Concerted efforts to control COVID-19 in Kuwait

Shuttered shops, vacant malls, empty streets and people walking around with face masks, are some of the most visible signs of coronavirus infection in many cities around the world. Kuwait has thankfully not displayed that level of panicky response. Yes, there has been a drop in the number of people visiting public places and restaurants, as well as in the traffic on roads, but the response has generally been muted.

The government, which is usually accused of always reacting to situations, has, for once, taken several proactive measures to curtail the spread of coronavirus infection in Kuwait. On Wednesday, during an extraordinary meeting chaired by His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, the Cabinet decided on a slew of measures to curtail the spread of coronavirus in the country. Some of these steps include the postponement of the opening of all government and private schools, as well as colleges and other educational institutions, from 1 March to 14 March.

The Cabinet also tasked the Kuwait Supply Company with supplying local markets with sufficient quantities of face-masks to be used by citizens and expats to curb infection. Also, the Social Affairs Ministry, in coordination with the Union of Consumer Cooperative Societies, is to make available all sterilization products in all cooperative societies.

Kuwait has also requested the WHO to send a specialized global medical team as soon as possible to review and assess measures taken by the state bodies to control the new coronavirus and offer their advice and recommendations.

__CONTINUED ON PAGE 11__
Sponsors held responsible if expatriates overstay visa period

D eputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior Anas Al-Saleh has issued a decision to suspend all residency-related transactions of sponsors, if the expatriates under their sponsorship overstay their visa period. This is applicable to Kuwaitis who sponsor foreigners on visit or work visas, as well as expatriates who sponsor their relatives on visit visas.

Minister Al-Saleh has mandated the Assistant Undersecretary for Residence Affairs Major General Talal Malrafat to enforce the decision. The suspension imposed on sponsors will be withdrawn only after submission of proof from concerned authorities that the overstaying expatriate has departed the country.

The Ministry of Interior clarified that the new measures were being taken after it emerged that more than 30,000 people, most of them women and children on visit visas, had not left the country despite the expiry of their visas.

There are also reports that a significant number of people who arrived on visit or business visas have remained in the country, many of whom are believed to be Syrian nationals. Many Syrians who arrived in Kuwait following the outbreak of conflict in their country in 2011 have taken undue advantage of the humanitarian decision to assist them and remained illegally in Kuwait.

Security campaigns will reportedly be strengthened across the country in the coming days to arrest and deport those overstaying their visas, however, the difficulty with these campaigns is that many of those overstaying, such as women and children, very rarely leave their homes.

Another problem that the authorities have faced in the past is that some of those arrested hide their identification documents and claim to be bedouins. The Central System for Remedying the Situation of Illegal Residents (CSRSIR) recently uncovered many such cases where people who entered the country recently hide their documents and claim bedouin status.

KIPS students hold Annual Day celebrations

K ids International Pre School (KIPS) celebrated its third Annual Day on 20 February. The program commenced with the recitation of verses from Holy Quran followed by its translation.

Rohit S. Nair then sang the Kuwait and Indian national anthems. The dignitaries in attendance by its translation.

Rohit S. Nair then sang the Kuwait and Indian national anthems. The dignitaries in attendance included the Managing Editor of The Times Kuwait, Reaven D’Souza, Advocate and member of NORKA Roots and legal advisor NORKA, The Government of Kerala, Rajesh Sagar; Abdullah Fahad Abdullah Al Ajmi; the Manager Commercial Bank of Kuwait (CBK) Samma Serri; the Asst. Manager CBK, Meraj Mahmud Al Farage; and the Principal in charge of India International School (Mangaf), Sophy John. The KIPS Principal Nikfar Qazi extended a warm welcome to all present.

Director of India International School (Mangaf) Malayil Moosa Khoya extended his appreciation to the students and teachers for presenting a classic program. He lauded the relentless hard work done by Principal Qazi, Vice Principal Gayathri Bhaskaran, the Administrative Manager Najiyah Kader, teaching and non-teaching staff of Kids International Preschool for presenting a mesmerizing experience.

The highlight of the program was a glimpse into school life of KIPS, and a walk-through of the presentation of Indian cultural heritage. This was followed by a ‘Indian Mela’ which showcased the extensive Indian cultural heritage. The event culminated with a spectacular grand finale showcasing the beautiful land of Kuwait to mark the beautiful celebrations of the country’s National and Liberation days which was recreated on stage by teachers and tiny tots of KIPS.

No more Egyptian farmers for Kuwait

T he Egyptian Embassy will no more approve work permits for farmers in a step to protect Egyptians from human and visa traffickers. Following reports that hundreds of Egyptians have been victims of visa trafficking, the embassy decided not to approve work permits for small enterprises starting April 2019.

Another reason is that the strict Kuwait law prohibits the visa transfer from one sector to another, regardless of the workers are registered as employees, farmers or fishermen. Sources revealed the embassy’s plan to include fishermen and other categories of workers due to irregularities in the recruitment process that is associated with visa trafficking. Sources affirmed there has been coordination with Kuwaiti governmental bodies in this regard.

It has been reported the price of visas for Egyptian farmers, fishermen and small enterprises is not less than KD 1,000. According to official statistics issued by the Public Authority for Civil Information (PACI) for the year 2019, the number of Egyptian workers reached $20,000 or 18 percent of the total workforce in Kuwait.
Reception held to mark Guyanese Republic Day

The Ambassador of Guyana to Kuwait, H.E. Dr. Shamir Ally hosted a reception to mark the 50th anniversary of his country’s Republic Day at the embassy premises on 23 February. Members of the diplomatic corps, special invitees and media personnel attended the function.

In his speech on the occasion, following the hoisting of his country’s national flag, the Guyanese ambassador provided some background on how Guyana secured its independence from the British in 1966 and became a republic in 1970. He pointed out that the country has made great strides in development since its independence and that the years 2020 to 2029 has been planned as the Decade of Development. He explained that in the decade ahead the country would focus on growth prospects in green energy, petroleum, digital connectivity and education. As a green state, the country would develop renewable energy sources, while as a petroleum state it would be producing 800,000 barrels of oil per day from newly discovered oil fields. He added, the country would also strive to improve its connectivity through digital technology and enhance the quality of education for its youth to develop the human resources and benefit the country.

Praising the diplomatic relations between Guyana and Kuwait, he called upon Kuwaitis to visit Guyana and see for themselves the vast potential of the country.

Maurya Kala Parisar to organize 7th Food Festival

Maurya Kala Parisar, Kuwait (MKP) is back with the 7th edition of its immensely popular annual Food Festival. MKP’s Food Festival. The main event is a competition of home cooked food from India and food stalls where visitors can enjoy popular dishes from various regions. The event will be held on Friday, 10 April, 2020 at Indian Community School Kuwait Junior, Block 10 Salmiya (ICSK Junior) from 3.00 pm onwards. The event’s objective is to highlight specialties from various regions of India especially from the states of Bihar and Jharkhand.

The competition will be held in five categories and will be judged by prestigious celebrities and chefs. Each category will have amazing prizes.

The entertainment will include various types of fun activities and several stalls of delicious food from various parts of India, in addition to accessories, clothing, games and many more.

Bank fraud victim reports loss of KD1,800

A Kuwaiti man has complained to police in Riqqa that he had been defrauded of KD1,800 by a person impersonating a bank official. In his report to the police, the Kuwaiti said the fraudster had claimed that unless the victims account was updated in 60 seconds he would lose access to his ATM card and the bank would freeze his account.

