

SUPPORTING BUSINESSES AND INDIVIDUALS AFFECTED BY COVID - 19

CENTRAL BANK EXTENDS FACILITIES TO FINANCE, LEASING COMPANIES

The Central Bank of Sri Lanka (CBSL) has decided to introduce several measures to provide flexibility to Licensed Finance Companies (LFCs) and Specialised Leasing Companies (SLCs) facilitating them to support businesses and individuals affected by the outbreak of COVID-19.

In line with this initiative, implementation of several regulatory measures such as capital enhancement will be deferred while certain regulatory

measures will be relaxed as a temporary step giving due consideration to the imminent threat faced by LFCs and SLCs.

"The Monetary Board decided to introduce several 'extraordinary measures' to provide further space for LFCs/SLCs to assist COVID-19 affected businesses and individuals on an urgent basis," the CBSL said in a press release.

The new measures include,

- (a) Reduction of maintenance of liquid asset requirement for time deposits, savings deposits and borrowings to ease liquidity stress faced by LFCs/SLCs due to sudden withdrawal of cash by depositors and non-repayment of loan rentals.
- (b) An extension of one year to comply with minimum core capital requirements. Accordingly time line of 01.01.2020 and 01.01.2021 already set for the enhancement

of capital up to Rs 2 billion and Rs 2.5 billion will be extended until 31.12.2020 and 31.12.2021, respectively.

- (c) Defer the enhancements of minimum capital adequacy requirements due by LFCs/SLCs on 01.07.2020 and 01.07.2021, for a further period of one year until 01.07.2021 and 01.07.2022 respectively.

The CBSL has also decided to relax

deadlines on submission of statutory returns. "All LFCs/SLCs are informed to submit statutory returns to the Department of Supervision of Non-Bank Financial Institutions within two weeks of the commencement of normal business operations of such LFCs/SLCs.

The CBSL is currently in the process of ascertaining the possibilities for granting liquidity support under Sri Lanka Deposit Insurance and

Liquidity Support Scheme for LFCs, if required.

LFCs/SLCs are advised to diligently monitor their risk profile and resources during this period, while the Central Bank will continue to closely monitor the liquidity and capital positions of LFCs in order to detect any early warnings of stress to ensure safety and soundness of the non-banking financial institutions sector.

195 nabbed for violating curfew in Colombo

CAMELIA NATHANIEL

The Police City Traffic Division had conducted a special operation in the Colombo area from Colombo 01 to 15 to nab curfew violators, the Police Media Division stated.

Accordingly, they had arrested 195 persons who had violated curfew laws and had taken into police custody 110 vehicles.

The Police Headquarters issuing a notice stated that the vehicles taken into police custody would not be released until the Corona threat is over and the situation in the country returns to normal.

Overall the police had arrested 312 curfew violators during a six hour period from 12.00 noon to 6.00 pm today (31). They had also seized 117 vehicles that were being used by the curfew violators.

The overall arrests of curfew violators made so far from March 20th to date stands at 7,931 and a total of 1,981 vehicles had been seized.



Special Task Force personnel on patrol in Kalutara yesterday as the Government took steps to strictly enforce the curfew. Picture by Rukmal Gamage

Navy seizes 1000 Kg ICE, Cocaine in international waters

MAHINDA P. LIYANAGE
(Galle Central Special Corr.)

A foreign vessel carrying a large consignment of narcotics including 500 Kg of drugs alleged to be Crystal Methamphetamine (ICE) together with about 500 Kg of cocaine was apprehended by Sri Lanka Navy in seas around 465 nautical miles off Southern coast of the island.

Sri Lanka Navy's Offshore Patrol Vessel SLNS 'Sayura' had detected the Flag State less vessel on Saturday, around 9.30 a.m. in international waters.

The Navy also announced that 200 packets of babul and another 100g of unidentified pills had been found on board the ship. The street value of the haul of drugs has not yet been estimated. However, it is believed that the

total consignment of drugs will be valued at more than Rs. 12,500 million.

Further investigations will be conducted following the illegal foreign vessel's arrival on tow to the Dickwita harbour on April 1.

Sri Lanka Navy had detained two more foreign vessels while transporting narcotics on two separate missions earlier during the last two months. Following that operation the Sri Lanka Navy arrested 16 foreigners and five Sri Lankans engaged in the narcotics trade. Regular search operations and arrests of vessels engaged in drug trafficking will be carried out with the use of satellite technology for surveillance.

The Police Narcotics Bureau coordinates with Sri Lanka Navy in these operations.

CURFEW TIMINGS

Due to Colombo, Gampaha, Kalutara, Puttalam, Jaffna and Kandy districts being identified as high-risk areas, the curfew currently in force will continue until further notice.

In all other districts, the curfew now in force will be lifted at 6.00 am today (April 01) and will be re-imposed at 2.00 pm.

Meanwhile, travel between districts has been completely banned, unless for essential services. However, the Police warn that those misusing the mechanisms imposed for the smooth operation of essential services will be dealt with severely.

The Government urged the public to adhere to the health advice and instructions as these measures have been taken in order to ensure the safety of the public from this deadly Coronavirus.

"Rakemu Api" app for help and info

The National Operation Centre for Prevention of Covid-19 Outbreak has introduced an online solution "Rakemu Api" to provide accurate information and help.

The official web-based help portal "rakemuapi.cmb.ac.lk" has been introduced to request essential supplies including medical supplies in an emergency and to report about a patient

with COVID 19 symptoms. Anybody who has associated a COVID 19 patient or come from a foreign country during the last 14 days could also report their status using this platform.

The application will help the citizens to get immediate and free of charge medical advice or relief measures, and accurate information on disease outbreak locations and protecting elder-

ly community. Food, drinking water and medical supplies for diabetes, asthma, heart attack and epilepsy can be requested through this platform.

The service is available in all three languages. An android app is also available for the help portal.

The application was collaboratively developed by Colombo University and the Army.

Strict social distancing essential - GMOA

BY NADIRA GUNATILLEKE

Only the areas which had locked down maintain 90 percent of social distancing which is excellent, the Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA) Secretary Dr. Haritha Aluthge said.

According to Dr. Aluthge, the public must remain within their households except when essential

to proceed outdoors. It is necessary for at least 80 percent of the total population to be indoors in their homes.

Dr. Aluthge pointed out that the social distancing in districts where curfew continues is 70 percent which is satisfactory but the areas where the curfew is lifted from time to time are the worst affected.

Only 50 percent of social distancing noticed in the areas where the curfew is lifted intermittently. This is a very dangerous trend. The entire country must maintain 80 percent of social distancing in order to control COVID-19 without letting it to reach to 3b stage or may be 4th stage of the disease which is the most dangerous stage, he added.

COVID-19: Global cases exceed 800,000

The total number of global COVID-19 cases exceeded the 700,000 mark last night as the Coronavirus Dashboard of the Johns Hopkins University, USA indicated 803,650 cases, with the US leading at 165,000 cases. Italy is next with 101,000 cases. There were 39,000 deaths around the world, with Italy accounting for 11,000 of them. Nearly 172,000 people across the globe had fully recovered from the viral disease, with the biggest number of recoveries (76,000) in China, where several previously locked down cities are now gradually reopening for travel.

In Sri Lanka, the health authorities stated that another 10 persons had tested positive for the Coronavirus yesterday. These infected persons were in quarantine at a quarantine centre in Puttalam. The Health authorities stated that this group was identified as having had close contact with an earlier identified group.

With the new group testing positive, the total number of infected persons in the country stands at 142. Of those infected with the virus and receiving treatment, 16 patients have made a full recovery and had returned to their homes subsequent to being discharged from hospital. Currently there is no cure or vaccine for COVID-19.

COVID - 19 Fund surpasses Rs.242 milion

With direct deposits and donations from organizations and individual donors the COVID - 19 Healthcare and Social Security Fund's balance has surpassed Rs. 242 million.

President Gotabaya Rajapaksa established this Fund on March 23.

The balance surpassed Rs. 242 million with contributions of Rs.10 million by the Financial Management Accounts Department of the

People's Bank, Rs.03 million by People's Bank Pensioners Association, Rs 5 million each by People's Leasing, Litro Gas Lanka Limited, Sri Lanka Insurance Corporation and Bank of Ceylon, Rs 8 million by The National Savings Bank and Rs.50 million by Akbar Brothers Pvt Ltd.

A special account had been opened at the Corporate Branch of the Bank of Ceylon under the

account number of 85737373. Local as well as foreign donors have made their contributions to the Fund. Donations to COVID - 19 Healthcare and Social Security Fund have been exempted from taxes and foreign exchange regulations. Deposits can be made through cheques or telegraphic transfers. Details can be obtained from Mr. K.B. Egodawela, Director General (Administration) through 0112354354.

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More concessions to public in the face of COVID - 19 outbreak

A host of more financial and material benefits have been granted to low income and vulnerable families and individuals in the face of COVID - 19 outbreak.

President Gotabaya Rajapaksa has instructed the Presidential Task Force established to administer essential services in the wake of spread of combat COVID - 19 that provision of Rs. 5000/= as a single payment to the low income families will ease the financial difficulties faced by them.

A circular signed by the Secretary to the President Dr. P. B. Jayasundara on the concessions granted by the President and how they will be implemented was issued yesterday

(30). The circular had been referred to the Secretaries of Ministries of Finance, Economic and Policy Development and Public Administration, Home Affairs, Provincial Councils and Local Government and all District and Divisional Secretaries. This relief programme will continue to operate until the priority programme to eliminate the novel Corona virus from Sri Lanka declared the completion of its mission.

One of the prime objectives of the priority programme is to ensure the uninterrupted continuation of civilian life, the Secretary to the President has highlighted in his circular. The Presidential Task Force had identified the necessity of re-integration of people who are affected due to the spread of the pathogen to the main stream.

Dr. Jayasundara stated that he had been instructed by the President to issue directives to all District and Divisional Secretaries to take all necessary measures to provide essential food items to the door step at a concessionary price.

Following are the declared concessions and the eligible groups.

1- Measures have been taken to pay Rs.5,000 each to all 416,764 senior citizen allowance recipients and to the recently registered 142,345 senior citizens.

2- An allowance of Rs. 5,000 will be provided to 84,071 disabled persons

and 35,229 newly registered disabled persons.

3- A total of 160,675 farmers who are registered under the Farmers' Insurance Scheme will also receive an allowance of Rs.5000 each.

4- An allowance of Rs. 5,000 will be paid to 25,320 kidney patients and 13,850 newly registered patients.

5- Thripasha and other nutritional supplements will be delivered directly to the residences of expectant mothers and families with malnourished children

6- Measures have been taken to provide Rs.5,000 each to all 1,798,655 Samurdhi recipients and to the recently registered 600,339 Samurdhi recipients by the Samurdhi Bank / Samurdhi Authority.

7- Payment of the pensions to 645,179 public officers.

8- Steps will be taken to pay the April salary for 1,500,000 Public Sector employees and loan payment deductions from salaries to be suspended until further notice.

9- Relief on lease instalments for 1,500,000 self-employed persons, including owners of three-wheelers, trucks, school buses and vans and self-employed motorists.

10- Relief will be provided for the private businesses that are not in a position to pay employees' wages due to the prevailing economic hardships.

Those who do not belong to the above mentioned classification, but could be identified as at risk, will

receive similar relief. This identification process will be conducted under the supervision of Public Health Inspectors, Social Services, Development, Samurdhi Development, Agricultural Research Development and Family Health Service Officers and District Secretaries.

The circular issued by the Secretary to the President stated that the District and Divisional Secretaries should take steps to directly distribute essential food items to individuals. In this process, officials have been asked to partner with Sathosa, Cooperatives and private traders in order to get a fair price for farmers without the interference of third parties.



A Security Forces member disinfects the Kalutara area yesterday. (Picture by Rukmal Gamage)

LRH pioneers telemedicine project

NADIRA GUNATILLEKE

The Lady Ridgeway Hospital (LRH) has commenced offering medical advice to patients using video conferencing technology, a Health Ministry spokesman said.

According to the spokesman the public can use the new technology by downloading the oDoc App to their mobile phones. More details about the service can be obtained by dialing 0770773333 and searching on the internet by typing oDoc.life. The system will be extended to other special state hospitals soon.

Raising public awareness on this new system will be done through the Health Promotion Bureau (HPB) and the Information Unit of the Health, Nutrition and Indigenous Medicine Ministry, he said.

This new system will enable the public to obtain medical advice over the phone, especially during this COVID-19 affected period, he added.



Dr. Anuruddha Padeniya offers medical advice to a patient using the technology while Health Minister Pavithra Wanniarachchi, Dr. Prasad Kolambage and LRH Director Dr. G. Wijesuriya look on.

Services for HIV patients continue uninterrupted

NADIRA GUNATILLEKE

The National STD/AIDS Control Programme will hand over all required drugs for patients islandwide until next Saturday (April 4), the Health Promotion Bureau (HPB) Director Dr. Palitha Karunapema said.

According to Dr. Karunapema, the Colombo clinic will be kept open from 8.00 am to 12.00 noon until next Saturday.

The patients can visit the clinic and obtain drugs. They can use the short message (SMS) sent to their mobile phone by the National STD/AIDS Control Programme as their curfew pass.

The patients who cannot visit the Colombo clinic can obtain the nearest clinic location and relevant telephone number from the web site www.aidscontrol.gov.lk.

Meanwhile the Director of the National STD/AIDS Control Programme Dr. Rasanjali Hettiarachchi said that the programme has taken all possible steps to serve patients islandwide.

Contributions pour in to COVID - 19 Healthcare and Social Security Fund



A large number of organizations and individual donors are contributing funds to strengthen the COVID - 19 Healthcare and Social Security Fund. President Gotabaya Rajapaksa established this Fund on March 23 to strengthen the mitigation activities

aimed at controlling the spread of COVID-19 virus in the country and related social welfare programmes. Creating the Fund, President Rajapaksa donated Rs. 100 million from the President's Fund. Yesterday, Sri Lanka Insurance Corpora-

tion Chairman Jagath Wellawatte and (Right) Litro Gas Chairman Anil Koswatta contributed Rs.5 million each to the Fund on behalf of their respective organisations to Secretary to the President Dr. P.B. Jayasundara.

