, as the health ministry began a test drive in two areas under lockdown. “It appears that this crisis is lasting longer in the world and is likely to continue into next year. It is clear that we are still in the phase of the curve going upward strongly,” the minister told reporters after touring a medical facility for expats at the fairground.

He also said experts are expecting coronavirus cases to reach three million at the end of April and could double the next month. Sheikh Basel appealed to people not to venture out unless it is extremely necessary, saying this is the only way of combating the disease. The minister said that the situation in Kuwait is under control as the number of cases has not increased rapidly as in other countries.

The ministry of health meanwhile began a drive to test some half a million expats residing in Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh and Mahboula, which were placed under lockdown a few days ago after a steep rise in the number of cases among expat workers, a majority of them Indian nationals. In the past four days, about 400 cases were reported, almost half of the total cases discovered in Kuwait so far and a majority of them expat workers.

The interior ministry’s relations and security information department also announced that the dates to receive residency violators from India have changed to April 16 to 20; instead the ministry will receive Bangladeshis from April 11 to 15.

In another development, MP Riyadh Al-Adasani said he plans to file to grill Finance Minister Mohammed Al-Sheetan over the country’s finances and alleged mismanagement, especially after the government sought to borrow some KD 20 billion. He also cited another reason after the Central Bank of Kuwait allegedly refused to launch an investigation into exposures worth $300 million by Kuwaiti banks against a UAE health establishment founded by an Indian billionaire businessman. The establishment is facing serious financial and legal problems and may not be able to repay a massive $6.6 billion in debt.

The announcement came following a meeting yesterday between Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem along with about 21 MPs with the government economic team. Ghanem said the discussions focused on the government debt law, which many MPs called on the government to withdraw and then submit a clear roadmap showing where the borrowed funds will be used. The speaker said the debt law was prepared before the coronavirus crisis and therefore has no relation with the stimulus package, and accordingly will not find the required majority to pass it.

MP Omar Al-Tabtabaei said the fiscal position of the state is catastrophic and if the government does not propose real solutions, the state may not be able to pay salaries of public sector employees after three or four months. He said the immediate requirement is that the government should utilize billions of dinars in profits being kept for years at some government departments and establishments. MP Safa Al-Hashem launched a scathing attack on the finance minister, saying his performance has been very disappointing. She called on the prime minister to dismiss him and Education Minister Saud Al-Harbi.

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The mask

Pandemic Diaries
By Jamie Etheridge
etheridge@kuwaittimes.com

The mask is made from the body of an old t-shirt. We cut the bottom third off, fold it into thirds, slide elastic hair ties on each end, fold the ends over and voila! - a cloth face covering. It may not help. I put my palm up in front of his face and he breathes, pushing air out and I feel the heat of his breath on my skin. Not good enough. So we use a different shirt, with a thicker, tighter weave and we add an extra fold. This time when he breathes out, no air reaches my hand. Ready for the grocery run. We are grateful we have access to food, a safe place to live, freedom to go and come and get the supplies we need. Not everyone is as lucky. Some will queue for hours, bunched up into tight knots of impatient humanity, social distancing impossible in the urgent crush for rice and bread.

We make a list, careful to focus on items needed and to limit luxuries to things like fresh fruit (I'm a sucker for lemons and oranges) and Greek yogurt for the kids. He puts on the masks, tucks the list into his pocket and heads out into the world. It's dangerous out there, potentially fatal, but one of us must go and so he does. I stay home with the children.

The above might read like an excerpt from a science fiction novel or a scene from Mad Max but it's not. This is our morning routine in Kuwait, a family of four, staying home, staying safe while fording the dangerous waters of daily life in the time of a global pandemic.

And we are among the lucky. We have cars and jobs still. We have an apartment with a small balcony. We have each other. We have our health still. It is easy to complain, to bemoan the long hours of 'staying at home', the boredom and the cabin fever. But there are so many millions struggling - out of work, out of food, out of hope. Millions in India forced to walk hundreds of miles to reach their villages with no work, out of food, out of hope. Millions in India forced to walk hundreds of miles to reach their villages with no work, out of food, out of hope. Millions in India forced to walk hundreds of miles to reach their villages with no work, out of food, out of hope.

We need more foundations for animal welfare and they should have an allocated budget within the government's national budget, and no veterinary hospitals should be working on their own. Please remember that dogs and cats are vulnerable animals and may fall victim to illness or death in case of neglect or abuse.

Justice for animals

Local Spotlight
By Muna Al-Fuzai
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Dogs and cats are commonly known as man's best friends. While they reduce stress, they increase our happiness and joy, are our companions and playmates for children and share the same roof and food with us - they are family members. This is why we need to protect them at all times, especially now.

During the recent period of curfew, I have been following several shocking videos, reports and images from around the world that show animal cruelty cases that have been reported in the last three months. I saw a video from an Asian country where shop owners shut their shops during the curfew and left animals to starve to death for a week, until a few of them were rescued by animal rights activists.

I believe that animal abuse is a common practice in both rural and urban areas in many countries. Unfortunately, some cases of animal cruelty are never reported, making it difficult to make an accurate estimation on how common they are. But we can use the information we have today to build a case to make the right global call to prevent more cases of abuse around the world.

I know that it is common, especially now, for people to consider that humans have priority, so animal rights are not viewed in earnest. I also think some may make excuses to be cruel to animals or at least throw them out of the house. They may intentionally ignore the fact that when a pet lives all its life in a house, it could easily fall prey to accidents on the streets by humans or cars.

I know very well that many countries of the world, including Kuwait, have animal welfare laws. Kuwait issued such a law in 2015. The law stipulates penalties of up to one year imprisonment and a fine of KD 1,000 for anyone who abuses, neglects or offers animals for sale while being sick or subjects them to scientific experiments without a license. Likewise, in many European and Asian countries, the laws do not prevent harsh practices against a large number of animals. I believe the Swiss animal protection law to be the best, as it stipulates that when dealing with an animal, its dignity and existential value must be respected, with strict laws that penalize animal abuse.

According to the classification of the World Index for Animal Protection, Switzerland is the only European country that requires all dog owners to provide them with an electronic chip and register them in a central database. As for cats, they should be in daily contact with humans or other cats.

We are in need for education to the public that cats and dogs cannot transmit the novel coronavirus to humans, but they may develop low levels of the disease if it is transmitted from infected people. This conclusion was reached by the Hong Kong Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, after a quarantined dog was found to have a small percentage of the virus. There are also theories that talk about the relationship between animals and the virus, but none of it has been proven to date.

We need more foundations for animal welfare and they should have an allocated budget within the government's national budget, and no veterinary hospitals should be working on their own. Please remember that dogs and cats are vulnerable animals and may fall victim to illness or death in case of neglect or abuse.

It’s a small world - or is it?

IN MY VIEW
By Abdellatif Sharaa
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When we heard about the coronavirus in Wuhan, some of us were guilty, including myself, of being lax in taking precautions, because Wuhan is around 6,500 km away from Kuwait. We assumed that regardless of how dangerous the virus is, it will not be easily transferred to us. Then soon enough we found out the virus began to hit everywhere and fast, from Brazil in the south to Norway in the north and everywhere in between.

We knew much earlier that the world has become a small village, because of the Internet and its applications. Add to that the so-called globalization that became supreme, as one treaty after another were being signed for free trade, as an example, and free trade zones were being created between countries via bilateral agreements.

The virus' nature enables it to stick like a glue on any material, and experts say that it can live for hours to a few days depending on the material it contaminates. For example, a shipment from Wuhan to any city in Europe or Asia takes a few hours to arrive (Wuhan as we know is a major Chinese industrial city, and it is almost back to normal now).

We must forget the idea that a country like China is far away and others are nearby, as we all are now a virtual single community. Wuhan is almost 10,000 km away from New York, but it is obvious how devastating the pandemic has been there. Passengers travelling became vehicles transporting the virus from one place to another.

Governments that realized the danger early found out that aircraft are one of the quickest means of spreading the virus around because of the sheer numbers of people they carry in close proximity from each other, and that is why they closed their airports and suspended commercial flights.

It is amazing how a virus that cannot be seen kept people in check and confined them not only in their countries, but in their own homes - very strange!

The coronavirus revealed something that can hardly be believed, as some countries showed selfishness, be they superpowers or otherwise, as they refused passage of simple things like masks and sanitizers to their destinations and confiscated them for their own. This shows how quickly things can change and how globalization can be thrown out of the window, even if temporarily, when it comes to one's own interests.

I hope that lessons are learned from what happened and the world community cooperates for the sake of all, because if not, all will fail without exception.

A final word: “Unity is strength...when there is teamwork and collaboration, wonderful things can be achieved.” - Mattie Stepanek, an American poet
Kuwait Times

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Filipinos who availed the general amnesty granted by the Kuwaiti government gather at Kuwait International Airport's Terminal 4 on their way home to Manila.

Kuwait this week placed a full lockdown on Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh and Mahboula and extended its partial curfew by two hours to run from 5 pm till 6 am until further notice. It also extended a previously enacted suspension of work for all ministries and government institutions by two weeks until April 26 as precautionary measure against the coronavirus.

Meanwhile, expats queue up daily with their documents and luggage to avail of an amnesty allowing residency violators to leave the country between April 1 and April 30 without paying any fines or airfare with a chance to return to Kuwait later.

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

Local

Friday, April 10, 2020

LIFE UNDER

Police officers man a checkpoint in Mahboula after the area was put under lockdown.

A mechanic sits outside a shuttered garage.

Egyptians queue up outside a school that was turned into a center to receive residency violators wishing to avail an amnesty.

A volunteer checks the temperature of a shopper at Mishref Co-operative Society.
Workers prepare to place Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh under lockdown.

Industrial areas of Shuwaikh and Sharq wear a deserted look with shuttered shops.
Despite calls for a rent moratorium in Kuwait, there is no government decision yet whether tenants should pay the monthly rent during the ongoing shutdown. The deadline for paying rent for many tenants all over Kuwait is on the 10th of the month, but many expat workers have received partial or no salaries.

“I have informed the haris that I will not be able to pay this month, but he insisted we have to pay by April 10,” said Anna (not her real name), a tenant in Farwaniya. “I did not get a salary in March. I am a salon worker, and since the government shut salons in early March, I do not have any money in hand right now,” she told Kuwait Times tearfully.

Mohamed, a mandoub from Egypt who lives in Salmiya, shared similar sentiments. “How can I pay? They know we haven’t been paid for the month of March, or even April. I will not pay a single dinar even if they drag me to the police station,” he said. He told Kuwait Times his haris already reminded him three times on April 1, 3 and 5 to pay up.

“Everyone in the world knows about the crisis. This is not just in Kuwait - this crisis is everywhere. They should be thankful because we are not crying for help with regards to food, now that we are all locked down. My remaining money is reserved for survival in case the situation worsens; I will not give it away,” the visibly-upset tenant said.

Other tenants in Fahaheel have also been reminded to pay the rent. They live four to a flat, but all have no work and no pay. “Our haris came yesterday and reminded us to pay. But we told him we cannot pay for March and April, since we do not have work, and the company is not willing to pay our salaries. In fact, we do not even have enough food; we are only surviving since some Good Samaritan is giving us some food to survive. If the crisis persists, we will definitely die,” one of the tenants stressed.

Mary Grace and her flat mates in Mahboula were also reminded by their building haris to pay the rent before the April 10 deadline. “We wrote a letter requesting a waiver to pay the rent. But the building owner told us not even a single dinar in discount will be given. We all have no work and we are staying at home since early March. I don’t know what to do - the flat is under my name. My flat mates are not willing to pay because they do not have money too. The building owner is too hardheaded and wouldn’t accept any explanation. I don’t know what to do,” she said.

Many expats in Kuwait share rooms and apartments to save money. The average rent of a two-bedroom apartment is KD 300 to KD 350 depending on the size of the rooms. For a thrifty tenant, sharing it with other boarders makes the rent affordable. Most expat workers in Kuwait are paid KD 250 to KD 500.
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Army aircraft with medical supplies returns from China

Ambassador supervising air corridor between China and Kuwait

KUWAIT: A Kuwait army transport plane returned home from China Wednesday, carrying tons of medical equipment and supplies to help the government curb spread of coronavirus, the ministry of defense said. This is the seventh army plane in service as part of repatriation and delivery operations aimed at providing logistical support to government bodies, the ministry said in a statement. This journey, it added, was in cooperation and coordination with the ministry of health to provide medical equipment and supplies.

Earlier on Wednesday, Kuwaiti Ambassador in Beijing Sameh Hayat said the transport aircraft, which took off from the Chinese city of Guangzhou, was loaded with 55 tons of medical supplies. Hayat, in a statement to KUNA, said he was supervising an air corridor between China and Kuwait to support the “strategic storage” in the country to help curb the spread of coronavirus. The ambassador thanked senior Chinese officials for facilitating transport of medical supplies for Kuwait. He also praised the Kuwait army for carrying out this mission. — KUNA

Oil producers intend to cut 10-15m barrels

KUWAIT: Top oil producers meeting later yesterday intend to cut production by between 10 and 15 million barrels per day. Kuwait’s Oil Minister Khaled Al-Fadhel said. The talks between OPEC and other major producers come as oil languishes at near-two decade lows, with Russia and Saudi Arabia’s price war compounding slack demand caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

“Through our continuous consultations in the past weeks, I confirm that the intention is to conclude an agreement to cut production by a large amount ranging between 10 million bpd and 15 million bpd," Fadhel said in an interview with Kuwaiti daily Al-Rai published yesterday. He said the aim of the huge reduction is to “restore balance to the market and prevent further drops in the prices”.

OPEC, led by leading exporter Saudi Arabia, and other top producers including Russia was to meet via video conference later yesterday amid hopes they will agree to cut output to shore up prices. Fadhel said negotiations were still continuing to secure the participation of a larger number of major producers such as the United States, Brazil, Canada, Argentina, Columbia and Norway. “There are also very important discussions still ongoing over how to distribute quotas and reductions among the countries,” said the Kuwaiti minister, adding that some progress has been made.

Kuwait, OPEC’s fifth largest producer, boosted its output to over three million bpd amid a price war that sent prices crashing. Fadhel said he was optimistic about striking a new deal to counter a sharp drop in demand, estimated by some studies at as high as 25 million bpd, or a quarter of global supplies. Oil prices extended gains yesterday after Russia, the world’s second producer, signalled it was ready to make a big output cut at the OPEC+ meeting.