Police have referred the case to the Electronic Crimes Investigation Department at the Ministry of Interior. Despite repeated warnings from banks and security personnel against divulging personal bank details to strangers, who call claiming to be bank officials, people continue to fall prey to this fraud.

Border official interrogated for misdemeanor

An unnamed official at the land border has been detained and is being interrogated by concerned authorities following the discovery that he aided a woman to illegally enter and exit the country.

The official is alleged to have stamped the entry and exit on the passport of an unnamed Kuwaiti woman who was not residing in the country. The duplicity came to light when the woman arrived at Kuwait airport and a vigilant immigration officer noticed that the woman had entered the country through the land border but had not exited the country. An investigation into the matter revealed that the border official while stamping exit in the passport had apparently forgotten to enter the ‘exit’ in the online system. Investigations are said to be continuing into the matter.

The event also has drawing and painting activities for kids as well as a fancy dress event will be organised for kids up to 14 years of age. Dress up your kids in the fanciest of dresses and let them walk the ramp.

Photography Contest is another attraction where on the spot photos of the 7th MKP Food Festival event will be accepted through WhatsApp. The best ones will be awarded.

Entries for the food competition is open to Indian Community in Kuwait including MKP members as well as non-members. As in previous years, there is no entry fee for participating in the 7th MKP Food Festival.

The association encourages all food enthusiasts from Indian Community to participate in this unique mouth-watering festival in large numbers. Please see this link for more information: https://www.timeskuwait.com/news/maurya-kala-parisar-to-organise-7th-food-festival-on-10-april/
Thought for the week

Always turn a negative situation into a positive situation.

– Michael Jordan

Foods to slim your waistline

Ask Mira: Eating Right to Live Happy & Healthy

Goat cheese mixed with oregano, basil, parsley, and chives is a delicious stuffing for chicken. The seasoning in the cheese will help to season the chicken, and you can try garnishing it with lemon juice, garlic and cherry tomatoes. Dial up veggie trays, crostini and tomatoes. Simply scoop it out, stir in herbs or spices, and instantly amp up meal time. Get creative with spices (and even fruit), and instantly dress up basic sandwiches and bagels. Add excitement to lunchtime with goat cheese as a palatable alternative to mayonnaise and an easy way to add more protein into the mix. For a tomato sandwich, goat cheese actually balances out acid from tomatoes and makes for a noteworthy bite. You can even mix and match sweet with savory. Bagels are a fantastic choice, as textually speaking, goat cheese is very similar to cream cheese. Or finely dice fresh vegetables and mix in with regular goat cheese for a tasty take on garden vegetable cream cheese.

Cream cheese is like sour cream, but better: Fresh goat cheese, plain and simple, is a great substitute for sour cream dolloped on a baked potato. Or add garlic and chives to give a little personality to baked potato night. The best part? Goat cheese is so flavorful that butter and sour cream will not be missed. You can also stir goat cheese into soup and chill right before serving.

Mix up pasta: If there is no time to make something like homemade ravioli, add plain goat cheese to your favorite cooked pasta noodles, tossed with olive oil, chopped pita/ach, black pepper, and lemon zest, for dinner in a pinch. The combinations of pasta fillings and sauces are endless.

Curb sweet tooth cravings: To curb sweet tooth cravings: to curb sweet tooth cravings, add honey and brown sugar to plain goat cheese. You can slather it on Graham crackers or use it as a crepe filling alongside seasonal fruit. You can even dip strawberries in sweetened goat cheese for a delicious and elegant dessert.

Lean proteins: Lean meat, chicken and fish have the ability to reduce belly fat. As I told you before, it takes more energy to digest proteins, so your body is working hard. Stay away from salmon, or limit it once a week. Although it is rich in omega 3, it is high in sodium which causes water retention. Lean proteins can best be served with steamed vegetables, boiled beans instead of rice for maximum benefits.

Grapefruit: One grapefruit a day can speed up weight loss. The fruit is high in water and vitamin C, and has been known to aid in proper digestion by creating an alkaline condition in the intestines. Moreover, grapefruit has the effect of suppressing your appetite, which helps you to slim down by making you feel fuller longer and reducing your interest in eating.

1 grapefruit: 110 calories, 0.3 g of fat, 0 mg of sodium

Asparagus: I mentioned in another post that asparagus has the ability to prevent cellulite. This is because asparagus is high in water and cleans the system. It will also help you to get a flat stomach.

4 asparagus: 27 calories, 0.2 g of fat, 1 g of sodium

Canned asparagus is high in sodium, so if you want to have it, you need to wash it many times with water. The amount of sodium is listed as ‘Sodium’ or ‘Na’. The daily sodium intake: 1200 to 2500 mg (for someone who doesn’t have medical problems). Other tips for a slim waist is to drink warm lemon water in the morning to clean your system and flush toxins out of the body. Two glasses of water before each meal is a must.

To subscribe to my diet programs, don’t forget to log in to: www.eatlikemira.com.

Mira is a go-to-source for nutrition and wellness and has joined The Times Kuwait team in a new weekly column discussing nutrition and answering queries. You can send in your questions to info@timeskuwait@gmail.com.

Goat cheese

Dial up veggie trays, crostini and tomatoes. Do not be scared to play with different herbs and spices. It is a fun way to amp up regular or even store-bought guacamole.

Dress up basic sandwiches and bagels: Add excitement to lunchtime with goat cheese as a palatable alternative to mayonnaise and an easy way to add more protein into the mix. For a tomato sandwich, goat cheese actually balances out acid from tomatoes and makes for a noteworthy bite. You can even mix and match sweet with savory. Bagels are a fantastic choice, as textually speaking, goat cheese is very similar to cream cheese. Or finely dice fresh vegetables and mix in with regular goat cheese for a tasty take on garden vegetable cream cheese.

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The government, in coordination with the Public Authority for Manpower (PAM), the ministries of interior, foreign affairs and other concerned government entities, has drawn up a new contract for all household workers in Kuwait, which is expected to go into effect this week.

The contract, officially referred to as the ‘Tripartite Model or Unified Contract’, will be applicable to the recruitment of domestic helpers of all nationalities, and is said to address the concerns of all stakeholders, including the employee, the employer, and the government, as well as domestic recruitment offices.

Copies of the contract are being sent to relevant parties such as domestic recruitment offices prior to its publication. The ‘Tripartite Model’ contract will oblige the employer to provide suitable housing with adequate means of living for the third party (the domestic worker), including food clothing and proper treatment, as well as medical care and registration in the health insurance system. The employer will also be obligated to pay wages at the end of each month, which should not be less than the minimum stipulated in the contract, and should be acknowledged by a receipt duly signed by the worker.

The new contract also underlines that the worker should not be made to work for more than 12 hours per day, with five hours of work followed by not less than an hour of rest, and a night break of eight consecutive hours, at least one day off per week and a paid annual vacation.

The contract also entitles the worker to an indemnity at the end of the contract period equivalent to a month’s wage for each year of service. The employer is also forbidden to keep the employee’s passport, ID or other personal documents. The employee’s residency cannot be transferred during the initial period of contract, and all disputes arising between the employee and employer is to be settled through the relevant department at PAM.

The terms of the contract are binding not only on the employer, but also on all family members. Meanwhile, there have been reports that some domestic recruitment offices have increased the recruitment cost of workers from the previous KD990 to KD1,200. This follows a stipulation in the new contract that obliges the recruitment office to return the worker to their home country, in the event of the worker refusing to work for the same sponsor during the initial contract period.

What is new in the latest Unified contract for Domestic workers?

What is new in the latest Unified contract for Domestic workers?