Public cooperation vital to overcome COVID-19 - Health Minister

CAMELIA NATHANIEL

Considering the situation faced by the government, Sri Lanka has managed to control the spread of the Coronavirus very effectively in comparison to other countries, said Health Minister Pavithra Wanniarachchi, calling on the entire country to contribute to the Government's efforts to control this virus.

She made this statement at the Operation Centre for the Prevention of Covid-19.

Despite many obstacles and shortcomings, with the cooperation of the public, this country could overcome this challenge and not fall into the same situation as many other countries are facing, said the Health Minister.

She urged anyone who has come to the country from overseas to self-isolate even from their own family members. She made this appeal after the discovery of five members of one family testing positive for the Coronavirus, including a four-month old infant.

The Minister added that the Sri Lankan Government's effort is to protect the citizens, adding that every possible measure has been taken to ensure the safety of the people.

She said that Sri Lanka is one of the countries that has taken the highest possible steps to protect its people and urged the public to cooperate with the efforts of the government.

More quarantined returnees head home

CAMELIA NATHANIEL

Another batch of 134 returnees after completion of the two-week-long quarantine process at the Military operated Punani and Diyathalawa quarantine centres, were sent home and currently, there are 1964 persons in quarantine at 48 centres, said Army Commander Lt. Gen. Shavendra Silva in a special statement issued at the National Operation Centre for the Prevention of the Covid-19, yesterday.

He said that another 321 persons who had completed the quarantine

process would be released including 104 from the Periyakadu Quarantine Centre, 11 from the Punani Quarantine Centre and 206 from the Vavuniya Quarantine Centre.

The Commander also noted that the Army had mediated and provided transport for 498 workers of the Seethawaka Garment Export Zone for them to return to their homes.

He also stated that 68 persons of the Kadayanakulam Village in Puttalam had been isolated and put under quarantine after a Covid-19 positive person was found in that vil-

lage. Further, the Akurana Village in Kandy was declared an isolated zone and also the Atalogama village in Bandaragama.

In the Jaffna Peninsula, all districts have been demarcated as isolated zones which has prevented the spread of the Coronavirus in that region. The Army Commander noted that these areas identified with persons who tested positive for the Coronavirus have been demarcated as isolated areas for the safety of the public and to prevent the spread of the Coronavirus.



People in Polgasowita buy fish from a mobile vendor during the curfew hours. (Picture by Sudam Gunasinghe)

Diabetes patients assured of drugs supply

The Health Promotion Bureau (HPB) has issued instructions for all Sri Lankans who visit Diabetes clinics and Endocrinology clinics island wide.

According to the instructions, all required drugs will be supplied by delivery. The diabetes patients who had not obtained drugs can dial the telephone number of his/her relevant hospital and inform the number mentioned in the 'Clinic Book'.

The hospital authorities will inform the caller what to do next. All required drugs will be supplied to the home within two or three days. All required emergency medical advice can be obtained from the same telephone number.

Four in 10 people worldwide confined

More than 3.38 billion people worldwide have been asked or ordered to follow confinement measures in the fight against COVID-19, according to an AFP database Sunday.

That represents around 43 percent of the total world population, which is 7.79 billion people according to a United Nations count in 2020.

The Chinese province Hubei and its capital city Wuhan, the first epicentre of the novel coronavirus, were the first to introduce confinement measures at the end of January.

As Hubei province starts opening up again after its months-long isolation, confinement measures have multiplied worldwide in recent weeks.

By March 18 these measures affected more than 500 million people. This increased to more than a billion people by March 23, and more than two billion just a day later.

On March 25 more than three billion people were affected by confinement measures in some form. On Sunday at least 3.381 billion people in at least 78 countries and territories have been called on to stay at home.

Most of those - at least 2.45 billion people in 42 countries and territories - are under obligatory confinement. No region in the world is excluded.

In Europe, the affected countries include Britain, France, Italy and Spain. In Asia, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka and more are affected, while many nations have measures in the Middle East including Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel.

In Africa, South Africa, Morocco, Madagascar, Rwanda and more are affected. In the Americas, confinement measures are in place in Colombia, Argentina, Peru and more, including a large part of the United States. In Oceania, New Zealand has imposed a lockdown. Congo-Brazzaville and two regions in Ghana will also join the list early next week. In most cases people are allowed to leave their homes to work, buy essential goods or for medical treatment. At least nine countries or territories - comprising some 511 million people - have urged their populations to stay home without imposing threats of punishment.

These include Germany, Iran, Russia and Uganda. (AFP)



People buying bread from a three wheeler during the curfew
(Picture by Sudam Gunasinghe)



A health worker inputs COVID-19 data
(Picture by Priyadarshini Kahawala)

A HOLISTIC APPROACH FOR DEFEATING COVID-19

BY NADIRA GUNATILLEKE

The College of Community Physicians of Sri Lanka (CCPSL) is the apex professional body for the practice of public health in Sri Lanka. The CCPSL functions as a strong and informed professional body to advocate promotion and prevention of disease of the people of Sri Lanka. The CCPSL is responsive to the current and emerging public health challenges and conforms to evidence based approaches and principles.

The membership consists of specialists in Community Medicine. In addition to these professionals, there are members from other specialties as well.

Has Sri Lanka done enough or done what has been shown to be effective?

The epidemic is continuing. The country has implemented a multi-faceted, multi-stakeholder and society-oriented strategies at their best to counteract the expected damage. Learning from the successes and failures of other countries which faced similar situations would be of immense help to reshaping the current strategies and introducing new modalities.

We emphasize that "China has rolled out perhaps the most ambitious, agile, and draconian disease containment effort in history.

Are we on track?
The CCPSL firmly believes that we are on the right track and that we have strategically implemented many of the interventions far ahead of other countries. However, the country needs to continue on the same path on a heightened scale with appropriate new strategies.

We acknowledge the strong political leadership provided by the President, the Prime Minister and the Minister of Health. Their commitment is in line with the Director General WHO's call for a "Whole Government Approach". The Army Commander's role and contribution brought success of the total quarantine process. This could not have been achieved with only the health sector. Sri Lanka Police is ensuring law and order during the social distancing. All the other ministries, agencies and professional bodies are supporting at their highest level in the response.

The CCPSL proposals for the future challenges in the epidemic response

Sri Lanka sets an example to the entire world, with its timely and effective response to the global epidemic despite being a low- and middle-income country. This highlights the importance of investing in public health. Although, we have done so far sensibly, the CCPSL proposes following strategies to address the future challenges in the epidemic response;

1. Learn from the successes of other countries:

Success of China, South Korea, Japan and South Korea and also the failures of Italy, Spain, Germany, UK and USA should be analyzed in depth and thereby, current strategies need to be reshaped.

We should acknowledge the importance of a whole government approach with optimal intersectoral collaboration and coordination



A Security Forces member disinfects a Government building in Kalutara
(Picture by Rukmal Gamage)

- a total system approach to manage health security (clinical services, population health, surveillance, science);
- transparency and accountability

2. Streamline lockdown strategy

Several issues have been encountered in the implementation of this strategy. To address the challenges, it is necessary to introduce a people-friendly intermittent relaxation of lockdown and improve social responsibility through culture change. It is imperative to strengthen non health measures such as availability of food and medicines, economic packages for all sectors affected, special care for financially vulnerable families, enforce laws to improve infection prevention and social distancing. We suggest to review the strategy after two weeks and change where necessary.

3. Personal hygiene and social distancing

Further strengthening community mobilization and mass campaign for personal hygiene and social distancing adopting new behaviors in the outbreak context should be considered as a 'nation at war against COVID -19'. It is crucial that we sensitize the public to their active role in the response, such as on social and physical distancing - staying home and the one meter rule at all times including transport

4. Sub-national and non-health sector preparedness and response plans

Engage with key partners to update national and sub-national preparedness and response plans.

Building on the existing strategic preparedness and response plan of COVID-19, exploration of possible collaboration

options with the non-health sector should be undertaken.

5. Raising health system capacity & readiness

In addressing the challenges in raising health system capacity & readiness, the aims should be;

- preventing transmission in facilities and homes and not to overburden system;
- ensure capacity to treat severe and critical patients while maintaining essential health services
- protect health workers for continued care and service

When the severity profile of COVID-19

cases is considered; 40% mild, 40% moderate (with Pneumonia), 15% severe and only 5% become critical cases. Severe patients need oxygen therapy and critical cases need mechanical ventilation.

Estimated numbers requiring hospitalization based on current size of outbreak cannot be precisely predicted.

At the same time, it is essential to expand the capacity of mild patient admission and to deploy/ surge medical teams from nationwide depending on the increasing case load.

6. Self-quarantine process

More stringent quarantine process for persons exposed and close contacts should be deployed. Singapore showed the success of the strict quarantine rules. Introduce quarantine for persons with fever/other symptoms, suspects and close contacts for better compliance and outcomes.

7. Protection and appreciation of key healthcare workers

Sustenance of the epidemic response is largely dependent on the active involvement of the healthcare workers. It is equally important to protect them from being victims of the epidemic itself and also to keep their morale high. This is very much needed for public health staff as their contribution has not been adequately recognized or appreciated at national level. Ultimately, they might become unsung heroes of the ongoing battle.

It is important to ensure adequate supply of personal protective equipment (PPE) for all the HCW dealing with patients and in preventive sector, and also to ensure the rational use of any PPE based on Ministry of Health guidelines which was adopted from WHO guidelines.

8. Disease stigma

The CCPSL is concerned with the stigma generated on identified cases and contacts by officials and media. We, CCPSL, reiterate that stigma is harmful to people and to the outbreak response. Stigma can drive people to hide the illness to avoid discrimination, stop people from seeking health care immediately and prevent people from adopting healthy behaviors.

9. Sustaining care for the non-COVID patients

Ensuring survival of the other patients is also crucial. When the whole system is geared to protect people from Covid19, the focus for other disease entities and non-Covid patients will be diluted.

Therefore, it is essential to introduce triage systems, reserving tertiary main hospitals for non-COVID patients. Vulnerable groups include: patients with chronic diseases who need regular treatment and drugs, e.g. dialysis; critical patients such as cancer patients, and those who have to seek rare medical treatment elsewhere; pregnant women who need regular prenatal check-ups; older people, those unable to leave the house and residents of different kind of institutions

10. Further collaborations with media on providing public awareness on COVID and getting the public mobilized to meet their obligations as responsible citizens through dissemination of authentic and evidence-based messages and information on the epidemic.

There is already a successful media campaign launched by the Health promotion Bureau. It should be strengthened by giving dedicated media time for dissemination of current epidemic information.

11. Compilation of the evidence of COVID-19 of all countries in a dynamic e-repository.

The future challenges
Epidemic response is a dynamic process and strategies may also need to change depending on the dynamics of the outbreak. The general public needs to understand this reality and have a right to know the true facts. They should develop trust on the government's country-specific approaches and maximally support such efforts as all the interventions are executed with a valid reason and purpose. However, both the authorities and the people need to think carefully, weigh risks in context, and pursue interventions commensurate with the magnitude of the challenge.

We are reaping the gains again of the well-structured public health system of this country bringing about astounding results in this pandemic situation. In Sri Lanka, already existing public health system consisting of a battalion of field health staff are geared for needy interventions which is seen as a feasible task and an approach immensely helping to flatten the curve.

At the same time, it should not be ignored that we may be at greater risk of exaggerated fears and misplaced priorities as history suggests. We should understand the limited evidence on epidemic progression in tropical countries like Sri Lanka. With 95 years of experience in having a strong public health system and being a tropical country, the behaviour of the epidemic will be more likely to be different to the temperate countries. As such, what may be predicted may not be applicable in unique contexts of our country.

We urge the government, community leaders, other stakeholders and general public on the need of concerted efforts to fight against the country's worst challenge in the millennium.

At the same time, the CCPSL is happy that the Covid19 outbreak forced an entire community to take refuge in a multiple healthy behaviours which we would have never been adopted with the traditional health education approaches and behavior change. Capitalizing on the context of the Covid19 outbreak, our long term target is a "Healthy Sri Lanka".

China	Sri Lanka
1. Unified and effective command system	Early setting up the National Corona Task Force
2. Law-based and science-based strategy	WHO guided scientific strategies backed by Police and other armed forces by enforcing quarantine act
3. Coordinated deployment of resources	A National Operation Center headed by Army Commander established. Sri Lanka Army, Police and other government agencies are deployed strategically.
4. 4-Earlys (Early detection / Early Reporting / Early Isolation / Early Treatment) & social mobilization	All 4 Early 's including prevention of imported cases done. Multi-sector social mobilization implemented
5. Rapid improvement in treatment capacity	Expanding treatment facilities / ICU capacity. Mobilization of health staff
6. Application of high tech	Digital health approach in case finding & contact tracing and media strategies
7. «For the people and of the people»	Social mobilization with media
8. International exchange and cooperation	Collective work with SAARC countries and WHO

Movies with life lessons

Staying at home, watching the movies..

MADAPATHA CHINTAKA

Movie and television production is, naturally, at an all time low. Recent reports indicate that up to 120,000 people may be put out of work in Hollywood alone thanks to COVID-19. To be sure, Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime, of which the most popular in Sri Lanka has to be Netflix, are seeing a surge in their audience numbers and individual subscriptions. But that's only one side of the story; the truth is that diminishing advertising revenues cannot, as per the business model of most streaming sites, compensate for revenues from subscriptions. It's a sharp double-edged sword for the entertainment industry – not just for movies or TV series – whereby people staying indoors, isolated, are nurturing a desire to be entertained, and yet the entertainers have no means of survival. In Britain alone, it is estimated that around 50,000 film industry freelancers will have their jobs axed.

