

ObserverWeekend

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AMIDST LOCKDOWN, SAY ADIEU TO ADDICTIONS!

SAMUEL KUTTY

It is a time of anxiety and uncertainty for people everywhere. There is no part of the society that is unaffected by the COVID-19 pandemic. While people with existing health problems are wondering how they will manage them for want of facilities that were available to them before have either been altered or closed, health professionals are working round the clock to reduce and prevent the spread of the contagion. Everything, except stores selling essentials like foodstuff and medicines, are closed. Work is largely done at home now. Venturing outside is only for necessities. The recommendation is for one person to do the shopping for a household, to limit exposure to the pandemic. Those who go out must wear masks

and use gloves, a practice, followed mostly in the medical or related sector. Everything is sanitised over and over and over again. The military and police at different checkpoints ensure that people who are out have the required documents for the travel. In other words, all of these make us mostly quiet. Even the normal routines have reshaped us. Social life has been limited to WhatsApp chats! During this time, anxiety can cause an uncomfortable feeling and can create a sense of behavioural paralysis and disengagement from daily tasks and obligations. As Dr Hamed al Sinawi, Senior Consultant Psychiatrist at Sultan Qaboos University puts it, “It is understandable that for many, the lockdown can cause stress and anxiety, especially with people who have some or the other addiction”.

THE FACT THAT SMOKING CAN AGGREGATE THE SYMPTOMS OF CORONAVIRUS AND LOCKDOWN SHOULD BE A MOTIVATION FOR SMOKERS TO QUIT THE HABIT

The most vulnerable individuals to coronavirus are those with low immunity, especially people with a nicotine addiction, since the virus affects the respiratory system. Dr Hamed says the lockdown is a good time to quit smoking. “Quitting smoking is challenging at any time, but it may seem especially daunting now, during the unsettled, anxiety-ridden days of the current pandemic. But for people who are battling with the smoking or any other addiction and who are very keen to stop them would make use of the current situation,” he says. A testimony to the fact is my friend

who has been trying to kick the butt for the last several years. He tried quitting many times, that too, not smoking for weeks. “Now the lockdown has come as a shot in the arm as I ran out of stock and my movement is restricted. Moreover, I realise that smokers are more vulnerable to the infection from the coronavirus,” he said. Suspecting him because of earlier failed attempts, when I insisted, he said, “it’s not like the past, there is an unprecedented risk now. Smokers are more vulnerable to respiratory infection,” he said. According to a recent report in

Harvard University publication, a history of addiction and its psychiatric comorbidity might increase risk for COVID-19 infection. It might also create conditions that threaten recovery. It’s a harsh reality that if you’re a smoker you’re more likely to get acute respiratory infections and have a higher risk of those infections becoming severe. “Increased risks may come from the damage smoking does to your lungs and the transmission of a virus from hand to mouth while you’re smoking. Exposure to second-hand smoke also increases the risk of getting acute respiratory infections,” wrote Sarah Chapman, a blogger and Knowledge Broker at Cochrane UK. The impact of flu or respiratory infections on smokers is more severe than non-smokers. But quitting is hard for many, and

perhaps particularly so at a time of great stress and when many of our routines have been so suddenly disrupted. According to Dr Hamed, people who are battling addiction and who are very keen to stop would make use of the fact that they are unable to go out and get cigarettes or the substances they are addicted to. “With family members being around, this could provide them with support to work with the potential withdrawal symptoms, which are disturbing but may not be lethal.” The fact that smoking can aggregate the symptoms of coronavirus and lockdown should be a motivation for smokers to quit the habit. Do not forget, smokers who become infected with the coronavirus are at much greater risk of having a worse outcome, perhaps because of smoking’s compromising effect on the body’s immune system.

SHORT TAKES

2 succumb to coronavirus, 50 new cases in Oman

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 17

Two residents aged 66 and 76 died due to COVID-19 in the Sultanate on Friday. Fifty fresh cases were also reported taking the total number of coronavirus patients to 1,069 of which 408 are Omanis and 661 expatriates. Of the new cases on Friday, 26 are Omanis and 24 cases are expatriates.

38 Omanis return from Thailand

MUSCAT: An Oman Air flight has brought back 38 citizens to Muscat from Bangkok on Friday. The crew was accompanied by a medical team from the Ministry of Health. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs said it was keen to fulfil all requests for return from across the world. If necessary, the national carrier will run more flights in coordination with the competent authorities to bring citizens from abroad. During its evacuation flights, Oman Air is committed to health procedures to ensure the safety and health of passengers and crew.



RAY PETERSEN

Everyday we learn something new, maybe about ourselves, maybe about others, but most that we are learning, I fear, is a poor reflection on human nature. The examples of good, greed and selfishness, the ability when 'the chips are down', to put ourselves first has clearly emerged, when we are faced with a loss of face, a loss of what we have and regard as 'ours', or financial loss. So which are the good, bad and ugly of COVID-19?

Leading yesterday's bulletins was the story that China had hidden not only the extent of COVID-19 when it emerged, but also the true origins. Neither for any other reason than to protect them from embarrassment. This closely followed on the heels of allegations that the Head of the World Health Organization, Ethiopian Tedros Adhanom, and the Chinese Government colluded to produce a significantly 'rose-tinted', WHO report so as to ease a great deal of global concern over the potential risks to human life, and to identify the China experience as a role model for other nations. Neither situation does anyone involved any credit, or leaves them with any credibility, at all, yet Adhanom, when questioned by the media, blamed racism for the reaction.

The obscenely wealthy have found ways to either become more obscenely wealthy by buying and selling shares and moving international investments based on what they had learned in high-level meetings. No, these were not pre-pandemic meetings, these were nods-as-good-as-a-wink, let-joe-public-know-later meetings, not with any objective of beginning to fight COVID-19, but to ensure that families were made safe, along with their inheritances. How many politicians, civil servants and leading industry figures have been harmed by COVID-19? Well you won't see them at the foodbanks!

Companies using COVID-19 to push their public profiles in a manner that makes you shudder. Elon Musk for example, just must be in the news! Whether its rescuing lost boys, moon landings, he always has an opinion. On March 23, Elon Musk promised 1,000 ventilators to California hospitals, earning the plaudits of many. Yesterday, California Governor Gavin Newsom asked where they were? Musk talks the talk but can't walk the walk, and just diverts energy and resource from the fight!

And what of normal, ordinary, man-in-the-street people of the

THE EXAMPLES OF GOOD, GREED AND SELFISHNESS, THE ABILITY WHEN 'THE CHIPS ARE DOWN', TO PUT OURSELVES FIRST HAS CLEARLY EMERGED, WHEN WE ARE FACED WITH A LOSS OF FACE, A LOSS OF WHAT WE HAVE AND REGARD AS 'OURS', OR FINANCIAL LOSS

THE REVELATIONS OF COVID-19: GOOD, BAD AND UGLY!

world? Easy isn't it? Go home, stay home, work from home. If you must go out then it should be a matter of some urgency/importance, but please wear a mask and gloves to protect yourself and others, and socially distance. But we can't do it! We... cannot... do... this... simple... request. I can't say any more. It's just mind-boggling!

The UK Government did well, and under Chancellor Rishi Sunak they came up with a 'Cbils' war chest of £324 billion, to be dispersed to business entities, however there are problems. Even with 4,900 lending institutions involved, only £1.1 billion has been paid out. America's Paycheque Protection Plan (PPP) loans have also faced documentation and Internet access issues, while Germany and Switzerland, with simpler documentation have reported the money getting, "where it's needed".

Dr Anthony Fauci, the American epidemiologist as the public voice of knowledge and understanding of COVID-19 does know what he's talking about, but he has found the daily press conferences "really draining". He's certainly not helped by President Trump turning them into daily "Here's what I think", events, and often flying in the face of all good advice. Staying in the USA, my gosh! Isn't New York Governor Andrew Cuomo a brave and resolute individual? He has family health issues, and millions of his citizens in grave danger, gnawing at him constantly. Yet he is doing a good job, defiant in the face of his President's constitutional challenges.

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, the youngest of the leaders, continues to demonstrate empathy for her nation, and its people by taking a 20 per cent salary cut for 6 months, and saying, "while it in itself won't shift the government's overall fiscal position, it is about leadership".

And here in Oman we have been fortunate, not only to have a vigorous and effective Supreme Committee, but a more than able communicator in Major Mohammed al Salmi, Director, Public Relations of the Royal Oman Police, as the face of their COVID-19 response. He is very clear, concise and empathetic.

