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OMAN AIR TO BRING CITIZENS BACK HOME FROM THAILAND



P10

NADAL EXPECTING LENGTHY WAIT BEFORE TENNIS RETURNS



The rose water of Jabal Akhdar



# US ambassador hails Sultanate’s management of pandemic

MUSCAT: Leslie M Tsou, Ambassador of the United States to Oman, commended the efforts of the Sultanate in combating the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19), describing as “proactive” the Omani leadership’s management of the pandemic.

She said that the measures undertaken by the Supreme Committee tasked to handle the virus spread, following the directives of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, are effective in protecting the lives of Omani citizens and expatriate residents in the Sultanate.

The message published on the US Embassy’s website reads as follows: “As residents of Oman, my colleagues at the US Embassy and I are grateful for the measures taken by the Omani government to protect everyone living here. We appreciate the leadership and proactive response of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, the members of the Supreme Committee for dealing with COVID-19, and the public servants and healthcare workers across the Sultanate who are working tirelessly for the health and well-being of the citizens and residents of Oman. I feel confident that, if everyone does their part, we can protect ourselves, our families, our communities and this wonderful country in which we live.

“While the US Embassy remains



open, we have maximised telework and minimised the number of staff who come into the embassy everyday. We have suspended visa services, but we are still available to provide emergency support for Americans living in the Sultanate. I encourage American citizens living in Oman to enrol in our Smart Traveler Enrollment Programme (STEP) to get the latest information and travel advisories related to COVID-19. I invite everyone to visit our US Embassy website and follow us on social media for updated information as well.

“Once all of this is over, I am looking forward to seeing more of this beautiful country I have only just begun to explore. In the meantime, the US Embassy is happy to do its part to support His Majesty’s leadership and efforts to curb and prevent the spread of COVID-19”. — ONA

## 635 expats among 1,019 COVID-19 cases

STAFF REPORTER  
MUSCAT, APRIL 16

The Ministry of Health announced 109 new cases of COVID-19 on Thursday, bringing the total number to 1,019, including four deaths. Of these 12 cases are Omanis and 97 cases are expatriates. With this, the number of cases crosses the 1,000-mark in the country.

Speaking at a press conference on Thursday, Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Saeedi, Minister of Health, said of the 1,019 cases reported so far, 384 of them are Omanis and 635 are expatriates.

The minister said though COVID-19 cases are on the rise in the Sultanate, numbers in Oman are much less compared to the global levels. The fatality rate in the Sultanate is 0.04 per cent.

Eighty-eight (88) of the 109 cases reported on Thursday are from Muscat.

Region-wise, Muscat has 832 cases, 119 recovered, 4 deaths, followed by Al Dakhiliyah (46), South Al Batinah (50), Musandam (3), Al Dhahirah (3), South Al Sharqiyah (27), North Al Sharqiyah (13), Buraimi (4), North Al Batinah (31) and Dhofar (10).

The Department of Blood Bank Services at the Ministry of Health has appealed to COVID-19 recovered patients to initiate a plasma donation

as a contribution to treating those infected with the virus.

The interested donors can contact the department via WhatsApp 94555648 or phone 24502324.

Recently, the MoH and the Royal Hospital performed successfully a procedure of convalescent plasma extraction and transfusion from people who have recovered from COVID-19.

Many recovered patients donated their blood plasma according to the global blood banks’ standards and controls. Recovered donors were scrutinised in the MoH’s Central Blood Bank laboratories to take their plasma to be injected into the critically ill patients admitted to the Royal Hospital.

The Directorate General of Health Services in Muscat Governorate started a medical examination for residents who show symptoms of COVID-19 at the Medical Fitness Centre (visa medical) in Darsait.

A centre has been started at Rusayl Al Sharadi also. Timings at both places are from 9 am to 4 pm.

The commercial market area adjoining the hospital in the Wilayat of Jaalan Bani Bu Ali in South Al Sharqiyah was lockeddown from 4 am on Thursday until further notice by the Royal Oman Police (ROP) after 12 cases were reported from the area.

CASES  
COULD REACH 1,500  
A DAY DURING THE PEAK OF THE OUTBREAK

# COVID - 19 CURVE MOVING UPWARD

MUSCAT: The precautionary measures adopted by the Sultanate to contain the spread of COVID-19 continues as the number of cases increase. The number of COVID-19 cases in the Sultanate stood at 1,019, including 23 inpatients. Of this number, 348 are Omanis and 635 are expatriates.

This was stated by Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Saeedi, Minister of Health, at the third media teleconference of the Supreme Committee on COVID-19, which was also attended by Shaikh Abdullah bin Nasser al Bakri, Minister of Manpower; Ahmed bin Hassan al Dheeb, Under-Secretary, Ministry of Commerce and Industry; Tahir bin Salim al Amri, Executive President, Central Bank of Oman and Qais bin Mohammed al Yousuf, Chairman of Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI).

The minister of health pointed out that according to an epidemiological curve designed by the ministry, the number of cases could reach 1,500 a day during the peak of the outbreak of whom 500 will require hospitalisation and 150 will need intensive care.

The curve has been moving upward yet slowly which enabled us to prepare our healthcare institutions, the minister said, adding that the Royal Hospital had a capacity of 60



ICU beds which is increased to 160. The cost of treatment for a coronavirus patient in intensive care exceeds RO 1,000 a day. Lab testing cost ranges between RO 20 to RO 30 depending on the type of test kits, medical staff and testing devices.

The minister added that the Sultanate has flown 16 flights to China bringing in medical supplies, and we expect more testing kits to arrive within 10 days. The devices and the lab staff are available at all the laboratories across the Sultanate with the sole exception of Musandam Governorate for which a device was made available and will be installed shortly.

**COMMUNITY TRANSMISSION**  
Twelve confirmed COVID-19 cases resulting from community transmission were reported in the Wilayat of

this time will constitute a precedent.

**JOB SECURITY FUND**  
Shaikh Abdullah bin Nasser al Bakri, Minister of Manpower, said the Job Security Fund is currently under foundation and the contribution of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has been deposited in the fund in addition to other contributions. The fund, to be headquartered at the Public Authority for Social Insurance, will benefit laid-out employees in the private sector.

Employers and representatives of trade unions are attempting to reach an agreement on a number of procedures and in the event of no agreement they will refer to the committee formed by the Council of Ministers to devise the best method which will be binding on both employers and workers.

Companies which are affected either fully or partially are required to provide a proof and based on that proof the committee is going to take suitable decisions, the minister said.

Al Bakri said there is coordination between the authorities concerned with countries on deportation of workers, and required procedures for their deportation will be taken once an agreement is reached. The government is constantly working on deportation of illegal workers.

TURN TO P2

## Europe still ‘in eye of the storm’ despite moves to ease virus lockdowns

LONDON: Parts of Europe moved cautiously to reopen their streets and economies on Thursday but the coronavirus pandemic was far from beaten and the World Health Organization warned the continent was still in the “eye of the storm”.

Since emerging in China late last year, the virus has turned the world upside down, killing tens of thousands, forcing half of humanity indoors and raising the specter of a second Great Depression.

Hope that its spread has peaked in Europe and the United States has seen some countries take tentative steps to ease restrictions, with US President Donald Trump set to unveil plans for lifting lockdowns across the world’s top economy.

But with global cases and deaths still growing — and fears of a second wave of infections in previously hit countries — officials are warning



A reporter in the empty Saint Peter’s Square, Vatican City, Rome, on Thursday.

that life around the world will not be returning to normal until a vaccine is available.

“We remain in the eye of the storm”, the WHO’s Regional Director for Europe, Hans Kluge, said in an online news conference from Copenhagen.

Positive signs in Spain, Italy, Germany, France and Switzerland were overshadowed by sustained or increased levels of infections in other countries, such as Britain, Turkey, Ukraine and Russia, he said.

“It is imperative that we do not let down our guard”.

More than two million people have been infected with the virus around the world and 137,000, including 90,000 in Europe, have died, according to an AFP tally. — AFP



KEEPING PEOPLE INFORMED



Members of the Supreme Committee on COVID-19 held a virtual press conference to provide the latest updates on coronavirus cases, the government response and more on Thursday. – ONA

Drones to help detect infected people

MUSCAT: Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Saeedi, Minister of Health, on Thursday launched drone technique in a bid to contribute in reducing the spread of COVID-19.

On the basis of many countries’ experiences to curb COVID-19 by using the artificial intelligence systems including robots, drones and the Internet of things to detect the infected persons, this smart technique will help to improve managing this crisis.

As part of the social responsibility, a joint team was formed, comprising researchers and academics from the Engineering College of the Sultan Qaboos University and Azm Technology Company, which is one of the specialized companies in this field. The team has developed a smart system using drones to measure the temperature of the human and therefore registered it remotely.