Still, prospects aren't that bleak. This will end, even though even if it ends soon enough in Sri Lanka the rest of the world will have to bear with it for a little more time. Like most people, I'd like to predict hope at the end of what will be a very long day's journey into night. On the other hand, with little to do, and very little to think of doing, there'll always be creative ways of passing the time and these can turn the most humdrum of daily pursuits into joyful pursuits to look forward to. Like watching films.

DISCOVER OR REDISCOVER MOVIES!

There obviously are many kinds of movies to watch, and with the pandemic entering its peak we'll probably be seeing a wave of disease themed films after all this is over. On the other hand, with productions halted, we'll all have to go back to discover or rediscover films from the past, at least for now. There's a whole flurry of movies and series that, watched so many times over, still retain their sense of joyous timelessness. You just never get tired of watching them again and again. Attempting a list could be futile – so many movies, so few of them one list can accommodate – and anyway, your quarantine movie list will be different to mine. As Wes Anderson has proved, moreover, such lists reveal the uniqueness, the eccentricities, the character of those making them and watching what's on them. (Anderson's quarantine list is full of films you'd probably NOT think of during an outbreak; his selection is as random and unlikely and idiosyncratic as much of his work.)

WHAT TO WATCH

Josephine Livingstone of The New Republic tells us that we should all watch movies about pandemics during pandemics. Susan Sontag pointed out 55 years ago in



an essay that science fiction disaster thrillers featuring aliens and alien invasions had become "as predictable as a Western", reflecting the zeitgeist or spirit of the times. If Hollywood revelled, in the post-war and Cold War era, in giant blobs taking over the world and intellectuals saving that world, in a hundred and one different variations of science triumphing over an evil from outer space, in today's trash-infested, climatically catastrophic world they revel in as many variations of the disease-outbreak-flick as possible: a virus diffusing beyond its place of origin, otherwise unimportant people, typically scientists and schoolteachers, discovering it, and these unlikely heroes racing against time to find a cure or, as in The Happening, letting events dictate their fate. In The Happening we do not know what the disease is; by its end, we know that it is a warning from nature, and that it will not go away.

It's hard to think of a time when Hollywood, or even the regional cinema (Tamil,

Malayalam, Kannada, Hindi) wasn't churning out disaster flicks about epidemics or plagues, even if in Sri Lanka such films haven't yet been made. (My guess is that they will be once the contagion is over, but even then, as Triton and Suparna recently showed for their respective genres, it will take some time.) The father of the pandemic movie is the zombie movie, and zombie thrillers have been coming at us since Night of the Living Dead. There's nothing much of a difference between plagues and zombie mutations: both turn humans into something they are not. The zombie film, of course, is the successor to the vampire thriller: plague movies can thus trace their origins to Dracula and Frankenstein. The most convincing plague zombie thrillers don't give us details of the genesis of the disease; this is true of Train to Busan, World War Z, and The Happening, as opposed to The Andromeda Strain, Flu, and Contagion. Grisly deaths don't necessarily amplify the thriller element either; as Contagion and The Happening prove, death due to disease doesn't always have to be bloody.

THE DAY AFTER TOMORROW

Epidemic movies don't always have to follow these patterns, and in fact the best ones among them remain fresher and more original than the plots you find in The Day After Tomorrow or Outbreak or, if we take a more recent outing, World War Z, but these are what rack up bucks at the box-office and the ones that audiences constantly go after. Consider that Contagion, a movie which many think effectively predicted COVID-19 – though experts, including those hired as consultants for the production, tell us now that nothing on the scale of what we see in the story will take place – was not available for streaming on Netflix in many countries as of early March: it was hardly noticed then, earning less than what World War Z did, but in light of COVID-19 it's become quite popular today.



Most of these movies critique political structures as well, in particular those which in societies like South Korea have deepened class rifts: in Train to Busan for instance, the villain is an old businessman, the hero the poor, and the protagonist a young executive visiting his family with his daughter, who in ordinary circumstances may have been a young version of the villain. Directors have attempted to glean how human beings respond to outbreaks in their own imperfect ways. The biggest lesson from these movies then is how everyone regains their humanity, in the face of a biological catastrophe which can turn them inhumane, by turning them into zombies or into selfish egotists.

it can even be the villain. In Flu, South Korea's equivalent of Contagion, WHO officials intrude on local officials, and eventually turn antagonistic towards everyone trying to defy them. Writers may turn scientists into heroic figures, but since of late they have been critiqued a little harshly in film after film. Most of these movies critique political structures as well, in particular those which in societies like South Korea have deepened class rifts: in Train to Busan for instance, the villain is an old businessman, the hero the poor, and the protagonist a young executive visiting his family with his daughter, who in ordinary circumstances may have been a young version of the villain. Directors have through all that attempted to glean how human beings respond to outbreaks in their own imperfect ways. The biggest lesson from these movies then is how everyone regains their humanity, in the face of a biological catastrophe which can turn them inhumane, by turning them into zombies or into selfish egotists.

This essay has so far assumed that all you can watch during a pandemic is a pandemic related movie. Livingstone is right there in that while walking into a fictionalised version of events actually happening in the world may be distressing, pandemic films offer "not an escape", but "a refreshing variety of ways to frame or process" the plotlines in light of what's happening out there. It's a coping mechanism, though perhaps not one that psychiatrists will universally recommend.

However, this does not and should not mean movies about disease and plague are the only outings you can escape to at this point.

Ever since COVID-19 hit and compelled us to stay indoors, I've been indulging myself in every kind of flick: none of Wes Anderson's film recommendations, for instance, has a direct bearing on the outbreak, so why should the films we choose to watch relate so literally to the contagion? I've been sampling Maleficent, Endgame, Into the Woods, Little Women (all five versions), and Emma.

These obviously tell us little, if not nothing at all, about how to tackle an epidemic, but all the same they are guilty pleasures. And anyway, if I want something as absurd as the Bennet sisters fighting zombies and plagues, I'll always have Pride and Prejudice and Zombies.

Everyone is talking about Contagion, of course; by March 21, Sri Lankans were searching for the movie on Google en masse. But the fact that it's trending, here and elsewhere, shouldn't keep us from delving into other simple onscreen pleasures. As this writer has observed, two kinds of "onscreen pleasures" have begun to trend in the midst of this pandemic: those that end up in a near complete annihilation of the world (an event only prevented by the heroics of the protagonists) and those that end up in annihilation and the erosion of humanity. If there's one thing the best outbreak movies tell us, it's that there are no real heroes and villains: not in Contagion, where Laurence Fishburne, against protocol, tells his wife to flee the city before the epidemic spreads, and not in Outbreak, where an entire African village gets bombed by the American military to, what else, keep the virus from spreading.

THE BIGGEST LESSON

In real life, science is the antidote to everything. In the movies, on the other hand,

The nursery should protect against rainfall.

Soil medium

"The soil medium should be excellent so we can reap a bountiful harvest. The plant needs to be strong with a good root system. We do not want to grow weak plants that yield a harvest that is not satisfactory. This is why the soil medium in nurseries should be good. Compost and top soil of good quality is necessary. The seeds should be planted quarter of an inch deep. Until it germinates, the beds and pots need to be covered by a goni bag," said Jayathilake.

When you grow the plants in the beds and remove them to replant them in the home garden, when removing them from the beds the roots may get damaged. But when growing in pots the soil mound is removed from the pots and planted in the home garden so the roots do not get damaged at all. Of course, removing the plants from the bed can be done carefully in a way where it does not harm the roots, and the plant is planted in a good soil medium with compost. If all this is done in the correct way with skill and experience you can maintain a good home garden.

Making compost

Compost can be prepared by kitchen waste. It should be well decomposed compost. Compost is a natural organic fertilizer. We

need to think how we can create organic fertilizer like Compost. One method is the Barrel System. For this we can use a cement or a plastic barrel. A plastic barrel would be more preferable because it is lighter and portable, and will no doubt play its part in reducing plastic waste in the environment. The cement one is difficult to move. In these two barrels there have to be holes to provide ventilation. Here leaves and kitchen waste can be put into the barrel. Ideally the barrel needs to be around five feet. The barrel needs to be in places with a lot of sunlight. It also needs to be placed in a position where there will be no floods. It takes around three months for it to become fertilized. Here one must be mindful that polythene, plastic and glass should not be put in. Here the lid needs to be opened and closed occasionally which will reduce the moisture.

During the rainy season the lid needs to be fastened well. If the moisture is high inside the barrel, it may emit a bad odor. Using kitchen waste makes your home very self-sufficient. A certain level of moisture for the activity of micro-bacteria is needed for fertilization, and that can be done by adding a little bit of water now and then. And if the moisture is too much you need to put in dry leaves.

The moisture level needs to be maintained. To get the final product there needs to be a small aperture at the bottom of the barrel. The barrel system is ideal for small spaces.

Fresh from the garden

Making a plant nursery

prepared soil medium. This is without planting it straight away in the garden. We grow them in nurseries, so that the plants will be strong and robust. Because if they are immediately planted in the home garden they may grow poorly and we do not want that. We want the best when we grow plants in our home garden.

"If we want to maintain a fully functional and sustainable home garden, we need to make sure that we do not run out of food. There needs to be a continuous supply of food. Every plant has a lifespan. Once we harvest the plant, the produce starts to

decline over time. The home gardener then knows that it is time to replace the plant with another plant (from another family) that is ready for planting in the nursery. So, then the harvested plant is removed and a new plant is planted in the bed. This is called crop rotation. A plant from a different family is planted. The idea is to have a continuous supply of food," explained Jayathilake.

Types of nurseries

These days with the COVID 19 Virus, the wise home gardener has resources in his or her nursery that will enable the home to



be self-sufficient in food. There are two types of nurseries – beds and pots. If you take pots there are different types. Polythene, Yoghurt Cups, Coconut husks, curd pots and ice cream containers.

The nursery is also there to protect the small plants grown within its confines from weather conditions, pests and diseases and it can ensure a high-quality yield.

The plants growing in the beds or in the pots can be observed, so we can supervise its growth. A nursery can be built in a place where there is ample sunshine, where it can be irrigated, and in a place where there is no flooding.



ISHARA JAYAWARDANE

Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa has advised the public to be self-sufficient in food, by maintaining home gardens. He has instructed the Sri Lankan public to prepare for the worst – a future global food crisis. Taking into account the gravity of the situation, the Daily News today features the third article of a home gardening series focusing on how to be self-sufficient in food in light of COVID 19.

Once you have prepared the design for your home garden and selected the plants that you wish to grow, the next step is preparing a proper nursery. A Nursery is a controlled environment where you grow the plants, that you ultimately intend on planting in your home garden. You can have a small nursery in your home garden, that can make your home garden a success! The Daily News speaks to District Agriculture Instructor and Deputy Provincial Director of Office Ratmalana K.N.K Jayathilake, on preparing nurseries that will enable you to be self-sufficient, so you will never run out of food!

The whole idea of having a home garden is to be sustainable. So, we create nurseries where you can plant the seeds in the



GROWING SELF-SUFFICIENCY - ARTICLE 3

HOW LONG A PLANT NEEDS TO BE IN THE NURSERY BEFORE BEING PLANTED IN THE HOME GARDEN

- Brinjals – 3-4 weeks
- Tomato – 2-3 weeks
- Green chili – 3-4 weeks
- Capsicum – 3 weeks
- Cabbage – 3-4 weeks
- Beet – 4-6 weeks
- Leeks – 10-12 weeks
- Cauliflower – 4 weeks

TWO METHODS OF DESTROYING BACTERIA AND FUNGUS (SUNLIGHT)

- Prepare the nursery bed
- Fill with soil medium
- Pour water on the bed
- Cover with polythene
- Allow sunlight to fall
- The heat will kill the bacteria and fungus

BURNING THE SOIL

- Prepare the nursery bed
- Fill with soil medium
- Pour water on the bed
- Apply paddy husk layer 1-2 inches
- Apply straw
- Apply second layer paddy husk
- Apply second layer of straw
- Set fire to it

ISRAELI FIRMS IN RACE TO DEVELOP CORONAVIRUS APPS



One app tells you if you've been in the vicinity of a coronavirus carrier and another aims to assess whether you have COVID-19 based on the sound of your voice.

In Israel, sometimes dubbed the "start-up nation" with nearly 10 percent of workers employed in high-tech, the coronavirus pandemic has seen a flurry of new technologies designed to contain transmission.

Start-Up Nation Central, an NGO, has compiled a directory of some 70 Israeli technology companies developing responses to the new virus, which has infected more than 4,000 people in the country.

One app that has stood out so far is Hamagen, Hebrew for "the shield", launched earlier this month by the health ministry. Using geolocation technology, the app informs users about any points of contact with known COVID-19 cases.

Available in five languages, Hamagen has been downloaded by more than a million users. The fortunate ones receive messages saying "no points of intersection have been found with coronavirus patients".

"We'll let you know if there is anything new," it adds. Hamagen was launched amid a controversy over plans to involve Israel's Shin Bet internal security agency in the fight against the virus. Critics warned that allowing a powerful investigative body access to personal devices without a court order could mark an irrevocable setback in the effort to safeguard data protection. Israel's highest court ruled that any Shin Bet involvement required parliamentary oversight.

Hamagen requires user consent



and the health ministry has assured that "GPS data does not leave your mobile phone, and is not sent to any third party".

'Sound' of corona

The defence ministry has meanwhile offered support to an Israeli start-up called Vocalis Health, which is developing an app capable of diagnosing COVID-19 based on the sound of someone's voice.

"We are working around the clock," Tal Wenderow, the start-up's co-founder, told AFP.

Voice samples from virus carriers in various stages of illness and samples from non-infected people are currently being collected, with the goal of developing an AI-based algorithm to detect COVID-19's vocal "fingerprint".

Health professionals will then be

able to alert users in the early stages of the disease and use the app to monitor its spread across the population. The response from people willing to give voice samples has been "overwhelming", Wenderow said.

In addition to helping curb new infections, the app could also allow patients to be monitored at home, he added.