US benchmark West Texas Intermediate rose 4.6 percent to $26.26 a barrel, while Brent crude, the international benchmark, jumped 2.7 percent to $33.73. Moscow said Wednesday it is willing to cut output by about 1.6 million barrels a day, Bloomberg News reported. Another key meeting takes place today, when G20 energy ministers hold talks remotely to discuss steps to steady the market. — AFP

PM commends important role of Audit Bureau

KUWAIT: HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah Wednesday commended “important and constructive” role of the State Audit Bureau in supporting government’s efforts to curb spread of coronavirus. The prime minister made the remarks during a meeting with Audit Bureau President Faisal Al-Shaya at Seif Palace, attended by Foreign Minister Sheikh Ahmad Nasser Mohammad Al-Sabah and Health Minister Sheikh Dr Bassel Al-Sabah, an official statement said.

Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled said the contribution of the bureau to government’s efforts “reflects the national responsibility” of the auditors. He called on the importance of continuing this cooperation to overcome this crisis. The two sides discussed coordination and cooperation in this “critical phase”, which required collaboration of government agencies to preserve public funds and maintain supervision.

Shaya commended the government’s “exceptional” endeavors in confronting the pandemic. He said he acknowledged the government needed exceptional measures to prevent a delay in auditing. The meeting was also attended by Minister of Public Works and Minister of State for Housing Rana Al-Fares. — KUNA

Police arrest six expats for rioting

KUWAIT: The interior ministry arrested six expats who caused riots and will take legal measures against them and deport them from the country. In a press statement, the ministry said on Wednesday it received a complaint from a representative of a private company stating that a group of workers gathered and tried to assault him while delivering their salaries. It added that a rescue patrol immediately moved to the location of the incident and upon its arrival, one of the company’s workers assaulted the police car. The patrol commander fired a precautionary shot in the air to disperse the gathering. The ministry stressed that an investigation has been carried out and the rest of the workers involved were being arrested and referred to the authorities. — KUNA
Fight against coronavirus in two hotspots in Kuwait to take weeks

Areas crowded with expats most vulnerable to outbreak

KUWAIT: Minister of Health Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah said Wednesday that public health teams are making intensive pandemic investigation in the two recently identified hotspots of the novel coronavirus. “It will take weeks to stem the tide of the pandemic in Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh in Farwaniyah governorate and Mahboula in Ahmadi governorate, which have been placed under total lockdown,” the minister told reporters.

Sheikh Basel made the comments after touring the fairgrounds in Mishref and Mubarak Al-Kabeer Hospital in Jabiya in Hawally governorate. He did not rule out the possibility of detecting more hotspots in the coming weeks despite the unprecedented measures to contain cases of community transmission.

He recalled his earlier warnings that areas crowded with expatriate workers are most vulnerable to outbreaks, given the fact that their residents are less responsive to the guidelines of public health. “The living conditions and social habits of these people make them more liable for infection with the virus than others,” Sheikh Basel said, affirming the ability of his ministry to conduct more COVID-19 tests and address any surges in cases.

On the evolving situation of the pandemic worldwide, he said: “Data received constantly show that this pandemic is unparalleled in terms of the scale and speed of its spread. The figures coming out so far are by no means final: they depend on the tests conducted and the persons who showed up, but there are many lone wolves everywhere. Nearly 50 percent of people who contract COVID-19 worldwide are asymptomatic; here lies the problem. They can unknowingly convey the infection to others. The only way to defeat the pandemic is to stay at home and keep social distancing.”

Sheikh Basel noted that this was the main theme of the video conference he had with senior officials of the World Health Organization (WHO) last week. Sheikh Basel affirmed that the ministry of health is in an open-ended session to assess the efficacy of measures adopted and analyze their outcomes with a view to maximizing the positive aspects. He highlighted the importance of precautionary measures in addressing any eventualty, noting that the situation in Kuwait is generally better than many other countries regarding the number of cases and fatalities.

Sheikh Basel appreciated the efforts of medical cadres who are on the frontline of the battle against the pandemic to save the lives of citizens and expatriates, stressing the need of commitment by everybody to the health precautions. Citing global studies, Sheikh Dr Basel said the current crisis is expected to continue until the end of summer or the year-end. Some studies predict the number of cases worldwide to hit three million by the end of April and then double in the coming month, he said, voicing hope for finding a cure in the near future. — KUNA

Kuwait Food Bank provides food aid to needy families

By Faten Omar

KUWAIT: Life in Kuwait has largely been put on hold, hitting businesses and employees badly. Many of them have lost their jobs and daily-wage workers are suffering, while others are struggling for food due to the coronavirus pandemic. More than half a million citizens and residents living in Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh and Mahboula are under a lockdown as a precautionary measure to face COVID-19.

Many charities are distributing food to people in these areas. General Manager of Kuwait Food Bank Salem Al-Hamar told Kuwait Times that KFB is distributing food to needy families and individuals. “Since the coronavirus outbreak, we are helping needy people. We are disturbing 18,900 daily meals to individuals and more to families,” he said.

Hamar explained that during this period, many have lost their jobs and need to provide food for their families, noting that the number of distributions has increased during the coronavirus pandemic, as Kuwait Food Bank used to distribute only 2,000 meals daily to individuals. “Most of the distributions are in Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh, Farwaniya, Khaitan and some other areas,” he added. Meanwhile, Hamar invited people affected by the coronavirus crisis to communicate with the food bank via its website https://www.kuwaitfoodbank.org to be provided with needed food aid. The bank’s database is constantly updated to add names of poor families with food delivered by professional volunteer teams.

In March, Kuwait Food Bank launched a project for more than 60,000 beneficiaries in various areas of Kuwait, as their number increased compared to last year. The project aims to distribute food aid, nutritional needs and necessary supplies to widows, divorced women, the elderly, the sick, people with special needs, orphans and poor people throughout the year in cooperation with the Awqaf Public Foundation.

Likewise, Kuwait’s Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor launched a central online database for disadvantaged families to receive aid, according to KUNA. The database allows 52 charitable organizations to coordinate their efforts to ensure there are no overlaps in aid supply and all families in need receive help.

Blood bank produces artificial plasma to combat COVID-19

KUWAIT: Kuwait Central Blood Bank (KCBB) has started producing plasma artificially to help treat patients suffering from the novel coronavirus. Director of KCBB’s blood transfusion division Dr Reem Al-Radhiwann announced on Wednesday. The process entails collecting plasma from donors who were formerly COVID-19 patients and then transfusing it into the blood of patients to strengthen their immunity, she said in a statement to KUNA.

“According to the standards of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the American Association of Blood Banks (AABB), plasma donation from former patients should start soon after the end of their home quarantine. When a person contracts a disease, their bodies start producing antibodies to face the new enemy,” she said.

“In the case of the respiratory disease COVID-19, a former patient keeps a high level of antibodies three weeks after their recovery, and then the antibodies start taking a downward slant towards the normal level. Therefore, the plasma generating process requires setting a time schedule for each donor,” Radhiwan explained, noting that a recovered person can help treat three patients. The plasma donation is conducted at the KCBB Headquarters in Jabiya, she said, appreciating the efforts of the medical teams that contributed to the start of this process in Kuwait. — KUNA
Coronavirus death toll crosses 87,000

Trump sees light at end of tunnel as global infections touch 1.5 million

WASHINGTON: The coronavirus pandemic notched up another round of record death tolls in the United States and Europe, dooming the optimism of US President Donald Trump who insisted there was light at the end of the tunnel. The virus has now killed more than 87,000 people and infected over 1.5 million, according to an AFP tally yesterday, sparing almost no country and tipping the world into a devastating economic crisis as global commerce shudders to a halt.

For the second straight day, the US grieved nearly 2,000 deaths on Wednesday, as flags flew at half-mast in hardest-hit New York. There was also a record death toll of 938 over 24 hours in Britain, where Prime Minister Boris Johnson spent a third night in intensive care, his condition said to be “improving.”

France saw its total number of dead climb over 10,000 as the country prepared to extend its strict lockdown measures. Spain and Italy are still seeing hundreds of deaths per day despite tentative signs the disease may have peaked.

And the pandemic is marching into areas previously only lightly affected in Africa, Ethiopia declared a state of emergency and Liberia said it was locking down its capital Monrovia.

Lebanon import woes deepen as supply chains buckle under virus

Beirut: Lebanon has been at the center of a global supply chain crisis as a global recession takes hold, with ships unable to dock and factories closed. The country is also grappling with a financial crisis that has pushed its currency to record lows andsent its economy into a recession. With the coronavirus lockdown, the situation has only worsened, putting pressure on already stretched medical facilities and strains on the already fragile economy.

Some elephants in India have died of lymphoma, a cancer that is rare in elephants. The disease is spread by contact with humans and their waste, and it is thought to be spread by flies, which pick up the disease from dead animals and then spread it to live ones.

Coronavirus death toll crosses 87,000

China seeks to halt ‘silent carriers’ of coronavirus

Beijing: China is taking steps to identify and isolate “silent carriers” of the coronavirus to prevent the spread of the disease. The government has identified hundreds of people who tested positive for the virus but did not show symptoms, and has called on them to be quarantined.

The pandemic has forced half of humanity into lockdown as countries impose strict measures to control the spread of the virus. The World Health Organization has declared the outbreak a pandemic, and has called on all governments to take action.

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China seeks to halt ‘silent carriers’ of coronavirus

Beijing: China is taking steps to identify and isolate “silent carriers” of the coronavirus to prevent the spread of the disease. The government has identified hundreds of people who tested positive for the virus but did not show symptoms, and has called on them to be quarantined.

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**International**

**Lebanon import woes deepen as supply chains buckle under virus**

**Suppliers delay shipments to Lebanon, refuse orders**

BEIRUT: Lebanon’s food importers, already hit by a dollar crunch, have struggled to book new cargoes as the coronavirus pandemic threatens supply chains and sparks fears of even more painful price hikes.

Some vendors are delaying shipments and refusing new orders to Lebanon - which relies heavily on imports - as the spread of the virus slows global food supply chains. This comes at a grim time for Lebanon. A financial crisis has wiped out about half the value of the currency and sent prices skyrocketing for months. Supply disruptions, twinned with the hard currency squeeze, risk fueling more inflation as poverty levels rise. Prices of consumer goods have nearly doubled from the start of the year, the central bank said in late March.

Dollars more scarce during lockdown

"Everything is slowing down and I fear that globally, the worst is yet to come," he said.

**Food security**

As major state buyers from Saudi Arabia to Egypt look to beef up their strategic stocks, for the first time in years Lebanon’s government is thinking of importing wheat itself, a job usually left to private mills. Economy Minister Raoul Nehme told Reuters the cabinet had authorized importing around 80,000 tons, though this was not "in the works today".

"It is just a measure to be ready at any point in case we need it, for food security...to have an additional security stock," the government has warned that foreign currency reserves plummeted to "dangerous" levels, pledging to keep them for key goods: wheat, fuel and medicine.

Buyers of staples like grains worry other countries will hold back shipments as the pandemic drags on or choose not to prioritize the supply of around six million. "The interruptions because of the lack of cash dollars, the lockdowns abroad, we're going to see the impact in two months," said Nabil Fahed, an importer who heads the supermarket syndicate. "The supplies will not be there...I'm really worried about this".

**Nobody selling**

With a tiny industrial sector and scant natural resources, Lebanon’s economy produces few goods. Fahed, who owns a major supermarket chain, said prices for most goods have risen 45-50%, with some already running out. Any harsher shortages could still be a few months off. Importers put stocks of most goods at 1-2 months and speculated Syrian forces. Syria’s mission to the United Nations in New York did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The special investigative unit was established by members of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) in 2018 to identify perpetrators of illegal attacks. Until now the OPCW had only been authorized to say whether chemical attacks occurred, not who perpetrated them.

Officials in the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and its military backer Russia have repeatedly denied using chemical weapons and accuse insurgents of staging attacks to implicate Syrian forces. Syria’s mission to the United Nations in New York did not immediately respond to a request for comment and there was no immediate reaction from Damascus to the report. In Moscow the Russian Foreign Ministry did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement the United States concurred in the new report’s findings, calling them “the latest in a large and growing body of evidence that the Assad regime uses chemical weapons attacks in Syria as part of a deliberate campaign of violence against the Syrian people.” Washington also assesses that Assad’s government retains enough sarin and chlorine and expertise “to use sarin, produce and deploy chlorine munitions and develop new CW (chemical weapons),” Pompeo said.

The OPCW Investigation and Identification Team (IIIT) said more than 100 people were affected by the 2017 attacks, carried out on March 24-25 and 30 in the town of Lumaanah. According to the IIIT report, the 50th Brigade of the 22nd Air Division of the Syrian Air Force dropped XH4000 aerial bombs containing sarin on the town and a cylinder containing chlorine on a hospital. The raids were conducted from the Sharat and Hama air bases, it said, “Military operations of such a strategic nature as those three attacks only occur pursuant to orders from the highest levels of the Syrian Arab Armed Forces,” it said. While individuals were identified by the OPCW investigators, their names have been redacted from the report, which was to be circulated to the OPCW’s 193 member states on Wednesday. — Reuters

**Virus-hit Iran urges IMF to okay $5bn loan**

TEHRAN: Iranian President Hassan Rouhani urged the International Monetary Fund on Wednesday to give the sanctions-hit country a $5 billion emergency loan to combat its novel coronavirus outbreak. The Islamic republic is battling one of the world’s deadliest coronavirus outbreaks which it says has killed close to 4,000 people and infected more than 64,500. There has been speculation abroad that the real number of deaths and infections could be higher.

Iran has said it needs what would be its first IMF loan in over half a century to continue fighting the virus. But its arch enemy the United States, which effectively holds a veto at the IMF, is reportedly set to block the loan, arguing Iran will use the funds for military purposes.

"I urge all international organisations to fulfil their duties," Rouhani said during a cabinet meeting.

"We are a member of the IMF...if there’s going to be any discrimination between Iran and others in giving loans, neither we nor world opinion will tolerate it.” Iran announced on March 12 that it had requested the loan. The country has not received assistance from the IMF since a “standby credit” issued between 1960 and 1962, according to IMF figures.