This technique aims to detect the suspected and unreported cases to avoid the outbreak of the infection



due to social contact. The drones are provided with advanced thermal imaging to measure the temperature remotely.

The major challenge of the current drones is the lack of required high accuracy to measure the temperature outside the buildings. The team will

improve the measuring device by the algorithm of artificial intelligence in order to be more reliable in dealing with the COVID-19 outbreak.

In cooperation with the Ministry of Health, the team will form field groups to use the smart technique if necessary. — ONA

COVID-19 CURVE MOVING UPWARD

FROM PAGE 1

The construction sector which employs more than 40 per cent of total expat workforce has not been affected by the crisis, the minister said, affirming that there are inspections and awareness campaigns by relevant authorities with regard to the working environment and the workers’ conditions. Besides, the Ministry of Manpower constantly issues instructions to workers in several languages, he said.

**FACILITATION PROCESS**

Qais bin Mohammed al Yousuf, Chairman of Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI), affirmed that the facilitation package issued by the Supreme Committee on Wednesday responds well to the aspirations and requirements of the private sector. He added that the OCCI has taken some procedures including contributing to the Job Security Fund.

Tahir bin Salim al Amri, Executive President, Central Bank of Oman (CBO), said the banking

sector has been affected by falling oil prices confirming that the sector continues to bear the brunt of the coronavirus crisis. He added that the reserves and capitals of the banks and financing firms are good.

Al Amri pointed out to big challenges with lending in the commercial sector but there is a large cooperation between all relevant authorities. The CBO is holding discussions with the commercial banks and the financing companies to find products which can benefit borrowers.

Al Amri noted that the lowering of the interest rate was among a set of measures proposed for the banking sector so that it can benefit from the liquidity provided. This liquidity is available to be utilised for lending and the interest rate in the Sultanate is fixed but it goes up or down depending on several factors.

Ahmed bin Hassan al Dheeb, Under-Secretary, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, said that the government is currently seeking to avoid shutting down certain economic institutions and has laid

down precautionary measures to be followed by these institutions as the falling oil prices and the COVID-19 crisis have affected the Sultanate’s economy, but the government has taken some measures to reduce the losses.

The Ministry of Commerce and Industry is seeking to reduce the burden falling on the commercial stores with a set of mechanisms discussed in this regard, and will be handed over to the Supreme Committee. These mechanisms are mainly aimed to support the owners of small and med-sized enterprises.

“We can neither predict nor provide figures of the scale of the loss incurred by the national economy, but we say that the losses will be small thanks to the huge cooperation between the government and the community”, Al Dheeb said, affirming that the ministry has managed to open direct shipping lines with the ports of the exporting countries and we have utilised Port Sultan Qaboos for direct import. — ONA

Oman Air to bring citizens back home from Thailand



MUSCAT: Oman Air will operate a special round-trip flight from Muscat to Bangkok, Thailand to bring home citizens who have been receiving medical treatment in the East Asian country. The flight, with eight doctors and nurses from the Ministry of Health on board, was scheduled to depart on Thursday and will return the following day.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that once this flight returns to Muscat, there will be no citizens stranded in foreign countries who wish to come

home. Should the need arise, Oman Air will be ready to repatriate Omani citizens once it receives the official requests.

In all its repatriation flights, the airline’s crew-members and passengers are carefully briefed to follow all official requirements in order to ensure the highest standards of health and safety. Ground crews extensively clean the aircraft after each flight to ensure that they are safe for use by crew and passengers.

Omani entrepreneurs stand out in fight against COVID-19

VINOD NAIR  
MUSCAT, APRIL 16

The Omani entrepreneurs are coming out with new and innovative ideas, while the authorities here have taken unprecedented measures to limit the spread of COVID-19 in the country.

Giving a boost to the healthcare system some youngsters have come out with new ideas whereas there are others who are taking advantage of the lockdown situation and offering online products and services.

A group of Omani innovators has been making good use of their untapped potential to produce and supply protection equipment used by frontline workers in the fight against COVID-19.

An Omani-owned private firm has manufactured 3D-printing face shields to protect healthcare workers who are busy fighting the virus. These shields are designed to protect the frontline workers from droplets generated by patient and non-patients.

It offers a shield to the facial area



against transmitted droplets, especially for a dentist who is directly exposed to contaminated tools if he deals with a COVID-19 patient.

While some of these products are not the core areas of this company, it

has been making efforts to rise to the occasion. The company says it can produce 1,000 face shields, and work is under way to double the production capacity.

The government has been encour-

aging innovators and researchers to present their innovations related to COVID-19, which can include a treatment method or an early detection method for disease, by creating a device or product related to this matter.

Jaalan Bani Bu Ali souq under sanitary isolation

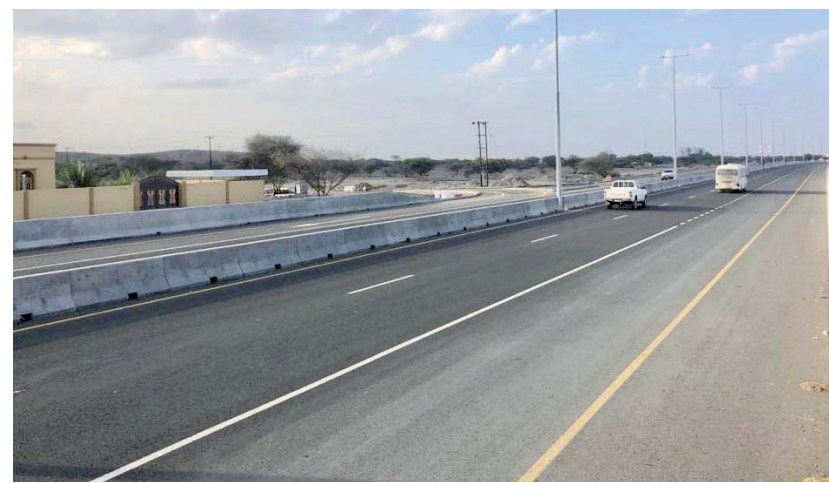
MUSCAT: The Royal Oman Police (ROP) stated that the souq (market) in the Wilayat of Jaalan Bani Bu Ali, next to the hospital of the wilayat, has been put in a total health isolation.

ROP pointed out that this measure

was taken starting from 4 am on Thursday until further notice.

ROP calls upon all citizens and residents in the wilayat to cooperate for the public interest.

— ONA

SAHAM ROUNDABOUT TO **BATINAH EXPRESSWAY**

The Ministry of Transport on Thursday opened a 12.5 km dual carriageway road link which connects Saham Roundabout to Batinah Expressway. The project highlights the ministry's continuous efforts to develop roads network in the Sultanate. — ONA

## National Bioethics Committee meets

**MUSCAT:** The National Bioethics Committee held a video conference meeting, chaired by Dr Ali bin Saud al Baimani, Vice Chancellor of Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), Chairman of the Committee.

The National Bioethics Committee received a statement by Unesco (Unesco's International Bioethics Committee (IBC) and World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology (COMEST) on the COVID-19 Ethical considerations from a global point of view, and recommended that they will be studied and circulated to relevant authorities.

The committee also discussed the outcomes of the second International Bioethics Conference.

It recommended writing a comprehensive report on the conference's outputs. — ONA

## KEEPING VIGIL



The Royal Oman Police and military personnel maintain vigil at checkpoints to enforce isolation measures to stop the spread of COVID-19.

## Two new centres for COVID-19 patients

**MUSCAT:** The Directorate General of Health Services in the Governorate of Muscat, inaugurated today two health centres in the Rusayl Industrial Estate and Al Sharadi in the Wilayat of Seeb for medical examination for expatriates living in the wilayat and who show symptoms of the Coronavirus (COVID-19).

Dr Fatima bint Abdullah al Fahdia said that the examination centres designated by the Directorate will receive any

expatriate who shows symptoms of Coronavirus, and when he is examined, the sample taken from him will be sent to the central laboratory in Darsait.

She added that in case the result is positive, we communicate with the patient and refer him to the epidemiological investigation team to transfer him to a health centre for treatment, which in turn decides for him the institutional or social isolation.

— ONA

## GCC ministers discuss COVID-19 impact on commercial activities

**MUSCAT:** The Sultanate, represented by the Ministry of Commerce and Industry participated in the second extraordinary meeting of the GCC Ministers of Commerce (video conference meeting) to discuss the efforts made in the GCC countries to minimize the effects of the novel

Coronavirus (COVID-19) on commercial activities and services.

The Sultanate was represented at the meeting by Dr Ali bin Masoud al Sunaidy, Minister of Commerce and Industry. — ONA



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A woman wearing protective gloves, as a preventive measure against the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), uses her mobile phone. – Reuters

# HOW APPS CAN HELP 'CONTACT TRACE' CORONAVIRUS

PARESH DAVE

A global race is on to develop smartphone apps and other types of mobile phone surveillance systems to track and contain the spread of the novel coronavirus.

