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STEPS TO STABILISE VEGETABLE PRICES, SUPPLY: MINISTRY



P6

APPLE'S FACTORIES ARE RUNNING, BUT SUPPLIERS WARY ABOUT IPHONE DEMAND



P12

EX-LIGA WINGER DONS WHITE COAT TO TAKE ON CORONAVIRUS



OMAN

255 Omanis stuck in Amman airlifted

MUSCAT: As many as 255 Omanis comprising students, tourists and business people were airlifted from Jordan in two special planes on Saturday. “We are safe and happy to be back to our soil on Saturday, March 28,” Dr Talib al Balushi, acclaimed Omani actor, who was in Jordan since first week of March as part of the cast and crew of an Indian film, told the *Observer* from the hotel on the banks of the Dead Sea where he was kept in home quarantine. The citizens who were airlifted included students pursuing their higher studies, tourists and those who went for business trips to Jordan earlier this month.

SEE P3

WEATHER TODAY

MUSCAT

MAX: 30°C
MIN: 21°C

SALALAH

MAX: 29°C
MIN: 24°C

NIZWA

MAX: 29°C
MIN: 19°C

SUNRISE 06.02 AM

PRAYER TIMINGS

FAJR: 04:46

DHUHR: 12:17

ASR: 15:44

MAGHRIB: 18:26

ISHA: 19:37



COVID-19 CASES TOP 150 IN SULTANATE

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 28

The Governorate of Muscat continued to top the list with 108 cases even as the total number of patients infected with COVID-19 reached 152 in the Sultanate on Saturday.

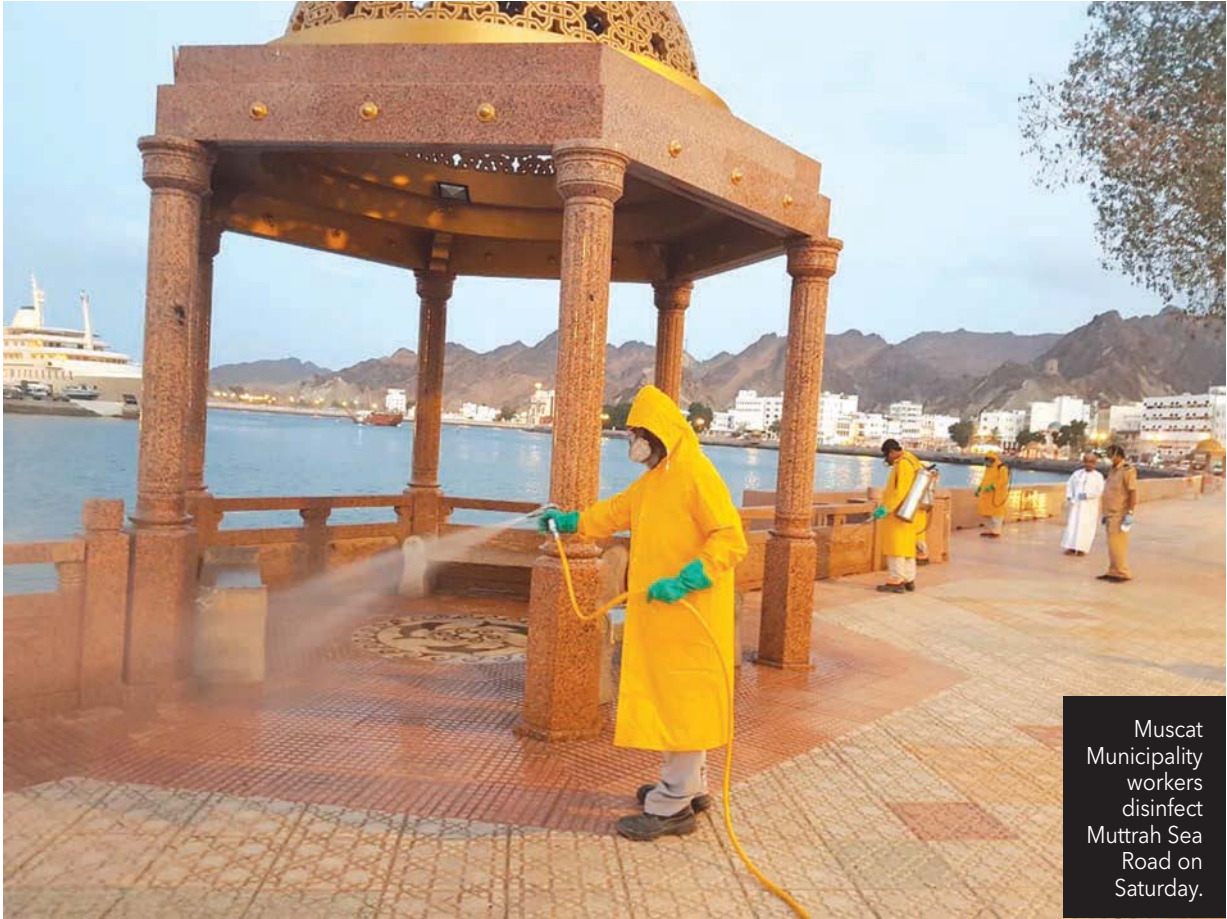
According to a statement from the Ministry of Health, Buraimi recorded the first case on Saturday.

“Out of the total 21 cases reported on Saturday, eight new cases are linked with having close contact with coronavirus patients while eight cases are related to travel”, the statement said.

Muscat was followed by Dakhiliyah and North Batinah with 13 cases each, South Batinah 8, Dhofar 6 and South Sharqiyah 1 case.

At the same time, 23 patients who were treated with the symptoms of COVID-19 have fully recovered, the statement added.

To combat and contain the spread of the virus, Muscat Municipality has launched a campaign to sterilise and disinfect the streets and roads in the capital. “The campaign is part of our efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19 and limit its impact on our health system,” the municipality said in its twitter handle.



Muscat Municipality workers disinfect Muttrah Sea Road on Saturday.

Earlier, the municipality in a statement urged restaurants in the city to roll out new measures to ensure the

health and safety of their customers. “Restaurants should maintain required physical distance between

customers, do not allow crowds to gather at the counter instead encourage cashless or contactless payment, drive-

thru and take home delivery services” it said.

In a similar decision the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries has decided to close the fish markets in the governorates of North Al Batinah, South Al Batinah, South Sharqiyah from March 28 until further notice as a precautionary measure to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

Meanwhile, in accordance with the decisions by the Supreme Committee, all domestic and international flights will be suspended to and from all airports in Oman from noon on March 29.

In a statement, Oman Airports said, “Services to Musandam and cargo services are exempted from noon of March 29, until further notice”.

Meanwhile, the Omani Cultural Attaché in Washington said on Saturday arrangements have been made to facilitate the travel of Omanis stranded in different parts of the US back to the Sultanate.

“Those registered with the consulate will be able to travel on Monday, March 30. They will be provided with their domestic and international tickets within the coming hours,” he said, calling on everyone to be ready to travel.

Europe’s virus toll surges but Wuhan cautiously reopens

ROME: The death toll from the coronavirus epidemic in Europe surged past 20,000 on Saturday, even as the Chinese city where the outbreak began cautiously returned to life.

Europe and the United States are facing a staggering increase in new cases of COVID-19 — despite perhaps a third of humanity now living under lockdown.

The grim new death numbers were reported after the IMF confirmed the world economy has plunged into a historic slump and the US invoked wartime procurement powers.

On Monday, Russia will become the latest country to “restrict traffic” across its borders in an attempt to slow the pandemic’s spread, according to a decree on the

government website.

More than 600,000 cases of the novel coronavirus have been officially recorded around the world since the outbreak began, according to an AFP tally.

Variations in testing regimes mean the true number is likely far higher, and confirmed deaths are mounting.

Europe is now the worst-hit continent with 20,059 deaths from 337,632 reported cases. The COVID-19 disease has killed 9,134 in Italy and 5,690 in Spain.

France has seen close to 2,000 fatalities while the British toll passed 1,000 on Saturday.

Elsewhere, Iran announced 139 more deaths and India sealed off a dozen Punjab villages that had been visited by a guru now known to be infected and a possible “super-

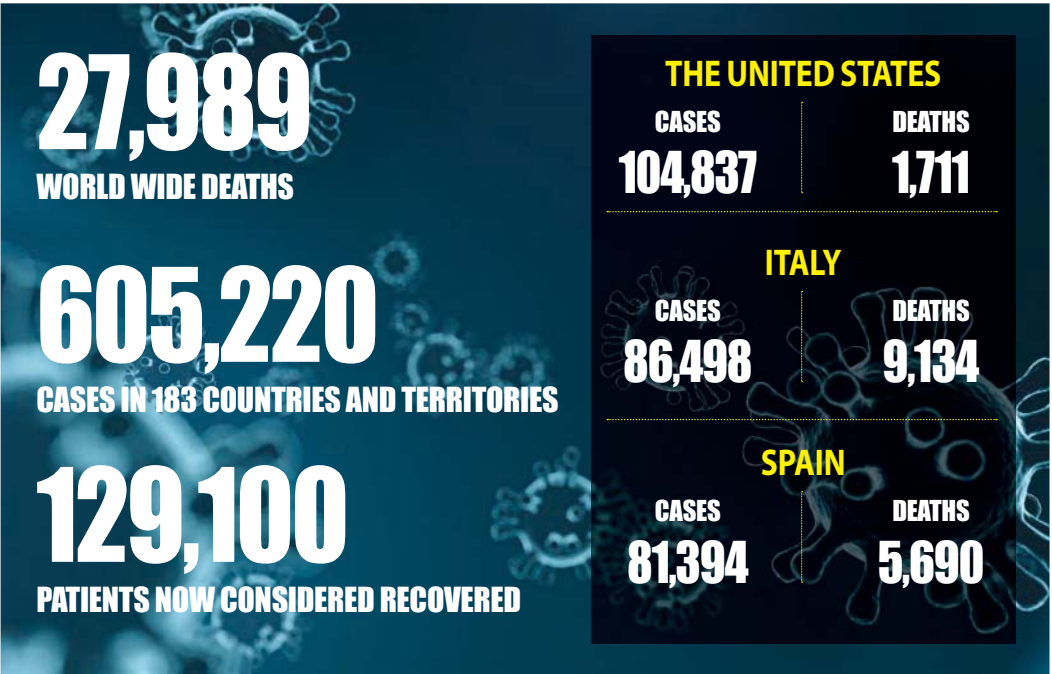
spreader”. And, in South Africa, Johannesburg police resorted to rubber bullets to enforce social distancing on a crowd queueing for supplies outside a downtown supermarket during a national lockdown.