Israel's largest hospital, the Sheba Medical Center, has already been using nascent technologies to protect staff caring for coronavirus patients. (AFP)

"The guiding principle is to make sure there is as little contact as necessary between medical teams and patients," said Professor Eyal Leshem, director of Sheba's centre for travel medicine and tropical diseases.

To that end, Sheba monitors patients in mild condition through "telemedicine", which allows vital signs to be

communicated to staff via sensors connected to a patient's phone "without any need for direct contact", Leshem told AFP.

"We used this in our in-patient treatment - now when we're shifting from containment to mitigation, we're going to start using the same technologies to monitor patients at home," said Leshem.

Sheba also has an innovation and research centre, which is working to collect "all meta-data from COVID-19 patients".

"As we have more and more data accumulated, we'll be able to identify markers of severe disease, identify prognostic factors for hospitalised patients at all levels, and potentially use this data to identify treatment opportunities," he said. (AFP)



Apple, CDC release Coronavirus app

Apple has released a new screening tool and set of resources to help people stay informed and take the proper steps to protect their health during the spread of COVID-19, based on the latest CDC guidance. The new COVID-19 website, and COVID-19 app available on the App Store, were created in partnership with the CDC, the White House Coronavirus Task Force to make it easy to get trusted information and guidance.

The COVID-19 app and website allow users to answer a series of questions around risk factors, recent exposure and symptoms for themselves or a loved one. In turn, they will receive CDC recommendations on next steps, including guidance on social distancing and self-isolating, how to closely monitor symptoms, whether or not a test is recommended at this time, and when to contact a medical provider. This new screening tool is designed to be a resource for individuals and does not replace instructions from health-

care providers or guidance from health authorities.

The app and website also offer access to resources to help people stay informed and get the support they need. Users will receive answers to frequently asked questions about COVID-19, including who is most at risk and how to recognize symptoms. In addition, they will learn the most up-to-date information from the CDC like best practices for washing hands, disinfecting surfaces and monitoring symptoms.

Along with the new COVID-19 app and website, customers may also ask Siri, "How do I know if I have coronavirus?" to access guidance and resources from the CDC and a curated collection of telehealth apps available on the App Store. The COVID-19 app and website were built to keep all user

data private and secure. The tools do not require a sign-in or association with a user's Apple ID, and users' individual responses will not be sent to Apple or any government organization.

Anyone who is 18 years or older can access the screening tool and resources today by downloading the COVID-19 app on the App Store or visiting apple.com/covid19.



Fintech apps rise as lockdown intensifies

The coronavirus has driven a massive 72% rise in the use of fintech apps in Europe, according to new research published by deVere Group. At a time when most sectors of the global economy are beginning to feel the effects of what may already be a worldwide recession, the sharp jump in app adoption and usage provides encouraging news for the fintech industry. And it comes as yet another indication that the long-term legacy of the coronavirus will be an increasingly digital and online society.

According to the Swiss-based financial services company, the massive 72% bounce in fintech app usage is part of a fundamental adaption to life in lockdown. "The world has changed in the last few weeks," explains James Green, deVere Group's Divisional Manager of Europe. "The measures we're now all taking to help the fight back against coronavirus are affecting the way we interact, live, work, and take care of our finances."

Specifically, deVere Group has measured a 72% rise in the usage of its own fintech apps. But with the coronavirus now having infected over 700,000 people worldwide, similarly sharp surges can be found and assumed elsewhere. One gold-purchasing app, Glint Pay, reported a monumental 718% increase in its traffic last week. Meanwhile, banking apps in Asia and the Middle East have also announced strong upticks in usage, with one bank in the Philippines seeing more than the double the usual registrations for its online banking service.

Such rises in the use of fintech apps come amid a general growth in the use of digital technology, as people find ways of working, communicating, and entertaining themselves in the face of the coronavirus pandemic. Netflix has already witnessed record viewing numbers since lockdowns began several weeks ago, while deVere's James Green also notes that remote-conferencing company Zoom has enjoyed a significant boost to its share price.

"A new era has already begun, with digitalisa-



tion and new technologies driving the shift," he says. "This can be seen by demand soaring for video-calling platforms such as Google Hangouts, Skype, FaceTime and Zoom amongst others, as more people from ever work remotely."

"Indeed, Zoom Video Communications has been a remarkable performer in recent times, with its shares gaining more 32% since the market began its decline in mid-February."

Of course, the question remains as to whether this shift to the digital will endure after the coronavirus pandemic is over. With regards to fintech and banking apps, at least, the effects will most likely persist. Adoption of such apps had already been growing steadily in the months and years before the coronavirus outbreak. For example, UK Finance reported last year that 72% of UK adults used online banking and 48% used mobile banking in 2018. A long-term shift was already underway, and given that apps arguably provide greater convenience and efficiency than using an old-fashioned branch, it's probable that the forced exposure to fintech and banking apps will create a sizeable number of converts.

And a very similar argument could be made for digital technology in general. Remote working had already risen in the United States by 159% between 2005 and 2017, while Americans were already spending less time outside and more time at home, as they became more reliant on digital tech to fill their days.

As such, the coronavirus lockdown could simply accelerate and strengthen trends that were already in motion, particularly if the lockdown lasts for several months, something which could help to instill habits in people. So in other words, the long term effect of the coronavirus will be to facilitate the spread of

Apps to keep you busy in lockdown

With much of the world in self-isolation due to the global Covid-19 pandemic, technology has become an essential ally, offering a wealth of information, providing entertainment and affording us opportunities to maintain social interaction.

Staying informed in these testing times is important as we look at a series of apps designed to help you keep track of how the virus is progressing and also to keep up to date on the latest health advice.

These apps are all verified in both the Apple App Store and Google Play and are sourced from recognised health agencies and institutions.

GLOBALLY AVAILABLE APPS

1) WHO (World Health Organisation)

The official World Health Organisation application offers the latest health information with advice, updates and the latest news on the virus. The daily press conferences can also be streamed live via the app. It's also reported that the WHO are working on a specific stand-alone Covid-19 application.



2) United Nations

This multi lingual UN application offers comprehensive information from around the globe on a series of issues ranging from sustainability through to climate change. It includes daily global Covid-19 virus information with a series of video and audio field reports on how the pandemic is affecting daily life in all corners of the planet.

3) Worldometer

An uncomplicated but informative numbers based application offering constant updates, statistics and graphs relating to confirmed coronavirus cases,

deaths, recoveries and closed cases on a both global level and country by country basis. (Only available via Google Play)



4) Youper

An emotional health assistant app with Youper using artificial intelligence to help users reduce their anxiety levels, manage their mood and improve their sleep. Through a series of strategies from Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), one can use the app to listen to its mindfulness practices, monitor your emotions with the mood tracker and learn more about anxiety and depression.

5) Headspace

An app that offers less stress and the ability to sleep soundly. Through a guide of daily meditations the app offers the user to manage stress and through original sleepcasts, provide the assistance to help users unwind at bedtime.



6) Zoom

In these times of self-isolation and

lockdown, staying in touch with close friends and family is essential. Zoom offers the possibility of high quality via 4G, LTE and 3G networks video calls with our nearest and dearest via the multiple user screenshare screen. The app can be used on both mobile devices as well as iPad, Mac and Windows based devices.



7) CDC (Centres for Disease Control and Prevention)

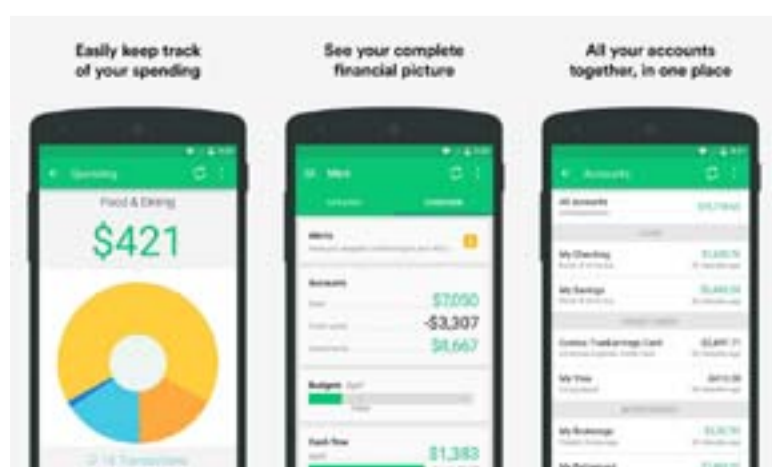
The official application from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is the leading national public health institute of the United States offers the latest health information for the US and worldwide.

The app offers advice, information and the latest date, news and updates on Covid-19 with the settings option affording users to opt for information.



8) Covid Symptom Tracker

Users are asked to create an account and asked to monitor any symptom that could be associated with Covid-19 on a daily basis. The list currently includes fever, persistent cough, fatigue, shortness of breath, loss of smell or taste, hoarseness, chest pain, abdominal pain, diarrhoea, drowsiness and confusion, and lack of appetite. (AS)



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COVID-19: Testing the key

If the symptoms of COVID-19 infection are similar to that of acute influenza, how do we know we are afflicted by the new, highly infectious disease? And, since the virus spreads rapidly from person to person, we will certainly need to know it fast enough to avoid infecting others.

Just as with all other diseases currently known and treated by the medical sciences, the diagnosis of COVID-19 is done by tests. Body samples are taken and analysed in laboratories and the result will indicate the nature of the infection.

The current challenge is to design testing systems that enable the quickest possible accurate diagnosis. After all, the earlier we know who and how many are COVID-19 positive, the quicker we can act to prevent them from infecting others. And, most importantly, the sooner the treatment of victims, the easier it is to prevent fatalities.

Medical scientists the world over, from the World Health Organisation (WHO) to our own medical scientific community, are unanimous in seeing testing as the core means of fighting the epidemic. In the long term, ultimately, it is hoped that a vaccine will be developed to prevent infection. Till then, it is prompt diagnosis that is the primary measure of preventing a contagion.

But this means test systems that are proactive rather than reactive. That is, rather than wait for symptoms to show sufficiently to suspect COVID-19 and then seek the test, there needs to be constant testing of people in different parts of the country – at public transit points, gathering places – to identify not only the number of infections but also the geographical spread. Such systematic testing will enable anticipation of directions of viral spread and the potential for increases of infections. At the same time, such proactive testing will ensure early diagnosis and thereby save lives.

The more convenient such testing is for the public, the easier it is to ensure the maximum public participation in testing. Simply put, there are broadly four stages in testing for a disease such as COVID-19.

Firstly, there is the stage of noting symptoms and engagement with the testing authorities. Secondly, there is the procedure for providing body fluid samples for analysis. Then, there is the analysis of the samples in a suitably equipped laboratory. The fourth stage would be the medical response to the diagnosis, either by treatment of the patient or by the discharge of the person because she/he is cleared of the disease. Sometimes, the cleared person may be subsequently monitored for a period just in case the infection arises later. Or, the person could be asked to under-go self-quarantine. South Korea, which has had thousands of COVID-19 positive cases, is being held up as an example of a country that has taken swift and extensive steps to counter the spread of the infection. The success of South Korea is based on the most pragmatic measure of maximising the testing of the population so that those infected are identified as early as possible.

When COVID-19 initially hit Sri Lanka with that single case of a foreigner (who was successfully treated), the medical specialists here were quick to develop a test kit. It was one that could be used in a convenient interaction with potentially affected persons. However, to date the testing procedure currently in use throughout the world needs several hours for sample analysis at specialised laboratories, though at least one company has developed a five-minute test.

Even as it consolidates its early systematic handling of COVID-19, the Government is already moving on to the logical next stage in fighting any lethal and volatile contagion: proactive testing of people across the country. The medical specialist community is already busy developing test procedures designed for convenient public use on a mass scale.

It is not an easy task and certainly an expensive one given that it requires the urgent deployment of design systems, production mechanisms and rigorous ensuring of scientific quality standards.

The medical scientific community, which is broadly unanimous about the need for extensive and systematic testing of the population, is looking to the Government to facilitate the process at the earliest. They point out that the current success in responding to the contagion by slowing down the spread cannot be sustained in the long term unless the spread itself is anticipated comprehensively and stopped.

They point out that some level of mass sample testing at centres across the country will be the final means of containing the epidemic in a viable manner which reduces the greater costs of having to deal with any expansion. Our medical scientists and administrators are already known to be in close consultation with counterparts in South Korea and China as well as the WHO in this regard.

This is the moment for the business community, too, to contribute with design and innovation in cost effective medical engineering on the one hand and investment in mass production on the other.

Economic resilience and unity to weather the storm



A Task Force meeting

The 1970-1977 era in the country was known for emphasis on self-reliance where local manufacturing was given an impetus with a "mixed economy model" as it was called.

Reminiscent of the United Left Front (ULF) administration led by late Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike, the people who have seen those days express mixed reactions. Typically, the first thing they recall are the economic hardships they underwent, but a sizeable proportion of them end the conversation with a remark that its import substitution industrialization process never got into top gear and had that been continued the country's story would have been different.

"Mrs B's Government" was compelled to severely restrict imports in the midst of an acute shortage of foreign exchange as foreign lenders, mostly the Western bloc, refused to give financial assistance to balance the budget. Price controls and food rationing were adopted to shield the poor and prevent shortages as far as possible.

Approaching a closed economy, local industries and factories were supported by the Government to replace foreign imports with domestic production to reduce foreign dependency. However, as the imported goods flooded the local market in the post-1977 period under the open economic policy of the J. R. Jayewardene administration, most of these local industries could not compete and sank into oblivion.

Towards a resilient economy

Decades after we have embraced economic globalization, with its many positive and negative spill-over effects, suddenly we have been forced to pause, hit by the worst economic realities caused by the COVID-19 global pandemic. As economies are melting down around the world, many countries would be compelled to limit their exports and suspend overseas supplies in the time to come. There is little argument that a national economy that gives priority to economic resilience is the only available option to face the future.