The process known as “contact tracing,” which is used to control the spread of infectious diseases, was boosted last week when the top two smartphone software makers, Alphabet Inc’s Google and Apple Inc, said they were collaborating on apps that can identify people who have crossed paths with a contagious patient and alert them.

## HOW CAN MOBILE PHONES HELP COMBAT THE NEW CORONAVIRUS?

Smartphones and some less-sophisticated mobile phones keep track of their location via cell-tower signals, Wi-Fi signals and the satellite-based global positioning system, known as GPS. Smartphones also use so-called Bluetooth technology to connect with nearby devices.

The location data can be used to monitor whether people, either individually or in aggregate, are obeying orders to stay inside their

## COMPANIES AND GOVERNMENTS AROUND THE WORLD ARE RACING TO CREATE APPS TO HELP TRACK THE SPREAD OF THE COVID-19

homes. It can also be used for contact tracing: determining whether people have been in contact with others who have the virus, so they can get tested or quarantined.

Smartphones can also be used to take surveys of people about their health via messaging, record their health histories via various forms of data entry and even produce a health “score” based on a combination of location information and health data.

## HOW CAN PHONES HELP WITH CONTACT TRACING?

Using Bluetooth, smartphones can log other phones they have been near. If someone becomes infected, there is a ready list of their prior encounters. Phones on the list would get push notifications urging them to get tested or self-isolate.

In principle, this system is more efficient than traditional contact tracing methods that require large staffs to interview patients about their travels and then call or knock on the doors of contacts.

The Bluetooth solution is far from perfect. Phones can log one another even when 15 feet apart or on separate sides of a wall, even though a cough from an infected person likely would not be problematic in those cases. But developers have been working on ways to better define “contacts” based on the length and strength of so-called handshakes between devices.

Bluetooth also remains more accurate than GPS or cell tower location data, which can wrongly associate everyone on a busy city block as contacts.

## ARE ANY OF THESE METHODS CURRENTLY IN USE?

Singapore pioneered contact tracing via Bluetooth with an app called “TraceTogether.” Israel, which made headlines by employing its powerful government surveillance system to track cases, has also rolled out an app called The Shield. India also has an app.

South Korea is using mobile phone location data for contact tracing, while Taiwan uses it for quarantine

enforcement and is also developing an app. China is employing a range of app-based tracking systems.

Meanwhile, dozens of efforts to develop contact tracing apps are under way around the world, many led by government research institutes and health authorities. In Europe, for example, a German-led effort is aiming to rally other European countries behind a technology platform that could support contact tracing apps across the 27-member EU. But several other European countries are pursuing their own apps. An effort is also under way in the United Kingdom.

The United States government has yet to promote an app, but at least two university research groups and one ad-hoc software development team are trying to gain endorsements from state and local bodies.

## HOW DO APPLE AND GOOGLE FIT IN?

The two companies said they were concerned about competing approaches and agreed to develop

tools, to be released in May, that will enable apps to “handshake” with one other. They also address battery drain and other issues that have limited the utility of some early apps.

Apple and Google also plan to go a step further later this year by integrating logging functionality directly into their phone software nearly worldwide.

People who catch the virus would still need to download an app to initiate contact notifications, but even those without apps could receive notifications.

## ARE THERE PRIVACY AND SECURITY CONCERNS?

Yes. The most sensitive issue is who can view a phone’s list of devices it has crossed. Nearly everyone agrees on deleting logs after about one month.

The tools coming from Google and Apple keep names off contact lists and leave the lists secret to everyone involved, which has drawn plaudits from privacy experts. Only governments, which must verify that people who say they tested positive

for coronavirus actually did so, would know the identity of disease carriers, and even they would not have access to the contact lists.

But some governments and technologists favour collecting a central database of all “handshakes” between phones because it is an easier system to design and manage. Privacy advocates worry that such a database would be a hackers’ goldmine and prone to governmental abuse.

Some researchers have suggested apps also track GPS information to better map the spread of the coronavirus. But GPS data could undermine people’s privacy and leave places visited by people who test positive ostracised, activists said.

## WILL PEOPLE BE REQUIRED TO TURN ON CONTACT TRACING?

No country is known to have required an app, but workplaces or other facilities could end up mandating usage. Apple and Google said that apps seeking to use its tools would need to be voluntary.

But the apps won’t achieve their purpose unless they are widely used. Some epidemiologists have said at least 60 per cent of a country needs to activate digital contact tracing for it make an impact. — Reuters

# Virus could cause upheaval across Middle East

GENEVA: Coronavirus outbreaks across the Middle East threaten to shatter the lives of millions of already destitute people in conflict zones, and could fuel socio-economic upheaval, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said on Thursday.

Curfews and lockdowns imposed as public health measures to stem spread of the virus are already making it difficult or impossible for many to provide for their families, it said.

The Geneva-based agency, in a statement naming Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Gaza, Lebanon and Jordan, called for authorities in the volatile region to prepare for a “potentially devastating aftermath” and a “socio-economic earthquake”.

“The Middle East is today facing the twin threats of potential mass virus outbreaks in conflict zones and looming socio-economic upheaval. Both crises could have severe humanitarian consequences,” said Fabrizio Carboni, ICRC director for



The virus is the latest threat to the millions of people who live in refugee camps. – Reuters

the Near and Middle East.

The ICRC statement did not refer to Iran, which has the region’s biggest outbreak, but a spokeswoman said it was supporting the Iranian Red Crescent society.

Millions in the Middle East already lack healthcare, food, water and electricity in conflict-hit countries where prices are rising and infrastructure damaged, the ICRC said.

The ICRC said it had provided its first hygiene kits and protective material for central prisons run by Syria’s interior ministry. Carboni disclosed a request to Damascus authorities in an interview with Reuters last month, saying detainees were more vulnerable than the general population.

Protective equipment including disinfectant has also been donated to health facilities and places of detention across Iraq with more than 45,000 inmates, the statement said.

In Yemen, the ICRC said: “Our life-saving support to hospitals, clinics and dialysis centres now includes help with their COVID-19 prevention preparations.”

In the Gaza Strip, home to around two million Palestinians, the ICRC said it had provided 20,000 masks and other protective materials to the Palestinian Red Crescent Society.

Three of the ICRC’s five biggest aid operations worldwide last year were in the Middle East — Syria, Yemen and Iraq. Nearly 40 million people need humanitarian aid in those three countries alone, it said.

The ICRC regional budget this year is 565.5 million Swiss francs (\$585.34 million), more than a third for Syria.

“Across the region, we want to increase our support in coming months, especially to people who may be particularly affected like low-income workers, women heading households, farmers and people with disabilities,” the statement said. — Reuters

# S Korea ruling party wins parliamentary majority



South Korea is among the first countries to hold a national election during the pandemic.

**SEOUL:** South Korea's left-leaning ruling party has won a landslide election victory, partial results showed Thursday, after the coronavirus pandemic turned the political tide in President Moon Jae-in's favour.

His Democratic party secured an absolute majority in the National Assembly, its first for 12 years, on a turnout of 66.2 percent -- the highest at a parliamentary election since 1992.

Just a few months ago Moon was threatened by scandals over power abuse and sluggish economic growth, while critics called his dovish approach towards North Korea unrealistic.

But the South's relatively quick and effective handling of the epidemic -- it has also exported test kits to at least 20 countries -- has been a boon for Moon and his party ahead of the polls, largely seen as a referendum on his performance.

Koreans' confidence in Moon's administration was boosted by his so-called "coronavirus diplomacy", such as recent bilateral phone calls with at least 20 state leaders, said Minseon Ku, a politics scholar at Ohio State University in the US. She added that the president had successfully framed the pandemic as an "opportunity for South Korea to restructure its economy -- capitalising on industries like AI and biopharma".

This "coupled with South Korea's global recognition" for its handling of the outbreak sat well with voters, Ku said. — **AFP**

# Bangladesh rescues 382 refugees drifting at sea for weeks

**DHAKA:** Bangladesh's coast guard has rescued 382 starving Rohingya refugees who had been drifting at sea for weeks after failing to reach Malaysia, officials said on Thursday.

Most of these Rohingya had left the refugee camps in Bangladesh to try and reach Malaysia but were unable enter the country or any other place, and decided to return, according to the coastguard spokesperson Lieutenant commander Hamidul Islam.

"Last night we detained them when they were trying to enter to Bangladesh. They were 382 people on the boat," Islam told Efe news.

"They told us that they left Bangladesh about two months ago for Malaysia and were joined by some other Rohingya from Myanmar's Arakan on their way," he added.

Islam said the coastguard officials learned that at least 28 people died from lack of food and water while at sea, and the bodies had been dumped into the water.

