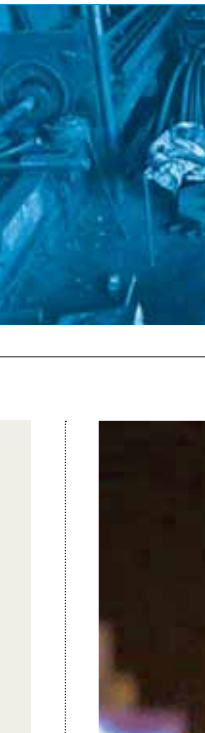


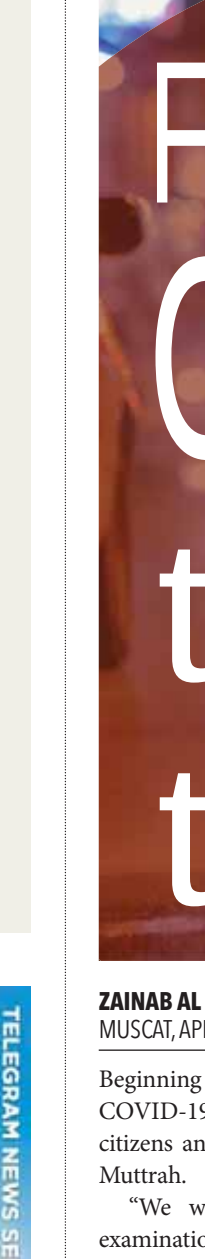
P4

COVID-19 COULD
PLUNGE HALF
A BILLION PEOPLE
INTO POVERTY



P7

OIL PRICES RISE
ON HOPES OPEC+
WILL AGREE
SUPPLY CUTS



P10

NBA LEGEND MICHAEL
JORDAN WINS LONG-RUNNING
CHINA TRADEMARK DISPUTE



HM issues Two Royal Decrees

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik issued two Royal decrees on Thursday.

Royal Decree No 54/2020 appoints a Deputy Chairman for the Tax Institution.

Article (1) appoints Saud bin Nassir bin Rashid al Shukaili, as Deputy Chairman for the Tax Institution with the same rank and financial allocations.

Article (2) says that this decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from its date of issue.

Royal Decree No 55/2020 appoints an Under-Secretary of the Foreign Ministry for the Administrative and Financial and Affairs.

Article (1) appoints Mohammed bin Nassir bin Hamad al Wahibi, as Under-Secretary of the Foreign Ministry for the Administrative and Financial Affairs.

Article (2) says that this decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from its date of issue.

— ONA

Free
COVID-19
test begins
today



Dhofar Municipality workers spray disinfectant in Salalah on Thursday. — ONA

WE ARE
MAKING
A SWITCH.

WEATHER TODAY

PRAYER TIMINGS

ZAINAB AL NASSRI
MUSCAT, APRIL 9

Beginning Friday, free test to check COVID-19 will be done on both citizens and expats in the Wilayat of Muttrah.

“We will begin to expand the examination on Friday (April 10) in Muttrah for more expats, as our idea is to focus on people and not their nationalities”, said Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Saeedi, Minister of Health, in an online press conference on Thursday.

He said that to make the communication more clear to the expat community, different languages will be used to guide them to the places of examination, he said.

According to the minister, the government will examine and treat all expats at free of cost and “other issues will not be considered.”

Expats coming for the tests will not be asked about their whereabouts or residence cards, and the goal is to

■ 38 new cases, bringing the total number to 475, including 211 expatriates

■ Of the 38 new cases, 31 are from the Wilayat of Muttrah

■ Focus on people, not nationalities, says minister

■ No need for residence cards for treatment

■ Muscat governorate lockdown from today

■ Elderly and those with chronic diseases must be careful

■ Supreme Committee calls for strict social distancing

Expat third COVID-19 victim

MUSCAT: A 41-year-old expat from Muscat died due to COVID-19, the Ministry of Health said on Thursday. Two earlier COVID-19 deaths in the Sultanate were also from Muscat: a 72-year-old citizen passed away on March 31 and another citizen also aged 72 years died on April 4.

The minister confirmed that the country has contacted several countries to exchange medical supplies if needed, saying “We are discussing a plan to exchange ventilators with other countries at the time of need. I want to stress that the Sultanate has sufficient stocks of ventilators and masks now. However, during this crisis, many local industries have come out with solutions for face masks and protective suits. It is something great to discuss.”

Dr Saif al Abri, DG of Diseases Surveillance and Control, pointed that there were cases of infection among Omani students coming from abroad. The MoH is in the process of intensifying the tests and new measures will be taken soon.

“We have a clear plan if there is a community transmission anywhere in the Sultanate. Muttrah is currently witnessing this problem as 31 of the new 38 cases that were reported on Thursday are from Muttrah,” he said.

TURN TO P2

World seeks economic remedy as virus death toll mounts

LONDON: World powers scrambled on Thursday to build a global response to the human and economic catastrophe caused by the coronavirus epidemic, as death tolls in the US and Europe soared higher.

In a locked-down New York, the UN Security Council was to meet on the pandemic for the first time, and in Brussels, EU finance ministers were wrangling over how to bail out hard-hit Italy and Spain.

On the spiritual front, Pope Francis was preparing to celebrate Maundy Thursday with The Mass of the Lord's Supper, but he was to be unable to perform the tradition of washing the feet of the faithful in case of infection.

And Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei warned Muslim worshippers to pray at home rather than in crowded mosques, even when the holy month of Ramadhan begins later this month.

Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has declared a month-long state of emergency in Tokyo, but there and elsewhere the economic slowdown is starting to bite

The number of worldwide cases of the novel coronavirus since it spread from China earlier this year topped 1.5 million. More than 88,981 people have died

Yemen was already in the grip of a humanitarian tragedy caused by its civil war before the virus erupted, but on Thursday the Saudi-led coalition backing the government side began a unilateral “coronavirus ceasefire”.

Meanwhile, the number of worldwide cases of the novel coronavirus since it spread from China earlier this year topped 1.5 million, according to an AFP tally. More than 88,981 people have died.

Alongside the personal tragedies and the pressure on overburdened hospitals, there has been a stark economic toll, with the WTO warning of the “worst recession of our lifetimes”.

The worst-hit countries in Europe -- the worst hit continent -- are Italy and Spain, where daily death tolls are now down from their peaks but still running high, despite strict lockdowns.

Spain's daily fatalities fell to 683 on Thursday, down from 757 the day before, while its total passed 15,000.

In Italy, the country's youngest COVID-19 patient, a two-month-old baby girl, was reportedly released from hospital, a bright moment of hope in a country with 17,669 dead.

Madrid and Rome are seeking assistance from EU partners to rebuild their economies in the wake of the disaster, but Germany has rejected the idea of joint borrowing and the Netherlands is blocking a compromise solution.

— AFP



AUTHORITIES ALLAY FEARS ON LOCKDOWN; NO NEED FOR PANIC BUYING

VINOD NAIR
MUSCAT, APRIL 9

The authorities concerned have urged people in Muscat not to indulge in panic buying and avoid crowding in supermarkets and grocery stores.

While the governorate will be under lockdown from 10 am on April 10, until 10 am on April 22, the limited movement will be allowed for by presenting the IDs for visiting hospitals, purchasing the necessary items, supplies, especially food supplies, buying medicines from pharmacies and going to the airport.

“All the entries and exits of Muscat Governorate will be closed for all except for emergency cases, which will be evaluated and determined by the authorities in charge of the implementation of the lockdown”, according to Royal Oman Police (ROP).

The authorities said people should avoid crowding in the foodstuff shops because of the high risk of spreading the virus.

The Ministry of Commerce and



Industry (MoCI) and the Ministry of Health (MoH) have said that food supplies and medicines are available to cater to the market needs for a long period.

The movement of food trucks will be also available within the governorates while the governmental associations and non-governmental organisations will play a key role in

serving the community, both residents and citizens.

While online grocery services have been making extra efforts to meet the needs of customers, several

All the entries and exits of Muscat Governorate will be closed for all except for emergency cases, which will be evaluated and determined by the authorities in charge of the implementation of the lockdown

supermarkets have started online ‘order and collect later’ facilities to avoid crowding at their premises and help people follow the #stayathome campaign.