Finally, it's clear that the developed nations were ill-prepared for a pandemic, and yet Europe and America have significant research investment from the drug conglomerates, governments and elsewhere. In 2018 the USA alone had 7,800 registered epidemiologists, so the question must be asked, if they all knew this was brewing, what were they doing? Was Nero fiddling while Rome burned, again?

Prices of vegetables and fruits fall

KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, APRIL 17

The prices of some vegetables and fruits have come down thanks to increased imports. One kilo of onion now costs 200 baisa — lowest in the recent history — against 500 baisa in the previous week at the Central Market in Mawaleh.

"The price reduction is due to the massive direct import of onions from its producer countries last week", said Omar bin Faisal al Jahdhami, Vice Chairman of the Consumer Services and Market Watch of PACP.

The price of imported hot peppers decreased by 50 baisa per kilogram, while the price of local sweet pepper decreased by 80 baisa.

While the price of domestic



cauliflower stabilised at 200 baisa per kg, there has been a decline in the prices of imported cauliflower by 60 baisa. The prices of fruits too witnessed a marginal decline, according to the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries. "The price fall is quite visible in fruits

such as Valencia orange ranging from 50 baisa to 100 baisa while some products reported a decline of 800 baisa", said a ministry source.

Prices of some varieties of imported apple fell by 100 baisa, grapes 800 baisa and bananas decreased by 15 baisa.

Omani citizens in Morocco requested to register for evacuation

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
MUSCAT, APRIL 17

Omani nationals who are currently in the Kingdom of Morocco who wish to return home are requested by the Sultanate of Oman's Embassy in Rabat to contact the embassy as soon as possible. Telephone numbers are 0611010008, 0537751764 and 0537751771.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been coordinating with its embassies to bring back nationals from various countries following the COVID-19 outbreak.

According to World Health

Organization's statistics, the number of cases currently reported in Morocco is 2,283 with 130 deaths. A total of 249 people recovered so far but active cases stand at 1,904.

Since March, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been coordinating with authorities concerned in bringing back students and citizens from various countries.

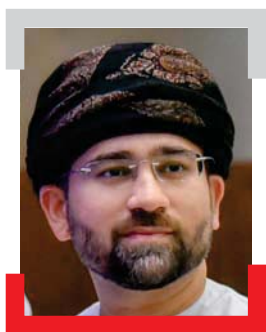
The move is part of constructive efforts made by the Supreme Committee for dealing with the COVID-19 outbreak and other relevant authorities to facilitate the return of Omani citizens from abroad

on account of travel restriction imposed by many countries due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Omani citizens have already returned from the USA, the UK, Canada, Egypt, Jordan, Malaysia, India, Pakistan, Thailand, Australia, New Zealand and European countries.

All citizens coming from abroad have to undergo a 14-day quarantine and the Ministry of Health has organised institutional quarantine centres in more than 23 hotels in Muscat and the other governorates of the Sultanate.

TIME TO TEACH OUR CHILDREN RESILIENCE



HASSAN BIN
SALMAN MIRZA

Companionship is essential for children's normal psychological development and well-being, and during the lockdown and social distancing, they are unable to meet and play with their friends, making them feel angry, fed-up and isolated, which takes a toll on them and can make them prone to develop symptoms of anxiety, depression, acute stress disorder and sleep difficulties

The coronavirus pandemic is an unprecedented event that has changed the way we live across the globe. It has impacted all domains of life be it education, work or how we socialise. Economies are struggling and long-term implications are as yet unclear, leading to a state of uncertainty and anxiety. The whole situation seems unbelievable, and yet sometimes feels familiar like in apocalyptic movies.

With many cities under lockdown across the world, and Muscat being no exception, we find ourselves in an uncertain situation. The lockdown has affected the adults and children alike, and we're finding ways to mitigate the psychological impact of this lockdown.

In the current situation, feeling of anger, sadness and anxiety is expected in children, and it is important for parents to validate these emotions in their children. Yet at the same time it is an opportunity to teach our children resilience, which means effectively adapting and managing stress, and being able to bounce back from adversity.

First of all, parents must learn to manage their own fears and anxieties, because children look to their parents for how to react to stress. Parents should provide age-appropriate explanations to children, be honest about it but keep it positive. For example, yes some do



develop serious complications and die, but most people overcome the infection with natural immunity, and especially vast majority of children have only mild symptoms of the infection.

Make children understand that scientists are working hard to develop effective treatments and vaccination, healthcare professionals are working tirelessly to serve those in need, the

government is doing an amazing job to curb the spread of coronavirus, and acknowledge the effort all children have put into this by being home-schooled to minimise the infection. Companionship is essential for children's normal psychological development and well-being, and during the lockdown and social distancing, they are unable to meet and play with their friends, making them feel

angry, fed-up and isolated, which takes a toll on them and can make them prone to develop symptoms of anxiety, depression, acute stress disorder and sleep difficulties.

And children with existing mental health difficulties are going to face more difficult challenges, similarly, those with special educational needs and autism are also at higher risk, as they can become frustrated and ill-tempered

due to disruption of their daily routines.

However, there are many things that we can focus on and help our children do as well, and these efforts with help mitigate the psychological impact of the current situation. For example, encouraging them to regularly wash their hands with soap and water, eat healthy food and maintain good sleep habits. Children should maintain daily routine, keep themselves busy, do school work, and stay connected with friends and family by phone and video calls. Children should be encouraged to exercise, and do something pleasurable every day. Parents should reiterate the importance of staying indoors to prevent the spread of the virus.

Nevertheless, it is also important to be aware of the red flag signs in children such as long-lasting sadness, extreme changes in mood, social withdrawal, excessive fear and anxiety, dramatic changes in sleep or appetite and self-harming behaviour in teenagers. Always remember that professional support is available, get help if your child needs it.

On the whole, people have faced many pandemics in the past, and just as they have always prevailed, we shall prevail again.

The writer is child & adolescent psychiatrist at Sultan Qaboos University Hospital.
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Believe us O Mother Earth, we can handle any virus now!

As I step out of my home for an early morning breeze and look at the sky to thank the Almighty for everything, I see three clear distinctive celestial bodies glistening in the morning sky. They are definitely not stars, I tell myself as I take out my smartphone and decide to check through an app. And voila! They were Jupiter, Saturn and Venus. Clearly visible, radiating that cosmic charm through the blues. Or maybe, we never bothered to notice them before. Or maybe our selfish acts didn't leave any room for us to see a clear blue sky in decades.

Man is a social animal. And greedy one. We had forgotten that our home, Mother Earth not only belongs to every human being irrespective of race, caste, religion, sex or class. We also have innumerable species of majestic and fabulous creatures and flora. However, a trash can is what we made of our home, intentionally or unintentionally. But what differentiates human from other animals, is its ability to think, observe, learn,

unlearn and relearn. The global pandemic has made us stop, ponder and act. And act now. It's a blessing in disguise. Lessons are being learnt. Mistakes are being accepted and realised.

Peacocks are seen around on the streets that were once full of vehicles and deafening sounds everywhere. Turtles, dolphins and whales are spotted at many beaches across the world, which are clean nowadays. Animals now feel safe, perhaps in decades. We can hear the birds singing and language of nature is far better understood now. There's a significant reduction in CO2 emissions, air quality is all time purest and ozone is healing itself. Education and work shall see a tremendous change. With few teething troubles related to home-schooling and work-from-home options digitally, we hopefully shall sail through. So many positive outcomes welcome us with open arms.

We have actually learnt more about our children, partner and family members. We have learnt to survive with essentials. Brands don't matter anymore. Few sets of clean



DR PRITI SWARUP

We have learnt to cook that is healthy and eat that is essential. We have understood the limitations of existing resources and one of the ways we can give back to the nature is use the resources meticulously and judiciously. We have learnt to help each other at home. We pray together. We are mindful of our health and it's the topmost priority for everyone now

clothes and appropriate footwear, good books to read and meaningful conversations are all we need to sustain. Money isn't being spent on non-essential and leisurely activities. We have learnt to cook that is healthy and eat that is essential. We have understood the limitations of existing resources and one of the ways we can give back to the nature is use the resources meticulously and judiciously. We have learnt to help each other at home. We pray together. We are mindful of our health and it's the topmost priority for everyone now.