The office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees thanked the local officials for providing support to the Rohingya aboard the vessel.

"These men, women and children were at sea for nearly two months in harrowing conditions and that many of them are extremely malnourished and dehydrated," UNHCR spokesperson Louise Donovan told Efe news. — **IANs**

# Israeli parties again fail to form unity government

**TEL AVIV:** Negotiating teams for Israel's two leading parties failed to form a government coalition before the deadline, with the task now set to head to the parliament.

Any lawmaker will have 21 days to gain the support of 61 others in the 120-seat Knesset and get his or her chance to form a government.

The step brings the country closer to holding its fourth election since April 2019; if the chosen lawmaker fails to form a government within two weeks, or no one gathers a majority, Israelis will go to the polls.

The failure comes despite "significant progress" in the past few days between the teams for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party and for the Blue and White alliance of his main rival, Benny Gantz. According to Israeli media reports, the negotiating teams were still continuing to meet even though the deadline has passed.

Gantz was given the mandate to form the government last month after receiving the backing of other lawmakers. It had been due to expire on Monday at midnight, but President Reuven Rivlin extended the deadline by 48 hours, to Wednesday at midnight, "on the understanding that [the two sides] are very close to reaching an agreement." — **dpa**

# Trump threatens to adjourn Congress to fill posts

**WASHINGTON:** US President Donald Trump threatened on Wednesday to take the unprecedented step of adjourning Congress to allow him to appoint top officials whose nominations he claimed were being blocked by Democrats in the Senate.

"I will exercise my constitutional authority to adjourn both chambers of Congress," Trump told reporters at a press conference in the Rose Garden of the White House.

"I'd rather not use that power," Trump said of a move that would likely trigger a legal fight between the White House and Congress. "We'll probably be challenged in court and we'll see who wins."

Trump accused Democrats in the Senate of stalling the nominations of several top administration officials whose appointments require hearings and Senate confirmation.

He said some of the vacant positions needing to be filled were vital to the response to the coronavirus epidemic which has left more than 27,000 people dead in the United States. — **AFP**

# SPITTING IN PUBLIC TO FETCH FINE, JAIL TERM IN INDIA

## PROACTIVE RESPONSE:

COVID-19 cases reach 12,380 with 1,489 recoveries and 414 deaths

**NEW DELHI:** Spitting in public in India will be punishable with a fine and a jail term of up to one year, the government has said, as the number of COVID-19 positive cases crossed 12,000 on Thursday.

Spitting is one of many widespread problems that the country of 1.3 billion has to tackle in its efforts to contain the spread of the disease.

Spitting after chewing tobacco, betel leaf, areca nut and related products is common across India and local authorities in several cities have imposed penalties on such acts for years, but in most cases the strictures are not taken seriously.

There have also been recent incidents of Covid-19 patients spitting at health care workers.

"The virus spreads through droplets so spitting is a dangerous act in the present circumstances and we need to impose the strictest punishment," Home Ministry spokeswoman Punya Srivastava said.

New guidelines issued by the federal Home Ministry recommended that regional governments should



Spitting is one of many widespread problems that India has to tackle in its efforts to contain the spread of the disease. — **Reuters**

impose a strict ban on tobacco that is chewed and not smoked and strictly prohibit spitting.

Refusal to comply with government orders under the Disaster Management Act may result in imprisonment up to one year or a fine, or both. The exact penalties are set by the regional governments.

India's Covid-19 positive cases reached 12,380 on Thursday with 1,489 recoveries. Of the 414 who died, more than 180 were from financial hub Mumbai and the western state of

Maharashtra.

The new guidelines were issued after India extended a 21-day nationwide lockdown in its efforts to contain the coronavirus to May 3.

## CHARGES AGAINST TABLIGHI

India has brought charges of culpable homicide not amounting to murder against the chief of a seminary for holding a gathering last month that authorities say led to a big jump in coronavirus infections.

The headquarters of the Tablighi

Jamaat group in a cramped corner of Delhi were sealed and thousands of followers, including some from Indonesia, Malaysia and Bangladesh, were taken into quarantine after it emerged they had attended meetings there in mid-March.

Police initially filed a case against Muhammad Saad Kandhalvi, the chief of the centre, for violating a ban on big gatherings but had now invoked the law against culpable homicide, a police spokesman said.

— **dpa/Reuters**

# Merkel urges 'extreme caution' as lockdown extends to May

**BERLIN:** Announcing an extension of restrictions on public life until at least May 3, German Chancellor Angela Merkel warned that the country had achieved a "fragile, partial success" against the coronavirus outbreak.

Speaking after talks with the leaders of Germany's 16 federal states, Merkel asked citizens to keep to the anti-virus measures imposed by the government in mid-March, saying they had been successful in preventing hospitals, doctors and health care workers from being overwhelmed.

Germans should still exercise "extreme caution" Merkel said, noting that there was still no vaccine or effective treatment against the virus.

Germany had registered 131,400 infections with COVID-19, the potentially fatal respiratory disease caused by the novel coronavirus, as of Wednesday evening. At least 3,553 people have died from COVID-19 nationwide.

In order to contain the coronavirus, the federal government is relying on detailed tracing of infection chains,

Merkel said. "If we allow more public life now, in small steps, it is very important that we can follow the infection chains even better ... It must be our goal to be able to track every chain of infection."

Germany's current anti-virus restrictions were due to expire on Sunday. The government and states agreed the nationwide lockdown should be extended until at least May 3, although restrictions will be loosened to allow smaller businesses and public places to reopen.

Individual states will decide how to implement the measures in detail.

Businesses with a sales floor area of up to 800 square metres will be allowed to open their doors from Monday, along with car dealerships, cycle shops and bookshops, provided that proper hygiene is maintained.

Wednesday's proposals also cleared the way for school pupils in their final year to sit their exams. Schools will begin reopening from May 4, beginning with pupils who are due to graduate, those who have exams in the

coming year and the oldest primary school classes.

Child day care centres are to remain open for essential workers' children, with the categories expanded.

Services involving close personal contact, such as hairdressers, can resume operations from May 4 under certain conditions, including the wearing of personal protection equipment.

Merkel's government also recommended "as a matter of urgency" the wearing of medical face masks on public transport or in shops, but stopped short of introducing a nationwide requirement to wear masks in public.

Some restrictions were to remain in place, however.

Major public events, including sports events, are to be banned until August 31. Restaurants, bars and pubs are to remain shuttered. Religious gatherings in churches, mosques and synagogues will continue to be prohibited in terms of the federal government proposals. — **dpa**

# WWII veteran, 99, raises £12m for health workers



Moore originally planned to raise £1,000 for a National Health Service charity. — **AFP**

**LONDON:** A 99-year-old British World War II veteran on Thursday completed 100 laps of his garden in a fund-raising challenge for health care staff that has captured the heart of the nation, raising more than £12 million (\$15 million, 13.8 million euros).

"Incredible and now words fail me," said Tom Moore, a captain who served in India, after finishing the laps of his 25-metre (82-foot) garden with the help of his walking frame.

Moore initially set himself the goal of raising £1,000 for a National Health Service charity in time for his 100th birthday at the end of the month, after receiving treatment for a broken hip and cancer.

But his efforts — a rare bit of good news during the global coronavirus pandemic that has killed almost 13,000 people in Britain alone — have made him a star in his own country and abroad.

"Thank you all for your amazing support. It has been a memorable experience. Thank you so much," he wrote on Twitter. — **AFP**



Marco Aprigliano of the City Police patrols to check opening permissions during a partial lockdown in Hanau, Germany. — **Reuters**



# Trump grapples up with opening US at the earliest!

ARUL LOUIS

W

ith signs that the COVID-19 pandemic may be abating in the worst affected areas, US President Donald Trump is grappling with how to open up the diverse nation while avoiding flareups and facing political opposition.

“The battle continues, but the data suggests that nationwide we have passed the peak on new cases,” Trump said on Wednesday at his news briefing while surveying the road ahead.

“These encouraging developments have put us in a very strong position to finalise guidelines for states on reopening the country,” the President said.

But Trump said that ultimately it will be up to the governors of the 50 states to actually open up their states - “some states much sooner than others”.

He had muddled the waters by saying earlier that he had the absolute powers to determine nationwide the easing of

the restrictions and override governors and faced fierce opposition, but on Wednesday he acceded the authority to the state leadership.

Given the risks of the pandemic suppressed by social distancing measures returning with a vengeance, he has said the decision would be the most important he would be making.

Trump had said that he wanted to open up the country on April 12, on Easter Sunday, but received a push back because of fears of the pandemic resurging. He took the advice of his medical advisers, Anthony Fauci and Deborah Brix, and agreed to postpone the opening.

Fauci is seen as the voice of reason and the figure inspiring confidence in the nation as he has sometimes openly disagreed with Trump. His OK on a Trump plan would get the president credibility.