Online services, however, do take a day or two due to unprecedented demand from customers in the current situation.

Free COVID-19 test begins today

FROM PAGE 1

“It is preferable to isolate the elderly inside houses and apply social distancing even among the family members,” said the Supreme Committee members during the online briefing at the headquarters of the Ministry of Education.

Dr Saif al Maamari, Adviser to the Minister of Education, while explaining about the ministry’s plan, said: “The ministry created a platform for distance education. The experiment that we are doing now may be inevitable even in future, as networks and devices were provided to some students”, he said.

Coordination is in progress with the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) to develop plans with ‘Unified Admission’ for public diploma students, he said.

Al Maamari clarified, “We are exploring alternatives with the suspension of classroom study. I assure you that solutions will be in the best interest of the students, as we care for their future.”

Brigadier General Saeed al Asimi, Director-General of Operations at the Royal Oman Police, said the check points at the Muscat Governorate have been activated.

“Movement of individuals to and from the governorate will be limited, and we appeal to everyone to understand the main reason for this. In light of this national crisis, we ask everyone to be careful and cooperate. The closure decision has been taken to limit the spread of the virus. It is all in the interest of the homeland and the people”, he said.

He said hospitalisation in government healthcare is now limited to expectant mothers, dialysis patients and other emergency cases.

The Supreme Committee tasked with tackling COVID-19, reiterated its call for the citizens and residents in the Sultanate to adhere to the instructions of the Ministry of Health (MoH) and give special care to those suffering from chronic diseases like those taking immunosuppressive drugs, because they are more vulnerable to get infected.

Dhofar Municipality drive to maintain public health



SALALAH: Dr Ahmed bin Mohsin al Ghassani, Chairman of Dhofar Municipality, confirmed the municipality’s keenness to take several measures in a bid to maintain health and safety of citizens and residents, in implementation of the decisions issued by the COVID-19 Supreme Committee.

He said in a statement to Oman News Agency (ONA) that the safety of citizens and residents is the highest goal. Therefore, the municipality continues the campaign for environmental sanitation and disease vector control that started on March 2.

The Chairman of Dhofar Municipality stressed the municipality’s keenness to prevent makeshift markets for the expatriate workforce in coordination with the concerned authorities, as these markets were closed permanently. He added that there is a study to provide an alternative that meets the health requirements as well as monitoring workers’ housing to ensure that they are clean and free from disease vectors.

He pointed to a community initiative in coordination with many government agencies, the private sector and civil society institutions to provide a food basket for some groups, especially the expatriate workforce.

He explained that this initiative comes with the aim of providing a social stability and that the expatriate workforce remain in their residence, ensuring social distancing and to control the spread of the diseases.

— ONA



The restrictions to be in force during Muscat shutdown

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
MUSCAT, APRIL 9

The shutdown during April 10-22 in the Muscat Governorate will start at 10 am on Friday. During the shutdown people cannot travel to other governorates from Muscat, while entry of individuals into Muscat from other governorates will not be allowed as well.

The shutdown, however, will permit vehicles to pass through the checkpoints that have essential role to play in terms of supplies related to food and other commodities.

At 10 am on Friday morning the check and control points will be activated. After this period no one will be allowed to enter Muscat, said Major Mohammed al Hashami of Royal Oman Police.

“As for movement within Muscat, shops will remain open and individuals can go out to purchase essential items. People can also go to pharmacies and make hospital visits if the need arises. However, the public must restrain from gathering



MUSCAT: The Medical Response and Public Health Sector’s members met at the Ministry of Health (MoH) headquarters here on Thursday under the chairmanship of Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Saeedi, Minister of Health. Present at the meeting were Dr Mohammed bin Saif al Hosani, MoH’s Health Affairs Under-Secretary, head of the sector, in addition to personnel of the Sultan’s Armed Forces (SAF), the Royal Oman Police (ROP) and the Public Authority for Civil Defence and Ambulance (PACDA). The meeting was held to review and follow-up efforts exerted by the concerned authorities in dealing with COVID-19. – ONA

in large groups to shop. There will be a steady flow of supplies. There is no need to buy in a rush or in bulk. On Tuesday night we saw a

lot of people shopping and gathering up very closely, which is not good. Please relax and do not panic”, Major Al Hashami told *Observer*.

Meanwhile, the Wilayat of Muttrah will continue to be completely under shutdown along with parts of Ruwi, Al Hamriya and

Wadi Kabir.

The Royal Oman Police (ROP) requested people to understand the main reason behind the shutdown.

When asked, should people who work in Muscat Governorate but live in another governorate must return before the shutdown, Major Al Hashami said, “It is up to them, if they want to return to Muscat Governorate, they should return before the shutdown”.

The traffic will continue to be stopped from Ruwi to Wadi Adai and beyond, but rest of the Muscat Governorate can continue with their regular exercise.

“People can move, except for the Wilayat Muttrah as it is under shutdown and that will continue. Ruwi, Hamriya, Wadi Kabir are part of the Wilayat Muttrah so the restrictions continue including part of Darsait.

Individuals must carry their IDs and work cards while stepping out for essential needs. But the best measure to combat novel coronavirus has been to stay home and avoid gatherings and while shopping to maintain one metre distance between each other.

GCC healthy cities panel reviews measures to tackle COVID-19

THE MEETING TOUCHED UPON THE ROLE AND EFFORTS OF THE HEALTHY CITIES IN THE GCC STATES IN TACKLING THE COVID-19 OUTBREAK AND REVIEWED THEIR EXPERIENCES IN THIS REGARD



MUSCAT: The Healthy Cities Committee of the GCC States convened on Thursday a video conference meeting in the presence of Dr Huda bint Khalfan al Siyabiah, Director of Health Community Initiatives in the Ministry of Health (MoH).

The meeting touched upon the role and efforts of the healthy cities in the GCC states in tackling the COVID-19

outbreak and reviewed their experiences in this regard.

The efforts of the ministries of health in the GCC states exerting to curb the COVID-19 outbreak have been highlighted during the meeting.

On this matter, Dr Huda al Siyabiah provided a presentation on promoting the community role in reduc-

ing the coronavirus in the Sultanate.

The meeting reviewed the community role in supporting the government to tackle this virus, developed an emergency plan to communicate remotely between the members of the main committee, established a particular mechanism for the sub-committees in the healthy city to support the sectors responsible for tackling the

pandemic, as well as strengthening the standards related to preventing the spread of epidemics and communicable diseases.

The meeting also highlighted the role of the volunteers in the community work along with the role of the healthy city in community mobilization for the national emergency plans.

— ONA

E-renewal system for vehicle registration

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 9

The Royal Oman Police has said that renewal of the registration of vehicles that have exceeded 10 years since the date of manufacturing, can be done via the ROP smartphone application without vehicle inspection.

The decision followed the suspension of vehicle inspection as part of measures aimed to stem COVID-19 outbreak. What the vehicle owners need to do is to renew the vehicle insurance online and then complete the registration renewal procedures including e-payment through the ROP app.

Oman Air flights to bring citizens and essentials

MUSCAT: Oman Air continues to operate flights to repatriate Omani citizens home and to provide food and health supplies as part of its support to national efforts in the face of coronavirus pandemic.

Oman Air, in direct coordination with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, operated a flight between Muscat, Madina,

Dammam and Riyadh to bring home 166 Omani citizens from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

This flight is part of several flights that Oman Air has taken over the past few days to return Omani citizens from a number of countries, such as India and Jordan.

— ONA

Nursing, midwifery witness remarkable progress in Sultanate

MUSCAT: The World Health Organization (WHO) has designated 2020 the International Year of the Nurse and the Midwife with a view to recognising their role in the healthcare sector across the world.

WHO estimates that an additional 9 million nurses and midwives are needed if the world is to achieve universal health coverage by 2030.

Nursing profession has developed in the Sultanate over the first years of the Renaissance era. The number of nurses in the Sultanate reached around 20,000, including 15,217 nurses who work in health institutions of the Ministry of Health with an Omanisation rate of 64 per cent.