Hand washing has become a ritual and personal hygiene is a norm for all. People have managed to get rid of their addictions be it smoke, liquor or substance. Yoga and meditation are part of our lives and we are much at peace, leaving aside the conundrums and hustle bustle the old world had given us. Living in the present, is our motto now. Social media is being used sensibly and diligently. Everyone around seems to be having a creative flair and the social media is now coloured with

artworks, sketches, paintings and positivity to the fullest. We have become more patient. We are more compassionate towards fellow human beings.

Believe us O Mother Earth, we can handle any virus now! Please take us from darkness to a new light, light of hope, light of new life! And we hope you'll forgive us soon O Mother Earth!

That day, Disneyland will be magical, and the Taj will shine again. Dubai Fountain shall once again sway gracefully to Whitney Houston singing 'And I will always love you' and 'Skyfall' by Adele where the adjoining magnanimous Burj shall display 'We did it'. Muttrah Souq shall once again be filled with unparalleled frankincense and New York shall stand strong as ever. Glistening Eiffel Tower shall again brighten up the Paris skies and fill it with immense love like never!

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W A R Y O F P U B L I C T R A N S P O R T

AMERICANS TURN TO BIKES

TIMOTHY AEPPEL

Added fear to the list of reasons people ride bikes. “I’m 51 and healthy, but I don’t want to get on the subway,” said John Donohue, a Brooklyn-based artist who bought a bike two weeks ago. Donohue, who doesn’t own a car, says he’s not sure when he’ll be comfortable on mass transit again.

The coronavirus pandemic has sparked a surge in bike sales across the United States, according to a major manufacturer and a half dozen retailers interviewed by Reuters.

Many of the purchases are by people looking for a way to get outside at a time of sweeping shutdowns and stay-at-home orders aimed at containing the virus: Even the worst affected states are allowing people out to exercise.

Still, a portion of the sales, especially in urban areas, are to people like Donohue who also want to avoid the risk of contagion on buses or subways.

He plans to use his new 24-gear hybrid for journeys such as regular visits to a printing shop across town that he normally travels to by subway. A key feature, he said, was the bright red panniers he added to carry his artwork.

To be sure, bikes remain well down the list of US commuting preferences.

About 870,000 Americans, on average, commuted to work by bicycle in the five years through 2017, or about 0.6 per cent of all workers, according to the US Census Bureau. The rate was higher in urban areas, at about 1.1 per cent, and about 20 cities with at least 60,000 residents had rates of about 5 per cent or more.

A more recent survey, though, showed a higher percentage of US workers using a bike to get to work. Private research firm Statista Inc’s 2019 survey showed 5 per cent rode their own bike, while another 1 per cent used a bike share service, an increasingly common option in larger cities.

RUNNING OUT OF STOCK

The government has declared bicycles an essential transportation item, so many bike shops remain open despite the widespread business shutdown. Many, though, have modified how they operate, no longer letting buyers test bikes and handing them over on the curb rather than inside the store.

According to the National Bicycle Dealers Association, roughly three-quarters of US bike sales are through big box stores.

While many of the outlets of large specialty sporting goods chains are closed, general merchandisers like WalMart Stores Inc, the



largest seller of bikes, remain open. Walmart did not respond to a request for comment.

Kent International Inc, which imports bikes from China and also makes them at a plant in South Carolina, said sales of its low-priced bikes had surged over the past month.

Kent is already out of stock on five of its top 20 models and expects that to rise to 10 by the end of the month, Chief Executive and Chairman Arnold Kamler said. He noted

supplies were flowing in from China, which has reopened much of its manufacturing base over the past month.

Kamler said sales at most of the major retailers he supplies were up 30 per cent last month and are up over 50 per cent so far in April, with the surge in demand forcing him to change shipping arrangements.

He normally imports bikes to ports on both the East and West Coasts. But with

many retailers asking for more bikes, he’s now directing all shipments into West Coast ports, then transporting them across the country. That adds to freight costs, he said, but can cut weeks off delivery times.

LOW PRICES

Mark Vautour, who manages a bike store near the Boston University campus, said he had sold bikes to anxious commuters - including

The coronavirus pandemic has sparked a surge in bike sales across the United States. Many of the purchases are by people looking for a way to get outside at a time of sweeping shutdowns and stay-at-home orders

at least one medical worker who wanted an alternative to using the subway.

“We’ve joked for years that trains are like a petri dish”, Vautour said.

Mostly, though, his sales have been children’s bikes, “because parents don’t know what to do with their kids”.

One indication that people are buying bikes for more utilitarian uses like commuting is that many of the purchases are low-priced bikes, several bike retailers said.

Joe Nocella, owner of 718 Cyclery & Outdoors in Brooklyn, said his normal “sweet spot” was bikes that sell for \$1,500 to \$2,000, used by city dwellers for touring.

“Now the average bike has turned to \$500 to \$800” he said.

Those lower prices are one reason many bike retailers are struggling, despite strong sales.

Andrew Crooks, Chief Executive of NYC Velo, a three-store chain in the New York area, said the drop in average selling prices meant revenues had fallen at a time when he was still paying rents, salaries and other costs.

“So we could keep our doors open and still end up with a business that’s not viable,” he said. Still, some new buyers say they are switching to bikes for the long term.

Having been stuck at home in Baltimore, Kaitlyn Lee bought a \$550 bike this weekend so she could get outdoors safely and avoid public transport when she gets a job.

Lee will finish a graduate degree in public health at the University of Maryland this spring and has applied for jobs at the Centers for Disease Control and the Health Resources and Services Administration, part of the US Department of Health and Human Services. Her plan is to commute by bike to a future job, if possible.

“I mean, it’ll never completely vanish,” she said of the coronavirus. “Rather we will learn how to live alongside of it, just like with other viruses.” — Reuters

Avigan: Anti-viral being tested

It is approved for use in flu outbreaks and has been deployed to treat Ebola, but now Avigan is being trialled as a potential coronavirus treatment.

Here are some questions and answers about the anti-viral medication:

What is Avigan?

Avigan is the brand name of the drug favipiravir. It was developed by what is now known as Fujifilm Toyama Chemical and approved for use in Japan in 2014. But in Japan, it is only approved for use in flu outbreaks that aren’t being effectively addressed by existing medications. It is not available on the market and can only be manufactured and distributed at the request of the Japanese government.

Favipiravir works by blocking the ability of a virus to replicate inside a cell.

There are some safety concerns: It has been shown in animal studies to affect foetal development, meaning it is not given to pregnant women, and some doctors say they would not recommend it for children or adolescents.

How is it being used to treat coronavirus?

Some doctors began trying favipiravir to treat coronavirus patients early on, reasoning that its anti-viral properties would be applicable.

Some initial results suggested the drug could help shorten recovery time for patients, with China’s ministry of science and technology hailing it as yielding “very good clinical results”.

There are currently around five clinical trials



ongoing in countries including the US, Italy and Japan, where Fujifilm announced it would be testing the drug’s efficacy on a group of 100 patients through until the end of June.

The Japan study will involve administering the drug for up to 14 days to patients between 20 and 74 with mild pneumonia. Gaetan Burgio, a geneticist at Australian National University’s College of Health and Medicine, said the trials would be looking at a variety of factors.

They include clinical outcomes — meaning effects on fever, cough, oxygenation, recovery time and time spent in hospital — as well as how quickly the virus clears the system, along with X-rays or CT scans for pneumonia.

“If we see a significant reduction in clinical outcome and lower viral load from the favipiravir group, this would be a good sign for a larger-scale clinical trial”, he told AFP.

What sets these trials apart?

While doctors have already been experimenting with favipiravir for treating

coronavirus patients, these trials will be conducted according to rigorous guidelines intended to ensure the drug is safe and effective across a broad range of patients.

“Smaller studies have been reported but it’s hard to draw conclusions from these as patient numbers are small and the trials often don’t compare versus (a regime of) best supportive care and placebo, more often to another drug”, said Stephen Griffin, a virologist at the University of Leeds. “The big trials should be segregated according to disease severity and will compare to placebo”.

How does it compare to other drugs?

Scientists are studying a wide variety of drugs for possible treatment of coronavirus patients, including remdesivir, another anti-viral.

One study of the two drugs as a treatment for coronavirus found favipiravir was only effective at relatively high concentrations, with remdesivir considered a better option, possibly in part due to the way coronaviruses replicate compared to other viruses, said Griffin.