Trump’s current marker is May 1, but

he has said that would take the advice of the two doctors.

He said: “We think some of the states can actually open up before the deadline of May 1st.”

The US will likely follow a variation of the plan announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday, which calls for restarting some vital areas of the economy with provisions for social distancing and keeping some hot areas under strict controls.

One difference will be that the US programme will be more decentralised and rely heavily on testing, both to identify those who are infected and those who have recovered and will less likely be at risk.

Under the shadow of the November election, pulling the nation out of the Stay-at-Home slumber is a political issue.

Trump would want to get the economy to rebound, while for some

Democrats and many in the media prolonging the restrictions could be seen as helping defeat him.

Opposing Trump’s plans, Democrat Speaker Nancy Pelosi said in a letter her party members: “The truth is, from this moment on, Americans must ignore lies (of Trump) and start to listen to scientists and other respected professionals in order to protect ourselves and our loved ones.”

But New York’s Democratic Governor Andre Cuomo, who has risen to national prominence with his measured, reassuring daily briefings, has also been looking at easing restrictions.

“Some businesses can say they can open tomorrow,” he said.

However, he said, it will have to be done in a phased manner considering how essential the businesses are, the degree of risk in opening them, with some able to maintain social distancing and other precautions.

The Stay-at-Home orders have crippled the US economy, created shortages of essential goods, disrupted education and taken a psychological toll on people shut in for weeks, even as it saved lives.

New York City has hired 11,000 drivers out of business from the restrictions to distribute food to people on the verge of starvation because of the Stay-at-Home orders, while victims have been buried in mass graves by prisoners.

Trump said that some governors were “chomping at the bit to get going” but there are vast differences between states that have to be taken into account.

New York with 118,392 COVID-19 cases and 10,899 deaths as on Wednesday night and some other big cities have dominated the narrative of the pandemic giving an image of national catastrophe, but vast areas have so far been spared.

— IANS



Nurses and doctors have been applauded across the globe as heroes. – AFP

## Struggle, fear and heartbreak for medical staff

D

octors, nurses and health care workers have become the unwitting heroes of the coronavirus pandemic, winning applause from balconies and streets around the world.

From Yaounde to Rome to New York, the pandemic has infected more than 1.9 million people and claimed 118,000 lives. Hospital workers are dealing with a huge influx of patients, while also facing a lack of equipment in many cases and the fear of becoming infected themselves. Often, they face heart-breaking decisions while treating their patients.

AFP journalists spoke to health care workers around the world to find out what it’s really like to be on the frontline in the coronavirus pandemic.

In Italy, one of the worst affected countries, dozens of doctors and nurses have died from COVID-19 and thousands of health care workers have become infected.

Silvana de Florio, nursing coordinator in the COVID-19 intensive care unit of the Tor Vergata Hospital in Rome, underlined the importance of being appropriately kitted out with masks, visors, gloves, scrubs and suits to avoid contagion.

“We don’t set aside a specific amount of time for it, but we have estimated that for a seven-hour shift, about 40-50 minutes is spent just on getting dressed,” she said.

“In terms of hand washing and hand decontamination, we are talking about 60-75 minutes per day,” she said after scolding a care worker for not wearing a mask.

“Medical staff can’t get sick — not so much because of their ability to work, but because it would not be fair.”

In the Pacific port city of Guayaquil in Ecuador, a sick nurse makes no

attempt to hide her anger: 80 of her colleagues have been infected and five have already died.

Ecuador is one of the worst affected countries in South America, with hundreds of dead bodies lying inside homes because the morgues are full.

“We went to war without any weapons,” said the 55-year-old nurse, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

“The necessary equipment was not ready when this (the pandemic) was already happening, devastating Europe,” said the nurse, who is resting at home as there is no space in the hospitals.

Patients with “severe symptoms” were arriving at her emergency department, “but due to a lack of tests, they were treated as if they had the flu and sent home.”

“We had no personal protective equipment (PPE) but we could not refuse to treat the patients,” she said.

In the United States, Judy Sheridan-Gonzalez, president of the New York State Nurses Association, also complained about the lack of protective gear for medical workers.

“We don’t have the arms and the armour to protect ourselves against the enemy,” she said at a recent protest outside a hospital.

Benny Mathew, a 43-year-old nurse in New York, said he caught the virus after caring for at least four patients without adequate medical dress.

Not long afterwards, when his fever had subsided, the hospital asked him to come back to work.

“They told me if you don’t have fever you can come on work — that was their only criteria,” he said.

“I was told to wear a mask and come to work. We don’t have enough staff so I think it was my duty to come back.

“But I was worried that I was going to transmit the disease to my coworkers, to the patients who don’t already have it,” he added.

With more than 195,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and around 10,000 deaths, New York state is the epicentre of the pandemic in the US, the worst affected country so far.

The doctors at Manila’s San Lazaro hospital, a specialist centre for infectious diseases, are used to battling humanity’s nastiest contagions — but they’ve never seen anything like COVID-19.

Suspected coronavirus cases have died at triage, terrified patients grow outraged when they can’t get tested immediately and the doctors have to manage the anxiety, they could be carriers too.

“It’s a living nightmare,” said doctor Ferdinand de Guzman, who at 60 years old is himself in a high-risk group.

With a limited number of intensive care rooms and ventilators, the doctors are burdened with horrific judgements.

“We don’t like to play God,” de Guzman said. “Clinicians just have to make decisions.”

Many are afraid to go home after work. “We are worried about our families,” de Guzman said.

“We always reserve one or two beds for (hospital) employees. We never had this problem before, ever.”

Roger Etoa, a doctor in Cameroon, one of the worst-affected countries in sub-Saharan Africa, admits that fear of catching the disease also affects health care workers.

“I live with my wife and children,” the 36-year-old said. “When I arrive in the evening I rush to the shower, but it is difficult to stop the children from jumping on you.” — AFP

## Hong Kong music lessons go mobile to beat virus

Y

oyo, 6, frowns with concentration as she plays the piano in the back of a truck — still able to practise thanks to an innovative Hong Kong music school keeping lessons going during the coronavirus pandemic.

While Hong Kong’s infections remain comparatively low — just over 1,000 cases and four deaths -- schools have been shut since late January and authorities have ramped up social distancing measures in recent weeks.

Schools and tutoring services have had to switch to online lessons. But music tutors like Evan Kam are trying to keep personal lessons going — whilst reducing the risk of infection for both teachers and students.

“Video teaching doesn’t suit us well as piano fingerings and gestures are better instructed with a teacher by your side,” the 28-year-old said.

The tutoring centre where Kam works saw business plunge by 70 per cent in February when infections first crossed into Hong Kong from mainland China.

Many students stopped attending because they did not want to take public transport.

Inspired by mobile libraries, the company rented three trucks and fitted them into mobile music classrooms, complete with air-conditioning and soundproof boards.

“We wanted to keep our colleagues employed. That’s why we wanted to step out of our comfort zone and see how far we can go,” said Jessica Lam, the firm’s business development manager.

“We like to offer our services directly to where the students live to shorten their travelling time,” she added.

Last week Kam’s truck was in Ha Tsuen, a remote village in northwest Hong Kong, close to the border with China.

After parking, he cleaned the keyboard, set up an air purifier, sprayed a doormat with disinfectant, and prepared hand sanitizer for his students.

Soon Alfred Tang, 10, and his sister Yoyo arrived.

Both beginners, Alfred played a gentle ballad called “Proud of You”, while Yoyo perfected a rendition of the notoriously catchy “Baby Shark”.

Their mother, who declined to give her first name, said the lessons were a highlight for the youngsters, who are cooped-up at home for most of the week.

“It’s convenient for us, as we can just go downstairs and take lessons,” she said.

“My children mostly just stay at home as schools have been suspended and we don’t go into town that much.” — AFP

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## CMA issues new guidelines for virtual general meetings of listed companies

**ELECTRONIC PLATFORM:** Omani IT professionals develop an ‘end to end system’ to automate and virtually hold General Meetings of Public Joint Stock Companies and Investment Funds

BUSINESS REPORTER  
MUSCAT, APRIL 16

The Capital Market Authority (CMA) of the Sultanate of Oman has issued new rules vide CMA Decision E/25/2020 on convening general meetings of ‘Public Joint Stock Companies and Investment Funds through Electronic Means’. The new rules set the stage for the launch of a new system to convene and hold virtual general meetings. The CMA has also issued a detailed Circular E/8/2020 explaining the procedures to be followed in organizing such online general meetings. The CMA decision and circular can be downloaded from the Authority’s website.

This is another ‘first’ in the region where the agenda of the General Meeting will be submitted to and approved by the CMA electronically. The agenda and notice can be viewed by shareholders online and shareholders can remotely vote on the resolutions. Muscat Clearing and Depository Company (MCDC) has, in collaboration with Omantel and Blockchain Solutions and Services (BSS), have developed a secure local electronic platform to



facilitate the process of convening and administering General Meetings.