The health sector has witnessed a progress in line with the government's interest in providing the primary, secondary and territory healthcare services for all citizens and residents. In 1979 the Ministry of Health established Nursing Department. In 1982 the first Omani woman was

The number of nurses in the Sultanate reached around 20,000, including 15,217 nurses who work in health institutions of the Ministry of Health with an Omanisation rate of 64 per cent

appointed as the Nursing Director. Furthermore, a number of Omani nurses obtained scholarships in various specialisations in the UK and the US.

Health Science Institute was inaugurated in 1982 for specialisations, such as nursing science, laboratories,



X-ray and physiotherapy. This was followed by inauguration of a number of nursing institutes in the wilayats of

Salalah, Nizwa, Suhar, Ibri, Sur and other governorates.

This progress was crowned in 2001

by the inauguration of the Specialized Nursing Institute, which includes specialisations like midwifery, adult

critical care, emergency and infection control. In 2016, the level of study was upgraded into a bachelor degree in all health institutes of the Ministry of Health by unveiling the Oman Health Science College.

In addition, the Oman Specialised Nursing Institute was also upgraded to become the Higher Institute for Health Specialisations.

Over the last decade, nursing and midwifery sector witnessed a remarkable progress.

In 2014, the Department of Nursing Affairs was upgraded to a Directorate General, as it includes three departments for professional organisation, human resources and professional practice.

The Directorate General works on upgrading nursing profession in all professional and ethical aspects, developing and following up nursing policies, regulations, strategies and plans in order to meet requirements of the health services. — ONA



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COVID-19 could plunge half a billion people into poverty



LONDON: The fallout from the coronavirus spread that has killed more than 83,000 people and wreaked havoc on economies around the world could push around half a billion people into poverty, Oxfam said on Thursday.

The report released by the Nairobi-based charity ahead of next week's International Monetary Fund (IMF)/World Bank annual meeting calculated the impact of the crisis on global poverty due to shrinking household incomes or consumption.

"The economic crisis that is rapidly unfolding is deeper than the 2008 global financial crisis", the report found.

"The estimates show that, regardless of the scenario, global poverty could increase for the first time since 1990", it said, adding that this could throw some countries back to poverty levels last seen some three decades ago.

The report authors played through a number of scenarios, taking into

account the World Bank's various poverty lines - from extreme poverty, defined as living on \$1.90 a day or less, to higher poverty lines of living on less than \$5.50 a day.

Under the most serious scenario - a 20 per cent contraction in income - the number of people living in extreme poverty would rise by 434 million people to 922 million worldwide. The same scenario would see the number of people living below the \$5.50 a day threshold rise by 548 million people to nearly 4 billion.

Women are at more risk than men, as they are more likely to work in the informal economy with little or no employment rights.

"Living day to day, the poorest people do not have the ability to take time off work, or to stockpile provisions", the report warned, adding that more than 2 billion informal sector workers worldwide had no access to sick pay.

The World Bank last week said

The report released by the Nairobi-based charity ahead of next week's International Monetary Fund (IMF)/World Bank annual meeting calculated the impact of the crisis on global poverty due to shrinking household incomes or consumption

poverty in East Asia and the Pacific region alone could increase by 11 million people if conditions worsened.

To help mitigate the impact, Oxfam proposed a six point action plan that

would deliver cash grants and bailouts to people and businesses in need, and also called for debt cancellation, more IMF support, and increased aid. Taxing wealth, extraordinary profits and speculative financial products would help raise the funds needed, Oxfam added.

Calls for debt relief have increased in recent weeks as the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic has roiled developing nations around the world.

In total, governments around the world would need to mobilise at least \$2.5 trillion to support developing nations.

"Rich countries have shown that at this time of crisis they can mobilize trillions of dollars to support their own economies," the report said.

"Yet unless developing countries are also able to fight the health and economic impacts the crisis will continue and it will inflict even greater harm on all countries, rich and poor".

— Reuters

Johnson 'getting better' in intensive care

LONDON: British Prime Minister Boris Johnson was getting better on Thursday in intensive care where he is battling COVID-19 as his government extended its bank overdraft facility and reviewed the most stringent shutdown in peacetime history.

Johnson, 55, was admitted to St Thomas' hospital on Sunday evening with a persistent high temperature and cough and was rushed to intensive care on Monday. He has received oxygen support but not been put on a ventilator.

"Things are getting better for him", his Culture Minister, Oliver Dowden, said on Thursday. "He's stable, improving, sat up and engaged with medical staff".

US President Donald Trump said Johnson appeared to be doing "better" after what he described as a "tough bout".

With a prime minister in intensive care, the British government was facing two major issues: How to finance a vast increase in state spending to support the shuttered economy, and when to start easing lockdown measures.

With the world's fifth largest economy facing potentially the worst economic hit since World War Two amid historic spending and tax cuts, the government said it had expanded its overdraft facility with the Bank of England.

While Johnson's condition was said to be improving, it was unclear how long he might be incapacitated, with some political commentators saying there was a power vacuum in his absence.

The United Kingdom is entering what scientists say is the deadliest phase of the outbreak,

with deaths expected to continue to rise over the Easter weekend. Latest figures show total deaths in hospitals from COVID-19 have reached 7,097.

The government's emergency response gathering, known as COBR, will on Thursday discuss how it should deal with a review of lockdown measures.

Johnson's designated deputy, Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab, will chair the meeting, although no final decision will be made. London's mayor and the Welsh regional government have both said the lockdown would stay in place.

Raab has said the government will continue to follow the strategy to combat the coronavirus set out by Johnson and that his cabinet would collectively make necessary decisions.

"No one pretends that this is easy with the prime minister in hospital. But the likelihood is that his recovery will take time and we don't have much," the pro-government Telegraph newspaper said in its editorial on Thursday.

"The cabinet cannot afford to wait until he is better before working up ways out of this dreadful impasse."

In an indication the shutdown measures are working, the number of coronavirus infections and hospital admissions in Britain is beginning to show signs of flattening, said Stephen Powis, medical director of the National Health Service.

The upbeat assessment boosted Britain's stock markets as investors pinned hopes on the COVID-19 crisis nearing a peak.

— Reuters

African leaders rally around WHO head after Trump criticism



JOHANNESBURG: African leaders have rallied around the Ethiopian head of the World Health Organization (WHO) after US President Donald Trump criticised the United Nations agency and threatened to withhold his country's contribution to its budget.

Trump had on Tuesday accused the WHO of being too focused on China and of issuing bad advice on the COVID-19 pandemic. South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, who chairs the African Union (AU), said in a statement late on Wednesday that WHO Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus had shown "exceptional leadership... from the very earliest stages of this unprecedented global health crisis".

"The AU calls upon the international community to join hands

to support the efforts of the DG and the entire WHO family as they lead global efforts to fight this pandemic", Ramaphosa added.

"If there was a time for global unity, solidarity and cooperation, this is that time".

Posting on Twitter, Rwanda's Paul Kagame said the WHO chief "has the full confidence and support of Africa", while AU Commission head Moussa Faki urged leaders to focus on fighting COVID-19 and said the time for accountability would come later.

Tedros, a former foreign minister of Ethiopia, has rejected Trump's suggestion that the WHO has been "China-centric" in its efforts to contain the spread of the new coronavirus.

"We are close to every nation, we are colour-blind", he said on Wednesday, adding the WHO had "kept the world informed about the latest data, information and evidence".

China has said Tedros had played an important role in promoting international cooperation to combat the pandemic, which has infected more than 1.47 million people and killed more than 87,000, according to the latest Reuters tally.

Africa accounts for a fraction of global cases of the disease, but its countries are feeling the impact with economies expected to contract, putting about 20 million jobs at risk.

— Reuters

Strays feel the bite as pandemic spreads

PARIS: As coronavirus forces billions of people around the world into lockdown, another sizeable population has also been hard hit — stray animals. While pet owners in many countries are still allowed to walk their dogs, thousands of other animals — the exact numbers are unknown — are starving and turning feral.

The mass closure of restaurants has also deprived hungry animals of leftover meals, forcing them to take greater risks. For many, the restrictions are tantamount to a death sentence.

"We are seeing an increase in the numbers of cats in areas where we feed, some appear to have been abandoned, while others have roamed far from their usual spots in search of food", says Cordelia Madden-Kanellopoulou, a co-founder of Nine Lives Greece, a network of volunteers dedicated to reducing the overpopulation of stray cats in Athens and other cities.