According to the IMF’s website, a Rapid Financial Instrument “is available to all member countries facing an urgent balance of payments need”. If they do not act on their duties in this difficult situation, the world will judge them in a different way,” Rouhani said.

**‘Maximum pressure’**

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo charged in a recent interview that Iran would use any economic relief to pursue nuclear weapons and back Shiite militias in Iraq that the administration blames for a wave of attacks on bases used by US troops, “You see the way...the regime is treating their people in this time of enormous crisis. You see the way that they continue to spend money,” Pompeo told conservative radio host Hugh Hewitt.

US President Donald Trump’s administration has waged a campaign of “maximum pressure” on Iran since it withdrew from a landmark nuclear deal in 2018. It has since imposed wave after wave of crippling sanctions that target key sectors of Iran’s economy such as oil sales and banking.

Iran has repeatedly called on the Trump administration to reverse its sanctions policy, which has been opposed even by some US allies, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic hit. — AFP

**Syrian air force behind chemical attacks: Probe**

LONDON: Syrian Arab Air Force pilots flying Sukhoi Su-22 military planes and a helicopter dropped bombs containing poisonous chlorine and sarin nerve gas on a village in the country’s western Hama region in March 2017, a new team at the global chemical weapons watchdog concluded in its first report.

The special investigative unit was established by members of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) in 2018 to identify perpetrators of illegal attacks. Until now the OPCW had only been authorized to say whether chemical attacks occurred, not who perpetrated them.

Officials in the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and its military backer Russia have repeatedly denied using chemical weapons and accuse insurgents of staging attacks to implicate Syrian forces. Syria’s mission to the United Nations in New York did not immediately respond to a request for comment and there was no immediate reaction from Damascus to the report. In Moscow the Russian Foreign Ministry did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

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Chinese virus medics arrive in Nigeria despite protest

S Africa’s Ramaphosa defends WHO after Trump virus lashing

ABUJA: A group of Chinese medics on Wednesday arrived in Nigeria to help fight the coronavirus pandemic, despite angry criticism from health workers in the west African nation. The 15-strong team were greeted by senior officials on the tarmac at Abuja airport after flying in on a month-long deployment with a plane-load of medical supplies.

China—where the first outbreak of the COVID-19 disease occurred—has dispatched medics and supplies across the globe in a soft power push to burnish its image. But the move to send help to Nigeria sparked an irate backlash from the country’s biggest doctors’ union.

On Sunday, the Nigerian Medical Association condemned the planned deployment as “a thing of embarrassment” to health workers fighting the disease in Africa’s most populous country “under deplorable conditions”. “It is a great disservice to the morale of the long-suffering frontline health workforce if the government goes ahead to invite these Chinese doctors,” a statement said.

“The invitation means their sacrifices so far in this pandemic,” Officials insist the Chinese team will help advise local authorities on handling the pandemic, Nigeria—which has so far recorded 254 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and six deaths—is seen as highly vulnerable to the spread of the virus due to its weak healthcare system and high population density.

The country has already received medical supplies, including masks, gowns and testing kits from China was contaminated with the novel coronavirus.

Meanwhile, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa has thrown his support behind the WHO after it came under stinging attack from US leader Donald Trump over its handling of the coronavirus pandemic.

A statement from Ramaphosa’s office late Wednesday said he “reaffirms his appreciation for the exceptional leadership of World Health Organization (WHO) chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, “from the very earliest stages of this unprecedented global health crisis”. Ramaphosa was speaking in his capacity as the current leader of the African Union (AU). On Tuesday, Trump threatened to withhold US funding to the WHO, of which the United States is the largest funder.

Trump accused the WHO of having “called it wrong” and months too late, while taking US money but favoring China.

“The WHO really blew it,” Trump wrote on Twitter “For some reason, funded largely by the United States, yet very China centric. We will be giving that a good look.”

Sudan’s Bashir, strongman turned inmate

KHARTOUM: Since his ouster last year, Sudan’s veteran leader Omar Al-Bashir has been detained and convicted of corruption, becoming the Middle East’s latest fallen strongman.

The 76-year-old, held in Khartoum’s Kober prison where many of his opponents were detained during his rule, had ruthlessly crushed dissent after his rise to power in a 1989 Islamist-backed coup.

For three decades, he tenaciously held onto power through several bouts of protests, even after the 2011 Arab Spring coughed up protest spires that toppled Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi.

Bashir’s fate, however, was sealed after his own military reacted to mounting public anger and ousted him in April last year after months of street demonstrations. He was handed a two-year sentence over corruption charges in December and faces separate charges over the deaths of protesters and the 1989 coup that brought him to power.

An appeals court upheld the sentence on Wednesday: The former leader has also been indicted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague over war crimes and genocide in the war-ravaged Darfur region of western Sudan. One of Africa’s longest-serving presidents, Bashir showed many different faces during his 30 years at the helm.

Known for his trademark dancing and waving of a cane before addressing loyalists, Bashir had remained defiant in the face of growing street protests before his overthrow. He long proved himself a political survivor, growing street protests before his overthrow. He long proved himself a political survivor, enduring Russia and China and winning re-election in 2010 and 2015 in polls boycotted by opposition groups.
Global leaders call to form task force to fight COVID-19

A 165-strong international group including 92 former Presidents and Prime Ministers, along with current economic and health leaders in the developed and developing world have come together to demand the creation of a G20 executive task force and an immediate global pledging conference which would approve and co-ordinate a multi-billion dollar coronavirus fighting fund.

In an open letter addressed to G20 leaders the group - which wants both to speed up the search for and development of effective vaccines and other treatments and revive the global economy - urges global collaboration and commitment to funding “beyond the current capacity of our existing international institutions.”

“The economic emergency will not be resolved until the health emergency is addressed: the health emergency will not end simply by conquering the disease in one country alone but by ensuring recovery from COVID-19 in all countries,” the statement says.

The plea is for agreement within days for:

- $35 billion to support health systems, from ventilators to test kits and protective equipment for health workers;
- And $150 billion for developing countries to fight the medical and economic crisis, prevent a second wave of the disease flowing back into countries as they come out of the first wave. This means waiving debt interest payments for the poorest countries, including $4 billion due this year from Africa. A $500-800 billion issue of additional resources by the IMF in the form of special drawing rights is proposed;

The letter also urges the co-ordination of fiscal stimuli to avoid a recession becoming a depression. Instead of each country, or state or province acting alone, the letter welcomes the G20’s first communique on the Covid-19 crisis, the 165-strong group are pressing the G20 to speed up an action plan.

The group states: “All health systems - even the most sophisticated and best funded - are buckling under the pressures of the virus. Yet if we do nothing as the disease spreads in poorer African, Asian and Latin American cities which have little testing equipment, hardly any ventilators, and few medical supplies; and where social distancing and even washing hands are difficult to achieve, Covid-19 will persist there - and re-emerge to hit the rest of the world with far greater ferocity.”

The appeal calls on countries to come forward with $8 billion to rapidly harden the global effort for vaccines, cure and treatment;

According to WHO, almost 30 percent of the world’s population - 1.4 billion people - live in countries with no coronavirus testing; and experts say around 80 percent of all new infections are undetected;

The group propose convening a global pledging conference to commit resources to meet these emergency global health needs;

Based on the Global Economic outlook, the group propose a range of measures and state: “Much has been done by national governments to contain the disease. But a global economic problem requires a global economic response. Our aim should be to prevent a liquidity crisis turning into a solvency crisis, and a global recession becoming a global depression. To ensure this, we propose a range of measures and state: “Much has been done by national governments to contain the disease. But a global economic problem requires a global economic response. Our aim should be to prevent a liquidity crisis turning into a solvency crisis.”
WASHINGTON: Leftist US Senator Bernie Sanders suspended his presidential campaign Wednesday, clearing the way for rival Joe Biden to secure the Democratic nomination and challenge Donald Trump in November.

The feisty 78-year-old democratic socialist shot up the 2020 race with his relentless pursuit of “economic justice” for all Americans and a demand for universal health care. But he acknowledged his campaign had fallen short, as party voters determined Biden would be a stronger candidate to go up against Trump in the general election. “I have concluded that this battle for the Democratic nomination will not be successful,” Sanders told supporters in a livestream from his home, where he has remained for the bulk of the coronavirus pandemic that put all in-person campaigning on hold.

“Vice president Biden will be the nominee,” he said, adding that he congratulated his rival, a “very decent man, who I will work with to move our progressive ideas forward.”

Sanders, who challenged Hillary Clinton for the party’s nomination in 2016, mounted a formidable campaign, which already has the backing of nearly all other ex-rivals in the race including senators Kamala Harris and Amy Klobuchar, and former Indiana mayor Pete Buttigieg. “I see you, I hear you, and I understand the urgency of what it is we have to get done in this country,” Biden said in a statement to Sanders and his supporters.

“I hope you will join us. You are more than welcome. You’re needed,” Trump said. Biden made his own pitch for Sanders’ supporters, though in a more abrasive tone. “Bernie Sanders is OUT!” the president posted on Twitter. “The Bernie people should come to the Republican Party, TRAID! TRAID!”

Biden seeks party unity
Biden immediately hailed Sanders as “a good man, a great leader, and one of the most powerful voices for change in our country.”

He urged Sanders to join his campaign, which already has the backing of nearly all other ex-rivals in the race including senators Kamala Harris and Amy Klobuchar, and former Indiana mayor Pete Buttigieg. “I see you, I hear you, and I understand the urgency of what it is we have to get done in this country,” Biden said in a statement to Sanders and his supporters.

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Trump won the 2016 election with help from disaffected working-class voters who believed they were being left behind by politicians in Washington. Sanders also appeals to those voters. He said he would not remain in an unwinnable campaign that would “interfere” with important anti-coronavirus work while the country is gripped by crisis.

Biden said his focus is on ending the pandemic, but promised to continue campaigning despite the logistical challenges. “First things first: how we’re going to keep America safe and get this crisis under control and provide economic assistance,” he said during a virtual fundraiser. —AFP

Coronavirus adds to struggles in City of God favela
RIO DE JANEIRO: There are no good options these days in City of God. Venture out in this densely populated Rio de Janeiro favela, and residents risk exposing themselves to coronavirus.

Stay in, and many have nothing to eat. The Brazilian slum rose to fame in 2002, when an acclaimed film of the same name chronicled the violence, crime and stark choices facing young people growing up on its streets.

“If you run, the beast will get you. If you stay, the beast will eat you,” went the film’s tagline. It could just as well apply to the era of COVID-19. Like 40 percent of Brazil’s labor force, people in favelas tend to work in the informal sector, the kind of jobs that become impossible under the stay-at-home measures adopted to slow the spread of the new coronavirus. “A lot of them are self-employed. They style hair, give manicures, collect cans to recycle, guard people’s cars, sell things at the beach,” says Samantha Messias, founder of a charitable organization called Ligacao Cultural (Cultural Connection). “All these people have lost their income. And they are urgently in need of help,” she says, wearing a pink face mask as she watches workers hand out food to needy residents in the slum of 37,000 people. —AFP

Pandemic gives shot in the arm to Cuba’s medical missions
HAVANA: Cuban doctors are back in global demand as overwhelmed national health care services tap their crisis experience as they battle with the coronavirus pandemic. Communist-run Havana has long used its “white coat diplomacy” as an arm of its foreign policy but has fallen foul of a changing political landscape in right-leaning Latin America and the Trump White House in Washington. But with the coronavirus pandemic sweeping the world, Cuba’s doctors are seen as a key resource for overwhelmed national health care systems. “We have been talking about the possibility of a pandemic since the beginning of the century, and Cuba has its army of white coats prepared,” said Arturo Lopez-Levy, a Cuban professor at Holy Names University in California. The ideals of the Cuban revolution of the 1950s mean free health care and education have long been considered societal pillars of the socialist island. “At the end of the Cold War, Cuba developed this capacity and therefore it’s logical that it became a very important tool in its foreign policy,” Lopez-Levy told AFP.

Doctors to 14 nations
Italy, with more than 17,000 COVID-19 deaths, is one of 14 nations that so far have called on Cuba to help out their beleaguered health care systems. Havana sent its Henry Reeve humanitarian brigade, named after an American communist in Cuba’s war of independence, that specializes in natural disasters and epidemics. Their arrival was greeted with applause as they filed into an Italian airport. Havana sent a 39-strong team of medics to Andorra after the principality reported that scores of its own doctors were quarantined. Cuba has also sent teams to Venezuela, Nicaragua, Grenada, Suriname, Jamaica and Belize. And France has now authorized Cuban doctors to work in some of its overseas territories in order to fill the gaps in hard-hit local health care systems. “The coronavirus has provided Cuba with a new opportunity to export medical services,” said Jorge Duany, head of the Cuban Research Institute at Florida International University.

Washington target
Cuba earned $6.3 billion from its medical programs in 2018. But since then, revenues have taken a hit, with Latin America swinging back to the right, and Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador and El Salvador all cutting contracts with Havana and sending the medical brigades home.

Cuba, which has suffered almost six decades of crippling US sanctions, blames Washington for campaigning to discredit an initiative that has sent more than 400,000 health workers to 164 countries.

The US accuses the Cuban government of exploiting the medics program for cash, saying 75 percent of their salary is withheld by Havana in a modern-day form of “slavery.”

And US-Cuban President Janine Bohorquez, who lashed out,8,000 Cuban health workers last year, accused Havana of using the program to plant intelligence agents in the country.

“Cuba offers its international medical missions to those afflicted with COVID-19 only to make up the money it lost when countries stopped participating in the abusive program,” the US State Department said on Twitter two weeks ago. Host countries seeking Cuba’s help over the pandemic “should scrutinize agreements and end labor abuses,” it warned.

Still, the program survives. As of last month, Havana still had 28,729 healthworkers posted in 59 countries. “Under the US policy of maximum economic pressure on Cuba, the rejection of the medical program could be interpreted as another strategy to deprive the Cuban government of material resources,” said Duany. —AFP
Coronavirus was spreading in NYC in February, came via Europe: Scientist

‘There was a focus on shopping travel from China’

WASHINGTON: The novel coronavirus began spreading in New York City in February, before widespread testing began, and the strain so far identified in local samples came from Europe, a scientist said Wednesday.

Adriana Heguy, a geneticist at NYU Grossman School of Medicine who led the research, told AFP that tracing back the virus’ chain of transmission will help policy makers make better informed social interventions in the future. “It’s very interesting that so far, the majority seem to be coming from Europe, and this is in part I think because there was a focus on stopping travel from China,” she said.