The United States now has the world’s highest number of COVID-19 cases but per capita European nations are still the worst hit, with emergency services across the world struggling to cope.

However, two months of almost total isolation appear to have paid off in China’s Wuhan, where the virus first emerged, which partially reopened.

Since January, residents have been forbidden to leave, with roadblocks installed and millions subjected to dramatic restrictions on their daily life.

— AFP





STEPS TO STABILISE VEGETABLE PRICES, SUPPLY: MINISTRY

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 28

The Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (MoAF) said it is closely monitoring the functioning of wholesale markets, especially the Central Vegetable and Fruits Market in Mawaleh in the wake of COVID-19 crisis.

A senior official from the ministry said that onion has been imported from several countries such as Yemen, India, the Netherlands and also in a small amount from Spain.

He added, "Most agricultural products are available in the market and shipments would be coming to the Sultanate next week, which will help maintain stability with regards to supply and prices".

He said, "During this period, the markets witnessed a slight rise in some prices of products — Turkish and Egyptian lemons rose by about 100 baisas, the price of potatoes increased by 20 baisas.

The price of onion reached 500 baisas per kilo due to the increased



demand for it as shoppers purchasing in large quantities. But there has been a shipment of 26 consignments (1,200 tonnes) from India and Yemen.

“
Most agricultural products are available in the Central Vegetable and Fruits Market in Mawaleh and shipments would be coming to the Sultanate next week, which will help maintain stability with regards to supply and prices

OFFICIAL
Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries

He stressed that all local fruits and vegetables are available and at reasonable prices, and the availability of imported products often depends on the situation in the country of origin such as curfews, closure of land, air and maritime borders, and difficulty in finding shipping and transportation lines from the exporting country.

MoAF is in constant coordination with the relevant authorities such as the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, and Customs at the Royal Oman Police (ROP) and merchants through the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Oman Agricultural Society and the Public Authority for Consumer Protection and Municipality of Muscat, to ensure the provision of products during the coming period.

The ministry called on the visitors and wholesalers at the Central Market for Vegetables and Fruits to adhere to the preventive instructions at the individual and collective levels in accordance with the decisions of the Supreme Committee.

Fish market in Seeb closed down



MUSCAT: The Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries on Saturday closed down the fish market in the Wilayat of Seeb as part of ongoing efforts to stem the spread of the coronavirus disease.

The ministry is closely monitoring the commercial activities at the wholesale markets, particularly Al Mawaleh Central Market for Fruits and Vegetables to ensure the presence of sufficient quantities of agricultural products.

Oman Airports issues statement on stranded Bahrain-bound passengers

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 28

Oman Airports has issued a statement on the issue of travellers bound for Bahrain stranded at Muscat International Airport after their reservations were cancelled.

Passengers have finally reached Manama at the time of writing.

Oman Airports said that the Bahrain-bound passengers were stopped despite meeting all the conditions for the onward journey and their presence at the departure gate before the time to close the gate. These violated international travel regulations.

Oman Airports said that the Royal Oman Police, the Public Authority for Civil Aviation and other competent agencies were trying to find alternative solutions and provide all the necessary care to them as is the case with similar cases.

Oman Airports in touch with the concerned embassy in Muscat to inform them of the refusal of the aforementioned aviation and involve them in the search for the optimal



solution to this matter.

The company indicated that it had communicated — as in similar cases — with the carrier that brought passengers to the airport where the travel regulations stipulated that the carrier be obliged to return the travellers to their destination, which was offset by a complete refusal by the travellers to travel on the flight designated by the carrier who brought them to the airport in accordance with the aforementioned regulations.

The company added that it had succeeded, in coordination with the Embassy of the Kingdom of Bahrain in the Sultanate, in allocating a plane that would take them to Bahrain International Airport.

The Ambassador of the Kingdom of Bahrain to the Sultanate had previously confirmed the success of efforts to resolve the issue of Bahraini citizens stranded at Muscat International Airport since yesterday.

SULTANATE OF OMAN
MINISTRY OF HEALTH

ANNOUNCEMENT

The Ministry of Health invites specialized companies to participate in the following Tenders: -

Tender Ref.	Description	Last date for Collection of tender Document	Closing Time/ Day/ Date	Eligibility	Tender Fee (Non-Refundable)
44/2020	Provision of Fire & Safety Services for the Royal Hospital	02/April /2020	Before 08 am on Wednesday 22/April/2020	Specialized Companies registered with Tender Board	R.O. 25/= Per set
45/2020	Supply of Surgical Items (Open Heart) for The Royal Hospital	02/April /2020	Before 08 am on Wednesday 29/April/2020	Specialized Companies registered with Tender Board	R.O. 25/= Per set

- All Specialized and interested Companies registered with Tender Board on the above mentioned Grade may obtain Tender documents from the E. Tendering website: <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om> against non-refundable payment as mentioned above for each set of document.
- Tenders should be submitted on line on the given website signed and sealed. The Tenderer should enclose scan copy of Bank Guarantee or a certified Cheque issued by a Local bank for not less than One percent (1%) for the Tender value validity for (90) days from the Tender Submission date, addressed to The Chairman of the Tender Committee before one day of date submission.
- The Original Bank Guarantee should be submitted to the office of Director of Purchase and Tenders one day before the submission date for all Tenders.
- Ministry is not bound to accept the lowest tender and reserves the right to accepts or reject any tender.

(<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>)
Any Clarification, you may contact via
Telephone: 24166670
Email id etenderhd@ita.gov.om

CPHL tests over 5,000 samples for COVID-19

VOLUNTEERS JOIN: CPHL director says, 'We now have several people coming from different sections to assist in the Virology section'

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
MUSCAT, MARCH 28

Volunteers from different establishments have come forward to join the Central Public Health Laboratories (CPHL) to keep up with the growing number of test samples for COVID-19.

"We started preparing for this in January 2020 for the diagnosis of COVID-19. We purchased all the testing kits and facilities and started training people to activate our contingency plan. We now have several people coming from different sections to assist in the Virology section," said Dr Amina al Jardani, Director of the CPHL.

The team has extended working hours up to 14 hours a day. "We have been lucky because we have also had support from other establishments to fight this pandemic. So we have volunteers from other centres such as National Genetics Centre, Al Nahdha Hospital, Royal Hospital, Petroleum Development and other institutions in the Muscat Governorate.

With their enthusiasm, hard work and commitment from the team we have been able to work smoothly even though the samples to be tested for COVID-19 have been increasing but the team has been consistent to maintain the turnaround time and the quality of the tests so that the medical



and surveillance team can take steps accordingly," she explained.

Since the beginning of the outbreak of the pandemic the CPHL has tested more than 5,000 samples.

Adal al Barwani from Petroleum Development Oman has joined the workforce and he works from 12 noon

to 8 pm, "I am from PDO Medical Clinic and I work at the lab. We support each other in a crisis like this and my request to everyone out there is — 'Stay at home for us, because we are here for you.'" Rajesh Kumar, Molecular Bacteriologist at the CPHL, said it is important for the people to

stay at home.

Ashwak al Maimani, is from the National Genetics Centre. "My colleagues have come as volunteers. We receive the samples and conduct the extraction in addition to documentation of Coronavirus cases. We have two shifts morning and night".

CPHL Director Dr Amina called upon people to adhere to the measures taken by the Ministry of Health and the authorities to contain this virus. "I want to call upon everyone to be part of this responsibility and practise their responsibility and commitment by adhering to the infection control measures like hand and respiratory hygiene, in addition to quarantine and isolation. Everyone must adhere to this because this is the only way out of it. Without this collaboration from all the sectors and every individual in the country we will not be able to control the outbreak".

Dr Hannan al Kindy Head of Virology Department said, "First of all I want to thank everyone who is staying home and following the advice that has been given to them. And I hope everybody does the same so the number of cases will go down".

"I would like to say we are here for you and we care about your health. Please stay home for us," said Dr Samira al Mahrouqi, Molecular Biologist at the Virology Department.

The CPHL is national laboratory for diagnosis and viral infection, bacterial infections and other rare viruses. It is also the referral lab for tuberculosis and food poisoning outbreaks. The CPHL also has specific labs for malaria, toxicology, biochemistry as well as for quality and risk management.