Tunisia clinches Independence Cup in volleyball tournament

British Academy of Sport (BAS) in cooperation with the Embassy of Serbia organized the 7th Men’s International Volleyball Tournament ‘Independence Cup’ between embassies in Kuwait. The highly charged event, which was held at the British School of Kuwait (BSK) campus on 14 February, was attended by a large crowd of spectators, including ambassadors and community members of the countries participating in the tournament. This year’s tournament witnessed the participation of 12 embassy teams: Afghanistan, Czech Republic, Ghana, Great Britain, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Kuwait, Philippines, Romania, Russia and Tunisia.

Several high-octane games in the tournament held the spectators spellbound, especially those between strong opposing teams. In the semifinals Tunisia took on India, while Romania was pitted against the Philippines. For the fourth consecutive year, the winners of the Independence Cup were Team Tunisia. Madame Vera Al Mutawa MBE, the founder of BSK, the Serbian Ambassador to Kuwait H.E. Vladimir Al Khout and the Director of British Academy of Sport Lucian Anisia handed over the medals and gifts to the participants and the Independence Cup 2020 trophy to the Tunisian Team.

The event was sponsored by Ecco, Royale Hayat, 4FEST, Jumeirah Messilah Beach Hotel, Qatar Airways, FCM Travel, Decathlon and media partner The Times Kuwait.

Apart from this tournament, BAS will open for registration for Term 3 Courses in the beginning of March.

Tunisia clinches Independence Cup in volleyball tournament

Tunisia clinches Independence Cup in volleyball tournament

HALDIRAM FROZEN NOW AVAILABLE IN KUWAIT
UN office participates in Kuwait’s National and Liberation Days celebration

The United Nations Office in Kuwait, in collaboration with the Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Heritage Village, hosted a ceremony at its premises on 22 February. A large crowd of foreign and Arab diplomats as well as a gathering of different nationalities attended the program held to mark the country’s 59th National Day and the 29th Liberation Day anniversaries.

On the sidelines of the function, the General Director of the village, Advisor at the Amiri Diwan, Mohammad Dhahafallah Sharar noted that the village’s participation comes to embody the distinguished relations between the State of Kuwait and the United Nations. Sharar added that this celebration was an exceptional UN initiative in recognition of Kuwait’s role in supporting UN efforts to establish world peace, and pointed out that the village’s participation in the UN function came upon directives from His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al Jaber Al-Sabah.

For his part, the village director Saif Al-Shalahi pointed out that the village’s participation intends to offer the diplomatic and international community a cultural and heritage view of Kuwait, through setting up a heritage exhibition that is a gift from the village’s employees to the United Nations. Al-Shalahi said that the exhibition represents the life of the people of the desert in the past, which includes Sadu crafts, which is one of the traditional Bedouin weaving. Many old handicrafts and ancient Rababa art.

New problems awaits the return of Filipino workers

Filipino household workers (HWs) are expected to start from the next month but despite the completion of formalities between Kuwait and Philippines new issues have emerged. The new standard employment contract has several clauses that were not circulated to the manpower agencies and this may hinder the application of these terms and conditions for the benefit of both the parties. Many job offices have decided to increase the recruiting rates from KD 990 to KD 1,200 to cover expenses if the applicant fails to continue working with the same sponsor. Except for those workers hired by the Al Dura Company, the new contract amendment does not allow other agencies to transfer workers to the new sponsor.

This can lead to complications as if the worker refuses to continue working at their sponsor, the agency has to bear the cost of returning them to their country and refunding the value of the cost paid by the employer.

The head of the Kuwait Federation of Owners of Home Labor Offices in Kuwait, Khald Al-Dikhan, has clarified that these are routine procedures that follow the signing of the agreement to bring domestic workers from the Philippines which may take about 10 days. Meanwhile, Diplomatic sources expect that the Philippines employment agencies would circulate the terms of the contract in harmony with the employment agencies and the embassy. Recruiting domestic workers to Kuwait will begin within a week.

Kuwait serious about improving conditions of the workers

Head of the Farwaniya Municipality, Engineer Muhammad Sarkhoosh has recently pointed out that the large companies have an opportunity to improve the housing conditions of their workers living in Jeleeb Al-Shuyoukh.

According to media reports, Muhammad Sarkhoosh has stated that Engineer Ahmad Al-Manshafi, Director-General of the Kuwait Municipality is monitoring the conditions in the area particularly after he requested an extension of the Municipality work, considering the involved authorities in the committee are focused on companies with government contracts and that there is, therefore, an appropriate time of 6 months to improve their conditions.

During a recent field inspection tour by Public Authority for Manpower personnel Muhammad Sarsukh emphasized the companies that they must protect the rights of their employees. Earlier the consensus from the last year’s visit by PAM personnel was that the housing provided to workers was generally unfit for living as most of the buildings were overcrowded with inadequate cleanliness and lack of proper sanitation facilities. Inspectors also came across several irregularities; some of the workers had transformed their housing into unlicensed mini-workshops doing different work, while others had turned them into makeshift groceries.

Recently, Sarkhoosh has revealed that to deal with the rest of the violations in the area, especially since the committee has come a long way in administratively closing the violating stores, a second plan will be announced shortly. He further added that there will be closure without any extension or renewal of certain commercial activities in the area, including a pharmacy, a company selling construction materials, and a money exchange, since the renewal is currently being carried out under an automated system and the licensing of these activities is being suspended.
The 2019 coronavirus started in the city of Wuhan in China's Hubei province with the first reported case coming to light on 8 December. Since then the virus has spread to a total of 60 countries and territories around the world. The latest tally on the COVID-19 is 8,678 cases reported, 2,933 known deaths, 39,659 recovered, 42,086 active cases, of which 35,268 are mild cases and 7,818 are serious or critical.

Most of the infections (76,257) and deaths (2,933) were in China, mainly in Wuhan, the alleged epicenter of the infection, followed by South Korea, which has so far reported 3,130 infections and 17 deaths. Italy with 889 infections and 21 deaths, Iran with 939 infections and 43 deaths and Japan with 240 infections and 5 deaths are the top-five countries impacted by the virus so far. Other countries have reported infections of less than 100 and deaths were reported in single digits from just four more countries — Hong Kong and France with two deaths each and Taiwan and the Philippines with one mortality each.

The fatality rate for COVID-19 has been tentatively placed between 2 and 3 percent. In comparison, the 2002 outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) had a case-fatality rate of around 16 percent (809 cases and 774 deaths), while Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) killed 34 percent of people with the illness between 2012 and 2019 (1,697 cases and 76 deaths). Based on the given data, the 2019 coronavirus fatality rate, COVID-19 appears to have resulted in more deaths than SARS and MERS combined. But the numbers are still changing as the virus continues to spread and peak infections and deaths are the top-five countries impacted by the virus so far. Other countries have reported infections of less than 100 and deaths were reported in single digits from just four more countries — Hong Kong and France with two deaths each and Taiwan and the Philippines with one mortality each.

The term ‘corona’ was given to this family of viruses, as under the microscope they appear in the form of a blob surrounded by spikes that resemble the sun’s corona. It belongs to a large family of viruses that cause respiratory infections like COVID-19 from 2012 in Saudi Arabia and SARS that was initially reported case coming to light on 8 December. Since then the virus has spread to a total of 60 countries and territories around the world. The latest tally on the COVID-19 is 8,678 cases reported, 2,933 known deaths, 39,659 recovered, 42,086 active cases, of which 35,268 are mild cases and 7,818 are serious or critical.