But remdesivir is not yet licensed anywhere in the world and has to be administered intravenously via a drip, whereas favipiravir is approved in several countries and can be taken orally as a pill.

Japan has heavily backed the drug, asking Fujifilm to ramp up production for use at home and offering to supply it for free to dozens of countries that have put in requests. — AFP





RAMADAN MUBARAK

The Prophet (ﷺ) said, “He who provides a fasting person something with which to break his fast, will earn the same reward as the one who was observing the fast, without diminishing in any way the reward of the latter.”

The Oman Charitable Organization is pleased to announce that it will receive donations for Ramadan Iftar Program in Sultanate of Oman for the year 1441 AH AD 2020 through the following accounts :

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Trump unveils three-stage process to end shutdown



President Donald Trump, flanked by Vice President Mike Pence, announces a gradual reopening of the United States. – AFP

WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump has laid out new guidelines for US states to emerge from a coronavirus shutdown in a staggered, three-stage approach meant to revive the US economy even as the country continues to fight the pandemic.

The recommendations call on states to show a “downward trajectory” of COVID-19 cases or positive tests for the disease over 14 days before proceeding with the plan, which gradually loosens restrictions on businesses that have been shuttered to blunt the spread of the virus.

“We are not opening all at once, but one careful step at a time,” Trump told reporters at the White House on Thursday. The president had said earlier this month he wanted to reopen the economy with a “big bang.”

The plan is a set of recommendations for state governors, not orders. In that sense, it represents a backdown by Trump, who on Monday insisted he had total authority to direct states to re-open or remain closed. The responsibility for such decisions lies with state, not federal, authorities.

With the onus on governors, the plan also gives Trump political cover if not everything goes well.

The president, a Republican who is running for reelection in November, has faced criticism for downplaying the seriousness of the virus in the early weeks of the outbreak.

The recommendations drew criticism from Ron Klain, who spearheaded the Obama administration’s response to Ebola and has advised former Vice President Joe Biden, the presumptive 2020 Democratic presidential nominee.

“This isn’t a plan. It’s barely a powerpoint,” he said on Twitter, noting it did not include provisions to ramp up testing or set a specific standard for levels of the disease before economic opening.

Democrats such as House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Biden said testing was key to opening the country and criticised Trump’s presentation for lacking specifics.

“I wouldn’t call it a plan. I think what he’s done, he’s kind of punted,” Biden said in an interview on CNN.

The new guidelines effectively end, at least for some states, the 30-day federal virus mitigation rules that were meant to stay in place through the end of April. States that have met

The recommendations call on states to show a “downward trajectory” of COVID-19 cases or positive tests for the disease over 14 days

the criteria can move into the first phase of re-opening on Friday, Trump said. Some 29 states would be in a position to re-open soon, he said.

‘NEW NORMAL’

Before they do that, however, the guidelines suggest hospitals have a “robust testing programme” that includes antibody testing in place for health care workers, the guidelines say.

States should have the ability to set up screening and testing sites for people with symptoms and as well as contact tracing capabilities, and health care facilities should be able to supply personal protective gear independently and handle surges if COVID-19 cases increase again.

In the first phase of re-opening, the guidelines say groups of more than 10 people should be avoided if appropriate distancing measures are not practical. Non-essential travel should be minimised, telework should be encouraged, and common areas in offices closed.

Schools remain closed in phase 1, but large venues such as movies theatres, restaurants, sports stadiums, and places of worship can open with “strict physical distancing protocols.”

Hospitals, which have been hit hard by the health crisis, may resume out-patient elective surgeries and gyms can re-open with new protocols. Bars should remain closed, it said.

In the second phase, applicable to states and regions with “no evidence of a rebound” in cases, the guidelines recommend groups of more than 50 be avoided where social distancing is not practical. Non-essential travel can resume, while schools and youth camps can reconvene and bars with “diminished standing-room occupancy” may re-open. Hospitals may also resume in-patient elective surgeries. Such procedures are critical to hospitals’ income. — Reuters



Manila’s roads have been nearly deserted since a sweeping lockdown was imposed a month ago on about half the country’s 110 million people. – AFP

Duterte threatens martial law-like virus crackdown

MANILA: Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has threatened a martial law-like crackdown to stop people flouting a virus lockdown in the nation’s capital.

Duterte spoke a day after authorities reported an upsurge of cars on Manila’s roads, which have been nearly deserted since a sweeping lockdown was imposed a month ago on about half the country’s 110 million people. “I’m just asking for a little discipline. If not, if you do not believe me, then the military and police will take over,” Duterte said in a televised speech late on Thursday.

“The military and police will enforce social distancing at curfew... It’s like martial law. You choose,” he added.

Duterte has repeatedly threatened to impose nationwide military rule over the Philippines, where the mere words evoke the worst rights abuses of the Ferdinand Marcos dictatorship.

The closest Duterte has come is the imposition of martial law

over Mindanao, the nation’s southern third, in response to IS-inspired militants’ siege of the city of Marawi.

As reported cases of the new coronavirus started to climb in March, Duterte ordered a quarantine of the main northern island of Luzon, which includes the capital’s 12 million people.

Only essential workers and people buying food or medicine are officially allowed outside their homes, yet many others have flouted the rules.

In some places, impoverished day labourers have no choice but to go out looking for work, though police have also reported breaking up social events like amateur boxing matches.

Police said they have warned or arrested tens of thousands of people caught outside their homes without valid reasons.

The Philippines has detected some 5,660 coronavirus cases, and recorded 362 deaths, but those figures are expected to climb as the nation ramps up testing. — AFP

Myanmar releases 25,000 prisoners amid virus fears

YANGON: More than a quarter of Myanmar’s prison population is being released, the president’s office announced on Friday, after calls grew to ease pressure on overcrowded jails with coronavirus fears gripping the country.

The Southeast Asian nation grants an annual amnesty to thousands of prisoners to mark its April New Year holiday, but this is the largest recorded in recent years.

It comes as governments around the world — including the US, parts of Europe, and Colombia — grapple with overcrowded prisons as fears spiral of virus outbreaks behind bars.

“To mark Myanmar New Year, by respecting humanitarian ground and peace in mind of the people, the president pardons altogether 24,896 prisoners from various prisons,” a statement on Friday from the president’s office said.

As news of the amnesty spread, crowds defied a new ban on gatherings of five or more people to assemble outside Yangon’s notorious Insein prison, hoping to see their family members freed.

As buses brought the newly-released through the prison gates, cheers erupted with people waving



Family members greet prisoners being freed from Yangon’s Insein prison on Friday. – AFP

flowers and reaching to grasp the hands of relatives leaning out of the bus windows.

Wearing a mask, Ei Nge said she came to the prison as soon as she heard about the amnesty.

“I’m not even thinking about coronavirus. I just really want to see my son.”

So far Myanmar has officially confirmed 85 cases of COVID-19, including four deaths, but experts fear the real number is many times higher because of the lo

The country is under a nationwide lockdown and there had been growing pressure to release inmates from what Human Rights Watch (HRW) branded “horribly overcrowded and unsanitary” jails.

The president’s office said 87 foreigners included in the amnesty would be deported.

By Friday afternoon the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners said it only had confirmation of the release of 12 of 76 prisoners of conscience, but the group was holding out hope for the others.

Before the amnesty, there were nearly 100,000 inmates across the country’s prisons which had space for just 62,000, according to HRW. — AFP

Biden seeks ways to close money gap with Trump

ELIZABETH CULLIFORD, TREVOR HUNNICUTT & JAMES OLIPHANT

J

oe Biden is starting to get the help he needs to compete with President Donald Trump's massive election war chest, although the Democrat has a huge shortfall to make up in the coming months.

Former Barack Obama staffers are planning to raise money for the putative Democratic presidential nominee. Ex-rivals like Elizabeth Warren are using their donor lists on his behalf, and the former vice president's campaign could soon strike a deal with the Democratic National Committee that would allow it to rake in much larger donations.

Those are positive signs for a campaign that has worked furiously to figure out ways to bring in cash since the coronavirus pandemic put millions of Americans out of work and forced

the 2020 White House race into a digital-only environment.

Even with the newfound support, Biden remains at a significant financial disadvantage heading into the November 3 election against Trump, a prodigious fundraiser who has been raising money for the general election since 2017.