It caters to the needs of many of the healthcare establishments in the Sultanate and with the COVID-19 pandemic the CPHL receives all the samples for diagnosis purposes.

"For diagnosis we receive the samples of nasopharyngeal swab (NP) and throat swab collected from different institutions for those cases that are meeting the concerned definitions of coronavirus. Once we receive the samples, we run a test called PCR (Polymerase Chain Reaction) for the detection of the virus and then we release these results to the medical team and the surveillance department to take appropriate measures for treatment in addition to support the infection control for the public health," said Dr Amina.

Daily reports go to the aforementioned departments as the CPHL is part of the National Team for the Preparedness and Response to this outbreak, which is why the CPHL is represented in the Main Task Force. Their daily meetings with epidemiologists and surveillance section is in addition to being part of establishing guidelines on how to deal with cases such as what the nation is going through currently. These guidelines go through case definitions, the measures to be taken for containment, information control etc.

255 Omanis stuck in Amman airlifted

KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, MARCH 28

As many as 255 Omanis comprising students, tourists and business people were airlifted from Jordan in two special planes on Saturday.

"We are safe and happy to be back in our homeland," Dr Talib al Balushi, acclaimed Omani actor, who was in Jordan since first week of March as part of the cast and crew of an Indian film, told the *Observer* from the hotel on the banks of the Dead Sea where he was kept in home quarantine.

The citizens who were airlifted

included students pursuing their higher studies, tourists and those who went for business trips to Jordan earlier this month.

This special flights were arranged on an understanding between the two governments to airlift the citizens earlier.

Dr Talib, was to share screen space in Amman with renowned actor Prithviraj Sukumaran in 'Aadujeevitham' (Goat Days), an adaptation by celebrated novel in the same name by Benjamin and directed by Blessy.

There were reports that the cast and crew were in danger after

COVID-19 cases were reported in Jordan.

Dr Talib had not joined the shooting schedule in Wadi Rum but he was kept in the hotel just as the local health authorities imposed two weeks home quarantine for all inbound passengers. Dr Al Balushi, Rekabi, other actors from the UAE and a translator were put on observation along with many other guests in the hotel.

"We are thankful to the Omani government and authorities of both Oman and Jordan for having facilitated our speedy transfer to the Sultanate", Dr Talib said.

Expats join hands in fight against virus

KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, MARCH 28

Residents in the Sultanate joined hands to fight the situation emerged out of the spread of coronavirus by contributing to the COVID-19 fund.

People from various walks of life are taking part in the national move to contain the deadly virus and ensure the health and well-being of citizens and residents.

"This (donating to the fund) is an opportunity for the expatriates like me to join the national cause and give back to the country that gave me a lot," an expat worker living in Muscat told the *Observer*.

"We take pride in being part of the support as we are collecting funds among our friends and colleagues to support the fight against COVID-19," said another expat doing business in Muttrah Souq.

There has been an overwhelming response to the fund ever since it was announced for public as anyone can contribute to the following accounts:

Bank Muscat (0423057947840019)

Notice

March 28, 2020

وزارة الصحة

سلطنة عمان

The Ministry of Health would like to announce the bank accounts

Numbers allocated to deposit donations for supporting the fight

against Corona virus 2019 (COVID-19) as follows:

Bank Muscat

acc. No. 0423057947840019

Bank Dhofar

acc. No. 01041388677001

National Bank of Oman

acc. No. 10840319012001

Oman Arab Bank

acc. No. 3160500500500

Sohar International

acc. No. 005020063531

1212 / 24441999

مركز الاتصال بوزارة الصحة

OmanHealth

OmaniMOH

www.moh.gov.om

BankDhofar (01041388677001) Oman Arab Bank (3160500500500)
National Bank of Oman Sohar International
(10840319012001) (005020063531).

DISINFECTING STREETS

Muscat Municipality has launched a campaign to disinfect streets and roads in the capital as part of precautionary measures to contain the spread of COVID-19.

New slogan for earth hour

SAMUEL KUTTY
MUSCAT, MARCH 28

The Sultanate, represented by the Ministry of Environment and Climate Affairs, will celebrate the Earth Hour with the rest of the world, this year under the slogan — raise your voice to nature — by turning off unnecessary lights.

"The world this year faces exceptional circumstances", the ministry said in a statement, inviting everyone in Oman to celebrate the hour from their homes by turning off the lights at 8:30 pm.

The Earth Hour Organising Team recommended that all individuals participate in the celebration digitally this year.

The celebration aims to educate society about the importance of

THE EARTH HOUR
ORGANISING TEAM
RECOMMENDED THAT
ALL INDIVIDUALS
PARTICIPATE IN THE
CELEBRATION
DIGITALLY THIS YEAR

participating in national efforts to confront global warming and the resulting climate changes, which are among the biggest global challenges at the present time facing the planet for several decades.

"The decision also aims to enhance the positive behaviour of members of society in order to

protect the planet from the negative effects of greenhouse gas emissions from human activities", the statement said.

This is in addition to enhancing awareness and culture among members of the society of the importance of rationalizing the use of traditional energy sources and expanding the use of different renewable energies in the sectors of comprehensive development, it said.

"We should preserve those sources and other environmental resources while providing services for both current and future generations", it said, adding, "we should encourage government agencies, private sector companies, individuals and civil society organisations to contribute to mitigating greenhouse gas emissions".



Virus is trying to change my life... dammit!



RAY PETERSEN
petersen_ray@hotmail.com

I guess I'm no different to anyone else, in that I've done my research on coronavirus, COVID-19, the Novel Corona Virus, whatever it's called, and to be quite honest, I'm more confused today than I was those few weeks ago.

Like everybody else, I was making light of its prospect of harming me and my family. If a colleague coughed or sneezed, I would look over the top of my glasses, raise an eyebrow, like Tom Selleck, and with an accent like a comical Mexican 'bandito' in a bad western movie would say "Coroooooooonna?" with a question mark, and we would both laugh it off! Well, we're not laughing now, are we?

I'm not sure though, how seriously some people are taking it. More question marks emerged, a bit more seriously, in my mind, after I went to renew the insurance on my little green Kia Picanto, the one I use to go backwards and forwards to work each day that runs on the smell of an oily rag, and cost more to insure for the next twelve months, than

it has cost me for petrol for all of the last twelve months. The annual trip to the ROP testing station is its longest journey!

The insurance salesman/agent, said "45 Rials Sir, and that includes UAE insurance". I didn't have the heart to turn down the UAE coverage, but really Kermit (that's what I call the little green toad-like machine), would have a coronary if I asked him to go that far after only clocking a thousand kilometres over a whole year, his fitness would be about as good as mine.

I did the insurance thing, and the system was 'down' so I went home, and three days later, I guess the system was 'up' so they WhatsApped a copy of my policy to me.

"I'll just go online," said I to myself, "and re-register for another year". But duh! Of course, the testing stations are closed aren't they, so I can't get my little Kermit re-registered till they open again. Uncertain whether I could use Kermit until he has been tested, I asked online, and a nice gentleman by the name of

If a colleague coughed or sneezed, I would look over the top of my glasses, raise an eyebrow, like Tom Selleck, and with an accent like a comical Mexican 'bandito' in a bad western movie would say "Coroooooooonna?" with a question mark, and we would both laugh it off! Well, we're not laughing now, are we?

Sekhar Vandavasi told me I can drive up to thirty days without any problem, so I hope he's right.

Anyway, the thing is you see, when I went to the insurance office, I wore my mask and gloves (as you would, I thought), but I could tell that I terrified all the people there.

Honestly, the looks on their faces were like, "You've got the virus, you stay away from me!" They didn't appear to understand that I was more terrified of them, with one of them coughing and spluttering the whole time I was there, none with masks or gloves, demonstrating no health awareness, and 'social distancing' a concept as foreign as the Arctic circle. I can understand confusion and fear, I'm in that very same boat, but not stupidity!