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Airlines stand to lose $29.3 billion of revenue this year due to the coronavirus outbreak, the global airline industry body has warned. The International Air Transport Association (IATA) predicts demand for air travel will fall for the first time in more than a decade. Airlines in China and other parts of the Asia Pacific region are expected to take the vast majority of the impact. It comes as carriers around the world have been forced to reduce flights. In total, airlines in the Asia Pacific region are set to see a $27.8 billion revenue loss in 2020, while those outside Asia are expected to lose $1.5 billion in revenue, IATA has forecast. Of that figure, IATA predicts that carriers in China are set to lose revenue of $12.8 billion in their home market alone.

"Airlines are making difficult decisions to cut capacity and in some cases routes," said IATA's director-general Alexandre de Juniac. "This will be a very tough year for airlines." IATA said it had based its estimates on the slump in demand that was seen during the Sars (severe acute respiratory syndrome) outbreak in 2003. That was characterized by a six-month period that saw a sharp fall in demand followed by an equally quick recovery. That year Sars was responsible for the 5.1 percent fall in demand for airlines in the Asia-Pacific region.

The forecast also assumes that the virus remains centered on China, but IATA warned the effect could be far worse if the infection spreads further in the region. IATA has previously forecast that the Asia Pacific region would be the biggest driver of air travel demand between 2015 and 2035, with four of the five fastest-growing markets in terms of passengers being from Asia.

On Thursday, two major airline groups warned of a severe financial impact as a result of the coronavirus hitting demand for travel in Asia.

Precautionary measures taken by the government recently to contain the spread of coronavirus in Kuwait has led to limiting public gatherings. In light of preventive steps announced by the authorities, the dergy and parish council members held an emergency meeting on 28 February, and decided that all churches in Kuwait will be closed from 1 to 14 March. There will also be no Masses, Retreats, prayer meetings, seminars or any other services during this period. In addition, Catechism classes will be suspended as well. The parishioners are requested not to organize any charismatic prayer services or practices, or any sort of meetings or gatherings in the Church compound.

Church officials clarified that the government is expected to provide further instructions on this issue on 14 March, and until such time the parishioners are advised to follow the new directives and be heedful of the prevailing health situation.

The faithful are advised to follow up their spiritual obligations and practices of faith in their own homes, through the following:

- To participate in the Holy Mass through the Catholic TV channels.
- To read the scripture readings of the day as a family.
- To perform the way of the cross.
- To recite the holy Rosary and Divine Mercy, and perform any other spiritual activity.

Parishioners are requested to implore the maternal aid of Our Lady of Arabia and continue to fast and pray for a quick medical breakthrough and speedy recovery of those infected by the Coronavirus.

Churches to remain closed after advisory from MoH

The Kuwaiti Ministry of Interior warned on Tuesday that it would take immediate legal action against those involved in spreading rumors about the novel coronavirus (COVID-19).

The ministry, in a press release, urged social media users to be helpful amid the current local and regional circumstances and the coronavirus outbreak, emphasizing that everyone should shoulder national responsibilities and back government efforts to fight this virus.

It regretted that some people are capitalizing on the current circumstances to throw people into a state of panic and spread rumors with a view to undermining security and reporting baseless information in this regard.
COVID-19 miracle? Vietnam says all its infected patients cured

And the rapid spread of the coronavirus outbreak around the world, Vietnam has announced that all 16 infected patients in the country were discharged from hospital and declared cured.

As of Wednesday, all 16 patients, including the oldest who is 73, had been cured and discharged from the hospital.

For the past 15 days, including on Friday, the government also detected no new cases of infections, the last one having been reported on February 15, even as a village north of Hanoi remains under a 20-day lockdown.

"If fighting COVID-19 has been a war, then we have won the first round but not the entire war because the situation can be very unpredictable," Vietnam's Ministry of Health quoted Deputy Prime Minister Vu Duc Dam as saying, referring to the illness caused by the coronavirus, during an online conference with city and provincial officials on Tuesday.

Worldwide, the outbreak has already killed almost 3,000 and infected more than 83,000 as of Saturday.

It is a different story, however, in Vietnam. World Health Organization (WHO) officials and health experts said the government's swift response to the emergency was crucial in containing the crisis at the early stage.

By Wednesday, the Vietnamese government declared that the 16th and final patient infected with the virus had been discharged from the hospital.

The 50-year-old man, identified as NVV, had earlier caught the infection from his 23-year-old daughter, identified only as NTD. Both are natives of Son Loi district in the northern province of Vinh Phuc, where 11 cases were found.

The daughter was one of eight employees of a Japanese company who returned from the Chinese city of Wuhan, the epicentre of the virus, on January 17. In all, six people among the group were found to have tested positive for the virus later.

Some of their relatives and friends were also infected, including a three-month-old baby, the youngest coronavirus patient to date.

Dr. Kidung Park, WHO representative in Vietnam, attributed the success to the government’s “proactivity and consistency throughout the response”.

Vietnam’s novel coronavirus nightmare began when two Chinese nationals were found to be the first cases in Ho Chi Minh City on January 23, the first day of the Lunar New Year celebration holiday, casting a gloomy air over the festive season.

Vietnam officially declared the coronavirus an epidemic on February 1, when the number of cases in the country rose to six.

On February 13, the health ministry ordered all 16,000 residents of Son Loi to remain under lockdown for 20 days, after more cases were confirmed.

"The country has activated its pandemic preparedness protocols to assess the infection and the level of severity. The situation is well-controlled and there are no further infections behind the clusters," Vietnam’s health minister, said at a news conference in Hanoi in early February.

While efforts were made to eliminate infections behind hospital doors, Vietnam has also suspended classes, extending school breaks to protect students. Millions of students in 65 cities and provinces in Vietnam have not been back to school since the beginning of the Lunar New Year celebration.

Deputy Minister of Education and Training Nguyen Huu Do said during a meeting on Tuesday that, "the safety of students must be placed above all", according to the education ministry’s website.

The ministry has instructed schools to disinfect classrooms before students resume their classes.

Teachers and staff have been asked to remind students about proper hygiene like hand-washing, and carry out temperature checks on students upon their arrival. Schools are also required to prepare health forms used to monitor students.

A document from the education ministry, issued on Thursday and seen by Al Jazeera, instructed authorities to allow students to return to school on March 2 if the COVID-19 situation is well-controlled and there are no further complicated developments.”

The Kuwait public sector continues to function normally

Work in the public sector is proceeding as regular and there is no need under current circumstances to stop it, Official Kuwait Government Spokesperson Tareq Al-Mezrem said on 28 February. The Government is keen on safety of citizens and residents of the country and is following up on developments concerning the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), Al-Mezrem said in a statement.

Public sector employees who are not compelled to show up at work are those who have been instructed by the Ministry of Health to quarantine themselves at their houses, the spokesperson added.

Kuwaitis advised not to travel unless necessary

Kuwaitis are urged not to travel abroad unless it was necessary in line with the state’s efforts to curb down on the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19), said the cabinet on 27 February in a statement, Deputy Prime Minister, Interior Minister, and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Anas Al-Saleh stressed that such advisories to not travel abroad comes to ensure citizens safety and prevent them from being subjected to coronavirus countermeasures implemented by other nations.

Travelers obliged to sign health undertaking as coronavirus precaution

In the light of the outbreak of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) worldwide, passengers leaving Kuwait via airports or land outlets have to sign a health undertaking to comply with the safety rules set forth by the ministries of health and interior upon their return.

The regulations include remaining in a 14-day quarantine if need be pursuant to Act 8 (1969) and cooperation with the competent authorities in order to curb the spread of the virus and protect the public health in Kuwait, the Ministry of Health said in a statement on Thursday.