It is encouraging to see that the Government has already paid attention to this aspect, while taking up arms against the unseen enemy COVID-19 and the sea of troubles it has caused. Cabinet Spokesmen Ministers Dr Bandula Gunawardena and Dr Ramesh Pathirana underlined at the last Cabinet press briefing that the Government has paid attention towards reviving agriculture and local manufacturing to reach self-sufficiency. They pointed out that uplifting local industries has always been the policy of the incumbent Government.

'Every dark cloud has a silver lining', and if we could revive the national economy, acting in unity shedding petty differences, the country would not only survive the difficult days but also be in a better position in the years to come.

For emergency requirements, the local production of ventilators and intensive care (ICU) beds has already started with the technical assistance of universities. The need to increase the number of ICU beds and ventilators was also highlighted at the Party Leaders' Meeting held last week.

The Central Bank has already directed the banks to suspend facilitating importation of vehicles and non-essential goods under Letters of Credit for three months to ease the pressure on the exchange rate.

Food security

In the meantime, a Presidential Task Force headed by the President's special envoy Basil Rajapaksa has been appointed to coordinate immediate as well as long term plans for food security and delivery of other public services.

The Task Force has been entrusted to provide facilities required by farmers for the production of paddy, cereals, vegetables, fruits, fish, meat, milk and eggs, as well as plantation products such as tea, cinnamon and pepper. It will also look into the delivery of



continuous services for the sustenance of overall community life.

The Task Force has already put in place a mechanism to supply agricultural products direct to customers through retail networks of Lanka Sathosa, cooperative network, Cargills, Keells, Arpico and Laughs. The Government has also intervened to set maximum wholesale prices for vegetables as some middlemen were trying to make hay with the surge in demand for food due to the curfew imposed in the country.

For a generation that grew up with the abundance of not only essential items but also many other unwanted consumer items in the markets even in street corners, waiting in queues and shortages were perhaps unheard of until last week. For those who had been through it before, the last few days might have rekindled the past memories. However, as Minister Dr Gunawardena told the media, there are sufficient food stocks in the country as at present. The problem has been the lack of coordination between farmers and traders and a proper distribution mechanism in the midst of a curfew. These issues are being attended to by the Task Force.

Identifying Colombo, Gampaha and Kalutara as high risk areas and Jafna, Puttalam and Kandy as having great vulnerability, the Government announced that the



A locally made ICU Bed

curfew would not be lifted in these districts until further notice. The curfew in other areas was also continuing with brief intervals every two days or so. The Police have rounded up over 7,300 people who acted in an irresponsible manner for violating the curfew. Tightening the curfew over the weekend, the Police stated that bail would not be given to those who violate the curfew. Several villages in Atalugama in Bandaragama, Kadayankulam in Puttalam, Akurana in Kandy and Pannila in Beruwala were cordoned off following the confirmation of COVID-19 cases.

The medical professionals have pointed out the need to expand testing to sustain measures taken to control the spread of the virus.

Sri Lanka's first COVID-19 death was reported on Saturday. A 60 year old patient, a resident of Marawila, had died while receiving treatment at the ICU of the National Institute of Infectious Diseases (IDH) in Angoda. He was said to be the second Sri Lankan tested positive for the novel Coronavirus in the country.

The second death was reported barely two days later. The deceased (65) was a resident of Kochchikade and had been transferred to Negombo hospital from a private hospital. He was identified as a COVID-19 patient at the ICU, but succumbed to the virus on that same day.

The selfless service of the country's health staff including doctors and nurses, the Police and Tri-Forces personnel, who are working day and night with sheer commitment despite the risk posed to them and their family members, has to be remembered and thoroughly appreciated.

It is the first time that curfew has persisted this long in Sri Lanka, a situation that had not prevailed even during insurgencies in the past. Then again, this is also one of the most challenging epidemics Sri Lanka has faced in recent memory. The situation is similar or worse in almost all other countries in the world.

It is in fact trying times for everyone, but it is the daily wage earners in the informal sector who are bearing the brunt of continuous curfews. Well-aware of this reality, the Government has come forward to make sure bare minimum provisions for them, while announcing a host of relief measures to ease the burden on low income families.

Payment of Rs 5,000 interim allowance to 2.3 million Samurdhi beneficiaries has been completed and the payment of the balance Rs 5,000 will begin shortly. The Rs 5,000 allowance has also been extended to about another 750,000 needy persons including the elders, disabled persons, kidney patients, and farmers who are contributing to the agrarian insurance scheme. Arrangements have also been made for the distribution of essential food items among the low-income families.

It is heartening to see how religious institutions, business community and various other groups and individuals have come forward to contribute to the 'COVID-19 Healthcare and Social Security Fund', while many voluntary groups and citizens have joined hands at the village level to support the needy in the small ways they can at this critical time.



CDF personnel packing food packs

COVID-19 Diplomacy:

Social Distancing, Virtual Closeness in SAARC

ANASUA BASU RAY CHOUDHURY and
SREEPARNA BANJERJEE

History reveals that once in nearly every 100 years the world is devastated by a virulent disease. In the year 1720 "The Great plague of Marseille" occurred claiming 100,000 lives. In the years 1817-20 due to the cholera outbreak, the death toll was again around 100,000 while the most recent deadly pandemic was the Spanish flu of 1918 which claimed 100 million lives. Currently, it is the COVID-19 which has already taken a pandemic shape worldwide.

The rapid scale of an outbreak of the virus has pushed the nation-states to act together, in close tandem on the one hand and on the other, 'social distancing' has become a central aspect of plans to limit the spread of the virus worldwide. The region of South Asia is no exception to it. After four years of logjam SAARC (South Asia Association of Regional comprising Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka) has been called to fight the novel COVID-19. The Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's sudden tweet on 13 March to hold a video conference with the leaders of the SAARC member states to chalk out a common strategy to fight coronavirus has made a spark. In a quick response on 15 March, a video conference was arranged where the country heads of all eight countries came together with exception to Pakistan which designated its State Minister of Health, Zafar Mirza to attend the call. In the video conference, each country expressed their concerns regarding the outbreak of COVID-19 and steps that can be taken collectively. Indeed this diplomatic stance creating the virtual platform to handle this severity has set an example to the world.

During this virtual conference, Modi proposed to set up a COVID-19 emergency fund for SAARC countries on a voluntary basis where India initially will contribute \$10 million. Modi also stated that any SAARC nation may utilise this fund during times of emergency and urged each nation to contribute. To quote Modi "We can respond best by coming together, not growing apart—collaboration, not confusion, preparation not panic.". Additionally, a Rapid Response Team of doctors, specialists, testing equipment and attendant infrastructure has also been proposed which will be put at the disposal of the SAARC nations.

Congratulating the effort of the Indian PM, the President of Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani, has proposed a common framework for telemedicine to combat coronavirus. Maldivian President, Ibrahim Solih appreciating the coordinated approach to deal with Covid-19 has said no country can deal with the situation alone. Sri Lankan President, Gotabaya Rajapaksa has proposed setting up of SAARC ministerial-level group to deal with issues related to Coronavirus. He said many lessons will be learned from the sharing of experiences and thanked Modi for offering assistance to SAARC nations. While on the other hand the Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has urged for continued dialogue between experts and officials on follow-up actions regarding Covid-19. More so, she has proposed for more video confer-



ences engaging the health ministers of SAARC nations to discuss specific issues related to COVID-19. The leaders of the Himalayan states of Bhutan and Nepal were also positive and keen to have a collective strategy. Amidst this the Pakistani representative Mirza used the occasion to raise the Kashmir issue, stating that the restriction at the Jammu & Kashmir should be uplifted to help fight the Coronavirus outbreak.

Indeed the effort of Modi is praiseworthy for calling forth the SAARC nations. This may be an initial step to rejuvenate the entire regional forum which has been otherwise inactive since 2016. The 2016 SAARC summit was to be held in Islamabad in November but was postponed amid tensions between India and Pakistan over the attack on a military camp in Uri. Against this backdrop, the revival of the forum depends on the future steps the Indian government will take following this video call. This is thus a rare prospect for India to establish its positive imprint over the region. It is also to be noted that India will be hosting the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit later this year, for which New Delhi may intend to invite the Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan and after India's diplomatic stance it is now Pakistan's turn to show some degree of flexibility.

Currently, each SAARC nation has stepped up its preventive measures to contain the said disease. However, effective surveillance, as well as the need for more aggressive efforts, is urgently required. The increase of diagnostic labs and kits is essential to ensure proper detection. The primary focus will be on addressing social distancing measures such as avoiding large social gatherings and closing educational institutions, malls, movie halls, etc. In addition, sealing land and maritime borders as well as testing individuals who have returned from affected international destinations is being practiced. It is noteworthy in this context that Pakistan has recently made the Coronavirus test mandatory with effect

from March 21 for all international arriving passengers to Pakistan Airports. The passengers shall be required to provide a copy of test results for COVID-19 through RT-PCR conducted during the 24 hours prior to boarding.

Sri Lankan Government Medical Officer's Association (GMOA) has requested to postpone all non-emergency healthcare services in government hospitals and has asked for adequate protection for hospital staff. It is worth mentioning in this context that as a preventive measure the Bangladesh government has cancelled the public gathering to celebrate the 100th Birth Anniversary of the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the former President of Bangladesh keeping the severity of the present situation in consideration.

On a regional scale, India has set up an Integrated Disease Surveillance Portal to better trace possible virus carriers and the people they contacted. The Indian Prime Minister offered to share this technology with SAARC partners besides providing training on using it. He also stated that existing facilities, such as the SAARC Disaster Management Centre, could be used to pool best practices and suggested a common platform to coordinate research on controlling epidemics within South Asia. The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) may also assist in this regard. Since this pandemic has economic costs as well as consequences, experts could brainstorm on the longer-term economic consequences of Covid-19 and how South Asia can insulate internal trade and local value chains from its impact. Modi also suggested that common SAARC pandemic protocols could also be drawn up and applied in such situations.

India and Covid-19

On a domestic front, as of 21 March (09:00), a total of 271 COVID-19 cases have been reported in India. They

include 271 Indian nationals, 32 foreign nationals, 19 recovered, 1 migrated and 5 death. So far, cases of COVID-19 have been reported from 20 States/UTs: Maharashtra (54 cases), Kerala (28 cases), Uttar Pradesh (23 cases), Delhi (17 cases), Haryana (17 cases), Telangana (16 cases), Karnataka (15 cases), Ladakh (10 cases), Rajasthan (17 cases), Jammu & Kashmir (4 cases), Tamil Nadu (3 cases), Andhra Pradesh (2 cases), Punjab (2 cases), Gujarat (2 cases), Odisha (1 case), Chattisgarh (1 case), Chandigarh (1 case), Pondicherry (1 case), Uttarakhand (1 case) and West Bengal (1 case). Hospital isolation of all confirmed cases, tracing and home quarantine of the contacts are ongoing.

The Prime Minister's Office, Ministry of Health & Family Welfare (MoHFW) and Cabinet Secretary are closely monitoring the situation of COVID-19, invoking powers under The Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897 to enhance preparedness and containment of the virus. State Disaster Response Fund (SDRF), constituted under Section 48 (1) (a) of the Disaster Management Act, 2005, is now available with State Governments for responding to COVID-19, which has been declared a notified disaster. A number of steps have been taken by the Central Ministries along with States/UTs in terms of strengthened community surveillance, quarantine facilities, isolation wards, adequate PPEs, trained manpower, rapid response teams for management of COVID-19.

It is interesting that the Indian response to the COVID-19 is focused on what WHO categorises as "imported cases only"- where transmission is limited to international travellers alone. This is mirrored by the current measures taken for instance to cancel all but a small set of visas, largely sealing the country's borders like all types of passenger movement for foreigners (except Nepalese and Bhutanese nationals) through all Immigration Land Check Posts at Indo-Bangladesh, Indo-Nepal, Indo-Bhutan and Indo-Myanmar border will also be suspended. In a recent step, the travel of passengers from Afghanistan, Philippines, Malaysia to India has been prohibited. All passengers coming from the European Union (27 countries), European Free Trade Association (4 countries), Turkey and the United Kingdom have also been prohibited from entering India till 31 March. In addition, testing for the virus has been limited to those with a history of recent international travel and individuals who have had contact with them. However, WHO categorises India as having local transmission where people to people contact through migration within and outside becomes important. In this context, understanding the correlation between migration and the spread of disease is becoming crucial day by day. Under the circumstances, where the movement of people is being restricted to ensure social distancing the virtual platforms may be of help in tightening closeness among people not only within India but also across borders in South Asia.

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In Passing...

Water the gardens with liquid magic of simple ideas

MALINDA SENEVIRATNE

Words. Millions of them. We are getting an avalanche. We are being buried or shoved into a void.

Maybe it's fear. Could be determination. Some of it comes with knowledge. It is backed with information that is sent through the mills of wisdom and experience so it comes out with cogent and pragmatic proposals. Not all of it though.

Words. It is not that the Coronavirus made people use more words than usual. The advent of social media did that. Words are used and shared. It has become a frenzy. And now it's as though we can't step back. Words, like a virus, find us out. There's no place to hide. They come, they pin us down, they drown us. We lose the thread.

So, theoretically, we could receive a piece of writing that could be described as a lucid focus on priority issues. It could be a superbly expressed call to action. Then comes the question: 'how can we keep such insights from disappearing into the void, especially since people have learned to glance and move on simply on account of the word-floods that hit them daily?'

Is it that in general social media users have developed an out-of-the-loop phobia? Are we scared that if we tarry too long reading something or researching it we may miss some life-death post in the newsfeed? Is the possibility of 'missing' sending shivers down our spines? Do we believe that if we missed something it means we've entered the vast void and cannot come out?

And what do we gain, really, from what appears to be cursory perusal? We click. We like. We share. Words



fly in all directions all the time. There are so many words that in the end they gather in incomplete or incomprehensible sentences, isn't this true?

Have we paused to ask ourselves, 'so what did we learn and how has that learning changed things?' Not much, I feel.

It's time to stop, perhaps. One of these days or maybe even within the next hour something is bound to turn up in your newsfeed. Something that is 'a lucid focus on priority issues' or a 'superbly expressed call to action.'