The findings also tie in with a spate of mysterious pneumonia cases that New York physicians were treating before large scale testing began in the city, she added. Heguy and her team determined the viral sequences of 75 samples taken from the nasal swabs of patients at Tisch Hospital, NYU Winthrop Hospital and NYU Langone Hospital Brooklyn. All organisms mutate over time, but so-called RNA viruses such as SARS-CoV-2 introduce errors in each cycle of their replication. This is the reason why influenza viruses are so different from season to season and require new vaccines. While the new coronavirus doesn’t seem to mutate as fast as the flu, there are enough changes for scientists to trace back its ancestry, much like a person’s DNA can be traced back to their parents and grandparents.

To do this, the New York team uploaded the samples they had taken to a server run by the Global Initiative on Sharing All Influenza Data (G-I-S-A-I-D Epiflu) where scientists from around the world share data. The first patient they studied had no relevant travel history, meaning he had been infected by someone in their community.

By the specific changes that had occurred in his virus, we could tell basically, with a high degree of probability that it was coming from England,” said Heguy.

Beyond determining transmission pathways, there could be clinical implications in continuing to gather more data. For example, scientists will eventually seek to learn whether some strains lead to less or more serious forms of the disease than others, and this could inform targeted treatments.

Another potential use will come as countries go back to work and lift lockdown restrictions — China and South Korea are starting to do so. If, as scientists suspect, the virus is seasonal and returns in a smaller second wave, they can immediately sequence its genome from infected patients, then take samples from the neighborhood where they live to determine if there is a community outbreak.

This in turn can help more targeted social interventions. The team is in the early stages of their project but hopes to soon sequence nearly 200 samples per week with the goal of offering thousands of genomes for analysis. — AFP

Johnson stable as lockdown extension looms

LONDON: British Prime Minister Boris Johnson yesterday began a fourth day in intensive care “improving” in his battle with coronavirus, as his government prepared to extend a nationwide lockdown introduced last month. Johnson is the most high-profile world leader to become infected with COVID-19 and his transfer to intensive care yesterday began a fourth day in intensive care “improving”. “When we have the opportunity to change interventions in the future. “It’s very interesting that so far, the majority seem to be coming from Europe, and this is in part I think because there was a focus on stopping travel from China,” said Heguy.

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Australian police take ‘black box’ off cruise ship in coronavirus homicide probe

Hundreds of passengers tested positive for virus

SYDNEY: Australian police said yesterday they have taken the “black box” of a cruise ship which disembarked hundreds of passengers infected with the coronavirus in Sydney, as part of a homicide investigation into the country’s deadliest infection source.

The investigation got underway as the Australian authorities said the rate of new coronavirus infections hit its lowest number in three weeks and began arranging more flights to bring home citizens stranded abroad.

The Ruby Princess cruise ship, owned by Carnival Corp, has become a flashpoint of public anger in Australia after authorities granted the ship permission to disembark its passengers last month without health checks.

Hundreds of the passengers later tested positive for the coronavirus and 15 have died, out of Australia’s roughly 6,000 confirmed cases and 51 deaths.

Investigators boarded the ship at an industrial port south of Sydney, interviewed the captain and took electronic logs as evidence, New South Wales (NSW) state Police Commissioner Mick Fuller said.

“They spoke to the captain of the ship, who was extremely helpful,” Fuller said in a televised news conference yesterday. “Ships have a black box and took electronic logs as evidence, New South Wales (NSW) state Police Commissioner Mick Fuller said.

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Indian court order for free coronavirus testing may hinder fight: Experts

India has 5,734 cases of coronavirus and 166 deaths from COVID-19

NEW DELHI: A decision by the Supreme Court of India to make testing for coronavirus free places an unfair financial burden on medical firms and could see a reduction in testing, already among the world's lowest, said business leaders and health experts.

The concern is that private medical firms, like many businesses in India are struggling financially, and could go under if they tested for free without financial assistance. Kiran Mazumdar Shaw, executive chairperson of Biocon Limited, one of India's biggest biotech firms, said private institutions could not be expected to operate on a charitable basis.

"Humanitarian in intent but impractical to implement - I fear testing will plummet," Shaw said on Twitter yesterday about the court judgement. "These are small businesses they're providing testing at very high costs. How will they pay their employees?"

The top court, responding to a public interest petition, said on Wednesday private medical institutions should be playing a philanthropic role at a time of national crisis and it would not allow a situation where India's philanthropic role at a time of national crisis is threatened. It said the issue of reimbursing these laboratories for tests for novel coronavirus that the world's second most populous country urgently needs would be considered later on.

India has 5,734 cases of coronavirus and 166 deaths from COVID-19, the respiratory disease caused by the virus, according to the ministry of health and family welfare, reflecting a jump of 480 cases over Wednesday.

The numbers are small compared to the United States, Italy and Spain and one of the reasons is that the country is testing a narrow range of the population, doctors say. These include people who have travelled overseas, people in contact with them and are showing symptoms, health workers with symptoms, hospitalised patients with respiratory problems and those who came in contact with a confirmed patient.

On Wednesday, 13,143 samples were tested nationwide, the government-run Indian Council of Medical Research said, well behind the 20,000 people South Korea has been testing each day from its far smaller population.

The plan is to scale up to 20,000 tests in the next few days and eventually to 100,000 a day in the worse-case scenario. But the court decision threatens to derail the plan to widen testing, said Shamika Ravi, a former member of the Indian Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council and a health specialist. "We are going to have fewer and fewer testing, and that is a very big problem right now because that is our single focus, to increase the testing capacity across the country."

The health sector like others parts of the Indian economy is struggling and in no position to offer a free ride, she said.

"There is a liquidity crunch in every business today, including diagnostics. People just don't have the liquidity to be able to undertake large, new exercises without any assurance," she said.

Of growing worry is India's financial capital Mumbai, which has reported 857 cases, the highest in the country including from its slums where even health workers are reluctant to go.

"We are seeing more medical staff either getting infected or just not showing up at work," said a city health inspector.

As delivery workers emerge as frontline soldiers, India warms to e-commerce

NEW DELHI: Three days after India imposed a nationwide lockdown, Devender Singh revved up his motorcycle to deliver meat and eggs to customers - but his heart was in his mouth as he closed in on a police barricade on a deserted New Delhi road.

"In these times, we are also fulfilling an essential service just like doctors, nurses and police," Singh said from behind a face mask and a handkerchief with a smile in his eyes.

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China seeks to contain ‘silent carriers’ of coronavirus

Maulanasyah building a makeshift hospital

BEIJING: China released new measures yesterday to try and prevent asymptomatic “silent carriers” of coronavirus from causing a second wave of infections, as the country reported another modest rise in new confirmed cases.

Mainland China reported 63 new confirmed cases on Wednesday, up from 62 a day earlier, the National Health Commission said. Of those, 61 were travellers arriving from overseas, bringing the total number of confirmed cases in China to 81,865.

While new infections have fallen from their peak in February after China locked down several cities and imposed strict travel restrictions, authorities have called for continued vigilance amid fears of a fresh wave of infections.

Aside from curbing an influx of infected travellers from abroad, China’s other concern is managing asymptomatic people, or virus carriers who exhibit no clinical symptoms such as a fever or a cough.

China reported 56 new asymptomatic cases on Wednesday, bringing the total number of such cases to 657 since data for such infections were first made public on Wednesday, similar to measures seen in Wuhan. — Reuters

Indonesian barber gears up to groom during coronavirus

BOGOR: Indonesian hair stylist Herman Maulanasyah knows that he may look comical in his makeshift protective gear but he sees that as a small price if it helps protect him and his customers from the novel coronavirus.

“Clad in a plastic sheet held together with tape, a ski mask, a gas mask and latex gloves, Maulanasyah, 40, welcomes customers at his salon in the city of Bogor, south of Jakarta, even as the virus spreads across the country.

“Please don’t judge, I’m not making it for fun or to look ridiculous, this is how I show my appreciation to the health workers,” Maulanasyah told Reuters at the salon he has run for 15 years.

Before he starts cutting hair, Maulanasyah sprays his protective gear and his customers’ hands with sanitizer. He has worn the gear for the past two weeks as part of efforts to cut the risks from the respiratory disease caused by the coronavirus that has killed at least 240 people and infected nearly 3,000 in the world’s fourth most populous country.

Health workers in Indonesia have paid a high price, with at least 24 doctors dying from the disease, according to the Indonesian Doctors Association. In Jakarta, 130 medical workers have been infected, according to the city government said.

Jakarta has ordered businesses and schools to close in a bid to contain the virus and it plans large-scale social restrictions enforced by security personnel.

“Though Maulanasyah’s salon is outside Jakarta, where many of the cases in the country have been clustered, his income has dwindled from about 500,000 rupiah ($31) a day to 100,000 rupiah ($6.20),” Customer Abdul Rahman Fattah said he felt safer having his hair cut this way but conceded that he was worried about the virus spreading.

New Zealand orders quarantine for returning citizens

SYDNEY: New Zealand will begin moving citizens to compulsory quarantine from today as they return from overseas, stepping up efforts to slow the spread of the coronavirus halfway through a four-week nationwide lockdown.

The shutdown began in late March in the Pacific nation of about 5 million, and a state of national emergency was declared to stifle local transmissions of the respiratory disease.

“Failure now would mean failure everywhere,” Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said, adding that 14 days spent in a government-approved facility would be a prerequisite for all foreign travellers.

“All we ask is you respect the requirement,” she said.

Ardern added that her cabinet would decide whether to extend the nationwide curbs on April 20, two days before the lockdown is set to end.

The lockdown has reduced domestic transmissions, authorities said, with a steady fall this week in the daily rise in infections.

The tally of infections rose by 29 to stand at 1,239 on Thursday, for the lowest daily rise since March 21, a sign the epidemic could be on the retreat since the lockdown began 15 days ago. Overnight, 35 people were declared to have recovered.

New Zealand, like neighbouring Australia, has fewer infections than many countries and the pace of infections in both nations has slowed dramatically in the past week.

Despite some signs of a plateau in infections, the government said it had no plans to relax the curbs over the Easter weekend and warned of hefty fines for non-essential travel then.

Police will step up activity around holiday spots during the Easter holidays, authorities said, with some roadblocks planned. Interactive graphic tracking global spread of coronavirus.
Indian inventor revs up corona car to drive home lockdown message

See Page 21
Vienna’s horse-drawn carriages ride again — for food delivery

Vienna’s horse-drawn carriages, a staple of street life in the Austrian capital and a popular tourist attraction, have been sidelined by the coronavirus pandemic — so they are now helping deliver food to the elderly. The carriages, or “Fiaker” as they are called in Vienna, are taking part in a food delivery scheme in one of the city’s central districts set up by the InterContinental Hotel, itself severely hit by lockdown measures taken to halt the spread of the virus. Instead of catering to guests, the hotel’s kitchens have been turning out 200-300 meals a day for senior citizens in the area.

Deliveries are made by volunteers using all manner of vehicles — including by part-time “Fiaker” driver Christian Gerzabek. Despite business coming to a standstill, “the horses still have to be moved, they want to get out after the winter,” he says. “I thought that we should combine that... with doing something good for people who need it,” he told AFP. The scheme has been a lifeline for its elderly beneficiaries.

General manager of the Hotel Intercontinental, Brigitte Trattner, providing food packages to be picked up in Vienna.

InterContinental general director Brigitte Trattner said carriage drivers were the first to respond to a call for delivery volunteers, with car drivers and cyclists also signing up. Describing the InterContinental Vienna as an intrinsic part of Vienna’s third district, Trattner said that when the coronavirus crisis broke “we naturally thought: Is there anyway we can help?” The hotel plans to run the project until Monday, and after that Trattner says meals would be distributed to staff at the Rudolfstiftung hospital, which is also nearby. —AFP

Locked-down Brits seek creature comfort

Stranded at home, Britons have sought solace in their traditional passion for animals, with shelters recording a wave of applications to adopt dogs and cats. The famous shelter at Battersea in south London saw 86 dogs and 69 cats leave in the week before the government announced its coronavirus lockdown, more than double the number at this time last year, leading to warnings against impulsive adoptions. “We are a country of animal lovers and I think people recognize the situation we find ourselves in is exceptional,” said Steve Craddock, Centre Manager at Battersea.

While all three Battersea centers have closed since the lockdown, “people continue to apply for adoption online,” he said. “We haven’t seen an increase of animals being abandoned which is encouraging,” he added. The Kennel Club, the world-renowned British dog association, has also noted a “surge” in interest. Puppy searches on its website increased by 53 percent between February and March, with a peak in the week before the confinement measures. Labradors, cocker spaniels and golden retrievers led the searches, all breeds popular with families. “There is an enormous surge,” Bill Lambert, head of health and well-being at the Kennel Club, told AFP. “People spend more time at home and are thinking that now they could actually have a dog,” he added.

‘Calm to household’

But the club warned against “impulsive” decisions to take on new pets. “People are making decisions about what is happening right now but they might go back to work and their situation might change,” said Lambert. “There is a big risk with getting a puppy now when you’ve got lots of time on your hands, the puppy will spend lots of time with you and suddenly the puppy’s routine will change and the puppy will be left on its own,” he added. “Puppies, and even older dogs should not be left for long periods of time.”

However, he highlighted the benefits of having a pet in times of anxiety and isolation, such as pandemics. “Dogs are a good way to reduce your blood pressure, dogs bring calm to a household, they give people something to focus on, particularly in these terrible times... particularly for people living alone,” said Lambert. The British have not only stocked up on toilet paper, but on treats for their pets. Pet shops, which are on the list of shops allowed to stay open, are experiencing record sales.

The Pets At Home chain revealed “exceptional levels of demand”, both in-store and online as the COVID-19 crisis has developed, but warned in a news release that its financial outlook for the year 2020/2021 remained uncertain. Shopping for dogs, however, is more complicated due to the pandemic restrictions. Bill Lambert believes this could be a blessing, forcing potential owners to wait until the crisis is over before making up their mind. “What we are hoping is that there is a good possibility that some people who are working from home will find a way to work from home far more frequently when the lockdown comes to an end,” he said, leading to fewer lonely pups. —AFP
A giant coronavirus is stalking the streets of southern India — propelled by a 100 cc engine and an inventor trying to drive home the message that Indians should stay indoors as the pandemic sweeps across the world. Sudhakar Yadav's wacky small single-seater car — made of fluorescent-green fibre and complete with the red crown-like spikes of the virus — has been racking up the miles in the tech hub of Hyderabad to remind fellow citizens of the dangers of COVID-19. “People are not scared and are still on the streets despite the clear danger,” the 67-year-old Yadav, who runs a printing business, told AFP. “My message through the car art is to make them understand that it is dangerous to be out on the streets and the safest place right now is the home.”