According to the municipality, the stray dog population in Athens is put at hundreds while the cats run into the thousands.

"It is a huge worry to us that strays could be exposed to more cruelty and poisoning, being more visible and hungrier now, and thus more likely to trust and approach people," said Madden-Kanellopoulou.

Greek officials over the weekend said an online platform had been created for food donations and veterinary services for strays and pets whose owners are unable to care for them.

"During the lockdown, we make sure that all dogs have enough food so that they don't become aggressive. This week we will also start installing feeders in different areas of the city making sure that dogs and cats are fed regularly", said Serafina Avramidou, city of Athens councillor for animal



welfare.

Avramidou said she has also already signed more than 350 permits for volunteers to visit feeding areas without getting fined.

In neighbouring Turkey, authorities in Istanbul distribute around a tonne of food for street cats and dogs everyday.

"We were taking care of strays even before the coronavirus," Tayfun Koc, an Istanbul municipal feeding worker, said. "I say this to all our citizens, stay at home, we will take care of our little friends", he said.

European authorities are realising that allowances must be made for populations of stray animals. Authorities elsewhere in Europe are gradually realising that allowances

The global lockdowns against the coronavirus are tantamount to a death sentence of stray cats and dogs

must be made for stray populations.

After Spain went into a nationwide lockdown on March 14, Madrid officials closed down 125-hectare Retiro park in the city centre where around 270 cats live in 19 different colonies.

For days, volunteers were not able to enter. City hall authorities

eventually allowed them to give food to park gardeners to distribute.

A single volunteer may also enter the park three times a week, for an hour at a time, to check on the health of the cats.

Mercedes Hervas, the president of the Association of Friends of the Cats of Retiro, says this was not enough time to check on them all and look after those in need of medical care.

On March 30, a park employee found dead a female cat that the group had been treating with antibiotics. Hervas predicted other cats would also die. "You have to go from colony to colony and wait for the cat to come out. Maybe Olympic athletes can do it in one hour, we can't", she says.

— AFP

SPAIN SEES CORONAVIRUS PAIN EASING

MADRID: Spain's coronavirus death toll slowed on Thursday as its leader said the worst should soon be over and exhorted all sides in the politically-fractured nation to join an economic revival pact as they did after dictator Francisco Franco's death in the 1970s.

Speaking to a near-empty parliament as more than 300 lawmakers participated remotely, Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez said latest data showed Spain was close to the start of a decline in the epidemic that has ravaged the nation.

"This war against the virus will be a total victory... the fire starts to come under control," he said.

Lawmakers were set to approve a two-week extension of a state of emergency, keeping most people at home until April 26.

After two days of increases, the daily death toll decreased on Thursday to 683 people in the previous 24 hours, taking the total to 15,238 – second only to Italy, though the ballooning US toll was likely to overtake Spain.

Confirmed cases in Spain rose to 152,446 from 146,690. The government's proposed new economic deal is inspired by the 1977 "Pacts of Moncloa" – named for the presidential palace in Madrid – to transform the state-run economy along market lines for the post-Franco democratic era.

It seeks to unite political parties, unions, companies and regions behind a common economic reconstruction policy and state welfare funding as Spain, like other western nations, piles billions of euros into aid and stimulus.



"I propose a great pact for the economic and social reconstruction of Spain, for all the political forces who want to lend their shoulder to take part," said Sanchez, a Socialist who leads a leftist coalition government after a series of inconclusive elections.

Extension of a state of emergency likely, keeping most people at home until April 26

The leader of the main opposition People's Party, Pablo Casado, said Sanchez did not have sufficient moral authority. "The appeal for a pact doesn't seem sincere," he told parliament.

However, his party would support an extension of the state of emergency,

Casado added.

The prime minister said measures to curb the COVID-19 disease – some of the toughest in Europe – have helped save many lives and slashed the proportional daily increase in new infections to 4 per cent from 22 per cent.

"All Europe arrived late but Spain acted earlier," he said, referring to the restrictions imposed in mid-March.

During the debate, deputy speaker Ana Pastor, recently discharged after being diagnosed with the COVID-19 disease caused by the coronavirus, wore a mask when it was her turn to lead the session.

Despite the expected extension of the lockdown, the government plans to ease restrictions for companies after shutting down all non-essential businesses nearly two weeks ago. Lifting measures would be gradual and dependent on health data, Sanchez said.

"We are starting to see the end of this long road to the new normal," he said, while warning that normality could not be complete until a vaccine was found against the coronavirus.

Spain's government is irked by European Union (EU) foot-dragging over how to unite efforts for financial recovery, with more fiscally-frugal northern nations like German and the Netherlands reluctant to inflate debt too much.

"I say it without nuances, our union is in danger," Sanchez said, ahead of another meeting of EU finance ministers to debate the issue. – Reuters

Virus cases in Russia surge past 10,000 after record daily rise

MOSCOW: Russia on Thursday reported a record one-day rise in cases of novel coronavirus, pushing the official tally to more than 10,000, a day after President Vladimir Putin said the coming weeks would prove decisive in the fight against the virus.

The number of cases jumped by 1,459 and 13 more people died, the national coronavirus crisis response centre said on its website. That brings the overall death toll to 76.

Moscow, the worst-affected region, and many other regions are in their second week of a partial lockdown. Residents have been told to stay at home unless they need to make essential trips to buy food or access urgent medical care.

Russia recorded far fewer cases of the new coronavirus than many Western European countries in

the early outbreak stages. But the number of cases began to rise sharply this month and the virus has now spread well beyond Moscow, the epicentre.

Russian officials until late last month were saying that the situation was under control and that there was no epidemic. Their tone changed however after Moscow's mayor, Sergei Sobyanin, who has taken a prominent role in the crisis, cast doubt on the veracity of official figures and said the real situation was much worse than it looked. Putin, 67, has told Russia's regional governors to tailor their response measures to meet local needs. Some anti-Kremlin politicians have criticised him for taking what they say has been too low profile a role in the battle to contain and slow the spread of the virus.

– Reuters

'Indian court order for free virus testing may hinder fight'

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 credit.

"Humanitarian in intent but impractical to implement – I fear testing will plummet," Shaw said on twitter on Thursday about the court judgement.

"These are small businesses they're providing testing at cost and not profiteering. 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 poor could not afford a test for the virus



that is quickly spreading through the country.

It said the issue of reimbursing these laboratories for running the hundreds of thousands of 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

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

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 460 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.

– Reuters

Africa's conservationists brace for the worst

NAIROBI/JOHANNESBURG: The orphaned baby elephants ambled in for their morning feed at Kenya's Sheldrick Wildlife Trust (SWT), but the hundreds of visitors who would normally be waiting to watch them were absent. So were their dollars.

As airports and borders closed last month to stop the spread of the novel coronavirus, Africa's wildlife tourism sector evaporated, along with revenues many conservation projects rely on to protect some of the continent's most endangered animals. "This is going to have huge economic ramifications – not only months ahead, perhaps years," said Kirsty Smith, SWT's donor relations manager. "It's uncertain territory, and we are worried".

Across Africa, wildlife reserves, conservancies and parks are halting infrastructure projects and cutting salaries as they struggle through a

AS AIRPORTS AND BORDERS CLOSED LAST MONTH TO STOP THE SPREAD OF THE NOVEL CORONAVIRUS, AFRICA'S WILDLIFE TOURISM SECTOR EVAPORATED, ALONG WITH REVENUES MANY CONSERVATION PROJECTS RELY ON TO PROTECT SOME OF THE CONTINENT'S MOST ENDANGERED ANIMALS

crisis that is hitting tourist destinations particularly hard.

Some 70 million tourists visited Africa last year, according to the United Nations World Tourism



Organization, many of them enticed by the prospect of a safari, game drive or high-dollar hunting adventure.

Kenya alone earned \$1.6 billion from tourism last year, money that

supports a sprawling hospitality industry as well as conservation and anti-poaching efforts.

The Sheldrick Wildlife Trust runs 13 anti-poaching teams and five

mobile veterinary teams, carrying out aerial surveillance and ground patrols to protect elephants and rhinos.