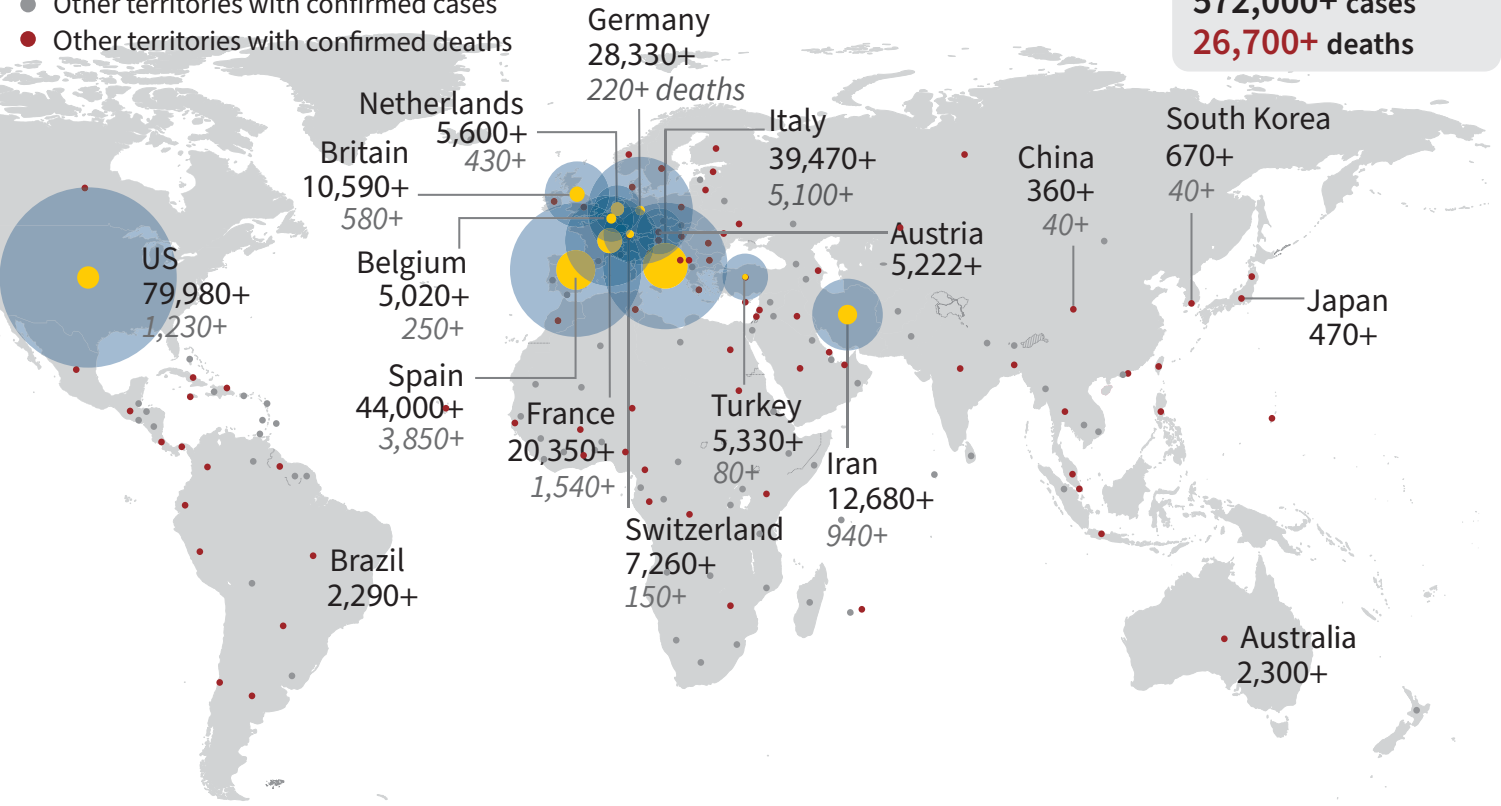
My wife Lena, has been brilliant, researching what foods to eat, what to drink, and how to minimise our exposure to the virus. Consequently, I have already put on a few kilos, and working from home certainly makes 'snacking' easier, but we had a proper laugh last night. After a trip to the pharmacy, she came and sat down next to me and said, "My dear, you aren't getting enough Vitamin C, so twice a day you take this tablet, and you'll be fine!" Now I always do what I'm told, and as far as medicines go, it doesn't matter what pills or remedies Lena gives me, I just take them. I don't think she's going to poison me now! This massive big pill lay in my hand for a few seconds, and then I thought, "okay, down the hatch," and commenced chewing on it, it was bitter-ish, tarty, and kept sort of exploding/expanding in my mouth, and I just had to keep chewing and swallowing until it all went down. It was a most excruciating experience.

Then, I picked up the long skinny tube with still another ten days of these tablets to go, and read the directions: 'Dissolve one tablet in a 200ml glass of water for a refreshing drink'. We do live and learn, don't we?

Keep safe, keep your distances, and keep well all of you, God bless.

One week of new COVID-19 cases

- More than 5,000 new cases March 21 - 27
- More than 80 deaths March 21 - 27
- Other territories with confirmed cases
- Other territories with confirmed deaths



© AFP

Moscow mayor comes to fore as 'PM for coronavirus'

ANNA MALPAS

A televised meeting with Vladimir Putin, Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin flatly told the President that official figures on COVID-19 cases were far from the reality.

That's because people are staying home sick and because there has not been enough testing, he said on Tuesday, so "no one knows the real picture". After that reality check, the official narrative changed swiftly: Putin, who had called the situation "under control", on Wednesday gave a grim-faced address to the nation. "Putin signed up to Sobyenin's position," opposition politician Vladimir Ryzhkov said on the popular Echo of Moscow radio station. Sobyenin, mayor since 2010 of the capital of 12 million people, comes across as dour and uncharismatic in public appearances.

Yet the 61-year-old Siberian has become a frontline figure in the coronavirus crisis as head of a task force for the entire country.

He announced stricter measures for Muscovites while Putin held back from a nationwide lockdown. On Tuesday, Sobyenin ordered shops except those selling food and essentials to close in Moscow along with restaurants, cafes and parks. He also recommended that Russians from other regions not visit the capital. And he has ordered the construction of a huge virus hospital outside Moscow that he says will be completed in weeks. Moscow, a hub for international flights, has seen the most confirmed Russian cases by far, and Sobyenin's role is crucial in managing the epidemic. Putin's evident trust in the mayor has given him a high-profile role despite his lack of flair with the public.

"Sobyenin's task now is to be at the cutting edge of the main problem — the coronavirus. That shows he is trusted by the president," said Konstantin Kalachev, who heads the Political Expert Group think-tank. Sobyenin led Putin's presidential administration for five years, a key backstage role. As mayor he has transformed Moscow's crumbling streets and parks into gleaming, hipster-oriented urban spaces. But he is far from universally popular. For example, he pushed through a vast and controversial resettlement programme of residents from Soviet-era blocks into enormous towers. "The role of 'prime minister for the coronavirus' is natural for Sobyenin," said Andrei Kolesnikov of Carnegie Center.

Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin is in charge of executing policy, but the former tax chief has only had a few months in the job.

Moscow confirmed its first COVID-19 case on March 2. It now has declared three deaths and 703 cases, more than half of the national tally of 1,036. "He and Putin are working as a united team and measures are taken jointly," said Carnegie Center analyst Kolesnikov.

"It's leadership by a team, but Putin has the last word". — AFP

Epidemic infects Europe with 'germ of division'

DAVE CLARK & FRANÇOISE MICHEL

The European Union has faced and survived a series of existential threats over the years but the coronavirus epidemic has exposed old wounds that could yet prove fatal.

A debt crisis in Mediterranean countries, a series of refugee influxes and the ongoing saga on Brexit all rattled the European project but did not sink it. They may, however, have left it vulnerable to a new disease.

"The germ is back," former European Commission president and one of the modern union's chief architects, Jacques Delors, said.

"The climate that seems to hang over the heads of state and government and the lack of European solidarity pose a mortal danger to the European Union," he warned. Certainly, Europe is the continent worst hit by the novel coronavirus epidemic that arrived from China, with around 18,000 deaths.

But EU member states also have some of the most advanced public health infrastructure in the world and a 27-member common project that should help them weather the storm.

The president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, has begged national capitals to show solidarity, but the crisis has only underlined existing divisions.

Italy, Spain and France — the hardest hit countries so far, with cases spreading fast — are pushing for Europe to find a way to better share the financial burden. But the Netherlands

A debt crisis in Mediterranean countries, a series of refugee influxes and the ongoing saga on Brexit all rattled the European project but did not sink it. They may, however, have left it vulnerable to a new disease

and Germany are sceptical, fearing their big-spending southern neighbours will exploit the crisis to push for a pooling of eurozone government debts. So-called "coronabonds" would, in the view of more frugal northern economies, be a back door to "eurobonds" that could undermine the stability of the single currency. They do not want southern countries to benefit from cheaper interest rates unless they can be made to play by the austere public spending rules, just like the north.

Regardless of the economics of the dilemma, the row has revealed a bitter split among member capitals, and strong language is being thrown around in public.

Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte said he and German Chancellor Angela Merkel had "not just a disagreement but a hard and frank confrontation" during a

videoconference on Thursday.

"If Europe does not rise to this unprecedented challenge, the whole European structure loses its raison d'être to the people," Conte told the *Il Sole 24 Ore* financial newspaper.

The EU has traditionally made its greatest strides forward when France and Germany have worked together, but on the debt issue France is siding with its southern allies.

"We won't overcome this crisis without strong European solidarity, in terms of health and budgets," French President Emmanuel Macron told Italian newspapers.

The Netherlands has made no secret of its opposition to any debt burden sharing, infuriating its partners.

"We are against it, but it's not just us, and I cannot foresee any circumstances in which we would change that position," Dutch premier Mark Rutte said after Thursday's meeting.

Many European leaders have been annoyed by The Hague's position, but Portugal's Prime Minister Antonio Costa was the most outspoken.

"This type of response is completely ignorant and this recurring pettiness completely undermines what makes up the spirit of the European Union," he said.

Even in Germany concerns are growing that this may not be the best time for budgetary dogmatism.

"If we're not prepared now to share our wealth, then I don't know where this Europe is headed," worried former German foreign and finance minister Sigmar Gabriel, in a *Bild* editorial. — AFP

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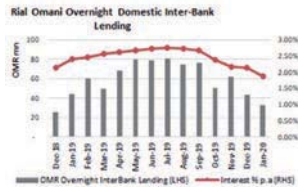
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Coronavirus fears continue to take a toll on MSM Index



MUSCAT: The MSM30 Index closed the week down by 0.80 per cent while MSM total return index was up 1.91 per cent during the week. Ex-dividend trades and continued fears of an increase in coronavirus cases were the major reason behind the decline.