Yadav says he was inspired by virus-shaped helmets worn by police elsewhere in India as they try to inject some light-heartedness into their enforcement of a crippling 21-day national lockdown. In the tech-hub of Bangalore, officers wearing red and green coronavirus helmets danced around drivers ignoring quarantine, while their colleagues blew horns and banged gongs to simulate a virus attack. In the southern city of Chennai, police inspector Rajesh Babu joined with a local artist to design a helmet with red spikes and bulbs to shock drivers there. Yadav the inventor — who holds a Guinness World Record for designing the world’s largest tricycle — said the Hyderabad police had been “supportive” of his journey.

“They want the car to be showcased to create awareness,” he told AFP, adding he planned to donate the vehicle to local authorities to maximize its use during the lockdown. Yadav has been designing quirky art pieces for almost five decades, including cars shaped as a burger, cricket ball and a computer. He also took motorbike engines, encased them in cigarette and condom-shaped fibre frames and drove them around Hyderabad to raise awareness about cancer and safe sex.—AFP

Pharmacists on the Indonesian holiday island of Bali are tackling a shortage of anti-coronavirus hand sanitizer by making their own unique, tropical version — from thousands of litres of fermented palm wine. The idea was the brainchild of Bali police chief Petrus Reinhard Golose, who says he was alarmed that supplies of alcohol-based disinfectant were in short supply while prices soared for what was left on the market. He rustled up some 4,000 litres of the popular, potent beverage — known as arak — by asking local manufacturers to donate from their stocks, with the force also dipping into its own funds to buy up extra supplies.

Staff at Bali’s Udayana University were then tasked with turning the wine into a handwash that could protect against the coronavirus. Within a week, they had managed to produce a disinfectant with a 96 percent alcohol content to meet WHO standards, according to the university. Some clove and mint oil were added to the mixture to reduce hand irritation. “So far we’ve produced 10,600 bottles of hand sanitiser using arak and Bali police have given them out to people in need,” Dewa Ayu Swastini, head of the university’s pharmaceutical faculty, told AFP on Wednesday. Bali has reported 49 confirmed cases of the coronavirus and 2 deaths.—AFP
Sitcom with ‘heart’: ‘Modern Family’ bids farewell after 11 seasons

The end of “Modern Family” after nearly 11 years may be yet another herald of the American sitcom’s end — but the series can go out counting itself among the icons of the genre. Wednesday’s two-hour finale on US network ABC began with a documentary and concluded with a two-part episode. The half-hour “mockumentary” followed multiple branches of the goofy but loving Pritchett clan for 248 episodes over 11 seasons. This season’s nearly four million viewers per episode are still a far cry from the show’s peak popularity in 2013 and 2014, when it would garner at least 14 million watches a week — and when video streaming had not yet reached its prime. “Modern Family”’s debut made a big splash among audiences and critics alike, winning a Golden Globe for best comedy series in 2012. It combined fake on-set interviews — like “The Office” — with an upbeat tone. The episodes’ signature structure often saw detached plot lines pay off with a central joke in the final act. “We debuted in 2009, when comedy was tilting heavily toward the cynical,” the final act. “We debuted in 2009, when comedy was tilting heavily toward the cynical,” the final act. “And Sofia Vergara’s quasi-matriarch Gloria was one of the only major Hispanic characters on television at the time, though some accused the portrayal of playing into negative stereotypes of a Colombian woman. While some film and TV projects have been delayed due to the spread of the coronavirus, the production for “Modern Family” was finished before lockdowns began. And now Luke Dunphy actor Nolan Gould hopes the ending can be a bright spot, “I’m glad that in the midst of all that’s going on in the world, there’s going to be a finale for “Modern Family,” he told the site Hollywood Life. “We can bring in a little bit of positivity and a little bit of joy into people’s lives and give people a sense of closure.” —AFP

Top French fashion brands start making free masks

Louis Vuitton is converting five of its French workshops to make masks for frontline health workers, the luxury brand said Wednesday. Its chairman Michael Burke praised employees who had volunteered to make the non-surgical masks with France hit — like several other countries — by shortages of protective face coverings. He said hundreds of thousands of masks would be produced in the workshops which usually turn out designer clothes and luxury leather goods. — Denisfilm/ IStock.com pic via AFP

Disney+ streaming service hits 50 million users

The Walt Disney Company on Wednesday said its television streaming service has already won 50 million paid subscribers just five months after its launch in the US. Disney+ rolled out in India and eight Western European countries in recent weeks. About eight million of its paid subscriptions are in India, where Disney+ is offered in conjunction with existing Hotstar service. “We’re truly humbled that Disney+ is resonating with millions around the globe, and believe this bores well for our continued expansion throughout Western Europe and into Japan and all of Latin America later this year,” direct-to-consumer and international chairman Kevin Mayer said in a release. The Walt Disney Company last month rolled out Disney+ streaming service in seven European countries, but had reduced bandwidth — and hence reduced output quality — because of the heavy demand on network infrastructure during the coronavirus crisis. Strict confinement rules are keeping millions of people at home in a bid to curtail the outbreak, effectively providing an enormous captive audience for the US entertainment giant’s contender in the streaming market. After its US launch last November, Disney+ is now streaming in Austria, Britain, France, Ireland, Italy, Germany, Spain and Switzerland. Disney is hoping its subscription rate of 6.99 euros a month (£5.99 in Britain and $6.99 in the US) will be a small price to pay for in-home access to its blockbuster films and franchises. It aims to compete with Netflix, Apple and Amazon by leveraging its huge catalogue of Disney animated classics along with its Pixar, Marvel and National Geographic movies — not to mention its wildly successful “Star Wars” franchise. Leading television streaming service Netflix reported having 187 million subscribers in a quarterly earnings report early this year. —AFP

The cast of ABC’s “Modern Family” is seen at the Screen Actors Guild Awards in 2014. —AFP

Members of a flat-sharing community watch the ‘Bambi’ film of Disney at their living room, in Dortmund, western Germany, on March 27, 2020, amidst the pandemic of the new coronavirus COVID-19. —AFP

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RAP, ‘FROZEN 2’ HELP REVIVE LAPLAND’S ENDANGERED LANGUAGES

Sporting a grey hoodie, goatee beard and oversized headphones, rapper Amoc spits a stream of aggressive, staccato rhymes into the microphone of his home studio as he works on new material. The punchy rhythm of the 35-year-old’s vocals would sound familiar to rap lovers all over the world. But Amoc’s lyrics are only understandable to the 300 speakers of the seriously endangered language of Inari Sami, from Finland’s far north. Until the middle of the last century, the 10 languages of the indigenous Sami people — who are spread across the northern parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia — were decimated by brutal assimilation policies by their governments.

Now, a new generation of young speakers has spawned music, TV programs and even a Disney blockbuster, in a “golden age” for Sami languages. But re-learning the almost-forgotten tongues has stirred up painful memories of past injustices against the Sami. “The more you learn,” says Sami parliament president Tiina Sanila-Aikio, “the more you realize this might be something that you cannot ever take back as a mother tongue.”

Not flowers but violence

When Amoc — real name Mikkal Morottaja — started rapping two decades ago, only “10 or fewer” young people could speak his language. His preferred themes of “occultist horror and violence” did not always go down well with the other Inari Sami speakers, who thought his lyrics would be more traditional. “The older people didn’t realize that it’s not about flowers and nature,” he tells AFP. “I don’t think they liked my music so much.” Morottaja often had to innovate to express modern concepts in a language more tailored to describing indigenous traditions such as reindeer herding. Inari Sami used to have no word for outer space, for instance.

But his father, Matti, an activist and president of the language council, has been able to advise and even help create new constructions. In the case of “space”, Inari Sami has now adopted “komovuota”, which literally means “openness”. Morottaja’s latest project is a collaboration with fellow Sami rapper Ailu Valle. Valle, a trek through an enchanted forest to meet the tent-dwelling Northuldra tribe, whose clothes and reindeer-herding way of life are distinctly Sami.

Immersion ‘language nests’

Until the 1960s, Sami children were routinely forbidden to use their mother tongue at school, under an education system that saw Sami people as second-class citizens to be assimilated into mainstream society. But a gradual shift in attitudes across the Nordic countries resulted in a milestone in 1992, when Finland passed a Sami language law giving speakers the right to use their mother tongue with authorities. Since then, the number of younger speakers has grown thanks to immersive “language nest” schools and nurseries, a policy copied from New Zealand’s Maori language revival.

Yet still only a quarter of the country’s 10,000 Sami speak a Sami language, Finland’s Sami parliament says. “One major concern is that rights to education and services in Sami only apply in Lapland’s designated Sami region,” parliament’s language protection secretary Anu Kirste Aikio tells AFP. “Even though over half of Sami live in cities and elsewhere.” Finland’s centre-left government has promised to address the issue, such as by expanding distance and online teaching in Sami. For now, the children’s programme “Unna Junna” is a vital resource.

Produced since 2007 by Finnish broadcaster YLE, each episode covers aspects of Sami life, in all three of Finland’s Sami languages. Producer Heli Huovinen and her small team sometimes ask viewers and their parents what they would like to see. “They want more films about nature, about animals, about traditional Sami things and ways of life,” she tells AFP. “We were expecting modern things like robots and computer games.” Huovinen, in her early 30s, grew up with a strong Inari Sami identity but had no opportunities to learn the language until high school aged 16. “It would have been so cool to have Sami children’s TV. I could have learnt from that,” she says. “So I’m very happy that we have children’s TV now.” But Sami’s growing popularity has also highlighted a shortage of resources and teachers. “We need more schoolbooks, we need more media, we need more arts and all kinds of support,” Huovinen says.

Elsa and Anna in Sami

In a sign that mainstream culture is becoming more widely available in the Sami languages, in December the blockbuster hit “Frozen 2” became the first ever Disney film to be dubbed into Northern Sami. Continuing the adventures of Queen Elsa and Princess Anna, “Jiknon 2” — as it is called in Northern Sami — draws heavily on Sami folklore and ways of life. The sisters embark on a trek through an enchanted forest to meet the tent-dwelling Northuldra tribe, whose clothes and reindeer-herding way of life are distinctly Sami.

The soundtrack, meanwhile, features traditional Sami “yoik” singing. Ailu Valle, tasked with translating the film’s song lyrics, describes the release as an “exceptional” moment for Northern Sami children. Disney’s producers collaborated with Sami leaders to ensure a respectful representation of their culture, and the film has been praised for rejecting the stereotypical depiction of Sami traditions as primitive. “We have had so many bad examples of our culture being misused,” Samila-Alcio, Finland’s Sami parliament president, tells AFP. “It’s a win-win for all of us and we’re very happy with this collaboration,” she says.—AFP

Rapper Ailu Valle, who raps in the endangered Northern Sami language and also translated into it the lyrics for the dubbed version of the Disney movie “Frozen 2”, poses for a picture in Inari, Finland.

—AFP photos

Friday | Times
Lifestyle | Feature
Friday, April 10, 2020
WOMEN FIGHT FOR A PLACE AT THE TABLE AS SUSHI CHEFS IN JAPAN

Women have warm hands, their periods alter their sense of taste and they can't work long hours — just some of the claims from those in Japan who believe women can't be sushi chefs. But a growing number of women in the country determined to shatter those myths are training and working as sushi chefs in some of Japan's most revered restaurants and institutions. Mizuho Iwai is a trainee at the upscale Onodera restaurant in Tokyo's Ginza, a ritzy neighborhood home to some of the world's top-ranked sushi restaurants. In an industry where women are still rarely seen, she knew she would be an anomaly, "I think there are a few (female) chefs but it's rare. But I wanted to challenge things because of that," the 33-year-old apprentice told AFP. "I thought: this is my mission."

And at Onodera, she's not totally alone, there was one other woman among the 10 apprentices training at the restaurant before it closed temporarily in April over the coronavirus outbreak. All 10 of the restaurant's chefs are men. The work can be grueling and requires years to master. Apprentices must learn everything from the names of different types of fish to removing scales and slicing properly. They are even instructed on how to correctly enter through the traditional drapes inside Onodera, by lifting and parting them with an elbow. "My colleagues have accepted me," said Iwai, who decided to become a sushi chef after cooking in small Japanese restaurants. "They don't treat me specially just because I'm a woman," she added, after learning how to properly peel freshly steamed shrimp. "It were tough," he said, as he showed Iwai how to thinly slice tuna and taught her how to properly peel freshly steamed shrimp. "It was long working hours with low pay. It was physically tough." "But the work environment is changing along with other changes in society. I think it's getting better for both men and women," he said.

He welcomes those changes and says being a chef depends not on gender but "competence, talent and how much effort people put in." Fuka Sano, the other female apprentice at Onodera, said she didn't think too much about the lack of women in the field when she decided to become a sushi chef. "I guess women think a sushi chef is a man's job because there are so few women," the 18-year-old said. But she was determined to enter the profession, after a formative trip to London. "I'm sorry to say this but sushi at chain restaurants in Britain didn't seem appealing!" she laughed. She hopes to improve the standards of Japanese food overseas.

And Sano wants her food to be judged on its own merits, without regard for her gender. "I want them to come (to the restaurant) for food," she said, not "because I'm a woman." Her fellow apprentice Iwai hopes women like her are helping change the industry: "It doesn't matter whether the chef is a man or woman," she said. "I hope the fixed image will disappear and there will be more options for women." "It's really a fun job."

Fukasano, an apprentice at Sushi Ginza Onodera restaurant, removes the fish bones while learning how to make sushi at the restaurant in Tokyo.
Dramatic volcanic activity has shaped much of the Eastern Oregon landscape, and contributes to the brilliant colors in numerous parts of the state.— Meghan O’Dea / Lonely Planet

Dramatic sandstone arches, alabaster-white ancient springs, all-encompassing fields of periwinkle – all the stuff of travel daydreams, right? Natural features around the world are often a sight for sore eyes when you’ve been focused on the day-to-day, especially natural wonders that seem to test the imagination and seem more suited to storybooks than scientific journals and geographic atlases. Some are popular destinations for travelers (when we’re not social distancing, that is), others are far-flung, remote, and overlooked. But all of them are stunners.