In case of failure to meet the obligations, travelers would be liable to legal measures stipulated in the above-mentioned law, the statement said.
Advice for Health Workers

Workers are at the front line of any outbreak and as such are exposed to hazards that put them at risk of infection from pathogens such as COVID-19. Hazards include pathogen exposure, long working hours, psychological distress, fatigue, occupational burnout, stigma, and physical and psychological violence. To highlight the rights and responsibilities of health workers, including specific measures needed to protect occupational safety and health, the World Health Organization (WHO) has published an advisory for health workers and their employers.

Health worker rights include that employers and managers in health facilities:

- Assume overall responsibility to ensure that all necessary preventive and protective measures are taken to minimize occupational safety and health risks.
- Provide information, instruction and training on occupational safety and health, including:
  - Refresher training on infection prevention and control (IPC) and health training.
  - Provide adequate IPC and PPE supplies (masks, gloves, goggles, gowns, hand sanitizer, soap and water, cleaning supplies) in sufficient quantity to healthcare or other staff.
  - Personal protective equipment (PPE) (IPC) as well as the proper donning, using and disposing of.
- Provide or reinforce accurate infection prevention and control and public health information, including to concerned people who have neither symptoms nor risk factors.
- Ensure regular contact (e.g. via phone) and re-assurance.
- Enable co-operation between management and workers and/or their representatives.
- Honor the right to compensation, rehabilitation and curative services if infected with COVID-19 following occupational exposure and resulting illness would be considered an occupational disease.
- Provide access to mental health and counselling resources.
- Enable co-operation between management and workers and/or their representatives.

Health workers should:

- Follow established occupational safety and health procedures, avoid exposing others to health and safety risks and participate in employer-provided occupational safety and health training.
- Provide protocols to assess, triage and treat patients.
- Treat patients with respect, compassion and dignity.
- Maintain patient confidentiality.
- Swiftly follow established public health reporting procedures of suspect and confirmed cases.
- Provide or reinforce accurate infection prevention and control and public health information, including to concerned people who have neither symptoms nor risk factors.
- Put on, use, take off and dispose of personal protective equipment properly.

Workers do not incur expenses for occupational safety and health requirements:

- Familiarize personnel with technical updates on COVID-19 and provide appropriate tools to assess, triage, test and treat patients and to share infection-prevention and control information with patients and the public.
- As needed, provide with appropriate security measures for personal safety.
- Provide a blame-free environment for workers to report on incidents, such as exposures to blood or bodily fluids from the respiratory system or to cases of violence, and to adopt measures for immediate followup, including support to victims:
  - Advise workers on self-assessment, symptom reporting and staying home when ill.
  - Maintain appropriate working hours and breaks.
  - Consult with health workers on occupational safety and health aspects of their work and notify the labor inspectorate of cases of occupational diseases.
  - Not be required to return to a work situation where there is continuing or serious danger to life or health, until the employer has taken necessary remedial action.
  - Allow workers to exercise their right to remove themselves from a work situation that they have reasonable justification to believe presents imminent and danger to their life or health. When a health worker exercises this right, they shall be protected from any undue consequences.

Health workers are at the front line of any outbreak and as such are exposed to hazards that put them at risk of infection from pathogens such as COVID-19. Hazards include pathogen exposure, long working hours, psychological distress, fatig

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Highlighted in green = All cases have recovered from the infection.
Highlighted in grey = All cases have had an outcome (there are no active cases).

Coronavirus Cases: 85,227

Recovered: 39,561

Total Cases in Kuwait: 45
Concerted efforts to control COVID-19 in Kuwait

In addition, the Cabinet urged all citizens and expats to avoid gatherings, which may help spread infections. Moreover, the Cabinet reiterated that more severe penalties would be applied to those who breach safety regulations in line with the cooperation with the authorities. The government also called on people to follow all measures aimed at ensuring their safety and prevent them from being subjected to the disease, and to ignore rumors and false information being circulated through various social media platforms.

For its part, the Ministry of Health is providing daily updates on the virus and explain the preventive measures taken to control COVID-19 and inform the public on a regular basis on the development locally and internationally. It urged people to follow official guidelines on how to guard against the disease and not to panic from reading exaggerated news items on social media platforms. Dr. Sheikh Basil Al-Sabah also attempted to calm public fears about the new virus.

In a follow-up to the country’s efforts to curb the spread of COVID-19 and ensure safety of citizens, Kuwait Cabinet on Thursday urged all citizens and expats who are stuck abroad due to the virus to stay home. In a statement, Deputy Prime Minister, Interior Minister, and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Ali Al-Salim affirmed that such calls to not travel abroad came to ensure citizens safety and prevent them from being subjected to coronavirus countermeasures implemented by other nations.

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs asked nationals who are currently abroad to return home. The Ministry said the call was intended to spare citizens from the hazards of infection of coronavirus and relieve them of rapid and changing precautions for entry and departure for travelers, undertaken by states as precautions against the virus. Kuwait’s Directorate-General for Civil Aviation has also banned flights from various countries reported to be infected with COVID-19, including Singapore, Japan, China, Hong Kong, Iran, Iraq, South Korea, Thailand, and Italy.

For its part, the Ministry of Health has warned that passengers leaving Kuwait via airports or land borders will have to undertake to comply with the safety rules set forth by the ministries of health and interior upon their return. The regulations include remaining in a 14-day quarantine if need be, and cooperate with the competent authorities in order to curb the spread of the virus and protect the public health in Kuwait. Failure to comply with these obligations could entail the passenger facing legal measures, said the ministry.

In a further move to contain the spread of coronavirus, the Ministry of Interior has announced that passports should be presented to authorities for citizens and GCC nationals traveling to or from neighboring GCC states instead of their national IDs. This precaution is to ensure that authorities can verify their recent travel itinerary and possible visits to countries hit by the coronavirus. However, this measure is not applicable to Kuwaiti citizens already in a GCC country who have used their IDs in their exit, and GCC citizens currently visiting Kuwait who have used their IDs to enter.

In support of the government’s initiatives to curb the spread of coronavirus in the country, the Catholic Church has decided to suspend its services for two weeks in a letter to parishioners, on behalf of the Vicar General of the Apostolic Vicariate of Northern Arabia, Parish of The Holy Family Cathedral, Rev. Fr. Peter P. Mathew. The Vicariate announced that it had received a directive from the Kuwait government and the Ministry of Health, to avoid any public gatherings for a period of two weeks, starting from 1 to 14 March.

The letter added that in response to this precautionary guideline, the clergy and parish council members held an emergency meeting on 28 February and decided that all Churches will be closed from 1 to 14 March. As a result of the closure, all Masses, Retreats, prayer meetings, seminars and any other services, as well as Catechism classes for this period will remain cancelled. The Vicariate also sent messages to the Vicarates and parishes that were closed to warn all priests and parochial vicars to avoid gatherings for a period of two weeks, starting from 1 to 14 March.

Citizens and residents in Kuwait seem to be heeding instructions from the authorities to avoid gatherings and postpone celebratory gatherings. In line with the government’s move to cancel all public gatherings, celebrations to mark the recent national holidays were a relatively low-key affair. The Ministry of health in coordination with other relevant entities have also intensified health scans at the airport and other entry points, to identify and effectively quarantine such showing signs of infection. Response of the public to all these preventive steps have in the large part been cooperative and supportive of the government’s actions.

Meanwhile, Kuwait has called for foreign hands with WHO in the fight against COVID-19. Kuwait and WHO are expected to significantly increase cooperation following the opening of a regional office of WHO in Kuwait, said Ambassador Jamal Al-Ghanmu, Kuwait top diplomat to the United Nations. In Geneva, Ambassador Al-Ghanmu was speaking after meeting with the Executive Director, WHO Health Emergencies Program, Michael Ryan, with whom he discussed diverting part of Kuwait’s annual donation to the WHO of $1 million to help fight COVID-19 infections around the world.