Financial Index closed down by 1.42 per cent w-o-w while Services and Industrial index closed up by 0.12 per cent and 0.84 per cent w-o-w. The MSM Shariah Index closed up by 0.02 per cent w-o-w.

Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA) has announced a temporary allocation of additional frequencies to be used by telecom companies for free. TRA urged telecom companies to provide incentivised offers to enable the subscribers to make the most of telecom services during this exceptional period. The move is also aimed to streamline remote work for various sectors without affecting network performance.

The Capital Market Authority issued guidelines to all insurance companies and brokers to follow a set of preventive measures in line with the decisions made by the Supreme Committee on tackling the spread of the new coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic. The measures, effective from Monday, include the provision of electronic insurance services, activating digital technology and avoid conventional paperwork.

Capital Market Authority has issued circular suspending general meetings of public joint stock companies and investment funds until further notice.

The CMA has also issued circular 4/2020 approving proposed dividends as per the approved agendas that have been sent to shareholders. The circular made it clear that dividend ex-date is the date which has been disclosed in the AGM invitation and affirmed that these dividends must be approved during first possible upcoming AGM.

The RO overnight domestic inter-bank lending rate declined by 27.4 bps to 1.865 per cent in Jan'20, as compared to 2.139 per cent a month ago. It has consistently been falling since the Fed funds rate cut last year and is below 2.415 per cent recorded in Jan'19. The rate has been declining steadily since the highest ever recorded at 2.770 per cent in Jul'19. Furthermore, overnight inter-bank lending amount reached RO 32.9m, down by 25.5 per cent YoY and 24.3 per cent MoM.

Among the listed conventional banks, HSBC Oman (HBMO) has the highest exposure (at 69 per cent of its total gross credit portfolio) to the corporate & commercial sector, as of FY19-end. Within its corporate & commercial exposure, HBMO has the highest exposure to Import Trade and manufacturing. The listed conventional banks' exposure to the services sector is also high, with highest exposure of Sohar International (BKSB) at 15 per cent of its portfolio, followed by Bank Muscat (BKMB) at 9 per cent, NBO and Ahli Bank (ABOB) at 8 per cent each, HBMO at 7 per cent and Bank Dhofar (BKDB) at 6 per cent. Sector exposure is 8 per cent.

[Courtesy: U-Capital]

PRECAUTIONARY STEP

CBO puts accent on digital banking services as safeguard against COVID-19

PANDEMIC PREVENTION MEASURES: APEX BANK URGES USE OF MOBILE, NET BANKING AND ONLINE SERVICES AND AVOID DEALING WITH BANKNOTES

CONRAD PRABHU
MARCH 28

In response to the Central Bank of Oman's (CBO) appeal for banks to discourage the use of banknotes — as a precaution against the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) — local lenders have begun urging their customers to explore an array of online and digital options from their safety of their mobile phones or laptops.

A number of local banks have taken to social media to encourage their customers to use contactless payment options as an alternative to cash in light of COVID-19 related concerns associated with the use of banknotes.

It follows a circular issued by Oman's banking sector regulator last week advising local banks to put the accent on digital channels for consumer and retail payments. "Customers should be encouraged to use mobile / net banking / online services and avoid dealing with banknotes," Tahir Salim al Amri, CBO Executive President, stressed in the memo.

"Banks should restrict the services provided in their branches to only those that are not available through digital / electronic / online channels, with suitable prior notice to the customers," the apex bank stated.

International medical opinion is divided over the likelihood of COVID-19 transmission stemming from the handling of



Banks should take suitable protective measures while handling banknotes / currencies / documents. Banks should inform customers, by various modes, about the availability of services and delivery channels

TAHIR SALIM AL AMRI

Executive President, Central Bank of Oman

COVID-19 MEASURE

Offer remittances services at minimum cost: CBO tells banks

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, MAR 28

The Central Bank of Oman (CBO) has urged all banks in the Sultanate to keep their fees to a minimum when processing requests for remittance services from customers — Omani and expatriate alike.

The advisory to banks comes in the wake of the shuttering of private money exchange networks in the Sultanate as part of measures introduced by the Omani government to curb the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19).

"Banks are advised to keep in view the closure of Money Exchange houses per the directives of the Supreme Committee and accordingly offer remittance services at minimum cost," the apex bank stated in a circular to licensed banks operating in the Sultanate.

Tens of thousands of mainly expat blue-collar workers, who have long been dependent on money exchanges for remitting funds to their native countries, will now have to turn to banks for these services.

The relatively tech-savvy among them, however, have downloaded money-transfer apps that make it possible for them



APEX BANK ALSO WAIVES CHARGES ON POINT-OF-SALE (POS) TRANSACTIONS AND HAS ASKED BANKS NOT TO PASS ON THESE FEES TO CUSTOMERS

to remit funds to their overseas accounts using the direct payment gateways offered by a number of local banks through third-party service providers.

According to figures published by the Central Bank, remittances by expatriate workers totalled RO 3.829 billion in 2018, down from a peak of RO 4.2 billion in 2015. The downtrend is attributable to the current fiscal and economic downturn, as well as an overall decline in the size of the expatriate

population.

Significantly, the Central Bank has also announced a waiver of its charges on Point-of-Sale (POS) transactions and has asked banks not to pass on these fees to customers in turn.

"The Central Bank is waiving the charges levied on POS transactions and accordingly directs banks to waive the charges levied by them for such transactions," the regulator added in its latest circular.

banknotes. Earlier this month, The World Health Organisation (WHO), while acknowledging the infection risk, has stressed that the risk is very low. "The risk of being infected with the new coronavirus by touching coins, banknotes, credit cards and other objects, is very low," it said in a recent statement.

Nevertheless, out of an abundance of caution, the Sultanate's Central Bank has urged local banks to promote digital and contactless alternatives to cash-based payments.

"Banks should take suitable protective measures while handling banknotes / currencies / documents," the Central Bank stressed in its circular.

"Banks should inform customers, by various modes, about the availability of services and delivery channels," the Executive President further noted.

All of Oman's leading conventional and sharia-based Islamic banks have already rolled out a raft of digital and online payment channels that eschew the use of cash. National Bank of Oman (NBO) has urged its customers to substitute cash with its contactless 'Tap and Go' cards when making in-store purchases.

"A range of everyday tasks can be completed through the app and online banking platform, including opening accounts,

paying utility and credit card bills, locating branches and ATMs, applying for products such as the Easy Payment Plan (EPP), and making local and international money transfers," the nation's second largest lender said in a press statement.

Additionally, the Badeel prepaid card, available to both NBO and non-NBO customers, utilises 'Tap and Go' contactless technology, allowing users to carry out day-to-day purchases, online transactions and bill payments at over 5,000 terminals across the Sultanate, it stated.

Bank Nizwa has announced the addition of a number of new features on its e-Wallet application to help users to complete payments electronically.

"The application which is a digital extension to the Bank Nizwa's tailored Islamic solutions allows customers to send or receive instant fund transfers through their mobiles with the use of mobile numbers or nicknames of recipients.

The application can also be used for bill payments, recharge of mobile balances, as well as, card less cash withdrawals from any of the bank's ATMs. Other features for the zero-service charge application include the instant transfer of funds at retail outlets or government entities by scanning the unique QR code," the Islamic bank said in a statement.

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Global oil refiners shutdown as demand plunges

SINGAPORE: The first oil refinery shutdowns in India and Europe were announced on Friday while global refinery runs drop like a stone in response to plunging demand as countries worldwide implement lockdowns.

Italy's API said it would close operations temporarily at its Ancona refinery, which has capacity of 85,000 barrels per day (bpd). In India, top refiners Indian Oil Corp and Mangalore Refinery and Petrochemicals declared force majeure, with MRPL in the process of shutting down its entire plant.

Global fuel demand is set to drop by as much as 15 per cent to 20 per cent in the second quarter after the coronavirus pandemic, which has killed more than 22,000 people, halted most worldwide air travel and prompted the national lockdowns to keep people at home.

The resulting slump in demand for oil products, along with Saudi Arabia and Russia's decisions to increase crude output after last month's collapse of Opec's oil supply pact, is expected to overwhelm refiners as storage capacity dwindles.

A source with knowledge of the matter said that Spain's Repsol would

Global fuel demand is set to drop by as much as 15 per cent to 20 per cent in the second quarter after the coronavirus pandemic halted most worldwide air travel and prompted the national lockdowns to keep people at home

cut runs by about 10 per cent at its complex refineries.

In Asia, home to more than a third of global refining capacity, India's top refiner IOC said in a letter to crude suppliers that it had reduced runs by up to 40 per cent and closed its Panipat naphtha cracker plant because of sliding petrochemicals demand.

Meanwhile, operators in Japan, South Korea and Thailand — already running at reduced rates — are looking at more cuts even as they shut plants for maintenance.



A worker walks atop a tanker wagon to check the freight level at an oil terminal on the outskirts of Kolkata, India. — Reuters

India's Reliance Industries, operator of the world's largest refining complex, has made a rare move to sell prompt crude as it plans to cut output in April. Several US refineries have also cut

production, including plants in the Los Angeles area, a busy hub for air travel, and Exxon's Baytown facility in Texas.

The Baytown plant, Exxon's largest in the United States, is shutting a

gasoline-making unit as US fuel demand tumbles.