If you’re longing for a taste of earth’s most artistic, stunning natural offerings, that showcase the world at its most tantalizing and stupefying, these 10 natural wonders are total eye candy:

La Salinas de Torrevieja are a unique salt lagoon in Spain. — Nikolay Tsuguliev

10 natural wonders so pretty you won’t believe they’re real
1. Blue Basin – Oregon, USA
The landscapes of Oregon’s John Day Fossil Beds don’t just reflect their prehistoric namesakes – the rocky cliffs and canyons of the Blue Basin area emanate a chalk-like blue-green that collides with the surrounding desert beige, and lends credit to the region’s Painted Hills moniker. Hike a winding boardwalk for 360-degree views of seemingly paint-splattered rock formations.

2. Hang Son Doong – Vietnam
Only first officially surveyed in the last decade, Hang Son Doong has emerged as the world’s largest cave both by volume and by cross section, making for a breathtaking view from the cavern’s mouth. The cave is home to 230ft stalagmites and entire forests of trees, grown beneath massive openings in the cave’s ceiling. Nearby in the same Phong Nha-Ke Bàng National Park is Hang En, the world’s third-largest cave.

3. Las Salinas de Torrevieja (Pink Lake) – Spain
Take a dip in Spain’s Las Salinas de Torrevieja and you’ll find yourself surrounded by nature’s organic blush. This regularly rose-colored lake owes its pink hue to microorganisms feeding off the abundant saltwater, and is complemented artistically by local flocks of flamingos, who gather around the shores in the thousands during breeding season.

4. Dockey Wood Bluebells – UK
Once a year, a verdant blue hue blankets these English woods outside London, drawing visitors by the thousands. Managed by the UK’s National Trust, the Dockey Wood Nature Preserve blooms a carpet of bluebells every spring, one of the best showings in the country. Hike for miles through the bluebells and lose yourself in spring chromas.

5. Socotra Island – Yemen
Technically under the auspices of Yemen, geographically part of Africa, and floating in the Arabian Sea, this archipelago is full of some of the most unique looking flora and fauna on earth. There are over 700 endemic species, including the striking dragon trees that make Socotra look a little like something from Dr. Seuss’ work. Socotra is a fragment of the ancient supercontinent Gondwanna – which once included Antarctica, South America and Africa.

6. Horsetail Fall, Yosemite National Park – USA
Yosemite National Park’s Horsetail Fall isn’t just a wondrous sight by day for the millions of annual visitors to the park. On rare occasions during the park’s less-crowded off seasons, the waterfall’s thin stream catches a sunset’s orange glow, and for a few minutes a “firefall” pierces the park’s granite backdrop. While the reflection inevitably fades, this natural wonder unintentionally recreates a piece of the park’s history: the man-made waterfall of smouldering coals that would regularly fall from the edge of Glacier Point in the early 20th century.
7. Wadi Rum – Jordan
Often a movie stand-in for Mars, the sandstone canyons and rock formations of Jordan’s Wadi Rum bear little resemblance to any other geological wonders found on Earth – making this destination a must-see unlike anywhere else. Scattered with wild flora and ancient pictographs dating back two millennia, the setting’s sand dunes and red rock walls seem to encompass time itself.

8. Pamukkale – Turkey
The mineral-rich waters flowing around Pamukkale in southeastern Turkey once fed into the Greco-Roman settlement of Hierapolis – now a series of well-reserved ruins and a Unesco World Heritage Site. The white travertine terraces still stand, however, dreamlike in their appearance to the millions of annual visitors to the site. The name alone fits the spring’s surreal attraction: Pamukkale translates literally to “Cotton Castle” in Turkish.

9. Landscape Arch, Utah – USA
By name alone, Arches National Park has a reputation for odd and natural wonders – but among the park’s 2000-some sandstone arches spread across 76,679 acres of red rocks and desert sands, Landscape Arch reigns supreme. Known as the fifth largest natural arch by span in the world (and largest in the United States), the rock’s sloping peak and red-orange hue forms a stunning sight against the park’s near-constant blue skies.

10. Devil’s Pool – Zimbabwe
Victoria Falls has been an intimidating sight for thousands of years, known as “The Smoke That Thunders” for its impressive cascades stretching more than 5000ft on the border of Zambia and Zimbabwe. If the views from the ground aren’t thrilling enough, daredevil visitors can make their way up to a naturally formed rock pool placed in the last place anyone would think to swim: the falls’ edge. Known as the Devil’s Pool, this swimming hole’s incredible view of the falls’ power and beauty is preceded by a precarious walk and swim through the Zambezi river. Mind the edge, as the river’s 350ft drop is certainly not to be tested. — www.lonelyplanet.com

In addition to dragon trees, Socotra Island is home to coral reefs, rare forms of aloe and unique types of pomegranates. — Getty Images

The unique white travertine terraces created by thermal activity are found on few places on earth. — Shutterstock

The Devil’s Pool is popular with visitors in the dry season. — Getty Images

Horsetail Falls in Yosemite National Park spills over over the eastern edge of El Capitan in the valley, sometimes creating an effect known as “firefall” Image by Chase Dekker Wild-Life Images.
**Daily SuDoku**

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**Yesterday’s Solution**

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**Kids Mazes**

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**Color It**

If I Only Have
Nines Lives
Let Me Spend
Them All
With You
Experienced In:
- Management of benign and malignant vocal cord lesions.
- Vocal cord augmentation.
- Diagnoses and treatment of spasmodic dysphonia.
- Adenotonsillectomy using latest techniques.
- Myringotomy and ventilation tube insertion.
- Surgery for the deviated nasal septum.
- Endoscopic sinus surgery.
- Diagnosis and treatment of allergic rhinitis.
- tympanoplasty.
- Diagnosis and treatment of vertigo.
- Thyroid surgery.
- Diagnosis and treatment of snoring.

Dr. Hamoud Abdullah Alarouj
ENT Consultant, Laryngologist

Dr. Ahmad Alasdeddine
Head of Cardiology Department at Dar Al Shifa hospital

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Taurus (April 20-May 20)

Are you considering moving to a new residence, re-decorating, or making some home improvements today, Taurus? If so, this is a good time to do it. These types of projects promise to go well, so don’t let doubt get in your way. Explore every possibility, ladder all the pros and cons, and then if it looks like it’s going to work, go for it!

Gemini (May 21-June 20)

You might need to make a lot of phone calls and get through some lingering paperwork today, Gemini. A business partner or friend could be instrumental in helping clear up some loose ends that have been left hanging. Be sure you get any leftover work out of the way, because soon you’ll probably be even busier. If you get bored, remember that success lies ahead. Good luck!

Cancer (June 21-July 22)

If you’ve been worrying about having spent too much recently, Cancer, the astral configuration indicates you should be able to put those worries behind you. There are plenty of opportunities that could bring increased income, possibly a new job, even a new career. A lot of phone calls, emails, or other communications could bring news of these possibilities your way. Be sure to record what you’re doing. Be very thorough, check everything over carefully, then put your plan into action and wait for it to bear fruit!

Leo (July 23-August 22)

Communication takes a prominent place in your life today, Leo. Your practical, direct, and down-to-Earth manner can hard, make it happen, and enjoy the journey!

Virgo (August 23-September 22)

You could be surrounded by secrets, Virgo. A number of colleagues might be leaving to pursue new opportunities, and you could wonder if there’s a reason for it that escapes you. It might even have you reevaluating whether or not you should stay put! However, don’t panic because others leave. If there are things about your job that bother you, by all means consider your options.

Libra (September 23-October 22)

A phone call or email from a friend could open up new career possibilities for you, Libra, perhaps involving the communications industry. Tales of people who have hit it big in this field could be circulating widely, but you should carefully consider all the aspects of any new option before jumping in. You don’t want to have any regrets about your decision later. Think about it!

Scorpio (October 23-November 21)

Communication of all sorts could be vital to you today, Scorpio. You might spend much of the day on the phone organizing an important event or perhaps clearing up a mis-understanding. This could turn into a busy day. It might be one of those days you just need to get through. Give yourself a bit of solitary downtime tonight to counterbalance the busy energy of the day.

Sagittarius (November 22-December 21)

Your outlook is apt to be optimistic, enthusiastic, and practical, Sagittarius! You have both creative and workable ideas. They’re likely to lead to success, although it could take a lot of careful planning and work to make it happen. Communication with colleagues is likely to be open, honest, and very dynamic as projects and enterprises take on a life of their own. Work hard, make it happen, and enjoy the journey!

Capricorn (December 22-January 19)

Tending to paperwork could take up much of your time today, Capricorn. A lot could be riding on your careful planning and projections, so you’re probably taking it very seriously. Nonetheless, don’t be intimidated. Trust your instincts. You know what you’re doing. Be very thorough, check everything over carefully, then put your plan into action and wait for it to bear fruit!

Aquarius (January 20-February 18)

Communication between you and either a business or romantic partner should get a fresh start today, Aquarius. You’ve gotten to know each other better and feel more comfortable being honest and open with each other than before. All signs are that any partnerships begun, renewed, or confirmed today are likely to be successful and profitable. Bear this in mind in future months when you hit the rough spots!

Pisces (February 19-March 20)

You’ve been juggling career, romance, and creative interests for the past year, Pisces. This is apt to continue. However, you could find yourself building a new career involving writing or speaking, perhaps in addition to your current career. You’re also apt to develop a vigorous interest in improving your health. You could make a powerful effort to change your diet and exercise habits. Good luck with it all!
Saudi, Russia to lead oil output talks

Trump wants global cut of at least 10 million barrels a day

DUBAI/MOSCOW/LONDON: OPEC and other oil producers led by Russia were discussing their largest ever output cut yesterday in talks complicated by recent animosity and US resistance to mandating cuts. The spread of the coronavirus has slashed fuel demand for vehicles and planes and sent crude prices below the cost of production for many, including US shale oil producers. Benchmark Brent crude oil prices hit an 18-year low last month and are trading below $34 a barrel, half their level at the end of 2019.

President Donald Trump on Wednesday said US oil producers were already cutting production and warned that he had many options if OPEC leader Saudi Arabia and Russia did not reach a deal yesterday. Trump said last week he had brokered a deal with Saudi Arabia and Russia that could lead to cuts of 10-15 million barrels per day (bpd) or 10-15 percent of global supply.

The largest one-off cut which the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) has ever agreed was 2.2 million bpd in 2008.

More recently, Russia and nine other producers joined OPEC in cuts which reached 1.7 million bpd, plus another 400,000 bpd which the Saudis voluntarily held back, Riyadh and Moscow, however, last month fell out over continuing those cuts, which were allowing the United States and others not participating to gain market share.

The United States has become the world’s largest producer but Trump’s administration has shown no appetite to mandate cuts. Saudi Arabia and Moscow have also not as yet publicly indicated any agreement on reductions or on how a cut would be distributed among participants.

 Asked if a decline in US oil output due to weak prices could count as a reduction, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Wednesday: “These are absolutely different reductions. “You are comparing overall decline in demand with cuts aimed at stabilizing global markets. These are different concepts,” Peskov said.

The meeting of producers yesterday via video conference will be followed by one of Group of 20 (G20) energy ministers today.

“This meeting will be an important opportunity to assess impacts on global energy markets and reassure both markets and energy consumers,” Angus Taylor, Australia’s energy and emissions reduction minister, said by email regarding the G20 meeting. He declined to comment on whether Australia would help by buying oil for storage in the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve under an agreement Canberra is negotiating with the Trump administration.

Baseline debate

Negotiating cuts will involve setting a baseline for them, an issue muddied after Saudi Arabia and Russia both announced plans to increase output following the collapse of talks among the so-called OPEC+ group of producers in Vienna on March 6. Saudi Arabia has ramped up supply to a record 12.3 million bpd in April from less than 10 million bpd in March. Allies Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates have also raised production and Moscow has said Russian companies might boost output by up to 500,000 bpd. OPEC sources said Riyadh wanted any cuts calculated from its record April levels. But Russia has said cuts should be based on first-quarter output. “The issue is still the baseline,” an OPEC source said. — Reuters
Sub-Saharan Africa to fall into recession in 2020: World Bank

Coronavirus will cost sub-Saharan Africa $79bn in output losses this year

NAIROBI: The rapidly-spreading coronavirus outbreak is expected to push sub-Saharan Africa into recession in 2020 for the first time in 25 years, the World Bank said in a new forecast yesterday.

The bank’s Africa’s Pulse report said the region’s economy will contract 2.1 percent to 5.1 percent from growth of 2.4 percent last year, and that the coronavirus will cost sub-Saharan Africa $37 billion to $79 billion in output losses this year due to trade and value chain disruption, among other factors. Africa has at least 10,956 confirmed cases of the novel coronavirus, 562 deaths and 1,149 recoveries, according to a Reuters tally based on government statements and WHO data.

“The COVID-19 pandemic is testing the limits of societies and economies across the world, and African countries are likely to be hit particularly hard,” World Bank Vice President for Africa Hafez Ghanem said.

The World Bank and International Monetary Fund are raising to provide emergency funds to African countries and others to combat the virus and mitigate the impact of sweeping shutdowns aiming at curbing its spread. The coronavirus has led to suspension of international passenger travel in many countries on the continent, and hit sectors such as tourism.

Various African governments have announced lockdowns or curfews in response to the virus, which was slow to reach many African countries but is now growing exponentially, according to the World Health Organization. Real gross domestic product growth was projected to fall sharply particularly in the region’s three largest economies - Nigeria, Angola, and South Africa, the World Bank said.