Ambassador Al-Ghanmu added that Kuwait fully supported WHO’s endeavors to fight and contain the coronavirus and that Kuwait’s delegation to the UN in Geneva was in contact with WHO on a daily basis to get latest updates about COVID-19 and convey them to the health authorities in Kuwait.

Despite fear mongering on social media platforms and blaring media headlines of infection and mortality figures, and the increasing number of countries being infected, the WHO has remained resolute and refused to panic and term the contagion a pandemic. Instead, the global health entity has maintained its earlier classification of COVID-19 as a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC), which it made at the end of January. This definition implies a situation that is serious, unusual or unexpected, carries implications for public health beyond the affected State’s national border, and may require international immediate action.

In a media briefing on 27 February, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus referred to the infection as an “uncontained global spread”, but he declined to call the outbreak a pandemic. “We are actually in a very delicate situation in which the outbreak can go in any direction based on how we handle it. This is not a time for fear,” he added.

This is a time for taking action now to prevent infection and save lives now,” said Dr. Ghebreyesus. He added, “Fear and panic doesn’t help. People can have concerns and rightly so. The most important thing is to calm down and do the right things to fight this very dangerous virus.
Huge potential in regional construction industry

Jeddah’s retail sector is benefiting from several new projects and developments coming up in Saudi Arabia’s commercial capital. Jeddah is expected to add approximately 40,000 sq m of gross leasable area (GLA) to the market, according to CBRE, one of the leading commercial real-estate services and investment companies.

The Saudi city’s retail sector expects a further boost with an additional 0.66 million sq m GLA entering the market in 2020, adding to an existing supply of around 1.46 million sq m, said CBRE in its report “Jeddah Market Snapshot 2019/2020”. The report added that the fall in retail sector also witnessed continued growth, with an influx of international and local brands planning to either establish or expand their presence in the market.

The report noted that key Grade A properties within Jeddah’s office sector have been able to maintain healthy occupancy levels, despite a marginal slowdown in business activities, as part of the region’s economic visions, the outlook for the construction sector remains promising for the future.

Mega construction contracts in the region have slacked since the heydays before the precipitous collapse of oil prices in mid-2014. This fall in project investment has served to remind regional governments of the pressing need to reform their development models, continue their economic diversification, and focus on transforming their economies to become less dependent on hydrocarbon revenues.

Today, the construction market is reportedly a third smaller in terms of new contract activity relative to its peak in the years leading up to 2013 and its rollover well into 2016. More recently, 2016 was a challenging year for the GCC construction industry. Although the oil price averaged over US$30 per barrel in 2018 compared with just US$52 a barrel in 2016, spending on projects continued to fall, just US$37.4 billion worth of contracts were awarded that year, compared with US$124 billion and US$116 billion in 2013 and 2012 respectively, according to MEED Projects. That made 2016 the worst year in terms of contract awards since 2004.

All six GCC states saw a decline in the value of new deals in 2018. Saudi Arabia, traditionally the largest and most diverse of the region’s projects markets, declined by a little under US$31 billion to US$26.4 billion. Qatar slipped by US$2.7 billion to just over US$11 billion, while Kuwait and Oman both experienced a more than 50 percent fall in deals to just US$5.6 billion and US$5.1 billion respectively. Meanwhile, although the UAE retained the largest index capital market project, with US$44.5 billion of new contracts in 2018, it too registered a fall of US$3.5 billion from a year earlier.

Regardless of the reasons for the slack in construction pace in the previous year, 2019 got off to a propitious start with US$2.4 billion worth of construction and transport project contracts being awarded in the first half of the year. Riyadh announced a record US$295 billion 2019 budget in late December on the back of higher project oil earnings; the UAE’s federal budget is also the highest ever set at $116 billion in 2019.

In view of the persisting challenges to economic growth, the finance chief called it a “very important issue” on the Saudi agenda. The Saudi finance chief called it a “very important issue” on the Saudi agenda. The Finance Minister Mohammad Al Jadaan said on Sunday in remarks concluding the meetings, “Global economic growth is continuing but remains low and downside risk persists, including those arising from geopolitical, remaining trade tensions, as well as policy uncertainty.”

The report also highlighted the importance of increased amenities and facilities with residential communities, developments now focusing as much on the public realm and social infrastructure as the individual residential offerings. High-end residential properties located along the coast are expected to experience softening in performance, due to increasing supply in this category, with an additional 1,480 residential units scheduled to enter market by 2023. The report added that Jeddah’s hospitality landscape, with an existing 13,900 keys, will continue to evolve, as the kingdom introduces new tourist visa policies.

The report published by MEED, the Middle East’s leading business information service, shows that in light of planned mega projects and major infrastructure development plans, the region’s economic visions, the outlook for the construction sector remains promising for the future.

Mega construction contracts in the region have slacked since the heydays before the precipitous collapse of oil prices in mid-2014. This fall in project investment has served to remind regional governments of the pressing need to reform their development models, continue their economic diversification, and focus on transforming their economies to become less dependent on hydrocarbon revenues.

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The report also highlighted the importance of increased amenities and facilities with residential communities, developments now focusing as much on the public realm and social infrastructure as the individual residential offerings. High-end residential properties located along the coast are expected to experience softening in performance, due to increasing supply in this category, with an additional 1,480 residential units scheduled to enter market by 2023. The report added that Jeddah’s hospitality landscape, with an existing 13,900 keys, will continue to evolve, as the kingdom introduces new tourist visa policies.

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Misdiagnosis affects millions each year

Medical diagnostic errors impact the lives of millions of people around the world and lead to the death of tens of thousands each year. In the United States alone there were more than 12 million people affected, and around 63,000 deaths, each year from medical misdiagnosis.

Medical misdiagnosis is an under-discussed issue that touches all aspects of the healthcare field — from physicians and healthcare systems to, most crucially, the patients whose lives might be on the line as a result of an inaccurate initial diagnosis. It is also a complex issue to address as it involves among others, finding solutions to systemic problems embedded in healthcare.

The Society to Improve Diagnosis in Medicine (SIDM) in the US has recommended a multi-pronged approach to addressing the issue. In 2015, pressure from the Society led the US National Academy of Medicine to oversee a review of diagnostic error and publish a report titled Improving Diagnosis in Healthcare. Key goals highlighted in the report to improve the medical system include:

- Fostering teamwork in the diagnostic process between patients, families, and providers;
- Improving medical education when it comes to making diagnoses;
- Making sure health information technology is applied effectively; ensuring that physicians and medical providers identify and learn from diagnostic errors;
- Creating a medical culture of fosters improvements in how doctors make diagnoses; Establishing a reporting and liability system; Offering funding for research in the diagnostic process.

According to SIDM, one area that needs special attention is medical education. Medical students tend to be taught by routine or basically, by recognizing patterns. Future doctors are not taught about bias and the pitfalls that go along with it over the long term. It is important to create curricula that will begin to do that — introduce the notion of bias, cognitive bias — into the medical school curriculum, so that physicians, nurses, and others involved are able to take that into account before reaching appropriate diagnoses. Medical systems are complex with many variables and interests often pulling in different directions. Many doctors tend to get frustrated with this complexity and believe there is nothing they can do to improve the situation. But that need not be so. For instance, doctors can begin to take action by starting to measure diagnostic error in their institutions.