"I think right now it's very hard to raise money," said John Morgan, a trial lawyer from Florida and a longtime political donor. "People don't know if they're financially ruined or not yet."

The Trump campaign and the Republican National Committee said this week they had raised a whopping \$212 million this year, giving the president \$240 million in cash in hand.

Biden's campaign has yet to announce its fundraising total for March. It had about \$12 million on

Former Barack Obama staffers are planning to raise money for the putative Democratic presidential nominee

hand as of Feb. 29, before his decisive victories in Democratic nominating contests.

Biden was not a fundraising juggernaut even before the coronavirus upended politics, finding real success only in the closing months of the Democratic presidential race.

His campaign is now hoping that endorsements this week from his onetime boss, Obama, as well as former rivals Bernie Sanders and Warren, will give its fundraising a shot in the arm, helping the campaign access a wider network of deep-pocketed donors.

Biden told donors on Thursday the backing from his ex-competitors helped him bring in \$5.25 million over two days this week.

Obama's former finance chair, Rufus Gifford, who helped his 2012 campaign collect more than \$1 billion, is setting up an online fundraising event on May 1 for Biden involving officials who worked for the former Democratic president.

"The goal will be to re-assemble the team that propelled the Obama/Biden team to victory twice," Gifford wrote in a recruitment email.

US Senator Kamala Harris, a former White House rival and a strong contender to be Biden's vice presidential pick, participated in an online fundraiser for Biden last week that brought in \$150,000 – exceeding the event's \$100,000 target, said event co-host Kimberly Marteau Emerson, a principal at KME Consulting.

Biden's campaign also plans to host a series of virtual events in the coming weeks featuring celebrities such as Broadway star Kristin Chenoweth, singer Melissa Etheridge and tennis great Billie Jean King, as well as ex-candidate Cory Booker and former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, said Tom Sacks-Wilner, who serves on Biden's finance committee. Sanders, who amassed a huge grassroots army of supporters, has not committed to raising funds for Biden. — **Reuters**



A worker in a protective suit collects a swab from a construction worker for nucleic acid test in Wuhan, Hubei province in China, on April 7. — **Reuters**

UK was too slow to react to virus outbreak: Expert

T

he British government was too slow to react on a number of fronts to the novel coronavirus outbreak that could cause the deaths of 40,000 people in the United Kingdom, a leading public health professor said on Friday.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson initially refrained from approving the stringent controls that other European leaders imposed but then closed down the country when projections showed a quarter of a million people could die in the United Kingdom.

So far, more than 13,729 people with COVID-19 have died in British hospitals, though new official data indicates the true death toll could be much larger.

"Where were the system errors that led us to have probably the highest death rates in Europe?," Anthony Costello, professor of International Child Health and Director of the UCL Institute for Global Health, told the Health and Social Care Committee.

"And we have to face the reality of that: We were too slow with a number of things. But we can make sure in the second wave we are not too slow."

The United Kingdom has the fifth highest official death toll from COVID-19 in the world, after the United States, Italy, Spain and France, though the figure only covers hospital fatalities and the real number is probably much higher.

Costello said the death toll in the United Kingdom could reach as much as 40,000 and that just 10-15 per cent of the population might then have immunity.

"The recent estimates, even from the chief scientific officer, is that after this wave - we could see 40,000 deaths by the time it's over - we could only have maybe 10 per cent, 15 per cent of the population infected or covered," he said. "So the idea of herd immunity would mean another five, six waves maybe in order to get to 60 per cent."

TESTING

Donna Kinnair, chief executive of the Royal College of Nursing, told the committee that there was still an issue over testing front line health professionals in Britain.

Under questioning from lawmakers, Health Secretary Matt Hancock said the rate of deaths due to COVID-19 in care homes was higher than 2 per cent, adding he was concerned about how the novel coronavirus was spreading in places housing vulnerable people.

Asked whether it was likely that less than 2 per cent of COVID-19 deaths were in care homes, Hancock told a parliamentary committee: "No," adding that the less than 2 per cent figure was out of date. "I can say with a high degree of confidence that the number and the proportion are higher than what you say," Hancock said. — **Reuters**

Nearly 1,300 Wuhan deaths 'not counted'

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early 1,300 people who died of the coronavirus in the Chinese city of Wuhan, or half the total, were not counted in death tolls because of lapses, state media said on Friday, but Beijing dismissed claims that there had been any kind of cover-up.

The central city where the outbreak emerged late last year added 1,290 more fatalities to the 2,579 previously counted as of Thursday, reflecting incorrect reporting, delays and omissions, according to a local government task force in charge of controlling the coronavirus.

Reflecting the additional deaths in Wuhan, China revised its national death toll later on Friday up to 4,632.

The revision follows widespread speculation that Wuhan's death toll was significantly higher than reported.

"In the early stage, due to limited hospital capacity and the shortage of medical staff, a few medical institutions failed to connect with local disease control and prevention systems in a timely manner, which resulted in delayed reporting of confirmed cases and some failures to count patients accurately," state media cited an unidentified Wuhan official as saying.

Suspicion that China has not been transparent about the outbreak has risen in recent days as death tolls mount in many countries, including the United States, with President Donald Trump on Wednesday expressing scepticism about China's previously declared death figure of about 3,000.

'RESPONSIBILITY TO HISTORY'

Foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said on Friday that while there might have been data collection flaws earlier during the outbreak, China

The central city where the outbreak emerged late last year added 1,290 more fatalities to the 2,579 previously counted as of Thursday, reflecting incorrect reporting, delays and omissions

has "a responsibility to history, to the people and to the deceased" to ensure numbers are accurate.

"Medical workers at some facilities might have been preoccupied with saving lives and there existed delayed reporting, underreporting or misreporting, but there has never been any cover-up and we do not allow cover-ups," he said.

Wuhan's total number of cases was revised up by 325, suggesting that some of the new deaths had been recorded as cases but not confirmed as fatalities, taking the total number of cases in the city of 11 million people to 50,333, or about 60% of mainland China's total.

The topic "Wuhan revises its death toll" was one of the most read on China's Weibo microblogging platform, which is heavily moderated.

Many commentators praised the government for admitting its mistakes and correcting them, although some still questioned the numbers and one urged other provinces to reassess their data.

Doctors and government officials in Wuhan have been repeatedly questioned about the accuracy of the death toll by journalists on

government-arranged trips.

CHAOTIC EARLY DAYS

Some of those officials acknowledged that people may have died without being counted in the chaotic early days of the outbreak, before testing was widely available.

"There couldn't have been many because that was a very short period," Wang Xinghuan, head of one of two field hospitals built for the outbreak, told reporters in Wuhan on April 12. He stressed that he was not speaking for the government.

It is not unusual in epidemics for case and fatality numbers to be revised after authorities carry out retrospective re-testing or reclassify the cause of infection or death.

The Spanish region of Catalonia on Wednesday announced an additional 3,242 coronavirus deaths since the start of the pandemic, nearly doubling its previous tally, citing a change in methodology to include data from funerary services on suspected and confirmed COVID-19 deaths in nursing homes and private homes.

Before the revised Wuhan numbers were released, China said it had recorded 26 new cases of the coronavirus on Thursday, down from 46 cases a day earlier, according to the National Health Commission.

It brought the total number of cases in mainland China to 82,367.

Of the new cases, 15 were imported infections, the lowest since March 17. The remaining 11 confirmed cases were locally transmitted, down from 12 a day earlier. The number of new asymptomatic cases increased to 66 from 64 a day earlier.

— **Reuters**

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Millions unemployed as Covid-19 ravages US

WASHINGTON: A record 22 million Americans have sought unemployment benefits over the past month, with millions more filing claims last week, almost wiping out all the job gains since the Great Recession and underscoring the toll on the economy from extraordinary measures to control the novel coronavirus outbreak.

The deepening economic slump was also amplified by other data on Thursday showing manufacturing activity in the mid-Atlantic region plunged to levels last seen in 1980 and homebuilding tumbling by the most in 36 years in March.

The reports followed dismal reports on Wednesday of a record drop in retail sales in March and the biggest decline in factory output since 1946. Economists are predicting the economy, which they believe is already in recession, contracted in the first quarter at its sharpest pace since World War Two.

“The scale of job losses we have had in the past four weeks is remarkable, nearly all the jobs gained since Great Financial Crisis are now lost,” said James Knightley, chief international economist at ING in New York.