Oil exporting-countries would also be hard-hit: while growth would likely weaken substantially in the West African Economic and Monetary Union, and the East African Community due to weak external demand, depressed prices are likely to strip out chains and domestic production. The bank said the spread of the flu-like respiratory disease also had potential to lead to a food security crisis on the continent, with agricultural production forecast to contract 2.6 percent and up to 7 percent in the event of trade blockades. “Food imports would decline substantially (as much as 25 percent or as little as 13 percent) due to a combination of higher transaction costs and reduced domestic demand,” the bank said in a statement accompanying the report. The institutions have also called on China, the United States and other bilateral creditors to temporarily suspend debt payments by the poorest countries so they can use the money to halt the spread of the disease and mitigate its financial impact. — Reuters

US weekly jobless claims hovering near record highs

WASHINGTON: The number of Americans seeking unemployment benefits in the last three weeks likely totaled a staggering 15 million as tough measures to control the novel coronavirus outbreak abruptly ground the country to halt, which would cement views the economy was in deep recession.

Yesterday’s weekly jobless claims report from the Labor Department, the most timely data on the economy’s health, would strengthen economists’ expectations of job losses of up to 20 million in April. The government reported last Friday that the economy purged 701,000 jobs in March. That was the most job losses since the Great Recession and ended the longest employment boom in US history that started in late 2010. “These dismal numbers suggest another record-breaking April jobs report,” said Beth Ann Bovino, chief US economist at S&P Global Ratings in New York. “America is now in recession and as it appears to deepen, the question is how long it will take before the US recovers.”

The number of initial claims for state unemployment benefits probably slipped to a seasonally adjusted 5.250 million for the week ended April 4 from 6.648 million, according to a Reuters survey of economists. The anticipated lower reading is likely because the model that the government uses to strip out seasonal fluctuations shows a downside bias for last week’s data. States also appear to be struggling to process high volumes of claims.

Estimates in the survey were as high as 9.295 million. Going by the average forecast, last week’s claims data would bring the cumulative jobless benefits claims to more than 15 million since the week ending March 21.

With more than 95 percent of Americans under “stay-at-home” or “shelter-in-place” orders, reports continue to mount of state employment offices being overwhelmed by a deluge of applications. Mike Ricci, a spokesman for Maryland Governor Larry Hogan, wrote on Twitter on Wednesday that “we have approximately 1,000 calls coming through in every two hour period of time,” noting that “currently, federal employees and people who have worked in multiple states cannot file online.”

As such, any moderation in claims last week would probably be temporary. The breadth of businesses shuttered because of the stringent measures to curb the spread of COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus, has expanded from bars, restaurants and other social gathering venues to transportation and factories. The United States has the highest number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in the world. Businesses are also encouraging their lowest paid hourly workers to apply for unemployment benefits to take advantage of an extra $600 per week for up to four months. This enhancement is part of a historic $2.3 trillion rescue package and is on top of existing jobless benefits, which averaged $385 per person per month in January. — Reuters

Asian, European stocks up, dealers eye virus peak

HONG KONG: Asian and European markets rose yesterday following another strong day for Wall Street as traders buy into optimism that the coronavirus crisis could be nearing its apex, while crude extended gains on hopes top producers will agree to a massive output cut.

Despite news that thousands more people had died of COVID-19 around the world, the slowing rate of new infections is providing some much-needed buoyancy to equities as investors eye an easing of lockdown restrictions that have strangled the global economy.

Meanwhile, lawmakers in Washington are discussing further possible stimulus measures of around $500 billion for struggling US firms, with Republicans and Democrats looking to work together in a rare sign of unity. While nearly 2,000 Americans died of the disease Wednesday, Donald Trump adviser Anthony Fauci said there could be a turnaround in the battle as soon as next week.

Citing a slowdown in hospitalizations owing to stay-at-home orders, Andrew Cuomo, governor of US hotspot New York state, told reporters: “We are flattening the curve.”

That optimism was shared by Trump, who said the US was “hopefully heading towards a final stretch, the light at the end of the tunnel”. Vice President Mike Pence added: “We’re beginning to see glimmers of hope.”

The upbeat tone sent all three main indexes on Wall Street surging and the gains extended into Asia again. Hong Kong, Singapore and Seoul rose more than one percent apiece, Sydney and Mumbai each jumped more than three percent and Bangkok climbed more than two percent.

Shanghai added 0.4 percent but Tokyo was barely moved while there were small losses in Taipei and Wellington. London, Paris and Frankfurt all rose more than one percent in early trade.

“Signs that the number of daily coronavirus cases plateauing is driving expectations that social distancing measures will be lifted soon in parts of the world,” said Stephen Innes of AxiCorp. “Indeed, relaxing social distancing in the new ‘risk-on’ barometer,” he added. “Pretty much everywhere you look in financial markets there is renewed optimism.”

However, while the VIX “fear index” has halved from its levels seen in mid-March there was still caution among observers, with health experts stressing that any premature loosening of restrictions could accelerate the spread of the pandemic, and the economic toll of the crisis is becoming apparent, with France now in recession after suffering its worst contraction since 1945, while European powerhouse Germany is expected to shrink by a tenth in the second quarter of the year. Despite this, EU leaders are still struggling to agree on a bailout plan to support the region, with a major sticking point being so-called “coronabonds” that would pool debt among nations. — AFP
MSCI postpones implementation date of MSCI Kuwait indexes reclassification

COVID-19 might impact international investors’ ability to complete preparation work

LONDON: MSCI Inc. (NYSE: MSCI), a leading provider of research-based indexes and analytics, announced on Wednesday that it will postpone the implementation of the reclassification of the MSCI Kuwait Indexes to Emerging Markets until the November 2020 Semi-Annual Index Review (SAIR). While the Kuwaiti equity market remains functional the decision to postpone is related to the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has on the ability of international institutional investors to fully perform all the preparation work required ahead of the implementation.

MSCI would like to emphasize that the MSCI Kuwait Indexes continue to meet all the necessary criteria for a classification in Emerging Markets but temporary measures that have been introduced globally by different authorities, corporations and institutional investors which aim to mitigate the COVID-19 pandemic may result in significant operational challenges around the required preparation to implement the index reclassification as part of the May 2020 SAIR.

Market participants have recently highlighted that they were experiencing difficulties as a result of COVID-19 measures in the process of opening accounts required to trade Kuwaiti stocks. Hence, there is an increasing concern that these investors will not have their accounts open in time and will not be able to implement the reclassification during the May 2020 SAIR.

Given these challenges and the ongoing uncertainty that has been created by the COVID-19 pandemic, MSCI decided to extend the lead time ahead of the implementation of the reclassification of the MSCI Kuwait Indexes from Frontier Markets to Emerging Markets. MSCI deems this postponement necessary to ensure a smooth reclassification implementation for both international institutional investors and local stakeholders.

As a reminder, on January 31, 2020, MSCI announced the launch of the MSCI Provisional Kuwait Indexes and the details of the Special Treatment to the MSCI Kuwait Indexes. MSCI will also extend the calculation of the MSCI Provisional Kuwait Indexes and the application of the Special Treatment until the November 2020 SAIR.

stc offers free delivery on online orders

KUWAIT: Kuwait Telecommunications Company - stc, a world-class digital leader providing innovative services and platforms to customers enabling the digital transformation in Kuwait, announced a series of exclusive limited-time offers available to stc customers in support of the State of Kuwait’s decision urging people to stay at home during these current conditions. stc is now offering new and existing customers exclusive voice plans, 5G internet and Jawwy TV packages available through the Company’s online store with deliveries free of charge.

In a statement released by stc, the Company emphasized the necessity for the public to abide by the instructions set by the Kuwaiti government to battle the current Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and refrain from leaving the house except for emergencies. In its role, stc is offering customers exclusive packages to fulfill their in-house entertainment needs at competitive prices through the telecom company’s digital channels with free delivery to all locations in Kuwait. This initiative comes in line with stc’s ongoing commitment to offer the latest products and offers to its customers while supporting the country in battling this pandemic.

To enrich customers’ home entertainment experience, stc is offering special packages to Jawwy TV, stc Kuwait’s exclusive service with original and premium content, with over 120 free-to-air and paid channels. Jawwy TV provides a rich array of free and premium live channels that include MBC, Star, National Geographic, Fox Channels, Fight Channel, in addition to exclusive content from StarzPlay, Wide Khaliji, BluTV and more, all under one subscription, providing an unmatched user experience. stc has also made switching from 4G to 5G internet packages easier by offering customers 5G service in addition to a 5G router.

The Company has also made switching easier by offering customers 5G service in addition to a 5G router.

Dhaman launches live broadcast program for expats

KUWAIT: As a part of the public service initiative during the looming COVID-19 pandemic, Dhaman Health Assurance Hospitals Company in Kuwait started a multilingual YouTube broadcast for audiences of all nationalities and linguistic needs. This live broadcast platform carries health education lessons targeting the expatriates in Kuwait on YouTube. Health lessons and programs are presented by Dhaman’s Family physicians along with an opportunity for a live discussion.

This will be the best opportunity for expatriates not only in quarantine but also for the general public who need to be aware of the current situation. The live webinar in Hindi for the benefit of Indian expatriates in Kuwait was available on Wednesday at 7:00 pm Kuwait time on the link: https://youtu.be/NuXyc_5738A.

The topics included What do you need to know about coronavirus?, What to do if you need to see a GP or medication?, How to look after your mental health during Coronavirus lockdown?, What is social distancing?, What is a risk group?, How to self-isolate?, How to protect yourself against coronavirus?, Are you washing your hand properly?, How to Stay Healthy while staying at home? and a wide discussion on skills to identify and connect facts about infection marks with coronavirus including the procedures to be followed.

There was a facility for expats to clarify their doubts through their language with the physicians from Dhaman Health Health Assurance Hospitals Company (Dhaman). Dhaman was established by a Kuwait Ministerial Decree, as part of the development plan set forth for the State of Kuwait to provide healthcare service to a large segment of Kuwait’s residents with an objective to be the first public-private partner. healthcare company in Kuwait and the GCC to adopt world-class healthcare standards. “Dhaman” is part of the Kuwait government’s push to segregate healthcare, limiting access for expatriates to the public system.

stc offers free delivery on online orders

KUWAIT: Kuwait Telecommunications Company - stc, a world-class digital leader providing innovative services and platforms to customers enabling the digital transformation in Kuwait, announced a series of exclusive limited-time offers available to stc customers in support of the State of Kuwait’s decision urging people to stay at home during these current conditions. stc is now offering new and existing customers exclusive voice plans, 5G internet and Jawwy TV packages available through the Company’s online store with deliveries free of charge.

In a statement released by stc, the Company emphasized the necessity for the public to abide by the instructions set by the Kuwaiti government to battle the current Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and refrain from leaving the house except for emergencies. In its role, stc is offering customers exclusive packages to fulfill their in-house entertainment needs at competitive prices through the telecom company’s digital channels with free delivery to all locations in Kuwait. This initiative comes in line with stc’s ongoing commitment to offer the latest products and offers to its customers while supporting the country in battling this pandemic.

To enrich customers’ home entertainment experience, stc is offering special packages to Jawwy TV, stc Kuwait’s exclusive service with original and premium content, with over 120 free-to-air and paid channels. Jawwy TV provides a rich array of free and premium live channels that include MBC, Star, National Geographic, Fox Channels, Fight Channel, in addition to exclusive content from StarzPlay, Wide Khaliji, BluTV and more, all under one subscription, providing an unmatched user experience. stc has also made switching from 4G to 5G internet packages easier by offering customers 5G service in addition to a 5G router.

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India’s govt warns to e-commerce

NEW DELHI: Three days after India imposed a nationwide lockdown, Devender Singh revved up his motorcycle to deliver meat and eggs to customers - but his heart was in his mouth as he closed in on a police barricade on a deserted New Delhi road.

Beatings of delivery workers by overzealous police after Prime Minister Narendra Modi last month suddenly imposed a world’s biggest lockdown to contain the coronavirus had unnerved him. “That day, it felt like my time to get thrashed had come,” Singh, 30, told Reuters on a quiet afternoon, looking able, selection of multiple salary batches and cheques entry and transfer process with a single touch, Electronic Dividend subscriptions via CBK Mobile, display foreign currency transactions in the KWD equivalent for accounts & prepaid cards and enhanced notifications via CBK mobile by enabling/disabling all accounts/cards alerts in a single OTP request.

Digitizing Al-Tijari

Integral to Al-Tijari’s efficiency goals and broader growth ambitions is our investment in technology. The powerful platform we’ve built gives us the reliability and scalability to sustain critical services and keep pace with customers’ changing needs. And as new opportunities arise, we’re ready to respond quickly. It’s rewarding to see our digital and mobile offerings earn top marks from customers, along with recognition from peers. As customers entrust us with the data, our team is in motion, adjusting our strategy, delivering excellence to deliver greater value to our customers. We’re making clear choices about where to focus the bank’s resources in order to accelerate the execution of our strategy; deliver earnings resilience and continue growing our customer base. As we maintain steady progress in improving the efficiency of our processes and systems, we uphold the strong risk controls that have always been foundational for Al-Tijari Bank’s Suarez, warehouse shutdowns and general confusion that initially accompanied the three-week lockdown order have eased. While still clearing a backlog of previously placed orders, most online retailers are accepting new orders, albeit with delayed deliveries and a limited product assortment.

Moreover, political coldness towards e-commerce, which many in India see as a threat to millions of brick-and-mortar retailers, has faded. While grocery stores and pharmacies are still open, it has become evident that delivery workers like him have become the most vulnerable workers in the country’s battle against the pandemic. Highlighting that shift, two days into the lockdown, Trade Minister Piyush Goyal held a video conference with nearly two dozen e-commerce executives in a bid to understand hurdles faced by the sector. That contrasts with Goyal’s public snub of Amazon boss Jeff Bezos during his India visit in January, when he said the company wasn’t doing a “great favour to India” by investing a billion dollars.

Amazon and its Walmart-controlled rival Flipkart have until now not had a warm welcome in India. New Delhi tweaked foreign investment rules, forcing the two companies to alter their structures, and anti-trust probes have been launched against them over allegations of deep discounts that hurt small businesses. While e-commerce companies are still struggling to fulfill deliveries, everyone - the government, customer, and Indian businesses - is fast realizing that online retail cannot be ignored anymore,” said Satish Meena, a senior analyst at Forrester Research. “I believe the government will now urgently streamline e-commerce regulations which will help ease processes and remove bottlenecks in the sector.” Singh said his wife had been reluctant to let him go to work, fearing he might contract the virus, be assaulted by police or even have his new motorcycle confiscated. But as the sole bread winner for his family of three, Singh had little choice. He delivers eight to 10 orders each day, down from about 20 when supplies and orders volumes were normal. Though, unlike in some countries where workers are paid per delivery, that doesn’t mean a hit to his monthly wage of about 18,000 rupees ($235). —Reuters
James hopes Lakers can eventually rekindle their revival season

NBA legend Michael Jordan wins long-running China trademark dispute

LOS ANGELES: LeBron James says the abrupt shutdown of the NBA season due to the worldwide coronavirus pandemic has left the Los Angeles Lakers feeling like they still have something to prove. “The Lakers were in the midst of a revival season, having made the playoffs for the first time in seven years, when the league suspended the 2019-20 season on March 11 after Rudy Gobert tested positive for COVID-19.”