“It is a matter of great pride that this complex system has been locally developed in the Sultanate of Oman by Omani IT professionals within record time recognizing the criticality of the need when Public Joint Stock Companies were barred from convening their Annual General Meetings (AGM) to prevent further spread of coronavirus. CMA

commissioned this project and provided all regulatory and logistics support to urgently launch this system,” said Shaikh Abdullah Salim al Salmi (pictured), the Executive President of Capital Market Authority.

“Keeping in view the current challenges and adopting a futuristic approach, this system will also bring in more transparency in conducting General Meetings and electing Board members. This initiative would

increase shareholders’ participation in General Meeting in future as the new Rules mandate that the listed Companies and Investment Funds shall have to continue providing such online electronic participation option for all future General Meetings as well,” added Al Salmi.

The new rules allow the shareholders to register their votes online on the proposed resolutions starting three days prior to the scheduled date of General Meeting. However, the vote can be changed during the meeting but before the voting is closed by the chairman of the meeting. The electronic platform will maintain utmost confidentiality of such pre-voting and will not reveal it except during voting on the item at consideration during the meeting.

The listed companies and funds shall have to coordinate with MCDC after the agenda approval by CMA to host the meeting on MCDC’s electronic platform to enable online viewing of agenda voting on resolutions and remote participation by the shareholders.

A link to view agenda and an invitation to attend the meeting would

be sent by MCDC to the mobile numbers and email ids registered by Investors with them.

The CMA has temporarily reduced the notice period of the General Meeting from 15 days to 10 days to facilitate the completion of General Meetings including Annual General Meetings (AGM) for the previous financial year that was suspended by the CMA earlier.

The CMA will start working on a new AGM timetable and start approving the latest General Meetings’ agenda starting from next week to facilitate organizing suspended General Meetings of Public Joint Stock Companies and Investment Funds.

The CMA also intends to host a webinar at which CMA and MCDC officials will give a brief about the new system and hold interactions with the representatives of Public Joint Stock Companies, Investment Funds, Legal Advisors and Auditors. The details of this webinar will be posted on CMA and MCDC websites shortly. CMA and MCDC will also issue further press releases as and when required and MCDC will forthwith publish a user manual with detailed guidelines.

Airbus puts off planned ramp-up of A220 jet



Employees work on an Airbus A220-300 at the Airbus facility in Mirabel, Quebec, Canada.

— Reuters

**MONTREAL:** Airbus SE is delaying its planned Canadian production ramp-up of its A220 jet by a year, a company spokeswoman said, as the coronavirus outbreak weighs on broader airline demand for aircraft.

Airbus plans to start picking up production of the narrowbody jet from the current four per month by mid-2021 at its Mirabel facility near Montreal, Airbus spokeswoman Marcella Cortellazzi said.

The company, which acquired the jet programme from Canada’s Bombardier Inc, had planned to produce 10 of the jets per month in the country by the middle of the decade.

Airlines are preserving cash as air travel plummets, with coronavirus cases topping 615,000 in the United States and 2 million globally, according to a Reuters tally.

Airbus’ planned ramp-up of the jet at a second site in Mobile, Alabama, to four a month remains unchanged.

— Reuters

## New COVID-19 Technological Innovation Committee unveiled

BUSINESS REPORTER  
MUSCAT, APRIL 16

The Ministry of Technology and Communications (MTC) has announced the formation of the Technological Innovation Committee to counter the novel coronavirus (Covid-19). The panel is headed by Eng Azza bint Sulaiman al Ismailiya (pictured), the Minister of Technology and Communications, and is composed of representatives from the Ministry of Health, Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA), Sultan Qaboos University, The Research Council, Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn), Oman Technology Fund (OTF), and Oman ICT Group.

This step comes in coordination with the Supreme Committee for Dealing with COVID-19 and in line with government’s efforts to limit the spread of this virus by adopting IT solutions as modern IT alternatives in dealing with its impact.

This committee, which will meet continuously in combating the pandemic, will supervise all IT initiatives directed to counter the coronavirus, and identifying priorities and requirements to ensure diversity of initiatives and avoid repetition. It will also organize and direct specialized national capabilities to provide innovative IT solutions to curb the spread of COVID-19 through: rapid diagnostic and epidemiological investigation, provision of medicine



and remote health care in addition to providing health and medication supplies and prevention techniques. The committee will also work to promote quarantine and social distancing measures and find a unified mechanism to enhance social solidarity.

This committee will also form a specialized team that includes Omani competencies in the field of innovation and business analysis which will work on evaluating the proposed ICT projects. This committee will be responsible of granting funding approvals for the projects and providing them with the required support after getting the approval from the technical team along with strengthening the partnership between the government and private sectors to support manufacturing and production of the technologies of urgent priority. In addition, it will work to find

a mechanism to improve the competitive advantage of the innovative national technologies, ensuring their continuation in local markets and developing and implementing awareness programs to ensure wider use of these solutions and applications in the community and work environment.

Azza bint Sulaiman al Ismaili, Minister of Technology and Communications, stated: “Modern technologies play an important role in providing solutions to many challenges faced by people throughout the world and we have witnessed many experiences in a number of areas including the health sector. We have noticed during the past weeks a number of technological initiatives from some individuals and companies as ICT solutions to tackle some of the repercussions of the novel Coronavirus COVID-19 and here lies the role of this committee to streamline and support all the national technological innovations to complement the efforts made by the Ministry of Health; therefore, we call on all innovators in The field of emerging technologies, whether individuals or private sector companies to contact us through MTC website to provide them with the consultancy and support for their initiatives to become technological solutions contributing to mitigate the severity of coronavirus outbreak.”

## US retail sales, factory output sink as coronavirus batters economy

**WASHINGTON:** US retail sales suffered a record drop in March and output at factories declined by the most since 1946, buttressing analysts’ views that the economy contracted in the first quarter at its sharpest pace in decades as extraordinary measures to control the spread of the novel coronavirus shut down the country.

The reports on Wednesday came as millions of Americans have been thrown out of work, and were the most solid pieces of evidence yet that the economy was in deep recession and potentially at risk of a depression. States and local governments have issued “stay-at-home” or “shelter-in-place” orders affecting more than 90 per cent of Americans to curb the spread of COVID-19, the respiratory illness caused by the virus, and abruptly stopping economic activity in the country.

“Economists have long imagined over the years what a new Great Depression would look like, but today they can stop thinking about it,” said Chris Rupkey, chief economist at MUFG in New York. “Things will plainly never be the same again for consumers and factories where everyone in the country will have to make do with less.”

Retail sales plunged 8.7 per cent last month, the biggest decline since the government started tracking the series in 1992, the Commerce Department said. Data for February was revised slightly up to show retail sales slipping 0.4 per cent instead of falling 0.5



An abandoned shopping cart lies between empty paper towel aisles during coronavirus disease related hoarding at a Target store in Culver City, California, US. — Reuters

per cent as previously reported. Economists polled by Reuters had forecast retail sales tumbling 8.0 per cent in March. Compared to March last year, retail sales dropped 6.2 per cent.

The \$46.2 billion decrease in sales in March was almost equal in a single month to the \$49.1 billion peak-to-trough decline that unfolded over 16 months in the Great Recession.

The Federal Reserve said on Wednesday in its April “Beige Book” report of anecdotal information on business activity collected from contacts nationwide that “economic activity contracted sharply and abruptly across all regions in the United States as a result of the

COVID-19 pandemic.”

The Commerce Department’s Census Bureau, which compiles the retail sales report said though “many businesses are operating on a limited capacity or have ceased operations completely,” it had “determined estimates in this release meet publication standards.”

Last month’s decrease in retail sales reflected depressed receipts at car dealerships, with auto sales crashing 25.6 per cent.

With millions at home and crude oil prices collapsing amid worries of a deep global recession, gasoline prices have dropped, which led to a 17.2 per cent decline in sales at service stations.

— Reuters

# G20 countries agree debt freeze for world’s poorest countries

**DUBAI/RIYADH/WASHINGTON:** Finance officials from the Group of 20 major economies agreed to suspend debt service payments for the world’s poorest countries through the end of the year, a move quickly matched by a group of hundreds of private creditors.

The actions to freeze both principal repayments and interest payments will free up more than \$20 billion for the countries to spend on improving their health systems and fighting the coronavirus pandemic, Saudi Finance Minister Mohammed al Jadaan told reporters after a virtual meeting of G20 finance officials.

Saudi Arabia is hosting the G20 meetings this year. Wednesday’s video conference meeting of finance ministers and central bank governors ran well over the scheduled two hours, delaying news conferences planned by al Jadaan and International Monetary Fund Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva.