Initial claims for state unemployment benefits dropped 1.370 million to a seasonally adjusted 5.245 million for the week ended April 11, the government said. Data for the prior week was revised to show 9,000 more applications received than previously reported, taking the tally for that period to 6.615 million.

A total of 22.034 million people have filed claims for jobless benefits since March 21, representing about 13.5 per cent of the labour force. Employment bottomed at around 138



People who lost their jobs wait in line to file for unemployment at an Arkansas Workforce Center in Fort Smith, Arkansas, US. – Reuters

million in December 2010 and peaked at 158.8 million in February. At face value, the staggering claims numbers set the economy on course for job losses of more than 1 million in April.

But a historic \$2.3 trillion fiscal package signed by President Donald Trump last month made provisions

for small businesses to access loans that could be partially forgiven if they were used for employee salaries.

As such, not all the 22 million people who have so far filed claims will be counted as unemployed when the government publishes its closely watched employment report for

April next month. The government surveyed establishments for April’s nonfarm payrolls component of the employment report this week.

“Still, the labour market has imploded,” said Gus Faucher, chief economist at PNC Financial in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. “Claims

have totaled 22 million, and claims will be in the millions again next week.”

States and local governments have issued “stay-at-home” or “shelter-in-place” orders affecting more than 90 per cent of Americans to control the spread of COVID-19, the respiratory illness caused by the virus, and

abruptly halting economic activity.

The Labor Department said “the COVID-19 virus continues to impact the number of initial claims.”

Economists are divided on whether the second straight weekly decline in claims suggests filings peaked at a record 6.867 million in the week ended March 28, or that overwhelmed state employment offices were unable to process the flood of applications. Jobless claims, the timeliest data on the economy’s health, are being closely watched for clues on the depth of the downturn, when the waves of layoffs may let up and when a recovery might start.

Stocks on Wall Street were mixed as investors focused on the second straight weekly drop in claims. The dollar .DXY was higher against a basket of currencies. US Treasury prices rose.

ECONOMY CONTRACTING

In a separate report on Thursday, the Commerce Department said housing starts plunged 22.3 per cent to a seasonally adjusted annual rate of 1.216 million units last month. That was the largest monthly decline in starts since March 1984.

The Philadelphia Federal Reserve also reported that its measure of business conditions in the mid-Atlantic region dropped to a reading of -56.6 in April, the lowest reading since July 1980, from -12.7 in March.

Economists are estimating the economy contracted as much as 10.8 per cent in the first quarter, which would be the steepest drop in gross domestic product since 1947. They say the massive fiscal package will likely provide little cushion for the economy.

— Reuters

New gas production, diversification to buoy Omani economy in 2021-22: WB

ECONOMIC UPDATE: Significant new gas production in 2021 along with diversifying the economy in sectors such as manufacturing, tourism and fishing will support the growth momentum and lessen the risks: World Bank

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, APRIL 17

An anticipated contraction in the Omani economy in 2020, attributable to the oil price downturn and the public health response to the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, is expected to give way to a recovery in 2021-22, according to the World Bank.

The international financial institution said in its latest ‘Economic Update’ for the Sultanate that the uptick will be spurred by an increase in gas output as well as infrastructure spending.

“Significant new gas production in 2021 along with diversifying the economy in sectors such as manufacturing, tourism and fishing will support the growth momentum and lessen the risks,” the Washington DC-headquartered body said in its



report for April.

But the slump in international oil prices will weigh on the economy this year, the global organisation warned. “Low oil prices and the spread of COVID-19 are the key challenges that Oman will need to navigate in the short-run. With oil prices in the mid-\$30s in 2020 and constrained oil demand, growth is expected to contract by 3.5 per cent,” it said.

Also disadvantageous in the present circumstances is the Sultanate’s exposure to the Chinese market, which accounts for 45 per cent of total Omani exports (or 21.7 per cent of GDP), mostly in the form of oil exports, the WB report noted. With China in the throes of a slowdown fuelled by the pandemic, imports have dramatically fallen in recent weeks and are expected to

maintain a downtrend this year.

Significantly, both the hydrocarbon and non-oil sectors of the Omani economy are expected to witness a contraction this year owing to the slump in oil prices as well as the impacts of the pandemic, says the World Bank.

“Real GDP growth is estimated to have decelerated to 0.5 per cent in 2019, down from a recovery of 1.8 per cent in 2018. This is largely driven by 1 per cent (y/y) decline in oil production, capped by the since-lapsed OPEC+ production deal. The non-oil economy is estimated to have been subdued due to the slowdown in industrial activities and services sector. Inflationary pressures are estimated to remain muted at 0.1 per cent in 2019, reflecting weak domestic demand and tame food and housing prices.”

T-Mobile wins final approval for closed merger with Sprint

WASHINGTON: California’s Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) voted on Thursday to approve the merger of wireless carriers T-Mobile US Inc and Sprint Corp, marking the final approval for a \$23 billion deal which closed on April 1.

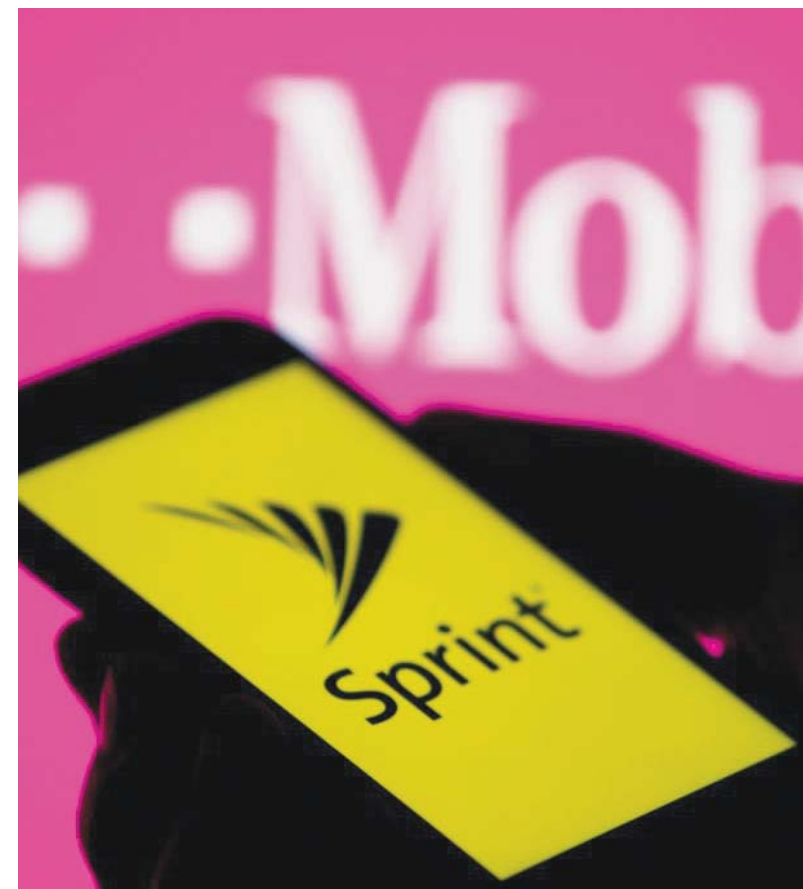
The deal had closed without a final decision from the California PUC, which gave that on Thursday with a unanimous vote. The CPUC had issued a proposed decision in March to approve the merger with conditions. T-Mobile and Sprint agreed to abide by those conditions.

The biggest hurdle for the companies was a legal battle with state attorneys general who had argued that the deal would mean higher prices for consumers. But a US federal judge disagreed in February, and allowed the deal, which was originally valued at \$26 billion, to go forward.

In comments before the vote, two of the commissioners noted the importance of ensuring that conditions that T-Mobile agreed to in order to win the approval be adequately enforced.

The combined company now operates under the T-Mobile name and will trade on the NASDAQ as “TMUS.”

The deal is designed to enable the combined company to join their high-band and low-band spectrum



A smartphone with Sprint logo are seen in front of a screen projection of T-mobile logo, in this picture illustration. – Reuters

that could allow a faster roll-out of national 5G.

The Justice Department and Federal Communications Commission signed off on the merger last year. The department

had given its approval to the deal in July on condition the combined wireless company sell off assets to Dish Network, making the latter the fourth-largest provider in the US wireless space. — Reuters

Japan airlines keep most domestic flights



All Nippon Airways (ANA) Boeing 787-8 Dreamliner taxis in front of other aircraft at the Tokyo International Airport in Tokyo. — Reuters

TOKYO: Japan's top airlines are operating a majority of their domestic capacity even though the coronavirus outbreak has left seats on flights mostly empty, amid a lack of clear government directives on the functioning of transport infrastructure in the crisis.