Almost every hospital, for instance, has an event-reporting structure for patient safety, but most do not have a system to track, measure or even put down diagnostic errors. One challenge is that when diagnostic errors are detected and recorded, the way they are dealt with is often flawed. For instance, if it is an issue of a doctor’s judgment call, it might be referred to ‘peer review’ and treated as an individual aberration, instead of a ‘systemic problem’ that needed to be tackled.

Experts at the forefront of addressing medical misdiagnosis stress on the importance of the 4Ts: teamwork, technology, training, and tuning to reduce medical misdiagnoses.

They call for a greater focus on collaborative work between medical professionals and a reduction on the focus on ‘heronion’ on the part of individual clinicians.

Most physicians are aware the problem exists. Many of them are aware they themselves have made diagnostic errors, but very few are willing to admit it as an error. The SIDM suggests that in general, doctors need to be a bit more ‘reflective’ on this issue, and accept that “to err is human.”

Facial expressions may not reveal true emotions

Just because someone smiles at you, do not take it for granted that they like you. New research seems to suggest that facial expressions often do not reveal a person’s true emotions and that the context of a person’s face varies, with some people being more expressive and some less. Not everyone is a clear cut extrovert or introvert, there are many that fall in between and their reaction could vary depending on a particular situation.

In one experiment, participants were shown a picture of the face of a man with a wide-open mouth, eyes almost closed, red face, eyebrows down looking very menacing. Participants overwhelmingly agreed that the man appeared very angry. However, when the rest of the image was revealed it showed the man running with open arms after having scored a goal in football. The experiment showed that context is important in understanding facial expressions.

The study could prove useful in encouraging people not to be too quick to judge a person based on their facial expression alone. Before you consider people not to be too quick to judge a person based on their facial expression should be considered along with the person’s body language and their culture.

Brief stints of mindfulness helps relieve pains

A new study by researchers at Yale, Columbia and Dartmouth Universities show even a brief introduction to mindfulness helps people deal with physical pain and negative emotions.

The research team found that the effect of mindfulness was so pronounced that even when participants were subjected to high heat on their forearm, their brain responded as if it was experiencing normal temperature.

When the participants were subjected to high heat on their forearm, their brain responded as if it was experiencing normal temperature. The team pointed out that these neurological changes did not occur in the prefrontal cortex, which regulates conscious or rational decision-making, and so were not the result of conscious willpower.

The team also found significant differences in brain signaling pathways when participants were asked to employ mindfulness techniques compared to when they were asked to respond as they normally would.

Specifically, participants reported less pain and negative emotions when employing mindfulness techniques, and at the same time their brains showed significant reductions in activity associated with pain and negative emotions. The team believed that these neurological changes did not occur in the prefrontal cortex, which regulates conscious or rational decision-making, and so were not the result of conscious willpower.
Violence against women blocks development

The single highest barrier to development globally is neither hunger nor disease. It is gender-based discrimination and violence. That is why achieving United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 — gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls — is a prerequisite for progress on the other 16 SDGs. And yet, with only a decade left to complete the SDG agenda, governments continually fail to uphold girls and women’s most basic rights, let alone empower them to reach their full potential.

Consider the plight of women in South Africa, where the femicide rate is almost five times the global average and sexual assault is rampant. In 2018-2019, the police recorded an average of 114 rapes per day — an increase of nearly 5 percent from the previous year. To add insult to injury, women and girls, including victims of such assaults, often lack access to sexual and reproductive health services, including safe, affordable abortion.

Globally, more than one in three (35%) women will experience physical or sexual intimate-partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime. Few see their attackers punished, and many cannot access sexual and reproductive health care after the fact.

The problem is not legal. South Africa’s constitution guarantees access to reproductive health care, and the 1996 Choice on Termination of Pregnancy (CTOP) act allows abortion on demand up to the twelfth week of pregnancy. Yet, unsafe abortions outnumber safe abortions 2:1. Based on South Africa’s high rate of sexual assault — and my firsthand experience as a doctor working in the country — it is fair to assume that a non-negligible share of these unwanted and unsupportable pregnancies began in violence. In this sense, many of South Africa’s women are victimized twice: first, by the perpetrators of the assault; and, second, by the health system that forces them either to carry an unwanted pregnancy to term or turn to sellers of illegal abortion pills.

In the latter scenario, the women risk side effects like sepsis and hemorrhaging, and often endure the dangerous and undignified process in public bathrooms. They may then suffer yet more violence, as their community blames them for the consequences of actions taken in desperation. For example, I was recently contacted by a young woman who was being hunted by a mob that suspected her of abandoning a fetus in a public toilet.

It did not matter that the woman had been raped and subsequently obstructed by the local clinic staff from receiving an abortion — care guaranteed by the CTOP act. It did not matter that her constitutional rights had been systematically violated. She would now suffer yet more violence, unless she managed to secure safe passage away from her home. Meanwhile, no health-care professional or support staff has ever been punished for denying abortion services in violation of the CTOP act.

These problems are systemic. A 2016 report by South Africa’s Commission on Gender Equality found that the Department of Justice was not coordinating the departments involved in implementing the Service Charter for Victims of Crime in South Africa. The Department of Health, for its part, had not established a standardized system for funding, monitoring, and evaluating the delivery of health-care services to victims. The consequences of these failures included shortages of DNA evidence kits at police stations, inadequate transport resources, and a lack of safe houses for victims. Perhaps not surprisingly, perpetrators of sexual violence are rarely punished.

These problems are hardly unique to South Africa. The World Health Organization estimates that, globally, more than one in three (35%) women will experience physical or sexual intimate-partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime. Few see their attackers punished, and many cannot access sexual and reproductive health care after the fact, even in countries that have ratified international instruments guaranteeing the right to such care.

In 2015, the WHO and other United Nations agencies attempted to help address these lapses with the Essential Services Package for Women and Girls Subject to Violence. The package serves as a tool to identify what countries’ health, social service, police, and justice sectors must provide to all women and girls who have experienced gender-based violence, and lays out guidelines for coordination.

By implementing the package’s recommendations, countries would be better able to fulfill their commitments under regional and international frameworks, such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (which encompasses the SDGs). This would also support national-level efforts, such as proper enforcement of South Africa’s CTOP act.

Failure to take such steps is exacting a devastating physical, psychological, social, and economic toll on countries. As a 2013 WHO report notes, violence against women leads to death, injury, and unwanted pregnancy, with higher rates of infant and child mortality. Moreover, victims often face depression, social isolation, and excessive alcohol use, all of which impair their ability to work, leading to lost income. In the European Union, gender-based violence is estimated to cost nearly €256 billion ($280 billion) per year. In South Africa, that figure stands at 28.4 billion rand ($1.9 billion).

Modern development strategies often recognize the pivotal importance of enabling women to fulfill their potential and contribute effectively to their economies. Yet they fail to recognize the need for concerted action to protect women from violence, and uphold the rights of victims. They are thus grossly inadequate.

Women deserve to be safe in their homes, at school or work, in hospitals, and on the streets. Only when they are not struggling to survive can they, and their communities, truly thrive.

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An economic stimulus plan for COVID-19

The COVID-19 epidemic is accelerating, and as the new coronavirus approaches pandemic status, it is increasingly likely that the economic impact will be severe. Alongside intensifying public-health responses, governments must step in to mitigate the virus’s impact on growth, employment, and living standards.

There are three reasons to worry that COVID-19 will hit the global economy hard. First, regional and national travel restrictions will curb the flow of goods and services across borders and within countries. This is already happening in China, where growth forecasts for the first half of 2020 are being slashed. As the world’s second-largest economy and home to much of the global supply chain, China’s slowdown is already being reflected in large US and European companies’ reduced earnings forecasts.