The meeting came amid widespread criticism - including from many G20 member countries - of US President Donald Trump’s decision on Tuesday to temporarily halt funding to the World Health Organization over its handling of the COVID-19 disease pandemic, which has now killed 131,000 people.

The debt standoff offer is open to the world’s poorest and least-developed countries, as defined by the World Bank and the United Nations, as long as they are current in their debt service payments to the World Bank and the IMF.

The initiative, backed by the Paris Club of creditors, is part of globally coordinated efforts to bolster the global



German Finance Minister Olaf Scholz awaits the start of the video conference of the G20 finance ministers and central bank governors in his ministry in Berlin, Germany. – Reuters

economy which is facing the deepest recession since the Great Depression of the 1930s due to the pandemic.

German Finance Minister Olaf Scholz called the move “an act of international solidarity with a historical dimension,” adding it would let the countries invest in health care “immediately and without time-consuming case-by-case examination”.

Oxfam International said more work was needed to protect Lebanon, Ecuador and other countries not covered by the deal, and to raise the estimated \$1 trillion needed to help countries weather the “economic tsunami” unleashed by the pandemic.

The charity group and others have called for cancellation - not just suspension - of poor countries’

debts in 2020. A source familiar with the agreement said it would cover \$12 billion to \$14 billion in bilateral debt service payments owed by the 76 International Development Association (IDA) countries, plus Angola, through the end of the year.

The poorest countries will be hardest hit by the pandemic because they have weak health systems and have seen a massive outflow of capital since the crisis began. Many have also been rocked by a sharp drop in commodity prices.

Georgieva welcomed the G20’s “exceptionally rapid” decision to move ahead on debt relief. In a new IMF document, she said debt relief was in the interest of all, “as the global community is as strong as its weakest

member in a global pandemic.”

**PRIVATE CREDITORS ALSO ENGAGED**

Private creditors will join the debt relief effort on a voluntary basis, said the International Institute of Finance, which represents 450 banks, hedge funds and other global financial firms.

That is critical since countries had been reluctant to offer debt relief if countries could use the freed funds to service private-sector debts.

A French finance ministry official on Tuesday said private creditors had agreed to roll over or refinance \$8 billion of the debt of the poorest countries, on top of the roughly \$12 billion in debt payments to be suspended by bilateral creditors.

— Reuters

## Apple has a \$399 iPhone SE for the budget-conscious

**NEW YORK:** Apple Inc released a smaller iPhone priced at \$399, cutting the starting price for the company’s smartphone line in a move to broaden its appeal to budget-conscious customers as the coronavirus hobbles the global economy.

The lower-cost model could also attract more consumers to Apple services, a growing driver of revenue. Apple will start taking orders for the phone on its website on Friday, with delivery of devices expected to start April 24.

The iPhone SE will start at \$50 less than what was previously the cheapest iPhone available, the iPhone 8, which will be retired. The SE comes with a 4.7-inch display and the same processor chip as Apple’s most advanced phone, the 11 Pro. The SE lacks Apple’s facial recognition system to unlock the device, instead relying on a fingerprint sensor similar to older models. While the new iPhone adds features such as wireless charging and a high-end camera, it lacks connectivity for 5G, the next generation of mobile data networks.

The new aluminum-and-glass SE — which comes in black, white and red, looks much like an iPhone 8. Previous iPhones have been unveiled in a polished presentation in front of fans, but large events remain banned in Apple’s home base of Santa Clara County, California, where public officials ordered the first lockdowns in the United States to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus.

Apple’s cheaper phone reflects



Apple Inc’s second generation iPhone SE is seen in this undated handout photo released by Apple Inc. – Reuters

the coronavirus-driven economic downturn and job loss.

Ben Bjarin, principal analyst for consumer market intelligence at Creative Strategies, said that Apple likely realised many customers were buying older models such as the iPhone 8 rather than the newer iPhone 11 Pro at \$999, “and a big part of that is probably price.” Those budget-minded iPhone buyers may have been turned off by the iPhone 8’s aging chips and camera.

Apple is “addressing that head-on with a device and price that can still get people on the latest technology,” he said. “Having a device you’re sure is going to last a long time is exactly what (consumers) want.”

The cheaper phone enters a cut-throat market for value phones, especially in China, where Apple derives about 17 per cent of sales. In China, rivals such as Xiaomi Corp last month announced models with 5G features starting at about \$425. — Reuters

## Brent erases tentative gains, WTI ticks up after US stockpile surge



A maze of crude oil pipes and valves is pictured during a tour by the Department of Energy at the Strategic Petroleum Reserve in Freeport, Texas, US. – Reuters

**LONDON:** Oil prices were broadly stable on Thursday after sharp losses in the previous session, with investors hoping that a big build-up in US inventories may mean producers have little option but to deepen output cuts as the coronavirus pandemic ravages demand.

With official data showing US inventories surging the most on record, US West Texas Intermediate (WTI) fell on Wednesday to its lowest since February 2002, with Brent losing more than 6 per cent.

Brent crude LCOc1 was down 19 cents, or 0.7 per cent, at \$27.50 a barrel by 0754 GMT. WTI was up 7 cents, or 0.4 per cent, at \$19.94. Brent was heading for its third straight session of losses, while WTI eked out its first tentative gains after falling for four sessions.

Concerns about crumbling demand kept a lid on gains, with both contracts trading earlier in the session as much as 2.5 per cent higher than on Wednesday.

Energy Information Administration data also showed large US refined fuels stock builds despite refiners operating at 69 per cent of capacity nationwide,

the lowest since September 2008.

“The massive storage build, as counterintuitive as it sounds, did provide some price support as the build foreshadows that more wellhead closures are just around the corner, which effectively trims US supply,” said Stephen Innes, chief global markets strategist at AxiCorp.

The figures followed a report from the International Energy Agency (IEA) that forecast oil demand would fall by 29 million barrels per day (bpd) in April to the lowest in 25 years, and to just below 30 per cent of pre-coronavirus global demand levels.

The projected demand loss is far more than recent output cuts agreed to by producing nations.

The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries and allied producers including Russia, a grouping known as OPEC+, have agreed to reduce output by 9.7 million bpd.

Hoped-for cuts of another 10 million bpd from other countries, including the US, could lower production by 20 million bpd, although some analysts have questioned that number.

— Reuters

## Best Buy to furlough 51,000 hourly US store employees

**NEW YORK:** Best Buy Co Inc said it would furlough about 51,000 hourly US store employees and that its sales dropped about 5 per cent in the first two months of the current quarter, as the electronics retailer kept its stores shut due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The company said that starting next week, some corporate employees would also participate in voluntary reduced work weeks and furloughs, while its top management and board would take a pay cut.

Best Buy, however, would retain about 82 per cent of its full-time store and field employees.

The company said sales grew about

25 per cent during an 8-day period ended March 20, a day before the company announced its decision to switch to a curbside delivery model, as people shopped for work-from-home equipment, gaming-related products as well as products needed to freeze food.

Best Buy added that domestic online sales surged over 250 per cent from a year earlier, with half the sales coming from customers who picked-up their products from stores.

However, store closures and decreased footfall have dented demand, and sales dropped 30 per cent from March 21 through April 11, Best



The company logo for Best Buy is displayed on a screen on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange in New York, US. – Reuters

Buy said.

“The situation remains very fluid and there is still a great deal of uncertainty, particularly as it relates to depth and duration of store closures

## Major US airlines eyeing govt loans after grants

**NEW YORK:** Several major US airlines are preparing to apply this week for a \$25 billion US government loan program after winning billions in federal payroll grants, people familiar with the matter said, as the industry braces for a slow recovery from the coronavirus pandemic.

United Airlines Holdings Inc, which unlike other major carriers had not yet disclosed its allotted payroll relief, said on Wednesday it would receive about \$3.5 billion in direct grants and about \$1.5 billion in a low-interest loan and issue warrants for Treasury to purchase about 4.6 million shares of common stock.

While some airlines had initially planned to tap only the \$25 billion in federal payroll grants, there is now a growing realization that the terms of the separate \$25 billion loan package may be significantly better than those available in capital markets, the people said.

Treasury agreed in principle on Tuesday to award the payroll assistance to airlines but will not release the funds all at once.

It told airlines to apply by Friday if they want priority consideration for the loan package, according to documents posted on its website, and by April 30



Delta Air Lines passenger planes are seen parked due to flight reductions, at Birmingham-Shuttlesworth International Airport in Birmingham, Alabama, US. – Reuters

to be ensured consideration. If there is any money left over, late applicants could receive funds at a later date.

Cargo carriers also face the same timetable to apply for a \$4 billion pool of funds.

An airline official told Reuters most airlines were expected to apply, partly because they would not be required to draw down the loan before the end of September and because the terms are favorable. Airlines will need to offer collateral like planes, spare parts and routes in exchange for the loans and

warrants equal to 10 per cent of the value of the loan.