Overall products supplied in the United States fell by 2.1 million bpd in the most recent week, representing

close to a 10 per cent drop, while IHS Markit estimates that gasoline demand in the world's biggest oil consumer could drop by nearly half in the coming weeks.

In Europe, some refineries in Britain and Germany have scaled back production, with traders expecting many others to follow as demand falters. ExxonMobil's French subsidiary on Friday said it would adapt production to falling demand.

Independent refiner Phillips 66 said its first quarter refinery utilisation rate was in the low-to-mid-80s range, with many refineries operating near minimum rates.

China is an outlier, having restarted its economy after weeks of lockdown, with its refining sector showing signs of recovery after a decline in the number of new virus cases.

Demand is likely to slump by 18.7 million barrels per day (bpd) globally in April, against a 10.5 million bpd drop in March, Goldman Sachs analysts said. Total annual consumption is expected to drop by 4.25 million bpd from 2019, they added. "Such a collapse in demand will be an unprecedented shock for the global refining system," the analysts said. — Reuters

Apple's factories are running, but suppliers wary about iPhone demand

BEIJING: As China reopens its economy after months of lockdown, Apple Inc's iPhone factories are largely up and running. But with the coronavirus pandemic spreading across the world, the urgent question for the company is how many buyers there will be both for current models and the new slate of phones expected in the fall.

A senior official at one of Apple's major contract assemblers said Apple's orders for the quarter ending in March are likely to drop 18 per cent compared with the previous year. The production ramp-up for new phones that work with next-generation 5G networks has been postponed, this person said, though it is still possible the 5G phones could launch as scheduled in the fall.

"No one is talking about manpower or material shortage (in China) anymore. Now everyone is looking at whether demand from US and Europe could keep up," said the person, who has direct knowledge of the matter. "The focus now is the demand from consumers in the US and Europe."

One of Apple's key display suppliers is preparing for a similar level of contraction, according to a person familiar the matter. The company had anticipated shipping 70 million



People wearing protective masks wait for checking their temperature in an Apple Store, in Shanghai, China. — Reuters

iPhone displays this year, but is now considering lowering that target by more than 17 per cent to 58 million units.

The company is also planning to reduce the workforce at its Apple-designated production lines in its Vietnam factory, where displays are assembled before heading to China to be put into phones, this person said.

Earlier this month, the company closed retail stores around the world even as it began to reopen outlets in China. With much of Europe and the United States on lockdown and

unemployment soaring globally, there is little clarity on when demand might return.

The company could also yet face further supply chain problems as countries including Malaysia and Vietnam impose new restrictions to combat the coronavirus.

"Things are changing on a day by day basis due to supply chain disruptions, so it is difficult to craft any meaningful comment at the moment about both supply and demand," said an official at one supplier in Malaysia. — Reuters

European airlines resist mounting refund claims

PARIS: European airlines waiting in line for coronavirus bailouts want to tap another source of interest-free loans: Their customers.

Cash-strapped carriers are seeking to suspend European Union rules requiring refunds for cancellations and instead issue vouchers to clients left out of pocket as hundreds of thousands of flights are grounded by the pandemic.

Refund claims, if honoured, would be a big additional cash drain on many airlines already in need of government aid to survive a sustained travel slump.

Consumer organisations say some major airlines are already flouting the refund rules and condemn what they describe as an attempt to force consumers to lend them cash.

"We've been absolutely inundated with passengers complaining they can't get a refund from their airlines," Rory Boland of British consumer group Which said.

The European Commission has rejected industry calls to relax the requirement in EU regulations to refund cancellations within a week, but the airlines say they are unable to comply.

"Faced with a cashflow catastrophe, many airlines can only offer vouchers in lieu of immediate cash refunds for cancelled flights," their lobby group Airlines for Europe



An Airbus A321 plane of the French airline Air France is seen on the tarmac at the Marseille-Provence airport in Marignane, France. — Reuters

(A4E) said.

A prolonged shutdown would make about 3.5 billion euros (\$3.90 billion) of Lufthansa revenue eligible for refund in the second quarter, Citi estimates — ahead of the 3 billion euros at British Airways parent IAG or Air France-KLM, 770 million euros at easyJet and 760 million at Ryanair. "Basically, we are trying to push as many vouchers as possible, and not allow for cancellations just to be refunded immediately," Lufthansa's finance chief, Ulrik Svensson, told investors last week.

A spokesman said refunds remain "possible in principle," but not "within the usual time limits." EasyJet and British Airways are among airlines that have made it harder to obtain refunds, by disabling them online and offering only vouchers. — Reuters

Wall Street tumbles as US virus cases pass 100K

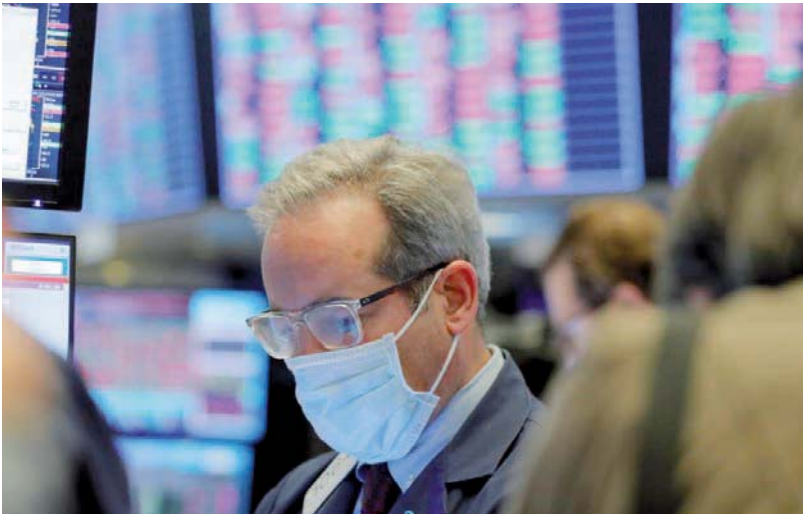
NEW YORK: Wall Street stocks tumbled on Friday, ending a massive three-day surge after doubts about the fate of the US economy resurfaced and the number of coronavirus cases in the country climbed.

US stocks deepened their losses late in the session, even after the House of Representatives approved a \$2.2 trillion aid package — the largest in American history — to help people and companies cope with an economic downturn caused by the coronavirus outbreak and provide hospitals with urgently needed medical supplies.

The United States has surpassed China and Italy as the country with the most coronavirus cases. The number of US cases passed 100,000, and the death toll exceeded 1,500.

"We have still not fully understood the degree of the economic impact," warned Massud Ghaussy, analyst at Nasdaq IR Intelligence in New York.

"Currently, from a policymaker's



A trader wears a mask as he works on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE) in New York. — Reuters

perspective, it's a relative balance between managing the spread of the virus and opening the economy". After the market closed, President Donald Trump signed the stimulus package into law.

The bill, along with unprecedented policy easing by the Federal Reserve, helped the S&P 500 surge 10.2 per cent for the week, its best week since 2009. But the US stock market benchmark is still down about 25 per cent from its

February high.

In its strongest three-day performance since 1931, the Dow surged 21 per cent in three straight days through Thursday, establishing it in a bull market, according to one widely used definition. Even after Friday's drop, the Dow ended 12.8 per cent higher, its best week since 1938.

Many investors see a strong risk the market could fall deeply again as coronavirus infections increase and more people die, however.

"Next week will depend on what happens over the weekend," said Lindsey Bell, Chief Investment Strategist at Ally Invest. "If there is a major acceleration over the weekend of coronavirus cases in New York and other states and the hospital system continues to get jammed up, then I think it will be a rough week for the market." Macroeconomic indicators offered a glimpse of the economic devastation from the crisis as the

lockdown of major cities upends the lives of millions of Americans.

US consumer sentiment dropped to a near 3-1/2-year low in March, according to a survey released on Friday, a day after data showed a record 3 million surge in jobless claims last week.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average slumped 4.06 per cent to end at 21,636.78 points, while the S&P 500 lost 3.37 per cent to 2,541.47.

The Nasdaq Composite dropped 3.79 per cent to 7,502.38.

Volume on US exchanges was 13.4 billion shares, its lowest since March 5, according to Refinitiv data.

Delta Airlines, American Airlines and United Airlines fell between 6 per cent and 11 per cent as US Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin said the help designated for airlines in the aid package was not a bailout and that taxpayers would need to be compensated. — Reuters

DOWNGRADE

Moody's cuts S Africa's credit ratings to junk

JOHANNESBURG: Moody's has downgraded South Africa's credit rating to junk status, piling more anguish on an economy already in recession and battered by Africa's worst coronavirus outbreak.

Two other major international rating agencies Fitch and S&P had cut the credit rating of Africa's most developed economy to subinvestment level in 2017.

Losing its last investment grade rating will see the country being excluded from the FTSE World Government Bond Index (WGBI).

The downgrade late on Friday came as South Africa began a three-week nationwide lockdown to try halt the rapid spread of the novel coronavirus which has infected more than 1,100 people in the country.

"The key driver behind the rating downgrade to Ba1 is the continuing deterioration in fiscal strength and structurally very weak growth," Moody's said.

"The government's own capacity to limit the economic deterioration, in the current shock and more durably is constrained," it said, blaming "unreliable electricity supply, persistent weak business confidence and investment as well as long-standing structural labour market rigidities". The South African government said the decision by Moody's "could not have come at a worse time," adding that it will "further add to the prevailing financial market stress".