Stop right there. Such messages come with prescription, the wiser the prescription the simpler it is, typically. Call someone who is alone, an elderly relative, a retired teacher, parents of friends who are overseas, someone in a home for the elderly. Plant something. Anything. Look at the stars at night, the elements like a mad artist spraying the sky at sunset, the poetry of cloud formations, the grass struggling to break through a crack in the pavement. Anything.

Write something. Write a list and shake it twice. Write several lists. The things that truly count and the inconsequential which we have been

obsessed with for years. Those who have hurt us but who we've not forgiven. Those who we hurt but didn't say sorry to. Things to do at home that we kept putting off because we didn't have the time or inclination. A list of every single individual we know who in one way or another helped us become who we are.

There are such posts, aren't there? Yes, they can all disappear into the void. Maybe what we haven't realized is that we are in the void and have been dwelling there for years and years. Maybe if we stopped, embraced (instead of shoving aside) and focused for a moment of 'putting things into practice,' we might come out. Slowly. Surely.

There are words. Millions of words. They touch us, push aside or into an abyss and move on. We are being hit by a word-flood. So let's try to catch a word-drop. Just one. Hold it in your palm. Reflect on it. Dissolve it in heart and mind. Water the gardens of life with the liquid magic of simple ideas. The void will, I am sure, come alive.

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Say 'No' to tobacco

MANJARI PEIRIS

It is normal to feel sad, stressed, confused, scared or angry during a crisis. But people should never use smoking, alcohol or other drugs to deal with emotions.

The public including the Government Medical Officers' Association and the National Authority on Tobacco and Alcohol have made requests to President Gotabaya Rajapaksa for the closure of liquor shops to prevent people from consuming alcohol and to ensure that public discipline is maintained during this outbreak and in a period where continuous curfew is imposed.

We have to thank the President for his deep commitment to protect the people of this country and Health Minister Pavithra Wanniarachchi and the Task Force to combat COVID-19, the Government Medical Officers' Association and Dr. Samadhi Rajapaksa, the Chairman of the NATA for making their contribution and the prudent decisions taken.

The Head of the WHO Health Emergencies Programme has noted that smoking is a risk factor for the severity of any lower respiratory tract infection and the same would be expected in COVID 19, a respiratory disease. Having had identified smokers as a potential vulnerable group for COVID-19, health experts have subsequently called for outright quitting of smoking in Indonesia (WHO), Israel

(Israeli Medical Association for Smoking Cessation and Prevention), Japan (Tokyo Medical Association), Ireland (Health Service Executive), and South Africa (National Council Against Smoking (NCAS)).

Here is what the WHO had to say about smoking and COVID-19: "Smokers are likely to be more vulnerable to COVID-19 as the act of smoking means that fingers (and possibly contaminated cigarettes) are in contact with lips which increases the possibility of transmission of virus from hand to mouth. Smokers may also already have lung disease or reduced lung capacity which would greatly increase risk of serious illness."

Smoking products such as water pipes often involve the sharing of mouth pieces and hoses, which could facilitate the transmission of COVID-19 in communal and social settings.

Conditions that increase oxygen needs or reduce the ability of the body to use it properly will put patients at higher risk of serious lung conditions such as pneumonia."

Increasing evidence is suggesting that smokers are at higher risk of severe COVID-19 than those who don't smoke. One study published in the New England Journal of Medicine in February looked at 1,099 patients in China with COVID-19, showing that of 173 patients who had severe symptoms, 16.9% of them were

current smokers and 5.2% had previously smoked. Among the patients with less-severe symptoms, 11.8% were current smokers and 1.3% former smokers.

More worryingly, the study showed that in a group of patients that either needed mechanical ventilation, admission to an intensive care unit, or ultimately died, 25.5% were current smokers, which was more than twice the rate of current smokers in a group of patients that did not have these severe adverse outcomes. Studying other coronavirus outbreaks provides further suggestions that smokers may fare worse with these types of viral infections than non-smokers. In a study of a small number of patients with Middle-East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) in South Korea, patients who smoked were less likely to survive than those who did not.

There is a long history of smokers having more severe respiratory illness in general and this is for a few well-established reasons. They clear mucus less efficiently, the cilia which get infectious particles and secretions out of the lungs, work less efficiently. Smoking also causes inflammation in the airways, which is made worse with respiratory illnesses. In Sri Lanka, 60 people die a day due to tobacco smoking associated disease.

The President should ban sale of cigarettes during this crucial period and help save Sri Lankans.

Pakistan PM for fighting COVID-19 with unity, sagacity

Prime Minister Imran Khan stressing on the need of fighting war against Coronavirus with unity and sagacity on Monday announced "PM's Relief Fund for COVID-19" and a youth force to effectively tackle the situation arising out of the deadly contagion

which has so far killed over 30,000 people across the world.

Addressing the nation over radio and television, he urged people including the Overseas Pakistanis to contribute generously in the PM's Relief Fund for COVID-19 for which an

account "NBPAPKAM-BR-4162786786" had been opened at the main branch of National Bank of Pakistan Karachi and would be operative from April 1.

The prime minister said those contributing in the PM's Relief Fund would not be asked any question

about the source of their funds, rather they would be given tax incentives.

He said the money raised through this fund would be used for giving financial assistance to the poor people hit by the COVID-19 at their doorsteps, through Ehsas Programme.

The prime minister also announced "Corona Tiger Force" to help the government and institutions to reach out to the poor people affected by the lockdown in the wake of COVID-19 and provide them with food and other essential items. "God for-

wards, if Coronavirus spreads, this youth force in coordination with army and administration will reach out to the poor people," he said and added that this force besides supplying food and other essential items to the poor, would also help create awareness

among people about self-quarantine and other safety measures.

The prime minister said the youth from all segments of society including young doctors, nurses and others could join the Corona Tiger Force. The whole operation of the force would be organ-

ized and coordinated by a data cell from the PM Office. Besides, he said, the State Bank of Pakistan had decided to offer soft loans to those industries and factories who would not lay off their employees and laborers in this situation.

(AAP)

The last Corona FREE PLACES in the world



BY BERNADETTE CARREON

A coronavirus-free tropical island nestled in the northern Pacific may seem the perfect place to ride out a pandemic — but residents on Palau say life right now is far from idyllic.

The microstate of 18,000 people is among a dwindling number of places on Earth that still report zero cases of COVID-19 as figures mount daily elsewhere.

The disparate group also includes Samoa, Turkmenistan, North Korea and bases on the frozen continent of Antarctica.

A dot in the ocean hundreds of kilometres from its nearest neighbours, Palau is surrounded by the vast Pacific, which has acted as a buffer against the virus.

Along with strict travel restrictions, this seems to have kept infections at bay for a number of nations including Tonga, the Solomon Islands, the Marshall Islands and Micronesia.

But remoteness is not

certain to stop the relentless march of the new disease. The Northern Mariana Islands confirmed its first cases over the weekend, followed by a suspected death on Monday.

Klamiokl Tulop, a 28-year-old artist and single mum, is hopeful Palau can avoid the fate of Wuhan, New York or Madrid — where better-resourced health services were overrun. But she describes a growing sense of dread, a fear that the virus is coming or could already be on the island undetected.

"You can feel a rising tension and anxiety just shopping," she told AFP. "Stores are crowded even more during non-payday weeks."

There have been several scares on Palau, including a potential case that saw one person placed into quarantine this week as authorities await test results.

— Antarctic seclusion —
Inside Australia's four remote Antarctic research bases, around 90 people have found themselves ensconced on the only

virus-free continent as they watch their old home transform beyond recognition. There is no need for social distancing in the tundra.

"They're probably the only Australians at the moment that can have a large dinner together or have the bar still open or the gym still open," Antarctic Division Operations manager Robb Clifton told AFP. The bases are now isolated until November, so the group is safe, but Clifton admits "the main thing that's on the mind of expeditioners is how their loved ones are going back home."

In some places, reporting no cases does not always mean there are no cases to report.

North Korea has portrayed emergency measures as an unqualified success in keeping COVID-19 out, despite sustained epidemics in neighbouring China and South Korea.

But state media also appears to have doctored images to give ordinary North Koreans face masks — handing sceptics reason

to believe the world's most secretive government may not be telling the whole truth.

While Palau has no confirmed cases, it has still been gripped by the society-altering fears and economic paralysis that have affected the rest of the world. Supermarket aisles in the country's largest town Koror have seen panic buying and there are shortages of hand sanitisers, masks and alcohol.

The islands depend heavily on goods being shipped or flown in, meaning supplies can quickly run low. United Airlines used to fly six times a week from nearby Guam — which has seen more than 50 cases — but now there is just one flight a week.

"Look at how bad we coped when shipments were late before this pandemic happened," Tulop said. "Everyone was practically in uproar."

Residents have been practising social distancing. Doctors are waiting for test kits to arrive from Tai-

wan. The government is building five isolation rooms that will be able to hold up to 14 patients.

It all feels like waiting for the inevitable.

"I would like to be optimistic we won't get the virus," Tulop said. "But Palau would most definitely get it. We rely heavily on tourism and most of us even need to travel for work."

Rondy Ronny's job is to host big tourist events, but work has already dried up, and he admits to being "very anxious".

"I have loans and bills and payments due," he said. "This will definitely put me back, I hope the government will do something about our economy too, to help it recover."

Palau's biggest test may yet come with the first positive case.

But even in the most remote corners of the world, the impact of this truly global pandemic is already being felt.

Nowhere, it seems, is truly virus-free. (AFP)

US Navy Hospital Ship docks in New York

A military hospital ship arrived in New York Monday as America's coronavirus epicenter gears up for the peak of the pandemic, with emergency restrictions extended as the national death toll passed 3,000.

The navy's 1,000-bed USNS Comfort docked at a Manhattan pier as more US states enforced stay-at-home orders after President Donald Trump abandoned his Easter target for life returning to normal in the United States.

The 894 foot-long vessel — which also has space for a dozen operating rooms — was greeted by cheering crowds after departing Norfolk, Virginia on Saturday.

Its arrival came as Virginia, Maryland and the capital Washington became the latest areas to restrict citizens' movements, meaning almost three-quarters of Americans are now living, or about to live, under various phases of lockdown.

On Sunday, Trump cancelled his plans to re-open much of the United States by Easter — April 12 — and extended social distancing guidelines until the end of April after his top scientists confronted him with data on the rising coronavirus deaths.

He said America's death rate was likely to increase for two weeks, describing as "horrible" a prediction by senior scientist Anthony Fauci that COVID-19 could claim up to 200,000 lives. Worst-affected New York is ramping up hospital capacity and taking

delivery of desperately needed medical supplies as it races against time.

"We have been playing catch up from day one," Governor Andrew Cuomo told reporters.

"Don't fight today's fight. Plan for two weeks, three weeks, four weeks from now when you're going to have the apex, and make sure that we're in a position to win the battle," he added.

The Comfort will care for New Yorkers requiring intensive care unrelated to the coronavirus, easing the burden on a hospital network overwhelmed by an influx of COVID-19 patients. The US now has the highest number of confirmed cases in the world — more than 163,000 according to a running tally by Johns Hopkins University.

The virus has claimed more than 3,000 lives in the country, including more than 1,200 in New York state. Some 790 deaths have occurred in New York City, the country's financial capital and the most populous US city.

It is spreading to other areas, notably New Jersey, Louisiana, Illinois and Florida, where Governor Ron DeSantis said Monday he did not want passengers from the cruise ship *Zaandam* suspected of having the virus "dumped" in his state.

New York opened a temporary emergency hospital in the Javits convention center with 2,900 beds on Monday. A field hospital in Central Park is due to open Tuesday. Four other sites have also been

approved to house patients discharged from hospitals to make way for residents suffering from the novel coronavirus.

Flights run by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) began arriving at New York's JFK Airport as Mayor Bill de Blasio said the city needed 400 more ventilators by the end of the week, describing next Sunday as "D-Day."

The flights, part of 50 planned under "Project Airbridge," are delivering millions of masks, gowns and thermometers for hospitals.

"We are all trying to reuse what we can because you never know when it's going to run out," 38-year-old doctor Peter Liang told AFP, referring to supplies at the Manhattan hospital he works in.

Fauci, who leads research into infectious diseases at the National Institutes of Health, said Sunday that between 100,000 and 200,000 Americans could die from "millions of cases."

Trump told Fox News on Monday he expected a spike in cases around Easter, before numbers begin to fall.

"That would be a day of celebration. And we just want to do it right," said Trump, who earlier said he expected the country to "be well on our way to recovery" by June 1.

Fauci said he had no trouble convincing Trump to extend the confinement guidelines.

"It was a pretty clear picture," Fauci told CNN on Monday. (AFP)



GLOBAL LOCKDOWN IN EFFECT

Lockdowns aimed at halting the march of the coronavirus pandemic have extended worldwide as the US outbreak continued to accelerate with the death toll rising 3,000.

Despite slivers of hope in stricken Italy, tough measures that have confined two-fifths of the globe's population to their homes are being broadened.

Moscow and Lagos joined the roll call of cities around the world with empty streets, while Virginia and Maryland became the latest US states to announce stay-at-home orders, followed quickly by Washington DC. A US military medical ship steamed into New York, where it will relieve pressure on the city's badly stretched health system. A field hospital set up in Central Park was due

to go online later Tuesday. The scale and speed of the US pandemic continued to expand, with the death toll topping 3,000 out of 163,000 known infections — the highest case count for any single country.

President Donald Trump sought to reassure Americans that authorities were ramping up distribution of desperately needed equipment like ventilators and personal protective gear.

But he also offered a stark warning, saying "challenging times are ahead for the next 30 days" as he acknowledged a potential nationwide stay-at-home order.

"We're sort of putting it all on the line," Trump said, likening the efforts against coronavirus to a "war."

The number of confirmed COVID-19 cases around the world rose above



784,000, with 413,000 of those in Europe, which also has the lion's share of the deaths, according to an AFP tally. World leaders — several of whom have been stricken or forced into iso-

lation — are still grappling for ways to deal with a crisis that is generating economic and social shockwaves unseen since World War II. Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin

discussed "closer cooperation" and addressed plunging oil prices in a Monday call, the Kremlin said.