At the time of the postponement, the Lakers were in first place in the Western Conference and had the second-best record in the league behind Milwaukee. If the season doesn’t resume, James says there will be a void.

“Closure? No. But to be proud of what we were able to accomplish to this point, I’ll be able to look back and say we did something special in that small period of time,” James said during a conference call with reporters on Wednesday.

“Just the ups and downs not only on the floor but off the floor everything that we’ve had to endure as Laker faithful,” James said he’s having trouble coming to grips with the scale of the pandemic, which has so far killed more than 14,700 people in the U.S., including almost 200 in his home state of Ohio.

“How do you assess what’s going on over the last three weeks or however long this pandemic has been going on? It’s unnatural,” James said. “It’s something that’s never happened before. Some of you guys are older than me, probably never seen this happen before. You just kind of take all the information you have on a day-to-day basis.”

He has been spending his self-isolating time practicing basketball with his son Bronny and talking on the phone with teammates and Lakers coach Frank Vogel. “I got a couple friends that have their own indoor facilities,” James said of his training sessions with his son. “They strip it down, wipe it down. It’s pretty much me in there along with my son. It’s just us. He wants to return to basketball but says it will be up to the experts to decide when. NBA commissioner Adam Silver said this week he doesn’t expect a decision on whether they can salvage the season until at least May.

“One they allow us to resume some type of activity, I would love to get things back going,” James said: “If it’s Las Vegas or somewhere else that can hold us and keep us in the best possible chance to be safe, not only on the floor but off the floor as well. Those conversations will be had.” Meanwhile, China’s Supreme Court has ruled in favour of basketball legend Michael Jordan in a long-running trademark dispute, ending an eight-year legal battle with a Chinese sports-wear firm that illegally used his name.

Upholding intellectual property rights is one of the core disputes of the US-China trade war, and a phase one deal signed in January saw Beijing pledge to improve protections of intellectual propriety. The landmark ruling, made late last month, prohibits the Fujian-based Qiaodan Sports from using the Chinese translation of Jordan’s name, Quan Dan. The retired Chicago Bulls player and six-time NBA championship winner has a huge following in China, a country that has legions of avid basketball fans. The Supreme Court decision overturns two previous verdicts in favour of the Chinese firm. However, it still allows the firm to use the Chinese translation of Jordan’s name.

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Verdict — a rare victory

S Sudan athletes keep Olympic dreams alive

MAEBASHI: The postponement of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics has been postponed. It’s not a problem,” team coach Joseph Renso Tobia Omirok, 59, told AFP.

“I’m happy because I’m still training, and in other countries they have no training. They’re sitting in their house but here we are OK... Training now is going OK.”

The decision to postpone the Games for a year until July 2021 came after athletes and sports associations heaped pressure on organisers and Olympic officials, pointing to scrapped qualifying events and restrictions on training.

Japan has so far avoided the sort of major outbreaks seen in Europe and the United States and a state of emergency declared on Tuesday only applies to some parts of the country, not including Gunma prefecture, where Maebashi is located.

The city of 340,000 has pledged to continue helping the young athletes by providing them with accommodation, meals and the use of a local public track, along with an army of volunteer coaches and translators.

Maebashi decided to host the team — the coach, one female and two male Olympic sprinters and one male Paralympic sprinter — as part of its efforts to promote peace through sports.

The athletes have visited local schools and community events to talk about their homeland, which won independence in 2011 and has been battling to recover from a civil war. They regularly practise with local children and have learned to speak simple Japanese.

The athletes say they have come to enjoy life in the city, abound with cherry blossoms after a bitter winter, despite being more than 10,000 kilometres from home, where they had to practise on simple empty fields, not a track.

“Before I reached Japan, I didn’t know what kind of people the Japanese are,” said Abraham Majok Metet Guem, 20, who runs the 1,500 metres. “The love I got here... is more than even what I expected. So I have not missed home so much because I am staying in a very peaceful environment with very loving people. So I was very surprised at that.”

The city has raised more than 14 million yen ($128,000) from across Japan through a special taxation scheme and is continuing to raise funds to secure the total 20 million yen needed to keep the team on through July.

Officials were quick to reassure the team they would be welcome to stay until at least July, after the Olympic delay was announced.

“We are eager to give them our continued support,” said Shintichi Hagiwara, a sports official at the Maebashi city government.

The athletes’ fate after that will be decided after the city consults with South Sudan’s Olympic authority, the Japanese government, the track team and others, Hagiwara said.—AFP
Premier League stars launch fund to ‘help’ health service virus fight

Players ‘agreed to play their part’ as pressure mounts

LONDON: Premier League players announced on Wednesday they had launched an initiative to generate funds for Britain’s National Health Service (NHS) to help against the coronavirus pandemic. The idea — named #PlayersTogether — has been set up to “help those fighting for us on the NHS frontline” during the COVID-19 outbreak. “It is about us, as players, collaborating together to create a voluntary initiative, separate to any other league and club conversation,” a statement from the group said.

“To try and help, along with so many others in the country, to make a real difference,” it added. Individuals such as league leaders Liverpool’s captain Jordan Henderson, Tottenham’s Harry Kane and Arsenal’s Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang were among those to post on social media about the #PlayersTogether to support NHS Charities.

The players had “agreed to play their part” as pressure mounts to find a collective pay deal. England’s top-flight stars had come under heavy fire over their lack of action, which contrasts sharply with significant pay cuts taken by players at other leading European clubs such as Barcelona and Bayern Munich.

Manchester United attacker Marcus Rashford defended his fellow players.

“I think there has been plenty of occasions, for me personally, where we’ve tried to help but we’ve not helped in the best way possible,” Rashford told BT Sport. “You can get some backlash from that. We wanted to take our time with the decision,” he added.

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Voluntary initiative

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British Health Secretary Matt Hancock was warned football faces economic challenges “beyond the wildest imagination of those who run it” as a result of the health emergency.

Spurs have come under pressure from fans to follow Jurgen Klopp’s side in reversing their decision to use public money to pay employees. The Reds, the European champions and the world’s seventh richest club, ditched their controversial plan to turf out some of their non-playing staff during the virus on Monday after coming under intense pressure from ex-players and fans. More than 60,000 people, including Prime Minister Boris Johnson who is being treated at an intensive care unit, have tested positive for COVID-19 in Britain, and more than 7,000 have died from the virus. — AFP

Delay of Olympic qualification gets cool reception

TOKYO: The decision by the governing body of athletics to suspend Olympic qualification until December due to the coronavirus outbreak has received a cool reception from some Tokyo hopefuls. World Athletics announced on Tuesday that qualification for the Tokyo Olympics, which will now take place in July and August next year, would restart on Dec. 1, subject to the global situation returning to normal.

“Pretty disappointed about this decision,” former Olympic steeplechase silver medallist Evan Jager posted on Twitter. “Even if COVID-19 clears up in some countries and it’s safe to compete, (it) takes away a major motivation to run fast this year.”

“I understand freezing the world rankings but I feel achieving the Olympic Standard should still be on the table.” Measures to control the coronavirus have forced many athletes into self-isolation, while most major meets and marathons in the first half of the year have been postponed.

Athletes need to reach certain qualifying marks to be available for selection for the Olympics by their national federations. The qualifying period started in 2019 and, after the suspension, will continue until the end of May for the marathon and 50 kilometre race walk, and June next year for all other events.

Jamaican middle-distance runner Aisha Praught-Leer thought the decision was premature and would affect the ability of athletes to earn sponsorship by achieving Olympic qualifying times (QTs). “Running for QTs was the last modicum of hope many could cling to in 2020,” she posted on Twitter.

“Most don’t make money. Most are doing everything they can to have a shot. Why make a blanket statement when we don’t know what the future holds and remove the only lasting power an athlete has in 2020?”

Christian Taylor, twice Olympic triple jump champion, welcomed the fact that the Athletics Commission of World Athletics had been consulted over the decision but thought wider opinion should have been solicited.— Reuters

China ex-PSG star Wang freed from virus lockdown

SHANGHAI: Chinese women’s football star Wang Shuang will finally reunite with the national team after two months stranded at the epicentre of the coronavirus pandemic in Wuhan, state media said.

The 25-year-old former Paris Saint-Germain midfielder will bolster a squad due to play off against South Korea over two legs for Asia’s final qualifying place at the Tokyo Olympics, which have been postponed for a year to 2021.

In February, Wuhan native Wang was pictured kicking a ball on a rooftop while on lockdown in the city of 11 million people as she attempted to keep up her fitness.

Wuhan, where the virus was first identified, led the world with an unprecedented total lockdown to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. On Wednesday, tens of thousands of people fied the city when a 76-day travel ban was lifted.

Xinhua news agency said that Wang and two other players stranded in Wuhan, Yao Wei and Lu Yueyun, would join the squad in Suzhou to prepare for the playoff. The first leg has been tentatively scheduled in Korea on June 4. But the trio will first undergo a further 14-day quarantine period on arrival in Suzhou, Sina Sports said.

Wang, the undoubted star of the Chinese side, has won more than 100 caps. She spent a year in the French capital with PSG before returning to Chinese football in July last year. Wang scored eight goals and contributed seven assists in 27 matches for PSG. — AFP
A month into lockdown, Serie A torn over return to action

Balotelli’s Brescia accept player pay cuts

MILAN: A month after Serie A last saw a ball kicked football-mad Italy is torn over whether to return to action or scrap the season as the coronavirus crisis continues to keep the nation on lockdown.

Endless dates have been proposed from May, through to September and October, all depending "on when health conditions allow". The Mediterranean country has been under siege since the COVID-19 disease took a grip on February 22, and no Serie A matches have been played March 9.

In the midst of the health crisis which has claimed the lives of nearly 18,000 people, Italy’s top clubs have been at loggerheads over when it is best to resume this season, if ever. The Lombardy region — home to Inter Milan and AC Milan — has recorded 9,722 deaths while the neighbouring Piedmont, the home region of champions Juventus has also been hard hit.

Among the most vocal supporters of the season being scrapped are clubs located in the northern regions, such as Brescia and Torino. Brescia president Massimo Cellino warned last month those located in the northern regions, such as Brescia and Torino. Brescia president Massimo Cellino warned last month that Brescia was "the sad reality of Brescia," the team that has been fifth in Italy’s first-rate division for the past decade, has been keen to return.

But some players remain sceptical. "We’re eager to go, but we know this is a global pandemic, some things are bigger and more important than football," Roma’s English defender Chris Smalling said on Twitter.

"We know there will be a lot of games to play in a short time, so we need to be ready for that. "We need two or three weeks training to get back up to full speed — and then it could be a busy run of games."

"The final decision will depend on the virus, with 542 reported new deaths on Wednesday in Italy, and at least 140,000 people infected. Meanwhile, Serie A’s Brescia, who want the Italian season stopped because of the coronavirus pandemic, announced on Wednesday their players have agreed to salary cuts."

In a statement addressed to season-ticket holders, president Massimo Cellino praised “the great sensitivity and responsibility shown by our players who, almost all, have accepted the cuts.”

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A month into lockdown, Serie A torn over return to action

Real Madrid players accept up to 20 percent pay cut

MADRID: Real Madrid players have agreed to cut their salaries by as much as a fifth, the La Liga club announced on Wednesday, as Spanish football remains on hold due to the coronavirus pandemic.

In a statement, Real said players and coaches from the side’s football and basketball teams, as well as key directors, had voluntarily agreed to the reduction, of either 10 or 20 percent, “depending on the circumstances that may affect the closing of the current 2019/20 sports season.”

Real didn’t say what circumstances would affect the rate of salary cut, but Spanish media reported players will receive 10 percent less if the season is completed and 20 percent less if the current campaign is terminated. The cuts will shave between 28 million and 56 million euros ($30.4 million and $60.8 million) off Real’s salary bill. It also means the club has avoided using the partial unemployment (ERTE) scheme that cut Barcelona’s and Atletico Madrid players’ salaries by 70 percent.

La Liga has recommended clubs take advantage of the scheme, and both Sevilla and Espanyol have also put in a request to be included on the ERTE scheme.

Over 14,000 people have died from COVID-19 in Spain, the second worst-hit country from the virus after Italy, with 146,690 registered cases. — AFP

Barca president seeks reshuffle of club board

BARCELONA: Barcelona president Josep Maria Bartomeu, whose tenure has been undermined by tense relations with players this season, wants to reform the club’s management because he was suspicious of some of the directors, he included,” Rousaud, who had been tipped to succeed Bartomeu as president, told Cadena Ser radio on Wednesday.

"He told me things had been leaked to the press that upset the players and he thought I had been critical of how the board had handled it. "The relationship between Barca’s players and board has been strained for several months, with Lionel Messi’s public criticism of technical secretary Eric Abidal in February just one of a number of off-field controversies.

Messi took another swipe at the Barca board last week, when confirming the squad would take a 70 percent pay cut during the coronavirus crisis.

The Argentine accused Bartomeu of undermining the players during recent negotiations. "It never ceases to amaze us that from within the club there were those who tried to put us under the magnifying glass and tried to add pressure to do something that we always knew we would do," Messi wrote on social media.

Messi’s message was soon posted on the pages of nearly all of his Barcelona teammates. The controversy further increased the pressure on Bartomeu and the Barcelona board ahead of presidential elections due next year. However, Bartomeu will not be eligible to run for re-election in 2021 having served two terms.— AFP
LOS ANGELES: File photo taken on March 5, 2020 LeBron James #23 of the Los Angeles Lakers handles the ball in a game against the Philadelphia 76ers. James said yesterday, the abrupt shut-down of the NBA season due to the worldwide coronavirus pandemic has left the Los Angeles Lakers feeling like they still have something to prove. — AFP

James hopes Lakers can eventually rekindle their revival season

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