South Africa slipped into recession during the final quarter of 2019. In the past five years, South Africa has posted its weakest growth rates — never exceeding 1.3 per cent and in some years falling below one per cent.

"To say we are not concerned and trembling in our boots about what might be in the coming weeks and months is an understatement," said Finance Minister Tito Mboweni. — AFP

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INDIAN male, 23, B Com, with 2 years experience in Accounts and Finance on a family visit, available for immediate joining. Suitable post of accountant, looking for a job. E-mail: aaronfernandes033@gmail.com. Contact ☎79869563.

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What we don't yet know about COVID-19

CHRISTINE SOARES AND
MIKE DOLAN

It has been only three months since reports first emerged from China of an unknown virus causing unusual cases of pneumonia, and scientists and public health experts already know more about it and how it works than at the same point in earlier outbreaks.

But there's still a lot they don't know.

As the new coronavirus continues to spread around the world, here are some of the most important questions researchers and doctors — as well as policymakers and economists — are still trying to answer:

HOW CONTAGIOUS IS THE VIRUS?

The virus spreads from person to person through small droplets from the nose or mouth via coughing or sneezing, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). It can persist on most surfaces up to several days, so in addition to directly inhaling the virus, you can become infected by touching something that has been contaminated and then touching your own nose, mouth or eyes. There is some evidence that virus particles in the faeces of an infected person can transmit the disease through contact, but that remains unconfirmed.

HOW MANY PEOPLE ARE INFECTED, AND HOW MANY DO NOT SHOW ANY SYMPTOMS?

So far, more than 550,000 cases have been reported worldwide, of which more than 127,000 have recovered and more than 24,000 have died. Some researchers estimate that up to 80 per cent of people who are infected show no or only mild symptoms and may not even know they are sick. That would put the number of people who might have been infected in the millions. But we need many more studies and much more testing to close in on a more accurate number.

ARE YOUNGER PEOPLE LESS LIKELY TO DIE FROM THE VIRUS?

Younger people, while less vulnerable, can still develop COVID-19 — the disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus — severe enough to require hospitalisation. Just how much safer they are is still unanswered. The WHO says older people with pre-existing conditions — such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease or asthma, high blood pressure, diabetes and heart disease — appear to develop serious illness more often than others, while a US health official said the mortality rate in males appears to be twice that of women in every age group. Health officials have cautioned that anyone with those underlying conditions, as well as those with weakened immune systems, are at increased risk.

CAN PEOPLE BE RE-INFECTED?

This is a key question — and we don't yet know the answer. There are a handful of cases of possible "reinfection" in recovered patients. But most scientists believe those are more likely to have been relapses. A patient may feel better and test negative for the virus in their nose and throat, while the virus remains elsewhere in their body. Fully recovered patients have antibodies in their blood that should protect them from fresh infection, but we don't know how long those antibodies will last. With some viruses, antibodies fade faster. Even if they do persist, SARS-CoV-2 might undergo small changes over time, as flu viruses do each year, rendering the antibodies ineffective.

Several academic laboratories and medical companies are looking to produce blood tests to figure out who has been exposed to the virus and whether some people have developed immunity. Serological testing will also give a better picture of the full extent of the pandemic.

DO WE KNOW WHEN THERE WILL BE TREATMENTS OR A VACCINE?

No. So far there are no vaccines or antiviral medicines specific to the new coronavirus. Treatment for now focuses on relieving symptoms such as breathing assistance. Companies around

the world are racing to develop vaccines. A few have launched early safety testing in humans, but experts say it could take a year or more to develop and test a vaccine. Another complication: viruses can mutate quickly. Some scientists have already identified subtle changes since SARS-CoV-2 emerged in Wuhan, China, in December. But recent studies show the virus is relatively stable, which suggests vaccines should still be effective when they become available.

DOES THE VIRUS SPREAD MORE SLOWLY IN HOT PLACES?

Some experts had hoped that the onset of summer will naturally slow the virus. But the European Centre for Disease Control said on Wednesday that it is unlikely to diminish its spread. The WHO has also said that the virus can be transmitted in all areas, including hot and humid climates.

HOW LONG WILL THE PANDEMIC LAST?

We don't know. It will depend on a range of factors, from how long people continue to isolate and avoid group gatherings to when effective drugs or a vaccine become available. President Donald Trump said this week that he hopes to "reopen" the US economy by Easter Sunday on April 12. But he has faced criticism that such a timetable is too rushed and could lead to more people dying. In Hubei province, the epicentre of China's coronavirus outbreak, life has started to return to normal after two months of lockdown. It remains to be seen whether such a return to normal spurs another outbreak.

DOES THE AMOUNT OF EXPOSURE TO THE VIRUS DETERMINE HOW SICK SOMEONE GETS?

Viruses enter the body and infect cells, using them as factories to make many millions of copies of themselves, so the number of virus particles that first enter the body has little effect on the eventual amount of virus in the system. At the same time, more frequent exposure does increase the chance that the virus will enter the body in the first place.

WHEN WILL THE ECONOMY RETURN TO NORMAL?

The International Monetary Fund expects the pandemic will cause a global recession in 2020 that could be worse than the one triggered by the 2008 financial crisis. The depth of a recession, how long it will last and the nature of the recovery are a matter of debate. Economists say it will largely depend on how long the lockdowns last — around a quarter of all humanity is currently in lockdown — and how far government support goes in helping individuals, businesses and markets survive the crisis.

ARE THE TRILLIONS OF DOLLARS IN EMERGENCY SPENDING HELPING?

Central bank measures have sought to keep financial markets functioning, including areas that keep the real economy humming, such as the markets where companies go to raise short-term cash to pay staff and where cities go to raise money for roads and schools. Steps taken by governments, such as the \$2 trillion US stimulus package, are expected to further help the economy by putting cash in the hands of individuals and providing additional funding to small businesses and companies. Such measures still need to work through the system, however, and it remains unclear whether they will be enough.

IS IT A GOOD TIME TO INVEST?

Some investors and bank strategists are starting to look at whether people should buy back into the world's stock markets, which have plunged some 25 per cent from their highs in February. US hedge fund manager Bill Ackman said this week he had turned increasingly positive on stocks and credit and was "redeploying our capital in companies we love at bargain prices that are built to withstand this crisis". But with all the uncertainties, many more analysts and investors remain shy about calling the bottom of the market.

— Reuters



From Monteverdi to Modernity

A FITTING TRIBUTE TO SULTAN QABOOS

GEORGINA BENISON

His Majesty the late Sultan Qaboos commissioned the Royal Opera House Muscat which opened in 2011, and especially its huge pipe organ, his favourite instrument, designed by Philip Klais of the Klais Pipe Organ dynasty which built the grand, 500 tonne, 4,500 pipe instrument with its iconic 'Flute Qaboos' stop. It is therefore appropriate that the programme held recently brought together the music which he loved best, and could be listened to 'in memoriam'. It featured some of the biggest names on the world stage and finest pieces ever written for the King of Instruments.

The first half of the concert featured guests, Oxford College Choir with 20 boy sopranos as young as nine-years-old and 12 adults under their Director, Steven Grahl. The youthful English organist, Simon Hogan, opened with Widor's famous 'Toccata' for solo organ. Being familiar, one could focus on the dynamic range of the perform-

ance, from the resonant booming bass pedals throughout the theatre, wooden shutters open, to delicate pianissimo.

It was followed by a troupe of nearly-all male choristers to perform Herbert Howell's delightful 'Hymn for Cecilia'. The refreshingly 20th century musical language was sung in English with clear diction and beautiful blending. The sweet timbre of the boy sopranos soared above the finely balanced choral and organ textures with perfect intonation.

Now unaccompanied in Monteverdi's Italian Madrigals for five voices, 'Ah, Dolente Partita' in close chromatic harmony, the soprano part was exactly high against a lovely male alto quality. 'Quel Augellin, Che Canta' featured a rich, warm tenor solo in florid, interwoven polyphonic writing.

Turning to an English master of both choral and organ composition, Benjamin Britten's, 'Rejoice' provided a substantial masterpiece for Oxford organ scholar, Ben Collier, solos and choir. Rare to hear Britten at ROHM, this allowed the choir to show their broad dynamic possibilities in a similarly 20th century English tonal language. It

The Pipe Organ concert featured some of the biggest names on the world stage and finest pieces ever written for the King of Instruments

was iconic Britten; brilliant choral and fugal writing, a solo boy soprano soaring above the texture in 'Alleluia' over lush organ harmony. A tenor solo sang, recitative style, to chromatic passages from the clarinet stop while the baritone solo was warm and rich over winding organ melodies. Slow, added chords smacked undoubtedly of the Aldeburgh composer as the male altos evoked spine-tingling counter-melodies. The poignantly quiet, controlled ending and softly clashing dissonances resolved in the final 'Alleluia' chorus.

Britten's 'The Evening Primrose' was a return to acapella form, and his arrangement of, 'The Ballad of Green

Broom' heard the folk melody from adult singers while the boys punctuated with light, "Green! Broom!" interjections, providing an amusing note to end on.

Part Two opened with Caesar Franck's highly virtuosic, 'Chorale' for solo organ with Simon Hogan back in the driving seat. He exploited the full breadth of colours from the instrument, from strong, broad sweeps to tender swells of sound using chromatic clarinet and woodwind stops in Franck's Romantic style. There was pin-drop silence in the hall as listeners focused on the rambling Fantasie-structure which concluded in a big splendid chordal finale.