Those activities rely on online donations and the 500-Kenyan-shilling (\$4.71) fee that up to 500 visitors pay daily to enter the elephant orphanage in the capital, Nairobi.

But the orphanage closed its doors to visitors on March 15, after the country recorded its first case of COVID-19.

Ol Pejeta, another Kenyan conservancy, expects to lose around 70 per cent of its anticipated business this year. "That's about \$3 million, for us. That's being optimistic", its Managing Director, Richard Vigne, told Reuters. "This is income that's directly for conservation efforts".

To cope, Ol Pejeta – a sanctuary for the critically endangered black rhino – is slashing staff wages, reducing fuel

usage and parking vehicles. "We will operate on the barebones", Vigne said.

In eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, Virunga National Park has struggled in the face of rebel groups and, for the past two years, an Ebola epidemic to build a tourism business that now accounts for 40 per cent of its revenues. "Tourism, in spite of all the setbacks, has actually been a great success for Virunga", park director Emmanuel de Merode said.

The park is home to around a third of the world's surviving mountain gorillas. But the areas they inhabit were sealed off in late February – to rangers as well as to visitors – in an effort to protect the animals from COVID-19, which they may be able to contract.

That month, an off-season month at Virunga, the park took in around \$280,000 from tourism. That revenue stream is now gone. – Reuters



Biden-Trump showdown looms as Sanders ends bid

Leftist US Senator Bernie Sanders suspended his presidential campaign on 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 shook 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 2020 bid.

He raised astonishing amounts of money from record numbers of donors, becoming the frontrunner early this year and earning the most votes in the first three state-wide contests.

But he was eclipsed by a surging Biden, who won the vast majority of remaining primaries and now holds a commanding lead in the all-important race for delegates who choose the nominee.

Sanders brought his liberal ideological platform — including a call for universal health care and a \$15 hourly minimum wage — into the mainstream.

“Together we have transformed

Joe Biden, the feisty 78-year-old democratic socialist, shook up the 2020 race with his relentless pursuit of “economic justice” for all Americans and a demand for universal health care

American consciousness as to what kind of nation we can become, and have taken this country a major step forward in the never-ending struggle for economic justice,” Sanders said.

Several lawmakers have come out in support of his policies, and Biden has shifted leftward to incorporate some Sanders positions, although he does not

support Sanders’s Medicare for All plan.

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 supporters 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.

“I hope you will join us. You are more than welcome. You’re needed.”

Trump made his own pitch for Sanders’s 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, TRADE!” Trump said.

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 unwinable 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



The Ansar Allah fighters have not yet commented on the unilateral ceasefire by the Saudi-led coalition. – AFP file photo

‘Coronavirus truce’ in Yemen war begins

The Saudi-led coalition began a unilateral ceasefire in Yemen’s long war on Thursday, saying it hoped the initiative to prevent coronavirus in the impoverished country would lead to a wider political solution.

The Ansar Allah fighters have not made any comment on the coalition’s declaration of a two-week pause in the five-year conflict that took effect from 0900 GMT. If the ceasefire does hold, it would be the first breakthrough since the warring parties agreed to a UN-brokered ceasefire in the port city of Hodeida during talks in Sweden in late 2018.

The United Arab Emirates, a key ally in the coalition which drew down its troops last year as the conflict became increasingly intractable, applauded the Saudi move as “wise and responsible”.

“Hope the Ansar Allah rises to the occasion. The COVID-19 crisis eclipses everything — the international community must step up efforts & work together to protect the Yemeni people,” UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash tweeted.

“It is an important decision that must be built on, on both humanitarian and political levels,” he added.

The conciliatory gesture follows an escalation in fighting between the warring parties despite a call by the United Nations for an immediate cessation to protect civilians in the Arab world’s poorest nation from the pandemic.

Saudi Arabia, which launched its military intervention to support Yemen’s internationally recognised government in March 2015, said on Wednesday that the truce, which could be extended, could pave the way for a wider political solution.

Officials indicated they are keen for

If the ceasefire does hold, it would be the first breakthrough since the warring parties agreed to a UN-brokered ceasefire in the port city of Hodeida during talks in Sweden in late 2018

a UN-sponsored face-to-face meeting with the rebels to achieve a permanent ceasefire.

But hours before the announcement, the Ansar Allah fighters released a comprehensive document that called for a withdrawal of foreign troops and the end of the coalition’s blockade on Yemen’s land, sea and air ports.

They also demanded that the coalition pay government salaries for the next decade, and hand over compensation for the rebuilding of the country including homes destroyed in airstrikes.

‘UTMOST URGENCY’

UN special envoy Martin Griffiths welcomed the truce, calling on the parties to “cease immediately all hostilities with the utmost urgency”.

The ceasefire comes as Saudi Arabia, reeling from plunging oil prices, seeks to extricate itself from the costly conflict that has killed tens of thousands of Yemeni people and triggered what the UN calls the world’s worst humanitarian crisis.

Saudi deputy defence minister Prince Khalid bin Salman on Wednesday called on the Ansar Allah

fighters to “show goodwill” by seriously engaging in dialogue. “The two-week ceasefire will hopefully create a more effective climate to deescalate tensions, work with (Griffiths) towards a sustainable political settlement,” Prince Khalid said on Twitter.

Yemen’s broken healthcare system has so far recorded no cases of the COVID-19 illness, but aid groups have warned that when it does hit, the impact will be catastrophic.

Saudi Arabia, the Yemeni government and the Ansar Allah fighters had all welcomed an appeal from UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres for an “immediate global ceasefire” to help avert disaster for vulnerable people in conflict zones.

“It is most important to watch if the Ansar Allah fighters will stop their military operations,” said Fatima Abo Alasrar, a scholar at the Middle East Institute. “That will be the real litmus test of a successful ceasefire as the Ansar Allah fighters have currently opened multiple battlefronts they cannot afford to close.”

Fighting recently escalated again between the Ansar Allah and Riyadh-backed Yemen government troops around the strategic northern provinces of Al Jouf and Marib, ending a months-long lull.

And Saudi air defences intercepted Yemeni rebel missiles over Riyadh and the border city of Jizan late last month, leaving two civilians wounded in the curfew-locked capital, state media reported.

It was the first major assault on Saudi Arabia since the Ansar Allah fighters offered last September to halt attacks on the kingdom after devastating missile and drone strikes on Saudi oil installations. — AFP

India’s poor hit hardest by virus lockdown

With his rickshaw sitting idle outside his one-room shack, Sailesh Kumar is one of the hundreds of millions of poor Indians hit the hardest by the world’s biggest coronavirus lockdown.

His family of six are stuck in their slum home outside New Delhi earning nothing and waiting desperately for money promised by the government.

Like an estimated 100 million others, Kumar is a migrant worker. He left his home village in Bihar, India’s poorest state, seven years ago “for a better life” and “good education” for his kids.

Before India’s 21-day lockdown began on March 25, the 38-year-old earned — on a good day — the equivalent of \$4 a day cycling his rickshaw, while his wife cooked and cleaned as a domestic worker.

Now with all activity except essential services halted in the country of 1.3 billion people, Kumar can’t work, and his wife’s employers wouldn’t even let her in the building.

“They feel she will give them this disease,” he said.

Their home in the city of Ghaziabad on the outskirts of the capital is one of dozens of single-room structures in rows with shared toilets and no running water.

It is among the many potential coronavirus breeding grounds that have experts alarmed.

“We store water in buckets for drinking and cooking. We can’t waste it to wash (our) hands every time,” Kumar shrugged.

The situation is similarly grim for Ram Kumar Gautam, hundreds of kilometres away in the Mumbai neighbourhood of Dharavi, India’s biggest slum.

The 30-year-old left his home in the northern city of Lucknow when he was just 17.

Until the lockdown, he used to send his family as much as he could from the \$9 daily wage he earned in a factory making aluminium foil.

“How will I send money home or pay back loans? The future looks scary,” he said.

Gautam said he would have starved but for the generosity of his employer, who was looking after him and other stranded employees.