ANA Holdings Inc and Japan Airlines Co Ltd (JAL), Japan's two biggest airlines, have cut around 90 per cent of international flights but left their domestic networks relatively intact, industry data showed. The two normally fly around 800 or more domestic flights daily.

They are currently flying around two-thirds of capacity with 10 per cent of the usual demand, according to the airlines. That is despite Japan declaring a one-month state of emergency in major cities on April 7 which was expanded on Thursday to include the entire country.

The move is set to add further financial strain on the Japanese carriers. Their peers in India, Thailand and the Philippines have grounded all domestic flights under government orders, while those in Australia and New Zealand are flying less than 5 per cent of their normal schedules due to travel restrictions and reduced demand. — Reuters

Google's Meet video tool getting Zoom-like layout



A 3D printed Google logo is seen in an illustration photo. — Reuters

OAKLAND: Google will allow business and education users on Gmail.com to directly take calls on its video conferencing tool Meet, a new feature being offered as the Alphabet Inc unit seeks to capitalise on security and other concerns with rival services.

The integration of Meet with e-mail is the first of several features being launched ahead of schedule because of a surge in demand for video conferencing, Google vice president Javier Soltero told Reuters.

Meet, which is available only to schools, businesses and governments and is distinct from the consumer-focused Hangouts tool, has added daily users faster than any other Google service since January. Millions of institutions now are relying on Meet because of lockdowns associated with the coronavirus, the company said.

Other functionalities will be added later this month, Soltero said. Meet will offer a layout displaying up to 16 call participants at once, resembling a popular option on rival Zoom that its users have compared to a grid in the opening sequence of American TV show "Brady Bunch." — Reuters

DHL struggles to cope as online parcel volumes surge



A DHL logo is seen on a DHL Boeing 757 aircraft during a charity fundraising event at the Safi Aviation Park in Safi, Malta. — Reuters

DUESSELDORF: Delivery business DHL is struggling to cope with a flood of parcels from online purchases due to the coronavirus crisis, forcing it to cut back extra collections from retailers in Germany, parent company Deutsche Post said.

A Deutsche Post spokesman said that the extra pick-up trips to retailers had been reduced nationwide, adding that DHL was handling more than 8 million parcels a day, similar to pre-Christmas trade and compared to an annual average of around 5.2 million.

"We are continuously working to synchronise our capacity with demand," the spokesman said.

The German association of online retailers (BVOH) had earlier highlighted the problem, saying if retailers had known about the bottleneck, they would have sought to rein in sales.

"Now the packed parcels are at the retailer and will not be delivered," said BVOH president Oliver Prothmann. — Reuters

China posts first GDP decline on record as virus cripples economy

BEIJING: China's economy shrank for the first time since at least 1992 in the first quarter, as the coronavirus outbreak paralysed production and spending, raising pressure on authorities to do more to stop mounting job losses.

Gross domestic product (GDP) fell 6.8 per cent in January-March year-on-year, official data showed on Friday, larger than the 6.5 per cent decline forecast by analysts in a Reuters poll and reversing a 6 per cent expansion in the fourth quarter of last year.

The contraction is also the first in the world's second-largest economy since at least 1992 when official quarterly GDP records started.

While China has managed to get large parts of its economy up and running from a standstill in February, analysts say policymakers face an uphill battle to revive growth as the coronavirus pandemic ravages global demand.

Nomura expects Beijing to deliver a stimulus package in the near-term, which could be financed by the central bank through various channels.

"However, unlike previous easing cycles, when most of the new credit went to finance spending on infrastructure, property and consumer durable goods, this time we expect most of the new credit to be used on financial relief to help enterprises, banks and households survive the COVID-19 crisis," they said in a note.

On a quarter-on-quarter basis, GDP fell 9.8 per cent in the first three months of the year, the National Bureau of Statistics said, just off expectations for a 9.9 per cent contraction, and compared with 1.5 per cent growth in the previous quarter.

Separate data showed China's industrial output falling by a less-than-expected 1.1 per cent in March from a year earlier. Retail sales fell 15.8 per cent in the same period. Fixed asset investment shrank 16.1 per cent in



A man wearing a protective mask walks by Beijing's Central Business District during morning rush hour as the spread of the new coronavirus disease (COVID-19) continues in China. — Reuters

January-March.

China's urban jobless rate was at 5.9 per cent in March, down from 6.2 per cent in February.

The pandemic has infected more than 2 million globally and killed more than 130,000. China, where the virus first emerged, has reported more than 3,000 deaths although new infections have dropped significantly from their peak.

Analysts expect nearly 30 million job losses this year due to stuttering work resumption and plunging global demand, outpacing the 20-plus million layoffs during the 2008-09 financial crisis.

Beijing has pledged to take more

While China has managed to get large parts of its economy up and running from a standstill in February, analysts say policymakers face an uphill battle to revive growth as the coronavirus pandemic ravages global demand

steps to combat the impact of the pandemic, as mounting job losses threaten social stability.

The central bank has already loosened monetary policy to help free up the flow of credit to the economy, but its easing so far has been more measured than during the global financial crisis.

The government will also lean on fiscal stimulus to spur infrastructure investment and consumption, which could push the 2020 budget deficit to a record high.

For 2020, China's economic growth is set to stumble to its slowest annual pace in nearly half a century, a Reuters poll showed this week. — Reuters

US small-business loan programme hits \$350 bn cap and is now out of money

WASHINGTON: A \$350 billion emergency US loan programme to help small businesses keep workers on their payrolls amid the novel coronavirus disruption has run out of funds, the US Small Business Administration said on Thursday.

That has left thousands of small business across the country, which have been forced to shut down in order to stem the outbreak, without badly needed funds to keep them afloat.

"The SBA is currently unable to accept new applications for the Paycheck Protection Program based on available appropriations funding," the SBA said on its website, adding that as a result it could not enroll new lenders in the program for the time being.

The SBA said in an email that nearly 5,000 banks had made roughly 1.6 million loans under the scheme, which was part of a \$2.3 trillion congressional stimulus package passed last month to combat the economic damage caused by the virus.

Major lenders, including Wells Fargo, JPMorgan and Bank of America, have been inundated with hundreds of thousands of loan applications, far more than they have been able to process, according to the banks and Washington trade groups.

The Trump administration has been pressing Congress to approve an extra \$250 billion for the program, which provides small businesses with guaranteed bank loans that can be forgiven provided most of the money is used for payroll costs.

But lawmakers have yet to agree on legislation, as Democrats push to



People who lost their jobs wait in line to file for unemployment at an Arkansas Workforce Center in Fayetteville, Arkansas, US. — Reuters

include other provisions to ensure financing for minority-owned and rural businesses and assistance for hospitals, state and local governments and the poor. Republicans oppose the additional measures.

Washington-based banking groups have written to Congress multiple times calling for lawmakers to end the deadlock and have asked that lenders be able to continue processing applications so they are ready to disburse the funds once they are approved by Congress.

"Small businesses are continuing to submit loan applications and existing applications are still pending SBA approval," Richard Hunt, president and chief executive of the Consumer Bankers Association, said in a statement on Thursday.

"The millions of men and women who work at America's small businesses and their families are battling a health crisis while also facing an economic crisis unless Congress authorizes additional funds."

Worried that the funds are not being fairly distributed, the Independent Community Bankers of America, a powerful Washington group, has been pushing for 25 per cent of any new funds to be earmarked for community banks with \$50 billion or less in assets.

The industry has also called for changes to the scheme's rules and terms, including waiving certain lending compliance checks that they say have slowed their ability to get funds out the door. — Reuters



West Asian Championship new assignment for coach Ivankovic

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, APRIL 17

Oman national football team head coach Branko Ivankovic and his technical staff will undertake a new assignment at the 10th edition of the West Asian Championship which will be held in UAE in January 2021.

Oman's participation is confirmed in this event which will be added in the list of the Croatian coach's assignments.

The tournament will be a perfect event for the national team to have some tough matches if the team wishes to seal a berth to the last round of the World Cup Qatar 2022 qualification. Three more matches are left for the

Sultanate team in the second round of qualifications against Afghanistan, Qatar and Bangladesh teams.