Blessed with a second ensemble of guests, the Orchestra Kolobov Novaya Opera Theatre Moscow took their seats for Francis Poulenc's 'Concerto for Organ, Timpani and Strings' in six sections under renowned conductor, Jan Latham-Koenig. Solo organ opened (Andante), joined with gorgeous use of strings over a strong pulse in the timps (Victor Sych). Poulenc demonstrated how powerful and spiritual the association of organ and orchestra could be in his brilliant writing for the forces, balancing quiet organ sonorities with warm cello themes (Allegro giocoso). Voluminous organ sounds were paired with timpani rolls, while its lighter qualities balanced with the strings. 'Subito Andante Moderato' explored oboe stop and bass fugal entries and imitation between organ, cellos and violins.

The solo organ part was integrated into the string orchestra texture using wind stops over a timpani pulse. A climax, Berlioz Symphonie Fantastique-like, of screaming witches and ghouls melted away, falling in Poulenc's romantic added harmony. The famous finale section was circus-like, a rhythmic wild cre-

scendo of colours before the Largo organ cadenza and solo cello melody (Anna Balan) faded al niente — ending with a sudden crash!

The orchestra, now augmented with winds and harp, performed a breathless romp through Borodin's 'Polovtsian Dances' from 'Prince Igor' with as much power as the mighty organ and an excellent opening from the double-reeds. The main, much loved, Stranger in Paradise theme, from the Cor Anglais (Anton Baltsevich) was given a beautiful, warm interpretation by the superbly tuned strings, though the pounding second theme seemed to be short of a few trombones — it was lost to some parts of the auditorium. No harm; the energetic, vibrant performance rounded off fast and furious what was an ingeniously balanced programme. The demands for an encore were rewarded with Shostakovich's famous 'Waltz', with a wonderful brass section and lovely legato horn playing. His lush, chromatic romantic harmony was atypical Shostakovich and the steady pace was just the perfect ending for what proved to be the ROHM Finale of the season.



DEFOE BACKS GERRARD TO BECOME TOP MANAGER

LONDON: Rangers striker Jermain Defoe believes his boss Steven Gerrard has the personal qualities that will take him all the way to the top in his management career.

At 37 Defoe is nearing the end of a career that has seen the forward work with the likes of managers Harry Redknapp and Sam Allardyce during spells at several clubs, including West Ham, Tottenham, Portsmouth and

Sunderland. Defoe compared Gerrard, in only his second season as a manager, to both Redknapp and Allardyce, adding the former Liverpool and England captain had a similarly acute understanding of players.

"I think he is going to be a top, top manager," Defoe told Talksport radio.

"He is brilliant, he is a natural. In terms of management he is still fresh

and new but you can see that naturally he has got everything.

"He always says to the players that if they want to go and talk to him his door is open. He is approachable which is really important as a manager.

"Sometimes there is things you want to talk about, you might have personal problems but you feel uncomfortable going to the manager but with Steven you can go and talk to

GERRARD'S CAREER IS CURRENTLY ON HOLD WITH THE SCOTTISH PREMIERSHIP, ONE OF SEVERAL LEAGUES THAT HAVE BEEN SUSPENDED IN RESPONSE TO CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK

him about anything. He is chilled.

"He reminds me of Harry (Redknapp) and Sam Allardyce where you can approach them and speak about anything. It is important."

Gerrard's career, in common with much football around the world, is currently on hold with the Scottish Premiership one of several leagues that have been suspended in response to the coronavirus outbreak.

But Defoe, capped 57 times by England, had no complaints about the move given the spread of COVID-19.

"To be honest, there are more important things happening in the world than football," he told TalkSport.

"People are dying every day which is such a sad thing, it puts things into perspective and you think, you know what, football is not important at all at this moment in time."

— AFP

Atletico join Espanyol in requesting player, staff paycuts

MADRID: Atletico Madrid became on Friday the latest La Liga club to request labour authorities to allow them to cut player and staff salaries while football is suspended in Spain due to the coronavirus pandemic.

In a statement, club CEO Miguel Angel Gil said that they were "obliged" to propose a partial unemployment plan "for the employees who, due to the state of emergency in our country, can no longer carry their work".

Atleti are among a raft of clubs set to take a huge financial hit due to the indefinite suspension of football in Spain, one of the countries worst hit by COVID-19.

Gil did not outline by how much salaries would be cut, but confirmed that the measure concerned both players and staff.

Earlier on Friday La Liga's bottom club Espanyol asked labour authorities in Catalonia to allow them to cut

player and staff salaries by 70 per cent.

Espanyol said that the proposed reduction regards players and coaching staff from the men's and women's first teams, Espanyol B and youth teams, and was made "unilaterally for reasons of urgency".

City rivals Barcelona said on Thursday that they were cutting salaries — although they did not specify who would be affected — in order to stave off financial issues, with football in Spain suspended until further notice as the country joins Italy at the epicentre of the coronavirus pandemic

In Germany, players at Bayern Munich and Borussia Dortmund have accepted pay cuts.

The clubs' move to cut salaries has left the players' union Fifpro concerned.

"We are extremely concerned that a significant number of clubs, in more

than half a dozen countries, have begun to immediately lay off players or unilaterally reduce their salaries," Fifpro said in a statement.

The union called on clubs experiencing financial hardship to meet their national leagues to find a fair and proportionate solution.

"At a time of such a significant social crisis, solutions must be found with everybody's contribution," Fifpro added.

"Most football players outside the world's biggest leagues are earning at the same level or below average domestic income and would be severely affected by salary decreases."

On Friday, the Spanish government announced that over 4,800 people have died in the country as a result of the coronavirus after 769 people died in the previous 24 hours, a record one-day figure for fatalities in Spain.

— AFP



Dybala reveals coronavirus nightmare

MILAN: Juventus star Paulo Dybala revealed on Friday how he "struggled to breathe" after contracting coronavirus which has killed over 9,000 people in Italy.

The Argentine international announced last Saturday he was one of three Juventus players to catch the virus along with Daniele Rugani and Blaise Matuidi, who both had no symptoms.

"I feel better now after some strong symptoms," the 26-year-old Dybala told JTV channel.

"A couple of days ago I was not well, I felt heavy and after five minutes of movement I had to stop because I was struggling to breathe.

"Now I can move and walk to start trying to train, because when I tried in the past few days I started to shake too much.

"I gasped for air and as a result I couldn't do anything, after five minutes I was already very tired, I felt the body heavy and my muscles hurt.

"Now I'm fine. My fiancée

Oriana (Sabatini) has also overcome the symptoms."

Dybala has scored 13 goals in all competitions this season, including in league leader's Juventus's last game against Inter Milan before Serie A and all sport in Italy was suspended.

"The goal against Inter was the greatest emotion, (Aaron) Ramsey provided the perfect assist — it's a pity that there was no public," added Dybala.

— AFP



sport

CORUNNA, Spain: Journeyman footballer Toni Dovale put his football boots to one side and slipped into a pharmacist's white coat in the front line struggle against coronavirus in Spain.

The 29-year-old pharmacy graduate and former top-level sportsman had been playing football for a Thai club, but was visiting his family in Spain when the COVID-19 pandemic took hold.

So he decided to pitch in his 'grain of sand' against the virus using the studies which he had yet to put into practice due to his passion for football.

"I really was packing my bags to go back when things got complicated," Dovale told AFP.

Travel restrictions trapped Dovale in his native La Coruna in the Atlantic coast region of Galicia, where he started his football career with nearby Celta Vigo.

Although Dovale also completed his university studies in pharmacy four years ago, he had never actually worked in the field.

Now with the world of sport in limbo the footballer realised the time was ripe to use his studies to help his homeland.

"I was playing in Asia then; pharmacy is different there and I was never in Spain long enough to work," he says,

"With football stopped and travel banned I said to myself 'get some practical experience and do your bit'".

'Fear'

The coronavirus is ravaging Spain with a death toll of over 4,800 and some 64,000 registered cases of infection.

There is hope of course with around 10,000 people already cured of the virus in Spains for multimedia clients

"We're in a really frightening situation. Those of us working with the public are afraid, and the people who come to us for advice are afraid too," says Dovale, who is working in a pharmacy run by his family.

He has gloves but no mask, and does not appear ready to lose his

smile any time soon.

"We all know we are exposed, that this is a pandemic and a complicated situation," he says.

"But we all know too that our behaviour in complicated situations defines who we are, and for me I need to put fears for my own safety to one side and help in any way that I can.

"There are shortages of many things and we are struggling to get enough of the simple things like thermometers, paracetamol, gloves and hand gels".

Dovale has played football for Spanish top flight clubs Leganes and Rayo Vallecano, Sporting Kansas City in the United States and also Bengaluru in the Indian Super League before moving to Thailand.

"Right now I'm the same as everyone else in that I train at home jumping over the furniture," he jokes.

"I start at 7 am and I use whatever I can including bottles of water and stuff like that. Then I go downstairs to the pharmacy.

"I hope this is over as soon as possible and that I can go back to playing football again.

"Right now though everything is up in the air and I have no idea when sports will get going again over there (in Asia) or when we Europeans will be allowed to even travel again.

"I have no idea how this is going to pan out. Let's just hope it's all over soon and I can get ack to my normal life playing football".

— AFP

EX-LIGA WINGER DONS WHITE COAT TO TAKE ON CORONAVIRUS