‘BETTER TO STARVE’

The fear of going hungry sparked an exodus by hundreds of thousands of migrant workers and their families back to their villages last month, many on foot. Some perished on the way.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) said this week that 400 million Indians working in the informal economy risk falling deeper into poverty during the crisis.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s government has announced direct cash transfers and food subsidies to help some 800 million people. —AFP

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US GDP will contract 30 per cent in Q2



A woman counts US dollar bills at an exchange house in Manila, Philippines. — Reuters

NEW YORK: The forced closure of businesses across the United States and surge in unemployment due to the coronavirus pandemic will force US growth to contract by 30 per cent in the second quarter and 5 per cent overall in 2020, Pacific Investment Management Co (PIMCO) wrote in a blog.

In a blog post, Tiffany Wilding, a North American economist at PIMCO, wrote that evidence from recent jobs reports suggests the unemployment rate may rise as high as 20 per cent.

The 30 per cent contraction in growth in the second quarter would likely be followed by two quarters of recovery, Wilding wrote. While two quarters of contraction is shorter than the four recorded in the 2008 financial crisis, the depth of the shock is far greater - quarterly contractions did not rise above 8 per cent during that time.

California-based PIMCO is one of the world's largest investment firms with \$1.91 trillion assets under management as of December 31 2019.

"The speed and magnitude of the US labour market disruption has been sharper than any we've seen in recent history, suggesting that the decline in overall activity has also likely been much more severe," wrote Wilding.

In spite of the already enormous spate of layoffs, the number of jobs lost is likely to continue to rise as more states close non-essential businesses. The figures are also expected to rise as unemployment offices work through a backlog of claims. Wilding notes that the government's March employment report showed that layoffs had begun earlier than suggested by weekly unemployment data, and were spread across industries, including health care, which PIMCO had expected to remain resilient. — Reuters

Automakers push to reopen plants with testing and lots of masks



Employees work on the production line of a new medical device called OxyGEN, a respirator to be sent to hospitals, during the COVID-19 outbreak, at the SEAT car factory of Martorell, near Barcelona, Spain. —Reuters

MILAN: Global automakers reeling from the COVID-19 pandemic are accelerating efforts to restart factories from Wuhan to Maranello to Michigan, using safety protocols developed for China and US ventilator production operations launched in recent weeks.

Certain safety measures differ from manufacturer to manufacturer. Italian sports car maker Ferrari NV said on Wednesday it would offer voluntary blood tests to employees who wanted to know if they had been exposed to the virus.

General Motors Co's head of workplace safety, Jim Glynn, said on Wednesday GM is not persuaded blood tests are useful. But Glynn said GM has studied and adapted measures taken by Amazon.com Inc to protect warehouse workers, such as temperature screening to catch employees with fevers before they enter the workplace.

Auto manufacturers and suppliers are converging on a consensus that temperature screening, daily health questionnaires, assembly lines redesigned to keep workers 3 to 6 feet (0.9 m to 1.8 m) apart, and lots and lots of masks and gloves can enable large-scale factories to operate safely.

"We know the protocols to keep people safe," Gerald Johnson, GM's executive vice president for global manufacturing, said in an interview. GM has relaunched vehicle plants in China and kept factories running in South Korea, he said.

GM has not said when it will reopen assembly plants in the United States.

Other automakers are putting dates out in public, even though health officials and federal and state policymakers are wary of lifting lockdowns too soon.

"You see vehicle manufacturers ... putting a stake in the ground," said Brian Collie, head of Boston Consulting Group's automotive practice. By setting a public date to restart production, they

Fiat Chrysler (FCA) and unions are discussing plans for beefed-up health measures at Italian plants to pave the way for production to restart as soon as the government eases a national lockdown due to expire on April 13, unions said on Wednesday.

Among the proposals from Fiat Chrysler's Italian unions: move meals to

three companies to plan ahead over the implementation of CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) safety standards and using all available technologies to protect all UAW members, their families and the public."

Among the union's concerns is that members who report being ill can take time away from work without penalty, Gamble added.

The UAW has supported GM and Ford Motor Co's (F) efforts to launch production of ventilators in US plants — operations that have allowed the companies and the union to road-test safety measures at small scale.

At GM's ventilator assembly plant in Kokomo, Indiana, workers and managers have been fine-tuning details such as when employees are handed masks, and when they step in front of a temperature screening device.

At first, ventilator assemblers in training at Kokomo walked down a hall before getting a mask, said Debby Hollis, one of the UAW-represented workers. Last week, she said,

"They met us at the door and had us get in the masks there."

The time workers spend putting on extra protective gear, the time spent doing extra cleaning, and spreading workers out on assembly lines designed to have one vehicle roll off the end every 60 seconds could undercut productivity.

"If we can protect employees we can get work done," said Johnson, the GM manufacturing chief. "The magnitude of the incremental cost is irrelevant. Costs will be managed." —Reuters

The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown the global auto industry into the worst tailspin since the 2008-2009 financial crisis. Consumer demand for vehicles has collapsed as governments have enforced lockdowns in China, and then in Europe and the United States.

signal suppliers to get ready to ramp up, he said.

The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown the global auto industry into the worst tailspin since the 2008-2009 financial crisis. Consumer demand for vehicles has collapsed as governments have enforced lockdowns in China, and then in Europe and the United States.

For the Detroit automakers and their suppliers, the shutdown of profitable truck and sport utility vehicle plants in North America has choked off cash flow.

In Europe, major automakers have said they hope to begin building vehicles again in mid-to-late April. In the United States, several big automakers, including Fiat Chrysler Automobiles NV, Honda Motor Co Ltd and Toyota Motor Corp, are aiming to restart production during the first week of May.

the end of shifts, allowing employees to choose to avoid canteens, eat their food elsewhere and leave half an hour earlier without losing pay.

In the United States, some non-union automakers have also said they hope to restart vehicle plants as soon as next week.

Tire maker Bridgestone said on Wednesday it plans to restart US production on April 13.

But the Trump administration has said people should continue to practice social distancing until April 30.

For the Detroit automakers, the United Auto Workers union will play a key role in deciding when and how plants will restart.

UAW President Rory Gamble said in a statement on Wednesday the union is in "deep discussions with all

Oil prices rise on hopes Opec+ will agree supply cuts



An oil pump jack works at sunset near Midland, Texas, US. — Reuters

TO BOOST PRICES, THE MEETING WILL NEED TO BE MORE SUCCESSFUL THAN THE OPEC+ GATHERING IN MARCH, WHEN IT FAILED TO AGREE TO EXTEND MUCH SMALLER SUPPLY CUTS, RESULTING IN SAUDI ARABIA AND RUSSIA PLEDGING TO FLOOD THE MARKET WITH CHEAP OIL.

LONDON: Oil prices rose on Thursday on expectations the world's leading crude producers will overcome obstacles at a meeting later in the day that have so far prevented a deal to cut output in response to a collapse in global demand.

Brent crude futures were up 3.7 per cent, or \$1.22, at \$34.06 a barrel as of 0902 GMT after hitting a high of \$34.08 early in the session.

US West Texas Intermediate crude futures were up 4.8 per cent, or \$1.2, at \$26.29 a barrel, after earlier hitting a session high of \$26.67 a barrel.

The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (Opec) and allies including Russia — a group known as Opec+ — are set to hold a video conference on Thursday at

about 1400 GMT.

Hopes of a deal to cut 10 million to 15 million barrels per day (bpd) rose after reports that Russia was ready to reduce its output by 1.6 million bpd and Algeria's energy minister said he expected a fruitful meeting.

Such a sizable reduction would be far bigger than any Opec has agreed before but Russia has insisted it will only reduce output if the United States joins the deal.

To boost prices, the meeting will need to be more successful than the Opec+ gathering in March, when it failed to agree to extend much smaller supply cuts, resulting in Saudi Arabia and Russia pledging to flood the market with cheap oil.

US President Donald Trump said

on Wednesday that US oil producers were already cutting production and warned that he had many options if Saudi Arabia and Russia failed to reach a deal.

The reference baseline for any cuts was also still unclear.

Following the Opec+ meeting, energy ministers from the Group of 20 major economies are set to meet.