As many as ten teams affirmed their participation at the West Asian Championship including: Lebanon, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Oman and the hosts UAE team.

It is expected that the number of teams may increase in the upcoming days as the West Asia Football Federation will continue receiving any new joining applications until end of the existing month.

The Croatian coach affirmed during the initial press conference, after appointing him as head coach of the national team, that advancing

to the second round qualification for World Cup Qatar 2022 is the top priority for him.

He confirmed that Oman's players ability to be competent enough to take on any top team in Asia.

The 65-year-old has signed a two-year deal in January. The Croatian coach lead the team at two domestic camps for the local players in February and he visited Oman's clubs to have a better idea on Oman's football organisation.

Later, the preparatory plan of the "Red Warriors" impacted due to the novel coronavirus (COVID-19).

The newly appointed coach decided for a personal initiative

against the pandemic through waiving of 40 per cent of his salary for the country to face the COVID-19 crises. "Red Warrior's fans and the community appreciated the coach's initiative through social media channels.

Asian Football Confederation (AFC) decided on April 14 to extend the postponement of all matches and competitions scheduled to take place in May and June until further notice. At the 2022 Qatar World Cup and 2023 China Asian Cup double qualifiers, Oman now possess 12 points from five matches while Qatar are topping the group by 13 points from the same number of games.



MELBOURNE: Cricket Australia has announced it is laying off most of its administrative staff and will run a skeleton operation until at least mid-year due to COVID-19's impact on the game.

The governing body informed the majority of staffers on Thursday that from April 27 they would have to remain home on reduced pay — reportedly 20 per-cent of their regular salary — until June 30 at the earliest.

With international and domestic cricket postponed indefinitely because of the virus, CA chief executive Kevin Roberts said the game had to cut costs.

"The impacts on the sports industry of the coronavirus pandemic are bigger than any one sport," he said in a statement.

"Cricket Australia — like all sporting bodies — is planning for a return to training/play, although no one is certain when this will be possible at this stage, and many scenarios are being considered."

Roberts said he hoped the situation regarding resumption of play would

Cricket Australia lays off staff over virus shutdown

be clearer by June 30.

Cricket Australia's website reported there were "ongoing discussions" between CA and the Australian Cricketers' Association about potential financial implications for players.

CA also said it was optimistic Australia's 2020-21 home schedule — which includes the T20 World Cup and a blockbuster Test series against India — would proceed even if stadiums were empty.

Australian officials are reportedly so keen for the India series to go ahead that they are considering basing Virat Kohli's men at a new luxury hotel with training facilities while they undergo mandatory quarantine.

The Sydney Morning Herald



reported the South Australian Cricket Association had offered to house India at the Oval Hotel, which is currently under construction at the Adelaide Oval.

Basing the team at the hotel, which is due to open in September, would allow the players to train at top-class facilities during a 14-day quarantine period.

The Herald estimated television revenue from the India series was worth Aus\$300 million (US\$190 million) for Cricket Australia.

It said the plan would need approval from government and health authorities in Australia, as well as the Board of Control for Cricket in India.

— AFP

New South African cricket boss Smith rules De Kock out of Test captaincy

JOHANNESBURG: Former Test skipper Graeme Smith was on Friday confirmed as South Africa's director of cricket — and revealed that Quinton de Kock would not be elevated to the Test captaincy.

Jacques Faul, acting chief executive of Cricket South Africa, said Smith had been appointed for a two-year term, expiring at the end of March 2022. Smith was appointed in an acting capacity last December.

Smith, 39, captained South Africa in a world record 108 Test matches and in 149 one-day internationals. He also captained a World XI in a one-off Test against Australia in 2005/06.

He told a tele-conference that the debate over the Test captaincy was one of the challenges he faced during a period when no cricket can be played because of the coronavirus pandemic.

"It's not going to be Quinton," he said, citing De Kock's responsibility as the country's limited-overs captain as well as being wicketkeeper and a key batsman.

Smith gave no indication of the likely replacement following the decision of Faf du Plessis in February to step down from the job.

"There's no one person you can pinpoint," he said. "There are a lot of players on a similar level." South Africa's next scheduled Test series is in the West Indies in July but Smith said that it had not been finalised due to the COVID-19 outbreak.

South Africa are also due to go to Sri Lanka for a limited-overs tour in June but Smith said both tours could be postponed.

"We are in discussion with the boards of those countries and decisions will have to be made pretty soon," he said.

“It's not going to be Quinton. There's no one person you can pinpoint. There are a lot of players on a similar level

GRAEME SMITH
Director of Cricket, South Africa

happened as planned.

He said South Africa hoped to host a Twenty20 series against India in August as part of the build-up to the world event. "There is a lot of doubt about what the situation will be by then but we are in discussions with the Board of Control for Cricket in India," he said.

Faul said he expected more clarity on the status of the T20 World Cup to emerge when the International Cricket Council hosts a video discussion between national chief executives next Thursday.

Smith's temporary appointment last December was at a time of crisis in South African cricket following the suspension of chief executive Thabang Moroe, calls for the board of CSA to resign and in the wake of a poor performance by the national team in the 2019 Cricket World Cup, which was followed by a 3-0 thrashing in a Test series in India.

One of Smith's first moves was to appoint former Test wicketkeeper and long-time team-mate Mark Boucher as national head coach through to the 2023 World Cup.

The team has had mixed results since Boucher's appointment, losing Test series and Twenty20 series against England and Australia.

But they finished the 2019/20 season on a high, beating Australia 3-0 in an ODI series, shortly before cricket was shut down.

— AFP



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VETTEL

DISMISSES BACK-TO-BACK RACING OVERLOAD AS 'NOT REALISTIC'

LONDON: Four-time world champion Sebastian Vettel on Friday cautioned against the temptation to shoehorn too many Formula One races into a revised calendar, describing the move as “not realistic”.

The 22-event F1 season has been decimated by the coronavirus with nine races either cancelled or postponed.

The French Grand Prix scheduled for June 28 is also in doubt as is the Belgian Grand Prix, set for August 30.

F1 chiefs have floated the idea of making up for lost time by staging races on successive weekends or even having two races on the same weekend.

However, Ferrari star Vettel fears such a move could lead to burnout for team staff.

“We drivers are a little privileged,” Vettel told reporters by teleconference from his home in Switzerland.

“Of course, the races are tiring but there have to be limits for the staff. They must rest.

“We must also see if it is easy to reschedule races, if the circuits are not already taken. Many questions remain. I think the schedule will be busier, but 10 consecutive weekends is not realistic.”

Vettel suggested that he would favour staging races without fans if it allowed a quick resumption as long as it did not become a common feature.

Other sports have already toyed with the idea of staging events behind closed doors.

‘IT’S COMPLICATED’

For example, the US PGA Tour on Thursday announced plans to resume in June, with the first four tournaments being closed to spectators.

“It’s complicated,” admitted Vettel.

“On the one hand, there is the health of the sport, on the other, that of the people who work in the paddock and

especially the fans. “There are several options. No one likes to run in front of empty stands, but we will have to see if it will not allow us to resume much sooner.

“The first races will probably be a little different, but not too much, I hope, because we want to run in front of the fans.”

Vettel insists that for him even a 10-race season is just as valuable as a 22-race campaign.

However, he admits that the damage to the sport caused by the coronavirus pandemic could be fatal for the smaller teams on the grid.

Without racing, the massive TV and sponsorship revenues have dried up.

Half of the teams have already started furloughing staff.

Teams have agreed to lower the spending cap from \$175 million (161.4 million euros) to \$150 million.

“Clearly, some small teams are in danger and, as a family, F1 has to take care of its own,” said Vettel.

SPECULATION

Spending has not been the only talk in the sport.

There has also been speculation over Vettel’s contract with Ferrari.

He penned a three-year deal with the Italian giants in 2017, reportedly worth around \$112 million.

There have been talks over an extension. However, those conversations took a twist after Vettel finished the 2019 championship behind new team-mate Charles Leclerc.

“At the beginning (of the coronavirus crisis), the priority was to manage the situation in the best way and therefore the negotiations were put on hold,” said Vettel. “I think we are going to move forward but we do not have a specific deadline.”

— AFP

“

We drivers are a little privileged. Of course, the races are tiring but there have to be limits for the staff. They must rest.

SEBASTIAN VETTEL, FOUR-TIME WORLD CHAMPION