Putin's government was getting to grips with its own outbreak, with the

Russian strongman urging residents of Moscow to respect a lockdown that has closed all non-essential shops, and left Red Square deserted.

Anna, a 36-year-old web designer, said the lockdown would be hard for her and her five-year-old daughter. "But I don't want Arina to get sick," she told AFP on her way to buy bread. "So of course we will observe the quarantine."

After weeks of a national lockdown in Italy, signs were emerging that drastic action could be slowing the spread of the disease.

Even though the country's death toll grew by 812 in 24 hours to 11,591, the number of infections climbed just 4.1 percent.

"The data are better but our work continues," said Giulio Gallera, the chief medical officer of Lom-

bardy, Italy's worst-hit region. Spain announced another 812 virus deaths in 24 hours, taking it past China, where the disease first emerged in December.

Even with the US health system stretched, Trump said he was ordering some excess medical equipment be sent to Italy, France and Spain. The lockdowns are causing hardship across the world but particularly in impoverished cities in Africa and Asia.

Africa's biggest city, Lagos, joined the global stay-at-home from Monday, with Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari ordering a two-week lockdown for its 20 million people. The measures also apply to the capital Abuja.

"Two weeks is too long. I don't know how we will cope," said student Abdul Rahim, 25, as he helped his

sister sell food from a market stall. Impoverished Zimbabwe also began enforcing a three-week lockdown.

"They need to be fed, but there is nothing to eat," vegetable vendor Irene Ruwisi said in the township of Mbare, pointing at her four grandchildren. "How do they expect us to survive?" The shutdown has already put millions out of work and forced governments to rush through huge stimulus plans.

Experts in Germany, Europe's economic powerhouse, said the virus would shrink output there this year by up to 5.4 percent.

The World Bank warned the economic fallout from the pandemic could cause Chinese growth to shudder to a halt, and thrust millions of East Asians into poverty. (AFP)

Physicist Philip Anderson dies



The US condensed-matter physicist Philip Warren Anderson died yesterday aged 96. One of the most celebrated condensed-matter physicists of his generation, Anderson's theoretical research into the electronic structure of magnetic and disordered systems led to an improved understanding of metals and insulators. For this work he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1977, which he shared with the British physicist Sir Nevill Mott and the US physicist John Hasbrouck van Vleck.

Born on 12 December 1923 in Indianapolis, Indiana, Anderson was raised in Illinois, where his father taught plant pathology at the University of Illinois in Urbana.

In 1940, Anderson went to study physics at Harvard University but during the Second World War was drafted to work at the US Naval Research Laboratory, spending the period from 1943 to 1945 researching antenna design.

He then returned to Harvard working on a PhD under the supervision of van Vleck, graduating in 1949. Anderson then

joined Bell Telephone Laboratories in New Jersey, which was part of the telecoms firm AT&T. It was there that he developed his theory of the electronic structure of solids.

Much of what we know about the electronic properties of metals and semiconductors is based on the idea that electrons with certain momenta can travel freely through a crystalline lattice, while others cannot. This is embodied in Felix Bloch's 1928 quantum theory of conduction, which describes the lattice as a periodic electric potential through which some electrons (behaving as "matter waves") diffract with ease. In the 1960s, Anderson worked out what

would happen in such a system if the potential lost its periodicity. This could happen, for example, if the lattice remained periodic, but the potential has a different value at each lattice site.

Anderson found that electrons would be unable to move through such a "disordered" lattice, and instead become trapped by specific atoms. If the disorder is sufficiently strong, the electrons cannot form an electric current due to destructive interference between different scattering paths. Instead, they become localized and unable to propagate in space.

For this prediction of what became known as "Anderson localization" he was awarded the 1977 Nobel Prize for Physics, which he shared with van Vleck and Mott for their "fundamental theoretical investigations of the electronic structure of magnetic and disordered systems". Anderson localization has since been seen in several systems including those based on light, microwaves and in atoms held in a Bose-Einstein condensate. (Physics World)

WHO STRESSES IMPORTANCE OF COVID-19 TESTING



Covid-19 testing in Vietnam (AFP)

In communities where most coronavirus tests are coming back positive, it's a sign there are many more cases there that haven't been found, say World Health Organization officials in a press conference on Monday.

"If 80-90% of the people test positive, you are probably missing a lot of cases," says Michael Ryan, executive director of the WHO Health Emergencies Program.

That's because more positives means the tests are being used mainly to confirm obvious cases, and as a result health authorities are not getting a clear picture on the scope of the epidemic in their area.

In places where every close contact and suspected case has been tested, the percent of negative cases is high. Ryan says in countries that have extensive testing, fewer than 12% of their tests are positive.

"We would certainly like to see countries testing at the level of ten

negative tests to one positive, as a general benchmark of a system that's doing enough testing to pick up all cases," Ryan says.

WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus says that testing is important for both the care of an individual, and for public health officials who are trying to slow the spread of the virus.

"Without knowing, without testing, it's like moving blindfolded," he says, pointing to how South Korean health officials identified religious gatherings and hospital settings as hotspots for disease spread — and were able to take corrective actions as a result.

Coronavirus testing is inadequate in many places because the tests themselves are in short supply. Communities have had to ration them based on need.

Maria Van Kerkhove, technical lead of the WHO Health Emergencies Program, says the WHO is working with countries to increase the number of coronavirus testing

labs, and to train more people to run the tests. They're also working to help increase the production and availability of tests and testing materials.

A new test may make diagnosing COVID-19 as easy as the flu. The new point-of-care test, having just received an emergency-use authorization by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), will be able to deliver results in as little as five minutes, according to the manufacturer.

This test from medical device company Abbott, which begins shipping April 1, may soon be available at your local urgent care clinic.

"This is going to be the fastest molecular point-of-care test to date," said John Frels, Ph.D., Abbott's vice president of research and development, in an interview with ABC News. "It generates a positive result in 5 minutes and negative results in 13 minutes." (NPR, ABC)

Americans could be asked to wear masks

President Donald Trump said Monday he could foresee a scenario where all Americans are recommended to wear masks in public to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

The idea on masks for combating coronavirus authored by his former Food and Drug Administration head, Dr. Scott Gottlieb, runs counter to the current government directive that masks aren't necessary for most people.

Trump said that could potentially change, but only for a short period.

"I saw his suggestion on that. We will take a look at it," the President said during his daily news briefing, saying he hadn't discussed the idea yet with his task force. A source close to the coronavirus task force said the idea of asking Americans to wear masks for a period of time during the pandemic is likely to be under "serious discussion."

The source said part of the issue with the recommendation is the current supply of masks would not meet the ongoing demand. Then, of course, there is the issue of medical professionals who still lack critical personal protective equipment due to supply shortages.

"You don't want to create a shortage for health care workers," the source said.

Trump said that if he does offer that recommendation, it would be for "a period of time, not forever." "You don't want to create a shortage for health care workers," the source said. Trump said that if he does offer that recommendation, it would be for "a period of time, not forever."

"We want our country back," the President said during the Rose Garden briefing. "We are not going to be wearing masks forever, but it could be for a short period of time after we get back into gear. I could see something like that happening for a period of time." (CNN)

New drug to be trialled for Covid-19

Researchers hope drug can treat a condition that accounts for some 50% of coronavirus deaths.

NeuroRx, a US-Israeli pharmaceutical company, and Relief Therapeutics, a Swiss drug development company, announced Sunday they received the go-ahead from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for phase two trials of a drug that could take on a deadly condition associated with COVID-19.

The companies revealed that the FDA issued a

"study may proceed" letter — which does not amount to a fully-fledged drug approval — for the substance to be tried on COVID-19 patients.

The drug in question, Aviptadil, is a synthetic form of a neuropeptide hormone that works to enable communications between neurons in the human nervous system.

The researchers are hoping that Aviptadil will be able to take on the so-called Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome

(ARDS) — a condition that has killed about 50 percent of COVID-19 fatalities.

ARDS is a respiratory system failure induced by rapid and severe lung inflammation, with shortness of breath — a symptom widely associated with COVID-19 — among its key signs.

It effectively brings to a halt the oxygen and carbon dioxide exchange in the patient's lungs, necessitating the use of an artificial lung ventilation machine.

(i24News)

Astronomers reach galaxy's edge

Astronomers from Durham University in England have made an exciting discovery about the galaxy that includes Earth — specifically, they've finally found its far edge.

Using nearby galaxies as a guide, astrophysicist Alis Deason and her colleagues have determined the exact diameter of the Milky Way to be 1.9 million light-years (with a margin of error of 0.4 million light-years). That's according to a paper from the team, posted at arXiv.org, which is an open-access archive of tens of thousands of articles from academics and scientists. And this work is important, for reasons that include the future additional discoveries it will help astronomers make.

Rosemary Wyse, an astronomer at Johns Hopkins University, told the publication Science News about the new Milky Way measurement that it should "help astronomers tease out other galactic properties." That's a reference to the fact that, for example, the more we realize the true dimensions of the Milky Way, it gives us a better understanding of what (and how many) galaxies are revolving around it.

Right now, about 60 are known to surround the Milky Way, but the expecta-



tion is that this new discovery will lead to the identification of more.

The team ran computer simulations to study how galaxies form and paid close attention to the way two galaxies form beside each other, like our galaxy and its nearest neighbor. Gravity from both galaxies pulls on each other, and when you get out beyond the dark halo of a galaxy like ours, the velocities of small galaxies drops off. The astronomers from Deason's team found that same kind of slowdown in galaxy speeds near the Milky Way, which helped them pinpoint the edge of our galaxy, at about 950,000 light-years from the center of the Milky Way. (BGR)

AI tool to predict serious cases of COVID-19

An artificial intelligence tool accurately predicted which patients newly infected with the COVID-19 virus would go on to develop severe respiratory disease, a new study found.

The work was led by NYU Grossman School of Medicine and the Courant Institute of Mathematical Sciences at New York University, in partnership with Wenzhou Central Hospital and Cangnan People's Hospital, both in Wenzhou, China. Published online March 30 in the journal Computers, Materials & Continua, the study also revealed the best indicators of future severity, and found that they were not as expected.

"While work remains to further validate our model, it holds promise as another tool to predict the patients most vulnerable to the virus, but only in support of physicians' hard-won clinical experience in treating viral infections," says corresponding study author Megan Coffee, MD, PhD, clinical assistant professor in the Division of Infectious Disease & Immunology within the

Department of Medicine at NYU Grossman School of Medicine.

"Our goal was to design and deploy a decision-support tool using AI capabilities — mostly predictive analytics — to flag future clinical coronavirus severity," says co-author Anasse Bari, PhD, a clinical assistant professor in Computer Science at the Courant Institute.

"We hope that the tool, when fully developed, will be useful to physicians as they assess which moderately ill patients really need beds, and who can safely go home, with hospital resources stretched thin."

Surprise Predictors
For the study, demographic, laboratory, and radiographic findings were collected from 53 patients as each tested positive in January 2020 for the SARS-CoV2 virus at the two Chinese hospitals. Symptoms were typically mild to begin with, including cough, fever, and stomach upset. In a minority of patients, however, severe symptoms developed with a week, including pneumonia. (Science Daily)

Ancient Mars had water reservoirs - study



Scientists have discovered that two unique reservoirs of ancient water once flowed deep beneath the surface of Mars.

It's hard to believe, but at one time the dry and dusty Red Planet was wet and lush.

"A lot of people have been trying to figure out Mars' water history," University of Arizona planetary scientist Jessica Barnes said in a statement. "Like, where did water come from? How long was it in the crust [surface] of Mars? Where did Mars'

interior water come from? What can water tell us about how Mars formed and evolved?"

Barnes and her colleagues examined the isotopes of hydrogen locked inside Mars rocks. Isotopes are variants of an element with different numbers of neutrons.

They studied samples they knew were originated from the planet's crust: the Black Beauty and Allan Hills meteorites.

Two geochemically different types of Martian volcanic rocks — enriched

shergottites and depleted shergottites — contain water with different hydrogen isotope ratios, the researchers found.

Their analysis, which was published today in Nature Geoscience, showed that Mars likely received water from at least two vastly different sources early in its history.

The variability the researchers found seems to imply that Mars, unlike Earth and the moon, never had an ocean of magma completely encompassing the planet. (FOX)

Mercedes AMG to build breathing aid

Individuals and companies are doing as much as possible to help slow the spread of coronavirus (Covid-19). Social distancing and stay-at-home orders should help flatten the curve while companies are now stepping in to improve upon the shortage of ventilators, respirators, masks, and other protective medical equipment.

Ford voluntarily stepped into to build ventilators, respirators, and masks, General Motors will be ordered by the Defense Production Act to do so, and other companies will be pitching in as well.

The Mercedes-AMG Formula 1 team is the latest

organization to announce its efforts to stop the spread of the disease. The F1 team worked with engineers from University College London to build Continuous Positive Airway Pressure (CPAP) devices that are currently in short supply. CPAP devices deliver oxygen to the lungs without needing a ventilator.

Forty of these devices have already been delivered to the University College London Hospital (UCLH) and three other hospitals in London. If the trials are successful, Mercedes-AMG will be able to produce 1,000 of the CPAP machines per day starting



in just one week's time. The UK's Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) has already approved the use of the Mercedes-built CPAP devices in hospitals. Mercedes says it fast-

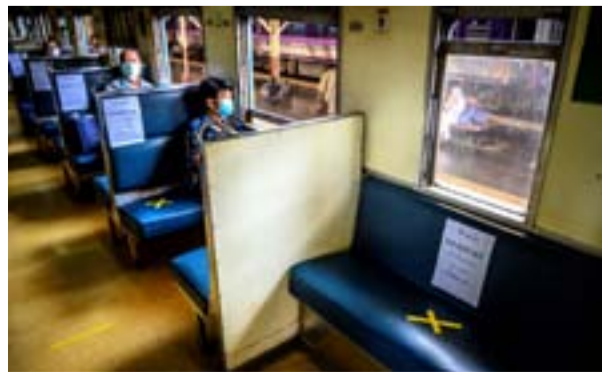
tracked the development process and it took fewer than 100 hours from the initial meeting to production of the first device. "Given the urgent need, we are thankful that we were able to reduce a pro-

cess that could take years down to a matter of days, said Professor Tim Baker, a UCL Mechanical Engineer. "From being given the brief, we worked all hours of the day, disassembling and analyzing an off-patent device. Using computer simulations, we improved the device further to create a state-of-the-art version suited to mass production."