However, with oil prices having halved since the start of the year and global oil demand forecast to slide as much as 30 per cent, some analysts remain sceptical about how effective an Opec+ cut would be in shoring up prices. "Ultimately, the size of the demand shock is simply too large for a coordinated supply cut," Goldman Sachs said in a note. —Reuters



Virus lockdown threatens \$60 bn in UK dividends

LONDON: UK-listed companies could cancel about \$60 billion in dividend payments this year following Britain's lockdown and calls from regulators to preserve cash during the coronavirus crisis, according to a report by analytics company Link Group.

As Britain battles to curb the spread of virus, the report published on Thursday showed that a record 41 per cent of dividend payouts by the country's listed companies were under threat if the situation worsens.

Link Group, which provides shareholder management services as well as analytics, said it based its UK Dividend Monitor findings on publicly available data from companies listed on Britain's main stock market, and consensus analyst forecasts.

Companies had already announced a staggering 23.8 billion pounds (\$29.5 billion) of dividend cuts and delays by April 5, it said, warning that a "UK recession is already underway, but duration and severity are unknowable at this stage".

British banks led the way as top lenders scrapped or postponed 13.6 billion pounds in planned payouts after the Bank of England asked them to



People look out onto the Canary Wharf district as they walk through Greenwich Park in London, Britain. – Reuters

halt dividends, while also encouraging them not to pay executive bonuses.

Barclays, HSBC, Lloyds Banking Group, Royal Bank of Scotland, Standard Chartered and the British

arm of Spain's Santander all put their payouts on ice in a coordinated industry response earlier this month.

The next largest batch of potentially frozen dividends came from the

mining sector, led by heavyweight Glencore, which deferred to August a decision on its proposed \$2.6 billion payout for this year while it weighed the impact of the COVID-19

pandemic on its business and on the economy.

The total amount of investor payouts being scrapped this year could nearly double, as an additional

COMPANIES HAD ALREADY ANNOUNCED A STAGGERING 23.8 BILLION POUNDS (\$29.5 BILLION) OF DIVIDEND CUTS AND DELAYS BY APRIL 5, IT SAID, WARNING THAT A 'UK RECESSION IS ALREADY UNDERWAY, BUT DURATION AND SEVERITY ARE UNKNOWABLE AT THIS STAGE'.

23.9 billion pound worth of dividends could be at risk, Link said adding that half of the amount could come from an oil sector hit by a price war between the world's top oil producers Saudi Arabia and Russia.

But much of that could depend on a meeting on Thursday, when the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries and its allies led by Russia, the group known as OPEC+, will discuss a potential big output cut to shore up crude prices that have also been hammered by the coronavirus pandemic. — Reuters

Nissan Motor seeks \$4.6 billion credit line

TOKYO: Nissan Motor Co Ltd has requested a \$4.6 billion commitment line from major lenders to cushion the impact of the coronavirus pandemic while it seeks to engineer a desperately needed turnaround, people with knowledge of the matter said.

As the virus decimates car demand and disrupts production across the industry, Nissan is particularly vulnerable, still reeling from sharp drops in profits after decades of aggressive expansion as well as management chaos due to the scandal surrounding ousted leader Carlos Ghosn.

Nissan is requesting the 500 billion yen in funding given the possibility the impact of the coronavirus on production and demand could continue for an extended period, one of the people said.

The amount has not been finalised, the second person said. The sources declined to be identified as they were not authorised to speak to the media.

A Nissan spokeswoman said the company had enough cash for its current business operations but the automaker was looking at various options to prepare for a possible crisis. She declined to



Nissan Motor's logo is pictured at its headquarters in Yokohama, Japan. – Reuters

comment further.

Nissan's new CEO Makoto Uchida has been tasked with delivering an aggressive recovery plan next month after the automaker's board deemed an earlier plan by his predecessor to cut 10 per cent of the company's global work force as insufficient to ensure the company's survival.

Financial strains have been increasing.

In February, Nissan posted its first quarterly net loss in nearly a decade, and for the year ended March operating profit is expected to plunge 85 per cent to 49 billion yen (\$450 million), according to a Refinitiv Smart Estimate.

That would be the lowest amount since a loss posted in the year ended March 2009 during the global financial crisis. — Reuters

UBS and Credit Suisse bow to regulator pressure on dividends

ZURICH: Swiss banks UBS and Credit Suisse will postpone paying out part of their 2019 dividends until later this year after mounting pressure from authorities over lenders' payouts during the coronavirus epidemic.

The move follows bank dividend cancellations or postponements across much of Europe as regulators have heaped pressure on lenders to conserve profits and capital in order to assist the economy.

The two banks were the remaining major European lenders to resist requests to change their dividend policy. But they stopped short of steps taken by British and euro zone banks who have either suspended or canceled all their 2019 payouts.

Switzerland's two biggest banks said their strong capital and liquidity positions would have allowed them to support the Swiss economy and their clients in the crisis while also paying out their dividends, but were bowing to requests from Swiss financial markets watchdog FINMA.

"Our financial strength well above regulatory requirements and prudent risk management allow us to deliver on our current capital returns policy," UBS Chairman Axel Weber said in a statement. "Nevertheless, at FINMA's request, we have adjusted the 2019 dividend payout proposal given the high and unprecedented uncertainty."



Workers are seen in scaffolding in front of Credit Suisse building in Zurich. – AFP

The regulator had warned banks not to pay out dividends in order to conserve capital to lend to companies during an economic downturn caused by coronavirus restrictions. It toughened its stance last week by blocking upcoming dividend payments from capital relief measures.

"We believe that this response to FINMA's request, in alignment with the similar decisions made by our peers, is a prudent and responsible step," Credit Suisse said.

Both Credit Suisse and UBS are participating in a Swiss government emergency loan scheme to support businesses hit by the pandemic. UBS said it had already provided 2.1 billion

Swiss francs (\$2.2 billion) in liquidity to more than 16,000 mostly small- and medium-sized companies.

UBS also offered a sweetener to investors, saying it expected on April 28 to report a rise in first-quarter net profit to around \$1.5 billion from \$1.1 billion a year ago. Credit Suisse confirmed upbeat trading updates given last month.

UBS said it intended to pay out its dividend of \$0.73 in two installments, half of it as a regular dividend and the rest as a special dividend — to be separately approved by shareholders on November 19 — after the publication of its third-quarter results. — Reuters

Toyota extends plant shutdown; stops paying 5,000 workers

WASHINGTON: Toyota Motor Corp said it plans to reopen its North American auto plants on May 4, extending its current shutdown by two additional weeks.

The Japanese automaker cited the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and decline in vehicle demand to extend the halt of production at all of its automobile and components plants in Canada, Mexico and the United States.

Toyota will not furlough its direct employees, but has asked its hourly plant employees to take two days out of the 10 day extension as paid time off or they can go without pay if they don't have accrued leave.

For Toyota's 5,000 workers provided by outside agencies, Toyota is releasing those workers back to their agencies. Toyota will continue to pay the benefits of those workers for the time being, and they may be eligible for unemployment.

On Tuesday, Honda Motor Co and Nissan Motor Co on Tuesday said they had furloughed thousands of workers at their US operations as the coronavirus pandemic slashes demand for cars in the country.

A spokesman for Honda, which employs about 18,400 workers at plants in Alabama, Indiana and Ohio, said the Japanese automaker would guarantee salaries through Sunday, having suspended operations on March 23. The plants will be closed through May 1.

Nissan said it was temporarily laying off about 10,000 US hourly workers effective April 6. It has suspended operations at its US manufacturing facilities through late April due to the impact of the outbreak.

Automakers are facing a dramatic drop in sales in the United States, the world's second-largest car market, after some states barred dealers from selling new cars while "stay-at-home" orders are in place. — Reuters

Norwegian Air seeks \$4.3 bn debt-for-equity deal

OSLO: Norwegian Air plans to convert up to \$4.3 billion of its debt into equity and to issue new shares as it seeks to stay in business following the COVID-19 outbreak that has grounded almost all of its fleet, the budget carrier said.

The move would allow the airline to tap government guarantees of up to 3 billion Norwegian crowns (\$292m), which are dependent on the company reducing its ratio of debt to equity.

Growing rapidly in the last decade to become Europe's third-largest low-cost airline and the biggest foreign carrier serving New York and other major US cities, Norwegian had accumulated debts and liabilities of close to \$8 billion by the end of 2019.