The expected applicants are in addition to American Airlines Group Inc, which confirmed on Tuesday it planned to apply for a \$4.75 billion loan ahead of the Friday deadline for priority consideration. Alaska Airlines Inc also said it would apply for \$1.1 billion in federal loans.

Among other large carriers, Southwest Airlines Co will likely apply, while United and Delta Air Lines were still considering, the people said.

Spirit Airlines Inc is considering applying for the loans, a spokesman said. The budget carrier said on Tuesday it expected to “agree on terms soon” on the payroll assistance grants.

Airline shares closed mixed on Wednesday, with American ending 2.9 per cent higher and United up 3.1 per cent, while Southwest closed 5.6 per cent lower and Delta was off 0.8 per cent. Major airlines must repay 30 per cent of the grant funds provided in the form of low-interest loans over 10 years and issue Treasury warrants equal to 10 per cent of the value of the grants.

American, which will issue warrants on the payroll loan for the federal government to purchase 13.7 million shares at the April 9 closing price of \$12.51, said on Wednesday that it would also issue warrants linked to the separate \$4.75 billion loan for about 38 million shares at the same April 9 price. The warrants do not have any voting rights, it said.

On the loan application due by April 30, airlines must describe any changes they expect to make in employment levels through the end of the year. Under the terms of the payroll aid, airlines must keep their workforce until September 30. — Reuters



# Disrupted Formula One season could end in tears

**LONDON:** Formula One's 70th anniversary season, stalled by the coronavirus pandemic, could end in tears for teams facing financial ruin unless the sport cuts costs and achieves sustainable spending.

Alarm bells have been ringing for weeks about whether the sport can survive in its current format ahead of key talks on Thursday between motor racing's governing body FIA, Formula One bosses and the 10 teams who take part in the circuit.

"The crisis is the final wake-up call for a sport which was unhealthy and not sustainable and had reached a point where we need drastic changes," McLaren's team principal Andreas Seidl told journalists on the eve of the conference.

Formula One, the most expensive luxury brand of motorsport, has weathered financial storms before. Following the 2007-8 crisis manufacturers BMW, Honda, Toyota and Renault quit. In 2009, the French Grand Prix was cancelled and the Fuji circuit in Japan, owned by Toyota, dropped out.

But Formula One cut costs and recovered.

This time the blow to the sport and the global economy is harder and the sport may be less well equipped to deal with it.

Two races (Australia, Monaco) have been cancelled, seven (Bahrain, China, Vietnam, Netherlands, Spain, Azerbaijan, Canada) have been postponed and the later rounds, starting with the French Grand Prix on June 28, are in doubt.

Ratings agency Moody's downgraded Formula One, owned by the



American group Liberty Media, early in April but said it felt the sport could survive a lost season.

"Formula One has strong liquidity and a sufficiently flexible cost base to manage through a severely curtailed 2020 season," wrote Moody's, adding that F1 "would likely be able to support a full cancellation."

The sport's leadership is not ready to write this season off.

"If we were able to start at the beginning of July we could do a 19-race season," Ross Brawn, a F1 managing director, said on April 8.

Brawn said under FIA rules "eight races is the minimum we can have a world championship."

"We could achieve eight races by starting in October. So if you wanted a drop dead point it would be October."

**RETHINK**

The picture is different for the teams.

Even those with wealthy backers, such as Renault and Daimler (Mercedes' parent company) might rethink their future involvement in F1.

The uncertainty is increased be-

cause commercial and governance agreements for next season are still being negotiated by the FIA, Formula One and the teams.

One issue is reducing the spending cap, which is currently \$175 million per team.

McLaren's Seidl says the impact of the coronavirus pandemic remains unknown but Formula One needs to assure its backers it can withstand the blow.

"With all the financial losses we will face this year and the magnitude being still unknown because we don't know when we will get back to racing, it is important we can show our shareholders that (whatever the) losses this year, you can compensate over the coming years."

The spending cap "is going to be lowered," FIA president Jean Todt said on April 9.

"Motor racing, starting with F1, is too expensive," he said.

"But the pandemic is making it more difficult to cover these costs. There is a risk of losing teams and manufacturers." — AFP

# Oman junior, Olympic football teams join e-training sessions through video calling apps

**ADIL AL BALUSHI**  
MUSCAT, APRIL 15

After the successful experience for many national sports teams having the e-training sessions through the online platforms, Oman U-16 and Oman Olympic football team's players have also started to use the advanced technology applications under direct supervision of the technical staff of each team.

Oman U-16 team began the first online training sessions on "Zoom" meeting application on Sunday. Coach Hassan al Kas-sori, the fitness head in the team, supervised the players during the e-training sessions. The national team players will have four sessions during the week and one session will be for 45 minutes and three days for rest. Al Kas-sori focused during the training on improving the fitness level and strengthen the physical aspects of the players.

The Sultanate U-16 football team is gearing up for AFC Asian Cup Championship which will be held in September in Manama city in Bahrain. The team, which reached the finals for the 11th time in history, had booked their slot in the qualification last September.



**The crisis is the final wake-up call for a sport which was unhealthy and not sustainable and had reached a point where we need drastic changes**

**ANDREAS SEIDL**  
*McLaren Team Principal*

Muscat.

On the other side, many domestic sports associations and committees recently implemented the modern technology communication ways to reduce the

impact of technical performance on the players from the wake of COVID-19 outbreak.

Based on the social media channels of many sports associations and committees, the e-training sessions registered positive interaction as many of the team's players are disciplined about their performance training and continuity on moving with the warm up plan.

A combination of individual and group online training facility is available at the modern technology platforms and that allow coaches to define some individual roles for some players.

Coronavirus pandemic crises opened the floor for many sporting teams to use the new online technology programmes efficiently as it was an essential supplementary tool to continue in the technical preparatory plan.

# India seal Women's World Cup berth after Pakistan series scrapped

**MUMBAI:** India have qualified for the 2021 women's World Cup after the International Cricket Council declared that the points from a cancelled series against Pakistan would be shared.

The series, part of the ICC Women's Championship, was unable to be played after India's governing body, the BCCI, said it could not get government clearance to host Pakistan with tensions rising between the neighbours over the disputed Kashmir region.

The ICC declared the circumstances a "force majeure" event and awarded the teams three points each.

Two other final-round series cancelled because of the coronavirus pandemic — South Africa v Australia and Sri Lanka v New Zealand — also saw the six points on offer shared.

The decision means India sealed the final automatic qualifying spot on 23 points behind Australia (37), holders England (29) and South Africa (25) for the 50-over competition next year alongside hosts New Zealand.



"The technical committee concluded that the (India v Pakistan) series could not be played because of a Force Majeure event," an ICC statement said late on Wednesday.

"The BCCI demonstrated that it was unable to obtain the necessary government clearances to allow India to participate in the bilateral series against Pakistan."

The fierce rivals have not played a bilateral series since 2012-13 when the Pakistan men crossed the border for a series of one-day internationals.

With their decades-old dispute over Kashmir at a new peak, India has stopped all sports teams going to Pakistan and they have only clashed at major international events, such as last year's 50-over men's World Cup in England.

Pakistan, who finished four points below India, will now seek one of the three remaining places in the World Cup at a 10-team qualifying tournament in Sri Lanka originally scheduled for July 3-19, but which could be postponed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. — AFP

# sport



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N A D A L E X P E C T I N G

# LENGTHY WAIT

B E F O R E T E N N I S R E T U R N S



**MADRID:** Rafael Nadal thinks the global nature of tennis means there is little chance tournaments will go ahead any time soon as sport continues to be paralysed by the coronavirus pandemic.

Novak Djokovic also anticipates a lengthy delay before tennis can be played even behind closed doors, with the world number one expecting players to have to wait a “few months”.

The French Open, which Nadal has won a record 12 times, has been postponed until September, shortly after the US Open, while Wimbledon was cancelled earlier this month for the first time since World War II.

But the prospect of either grand slams at Roland Garros or Flushing Meadows being played with fans appears increasingly remote.

“Tennis is a global sport,” Nadal told Spanish radio station Onda Cero on Wednesday night. “We go from country to country and a lot of people have to move around.”

“It seems difficult to me for any big tournament to be played in the short or medium term.”

Football’s major leagues are preparing to play behind closed doors for several weeks to complete their seasons and avoid losing considerable sums of money from broadcasting contracts.

But tennis tournaments are more reliant on fans for their income, making it more complicated to stage competitions in empty stadiums. “It is not an easy decision,” Djokovic told the same programme. “I am ready but I think we have to wait a few months.” — AFP



Tennis is a global sport. We go from country to country and a lot of people have to move around. It seems difficult to me for any big tournament to be played in the short or medium term

**RAFAEL NADAL**

*French Open champion*