Second, increased uncertainty will translate into reduced ‘big ticket’ spending by households and small businesses. Holidays and business travel are already being reconsidered, as evidenced by the 200,000-plus airline cancellations so far this year. Auto and home purchases will likely follow suit. Before long, businesses will put off investment in structures, plants, and equipment, creating major negative ripple effects across the world’s economies.

Third, sharp declines in global equity markets, if sustained, will harm the real economy. Plunging markets stoke fear and uncertainty, reduce household wealth, and therefore erode consumer spending. They also raise the cost of capital for firms, which means less hiring and reduced capital expenditures. In short, COVID-19 and the response to it could easily lead to a global spending shortfall, which would soon be放大ed by mounting job losses, potentially pushing real economies everywhere to the brink of recession.

But governments have tools for fighting recession. Low inflation (below central-bank targets in most cases) means that monetary policy can be eased without raising concerns of overheating. And ultra-low bond yields will allow governments in developed and many advanced and large emerging economies to borrow and spend on stimulus measures. In any case, the policy response should be flexible and reversible, in the event that the epidemic and its economic impact are less severe than feared.

So, what specifically should governments do? First, they must implement measures to stabilize commercial activity without delay. Corporate tax cuts, infrastructure spending, and other measures with delayed effects are ill-advised. Tax holidays or reductions of payroll, sales, and value-added taxes have never been recommended. The point is to boost disposable purchasing power within days, not months, by putting more money in the hands of middle- and low-income households, who tend to spend a greater fraction of their incomes. With that in mind, the United States, the United Kingdom, and many other countries did during the 2008-09 ‘Great Recession’, though many economists, including me, would have preferred an even bigger stimulus package.

Second, even if the effectiveness of monetary policy has been diminished after a decade of low and even negative interest rates, the major central banks should announce fresh rate cuts and liquidity provisions. When fear strikes, the demand for money can spike.

Central banks should make clear far in advance that they will meet or even exceed that demand. As former European Central Bank President Mario Draghi demonstrated at the height of the eurozone crisis, a stated commitment to do ‘whatever it takes’ may well be the most powerful weapon in monetary policymakers’ arsenal.

Third, governments everywhere should adopt legislation to increase and extend unemployment benefits, at least temporarily. As with cutting regressive taxes, increased unemployment benefits will put cash in the hands of those most likely to spend it in the near term, providing a necessary offset to weaker spending elsewhere in the economy.

Moreover, in the case of the US, the federal government should authorize temporary block grants to states facing hard budget constraints, in order to avert near-term deficits that would require counterproductive tax increases or spending cuts. Again, this approach proved effective during the last recession, when federal transfers to states offset about one-third of state governments’ budget shortfalls.

Finally, all governments should immediately boost spending on medical services, which must be made available to those most at risk from the coronavirus: the elderly, the poor, and the marginalized – both in cities and remote, rural communities. Policymakers should immediately authorize spending for fleets of mobile medical units to reach those who cannot otherwise access proper care.

Yes, some commentators will fret about the fiscal consequences of tax cuts and increased government spending. But they will be wrong to do so. Low and falling bond yields mean that the most advanced and large emerging economies have extraordinary leeway to borrow at little cost. Central banks are ready to hoover up any government debt that financial markets cannot absorb. Besides, emergency measures will be temporary, and subject to reversal after the crisis passes.

Deficits are tomorrow’s problem. The challenge today is to fight COVID-19 and its harmful economic effects not acting forcefully and immediately would be akin to letting the patient die just to teach him a lesson. Partisanship and zero-sum politics are no excuse for governments to shirk their fundamental obligations to citizens. Indeed, if any good can come from this crisis, it is that politicians might finally find a way to set aside their differences and do their job.
All Eyes on South Korea

South Korea is all the rage these days. Earlier this month, Parasite, from the South Korean filmmaker Bong Joon-ho, won Best Picture at the Academy Awards. Having read the reviews and seen the film a few days earlier, I was not surprised. Still, for the uninitiated, it is worth noting that this was the first time that a foreign-language film took home the top Oscar. Now, many around the world are eagerly searching for more examples of South Korean coolness, from K-pop to cutting-edge fashion designers.

One usually does not associate economics with coolness. Nonetheless, I have long pointed to South Korea as one of the most interesting economic case studies to appear in my professional lifetime. No other so-called ‘emerging economy’ has matched its success over the past 40 years. Home to 50 million people, South Korea has experienced faster income growth than any other similar-sized country. In terms of per capita GDP, South Korea has gone from being close to most Sub-Saharan African countries to enjoying a standard of living similar to that of Spain. In terms of per capita GDP, South Korea has gone from being close to most Sub-Saharan African countries to enjoying a standard of living similar to that of Spain.

To be sure, Parasite tells a story of Seoul’s haves and have-nots, and offers a scathing critique of inequality in contemporary South Korea. And yet, one of the notable components of South Korea’s success is the relatively low variability in its income growth compared to many other countries that have reached high-income status. The Gini coefficient (a standard measure of inequality) indicates a more egalitarian income distribution than that of the United States and many European countries.

What lessons does South Korea hold for the rest of the world? Let us start with low- and lower-middle-income countries. As I have pointed out many times, long-term economic growth essentially comes down to two things. The first is the size and growth of a country’s labor force. It is much easier to achieve stronger growth in an economy that has a large number of prime-age people working, plain and simple. This factor lies at the heart of China and India’s growth stories over the past few decades. But a vibrant, growing workforce is not enough. Many Sub-Saharan African countries, Pakistan, and even India (on occasion) have failed to reap the potential benefits of their large, young populations. Indeed, governments in these countries often regard the size of their population as a burden, because they have failed to achieve the second factor of growth: sustained productivity gains.

This point goes to the heart of what makes South Korea unique. For whatever reason, most of the countries that have enjoyed strong productivity growth over the past 40 years have been those with smaller populations. Aside from South Korea, the only other big exception is the US, which has a population well over 300 million and until recently enjoyed robust productivity growth.

During my time at Goldman Sachs in the 1990s and early 2000s, I presided over the creation of an index to monitor sustainable growth trends. It consisted of many variables that seemed to be important for productivity: the strength of governance and institutions, investments in education, openness to trade and investment, the adoption and penetration of technology, and so on.

In studying these trends, what I found most interesting was not just the annual top-level results, but also the strong correlation between specific variables and average incomes. Not only did South Korea often rank in the top 20 overall, but it also came in first on key indices such as the use of technology. The country got in early on the computer age, and it paid off.

Given their low positions on the index at the time, I often advised policymakers in Sub-Saharan African countries to study South Korea and try to mimic its model. I cannot resist suggesting this again, particularly in the case of Africa’s most populous country, Nigeria, which also happens to be a notable source of global culture, particularly in music and film.

Moreover, there is reason to think that South Korea might eventually outperform many other rich countries, too. After all, its response to ongoing global challenges seems to have been more effective than that of Germany, which until recently was regarded as a lasting economic success story. This is not to suggest that South Koreans are living carefree. The country must contend with several major challenges, not least the slowdown in China and climate change, which calls for the development and deployment of cleaner forms of energy and transportation. But almost no country will be spared the effects of these forces, so the real question is who is most likely to adapt best.

Similarly, countries at all levels of development are grappling with the effects of new technologies. But, at least in terms of access and adoption to 5G and the latest wave of information and communication technologies, South Korea already seems to be ahead of the US. I do not know which countries will fare best in the coming decades. But I suspect that we will be thinking more about South Korea, with or without the Oscars.