On March 16, the company announced temporary layoffs of 7,300 employees, about 90 per cent of its workforce, and the following day called on Norway's government for

help, saying it needed cash "within weeks, not months".

"The proposed measures are necessary in securing the next tranches of the Norwegian government state guarantee programme," Chief Executive Jacob Schram said in a statement on Wednesday, announcing the measures on the eve of Norway's Easter break.

"They are also necessary for the future of the company by strengthening the company's balance sheet," added Schram, who joined the airline only last year, adding work had begun on building the future "New Norwegian".

The company must convince its creditors to agree to the plan before it is put to a shareholders' vote on May 4.

If approved, Norwegian would convert part or all of its bonds worth 5.68 billion crowns into shares as well as leasing debt of up to 38.82 billion



A Norwegian Air plane is refuelled at Oslo Gardermoen airport, Norway. – Reuters

crowns, the company said.

It would also aim to raise at least 300 million crowns of fresh cash by selling new shares, with the aim of

reaching a total of 400 million to meet government terms for its aid.

Those deals are far in excess of the company's market capitalisation of 1.4

billion crowns and will significantly dilute existing equity.

Asset manager Sissener AS, which holds bonds in Norwegian with a nominal value of \$5 million, but also shorted some stock, said creditors may have few options but to accept the proposal.

Seizing the underlying assets would make little sense in the current situation, the fund's founding partner Jan Petter Sissener told Reuters.

"One of the bonds has a hangar as security, who needs a hangar today? And the others, with security in slots at Gatwick, they don't have much value today either," Sissener said.

On the other hand, foreign creditors may not see it the same way, he added.

"It's the American bond holders that are calling the shots and they may have a different agenda, I don't know how they will react." — Reuters



OMAN FUTSAL TEAM USES 'ZOOM' APPLICATION FOR FITNESS TRAINING

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, APRIL 9

Oman futsal national team took the opportunity of the postponement of AFC Asian Futsal Championship in Turkmenistan to August through conducting home training sessions. The Sultanate futsal team's fitness coach, Ricardo Silva, is leading the home training practices through "Zoom" video application.

The Portuguese coach, Ricardo Silva, said the preparatory plan for the team includes many camps and friendly matches but due to the current situation of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic the whole programme changed.

"Since three weeks ago, we started on

sharing some strength activity videos to all players. Then, we decided to shift to online and live training session with presence of all the team players through "Zoom" video application. We have completed until now four training sessions and will continue until we are back to normal situation. Currently, our focus is more on general strength and aerobic capacity," the fitness coach of national futsal and beach soccer teams.

Commenting on the interaction, the fitness coach said: "I would like to thank the players for their commitment and discipline to perform the training sessions. Our target is keep maintaining the top physical level and minimising the effect dropping of the level. Developing the strength and endurance skills is another objective which is also



working on it," fitness coach ended.

Coach Ricardo Silva joined Oman Football Association (OFA) since 2011. He worked for all the national teams as he started with National Teams (U22, U19 and U16). He was in charge of the fitness activities for the first National Team for five years and currently he is working with Beach Soccer and Futsal National Teams.

The Portuguese coach is holder of Sports Science Degree. He is postgraduate in Rehabilitation in Sports Medicine and in Sports Psychology.

The national futsal team had secured their spot at the AFC Futsal Championship in Turkmenistan in 2020.

Oman booked their direct qualification after edging the UAE 5-1 in the West Zone

play-off in Bahrain in December 2019.

The AFC Futsal Championship official draw clubbed Oman in Group A besides hosts Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Vietnam.

Japan, one of the favourites, are clubbed in Group B alongside Lebanon, Kyrgyz Republic and Kuwait. Group C comprised four-time runners-up Uzbekistan, Indonesia, Bahrain and China PR.

Iran, title holders of the last edition, were grouped in Group D alongside Korea Republic, Saudi Arabia and Thailand. The upcoming edition of the Asian Futsal Championship will be the final stage of Fifa Futsal World Cup qualifying.

The top five teams at the AFC Asian Futsal Championship will represent the continent at the Fifa Futsal World Cup Lithuania 2020.

Southampton first Premier League club to defer players' wages



LONDON: Southampton on Thursday became the first Premier League club to announce their players will defer several months of their salaries during the coronavirus pandemic.

The club's directors as well as manager Ralph Hasenhuttl and his staff will also adopt the measure until June.

The Premier League has called on players to take a 30-percent pay cut across all clubs but the players' union has argued that that would have a negative impact on tax contributions to Britain's health service.

Players have launched their own initiative to contribute funds to the health service on a voluntary basis.

Southampton said that in addition to the players deferring wages for



April, May and June, the club will also not use the government's furlough scheme during that time.

In a statement, it said all club staff not deferring their salaries will "continue to receive 100% of their pay".

Southampton, who were seven points above the relegation places when the season was suspended, said the players' wage deferrals will "help protect the future of the club, the staff that work within it and the community we serve".

The decision of Premier League

leaders Liverpool and last year's beaten Champions League finalists Tottenham to furlough staff and use the government scheme was met with an angry response in Britain, although Liverpool quickly reversed their decision.

Newcastle, Bournemouth and Norwich, and many clubs lower down the English leagues have all said they will apply for the government funds.

More than 7,000 people have died in Britain during the pandemic and Prime Minister Boris Johnson is in intensive care.

— AFP

Dybala too good for Bale in charity video game clash

MADRID: Paulo Dybala left Gareth Bale out of his Real Madrid starting line-up but had no trouble beating the Welshman's Manchester City side in a FIFA 20 video game as part of a Combat Corona fundraiser for UNICEF at the weekend.

Juventus striker Dybala only recently recovered from the coronavirus himself but was in good spirits and proved too good for the Real winger at the console on Sunday.

"I think it's a quick retirement back out of Fifa for me to be honest... all it takes is one moment and my defence wasn't good enough," Bale, who is the co-owner of esports organisation Ellevens Esports, said.

With the coronavirus pandemic bringing soccer across the globe to a standstill, the world of esports has helped keep players and fans entertained.

"It's just about people staying home and finding things to do... obviously everybody is going to find it difficult at different points (to self isolate) but if we can stay in and keep everyone safe, it'll save lives," Bale added.

"Everyone try your best to stay at home and keep yourself entertained."

Other top players such as Luke Shaw, Dominic Calvert-Lewin, Jordan Pickford and Ruben Loftus-Cheek



were also part of the event, which was broadcast live on Twitch and raised around £17,000 (\$20,791) through online donations.

Dybala, who won the game with a quick-fire brace from the Karim Benzema avatar and another goal from the virtual Eden Hazard, said

the rematch would be in video game version of another sport close to Bale's heart.

"It will be on the golf course," said the Argentine, who admitted he had never played the sport in the real world.

— Reuters

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BEIJING: 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 sportswear 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 property.

The landmark ruling, made late last month, prohibits the Fujian-based Qiaodan Sports from using the Chinese translation of Jordan's name, Qiao 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 continue using its logo of a silhouetted basketball player – which has similarities with the “Jumpman” logo used by Nike to promote its “Air Jordan” line of sports shoes.

However the Supreme Court referred the case over the use of the logo for retrial by the State Intellectual Property Office.

In 2016, Jordan won the right to his name in Chinese characters, but the Supreme Court upheld the firm's right to use its trademark “Qiaodan” in Romanised English.

Qiaodan Sports said in a Weibo statement on Tuesday that the ruling “would not impact



the normal use of [its] existing trademarks, nor would it affect normal business operations.”

Founded in 2000, the sportswear franchise operates more than 5,700 stores nationwide.

It has also applied for nearly 200 similarly named trademarks including different Chinese spellings of “Qiaodan”, “Flying Power” and “Qiaodan King”, according to the verdict.

In 2017, the sportswear brand New Balance was awarded \$1.5 million in copyright damages by a Chinese court over its famous “N” logo, which was illegally copied by a local sports shoe firm.

The verdict – a rare victory for a Western brand in a Chinese intellectual property infringement case – was announced shortly after US President Donald Trump launched a sweeping investigation into China's record on intellectual property.

The UN said this week that China became the world leader in international patent filings last year, unseating the United States which had held the top spot for more than four decades. – AFP

NBA Legend Michael Jordan wins long-running China trademark dispute