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"These devices will help to save lives by ensuring that ventilators, a limited resource, are used only for the most severely ill," said UCLH critical care consultant, Professor Mervyn Singer. "While they will be

(CARbuzz)



A train with social distancing signboards in Thailand (AFP)



Finance

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World Bank warns of Coronavirus economic pain for Asia

WASHINGTON – The World Bank is estimating that the coronavirus outbreak will cause economic growth to slow significantly this year in China and other East Asian-Pacific countries, throwing millions into poverty.

Under a worse-case scenario, the region could suffer its sharpest downturn since a devastating currency crisis more than two decades ago, the bank said in an updated forecast released Monday.

The bank's report projects that growth in the region would slow to 2.1% this year from 5.8% in 2019 under a "base-line" forecast in which economic recovery takes hold this summer.

But under a worse case, in which the adverse effects of the virus spillover into next year, the region's economy would contract 0.5%, the bank estimates.

That would represent the weakest performance for the region since the 1997-98 Asian currency crisis, which plunged 40% of the globe into recession.

More than 11 million people could fall into poverty in the region under the worse-case scenario, the bank estimates.

That's in stark contrast to its earlier forecast that growth would be sufficient this year to lift 35 million people out of poverty.

A slowdown of the size being project-

ed by the World Bank for such a critical part of the global economy would have severe effects for the rest of the world. The World Bank said it has not finished forecasts for other parts of the world but last week, International Monetary Fund Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva, said it is clear that the global economy has already entered a recession that could be as bad or worse than the slump after the 2008 financial crisis.

In the World Bank's base case, China, the world's second largest economy, would see growth slow from 6.1% last year to 2.3% this year. In the worse case scenario, growth in China would come to a near halt with a tiny 0.1% gain.

In the worse case scenario where the virus keeps disrupting activity for many more months, the negative 0.5% drop for the region would include economic declines of 2.3% in Indonesia, 4.6% for Malaysia and 5% for Thailand.

"In addition to bold national actions, deeper international cooperation is the most effective vaccine against this virulent threat," said Aaditya Mattoo, chief economist for East Asia and the Pacific at the World Bank. The World Bank has pledged to provide \$14 billion in financial support through a fast-track package to strengthen the response of developing



Tokyo Stock Exchange

countries to the virus and expects to deploy up to \$160 billion over the next 15 months to protect the poor and vulnerable.

The IMF has said it will commit if needed its full \$1 trillion in lending resources to support nations hit by the virus. *(Market Watch)*

CSE closed from April 1

The extraordinary measures taken by the Government of Sri Lanka in order to contain the COVID-19 pandemic includes an extension of a country-wide curfew. The Government has also given specific directions with regard to social distancing and the public has been asked to stay indoors, except for any engagements relating to the maintenance of certain essential services which have been specified.

In view of the aforesaid and pursuant to a guidance received from the Securities and Exchange Commission of Sri Lanka in this regard, the Colombo Stock Exchange (CSE) will remain closed for Trading from April 1, until the curfew is lifted.

ICRA Lanka reaffirms the issuer rating of MCB Bank

ICRA Lanka Limited, subsidiary of ICRA Limited, a group company of Moody's Investors Service, has reaffirmed the issuer rating of MCB Bank's Sri Lanka branch (MCBSL or the Bank) at [SL]A+ (Pronounced SL A plus).

The outlook on the rating is Stable.

The rating factors in the financial, managerial and operational support provided by MCB Bank Limited, Pakistan (MCBP; rated Caa1/ NP by Moody's) to its Sri Lankan branch operation. The rating takes note of the comfortable capitalisation profile with Total Capital ratio including – Capital Conservation Buffer ("CCB") at 28.23% as in Sep-19 compared to minimum regulatory requirement of 12.50%.

Further, the Bank's core capital was at LKR 6.2 Bn as in Sep-19, against regulatory minimum requirement of LKR 5.0 Bn by Dec-20. The capital profile was supported by healthy profitability indicators with Return on Assets of 1.35% and Return on Equity of 6.32% in 9M CY2019.

The rating takes note of MCBSL's weak asset quality profile with gross NPA[1] of 4.13% as in Sep-19 vis a vis 5.73% as in Dec-18 (4.18% as in Dec-17).

The rating however takes cognizance of MCBSL's modest size and franchise, geographically concentrated presence, its concentrated exposures and a moderate deposit profile.

MCBSL's lending and deposit portfolios are quite concentrated with top 10 exposures accounting for about 71% and 45%, respectively as in Sep-19.



Board of Governors of Northshore Campus

Northshore Campus to invest Rs. 300 mn for upgrade

Northshore Campus held its first Board of Governors meeting on the 03rd of March to exchange views and discuss its highly ambitious plans for the future to be a top ranked higher educational institute in the country for graduate employability, academic and research excellence.

It was also discussed and finalized that Northshore Campus, among many other initiatives in the

pipeline this year, will be investing LKR 300 million to upgrade and elevate its Health Sciences, Engineering and IT laboratories to include the very latest, state-of-the-art equipment to ensure a stimulating environment to all students.

Northshore Campus provides various programmes such as HNDs, undergraduate and postgraduate in the fields of Engineering, Business Management and IT, with its part-

nership with the University of the West of England (UWE) Bristol in UK and Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA).

Streams such as Tourism and Hospitality, Linguistics, Teacher Training and Education, LLB and Health Sciences are set to launch in near future.

The campus is equipped with modern lecture rooms, library, laboratories, spacious cafeteria, various

recreational areas and an enormous well-furnished auditorium which is the largest of its kind in the country.

Its Board of Governors are headed by VC and CEO, Prof. Nalaka Jayakody and includes eminent personalities such as Anuradha Wijekoon, Prof. Ajantha Dharmasiri, Dr. Dan Malika Gunasekera, Dr. Anil Samaranyake, Dr. Kishu Gomes, Dr. Indika Sigera, and Deputy VC Prof. Sisuru Sendanayake.

Standard Chartered commits USD 1 bn to finance companies to tackle COVID-19

Colombo, March 31, 2020 - Standard Chartered announced this week that it will globally commit USD1 billion of financing for companies that provide goods and services to help the fight against COVID-19, and those planning the switch into making products that are in high demand to fight the global pandemic.

Companies in scope include all those associated with helping to tackle COVID-19, including manufacturers and distributors in the pharmaceutical industry and healthcare providers, as well as non-medical companies that have volunteered to add this capability to their manufacturing output - goods in scope include ventilators, face masks, protective equipment, sanitisers and other consumables.

Commenting on this global initiative, Standard Chartered Sri Lanka's CEO Bingham Thewarathanthri commented: "Standard Chartered has been in Sri Lanka for more than 150 years and have worked with the communities during good and bad times. The COVID-19 pandemic will not be an exception. We will work with our colleagues in the Group to get the funding benefits to the Sri Lankan clients. We believe that Sri Lanka is doing what it takes to combat the virus and we are glad to be part of the national agenda."

Part of being 'Here for good' in the markets where the Bank operates involves supporting communities in the wake of crises when appropriate. To this extent, the senior leadership team at Standard Chartered Sri Lanka has

personally pledged to provide various medical supplies and other items for a new Isolation Unit that is being built at the Kalubowila Hospital to help in the treatment of infected patients. "We are also looking at a much larger initiative to help support those most vulnerable in the country during this difficult period," Bingham added.

The bank will continue to serve all of its clients during what is a challenging period for all companies, from small businesses to large multinationals.

Standard Chartered is a leading international banking group, with a presence in 59 of the world's most dynamic markets, and serving clients in a further 85.



CEO Bingham Thewarathanthri

WHO, Viber join to fight COVID-19 misinformation

The World Health Organization (WHO) and Rakuten Viber, announce a new partnership to fight misinformation around COVID-19 with an interactive multi-language chatbot available globally. The bot aims to combat fake news and false information that has been rapidly circulating about the virus.

To assist people who are looking for accurate health information, the chatbot is available in English, Arabic, Russian, and soon to be translated into 20 more languages. It highlights the most commonly asked questions and the latest news related to the pandemic.

The "Latest News," section is updated in real-time straight from WHO's website and into the palm of your hand. Other main sections include "Protect Yourself," "Mask usage," "Travel recommendations" and an interactive "Myths" quiz to test the knowledge of the virus. The "Donate Now" button prompts users to support the WHO fight against the pandemic through donating to the COVID-19 Solidarity Response Fund.

"WHO aims to reach as many people as possible with reliable health information through innovative digital technology. Information is power and can help save lives during this pandemic," said WHO Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.



"We're helping people stay connected while also assisting local and global government and healthcare agencies around the world to offer critical updates and to combat misinformation. Rakuten Viber and WHO are working together to help individuals and communities stay informed and healthy during this challenging time. Use the chatbot yourself, support and protect your relatives by sharing it with them. Digital is safe," commented Djamel Agaoua, CEO of Rakuten Viber.

The chatbot is free and already available for all Viber users globally.

Viber is also launching a specially designed sticker pack to complement and support the efforts of all health workers on the frontline with the virus as well as to spread motivational and positive vibes throughout the world under lockdown.

All who download the pack from the Viber's sticker market will get smooth and instant access to the chatbot.

Govt and Uber Eats partner to deliver essential supplies

The government of Sri Lanka and Uber are joining forces to deliver essential supplies as part of efforts to slow the spread of COVID-19 in the country.

Uber Eats will enable people to receive essential food items and support the government's guidelines by staying at home. Users can now get groceries safely delivered on the same day, in full compliance with hygiene measures and traffic restrictions, and have the option of paying through card or cash.

Following the temporary closure of all restaurants and shopping centres, Uber Eats has partnered with supermarkets and small independent businesses to meet the grow-

ing grocery needs of the citizens. By sharing its technology and vast network of delivery partners with the government, Uber is helping to free up precious State resources so that they can be channelled towards life-saving efforts.

"I want to thank both Uber and Mobitel for accepting my invitation and stepping up in this time of crisis to partner with leading Supermarket stores to provide a state of the art delivery service. It will be operational from cities in the Colombo, Gampaha and Kalutara districts," said Namal Rajapaksa, Member of Parliament commenting on the partnership.

"Our partnership with Cargills Food City and other businesses to deliver essential everyday items via Uber Eats will allow people to stay at home and help authorities reduce the spread of COVID 19. It will also help reduce the burden on authorities in providing essential goods for every citizen.

To enhance safety for our community, Uber Eats deliveries can be contactless and users can request orders to be left at their doorstep. In these unprecedented times, we are privileged to be able to support authorities and the people of Sri Lanka meet everyday needs," said Bhav-



na Dadlani, Country Lead, Uber Eats Sri Lanka.

Uber Eats allows people to search for and discover local restaurants, order a meal at the touch of a button, and have it delivered reliably and quickly. Since launching the Eats app three and a half years ago, the business has leveraged Uber's technology and logistics expertise to serve 500+ cities globally.

Trade deficit widens, export earnings dip *See Finance Page ii*

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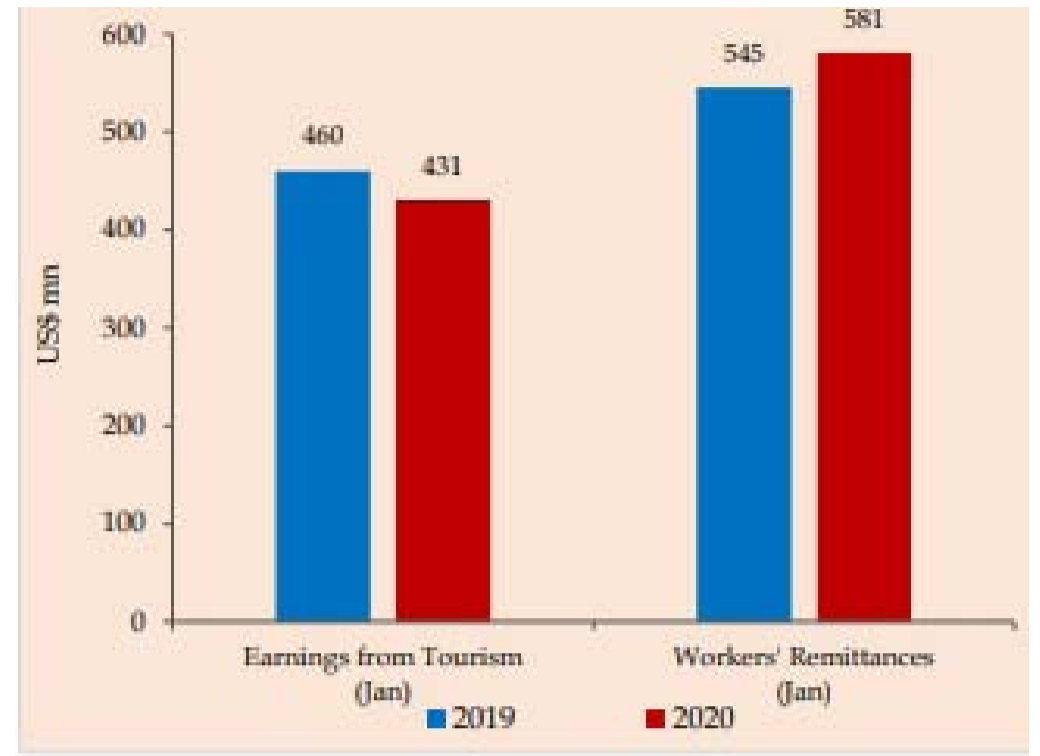
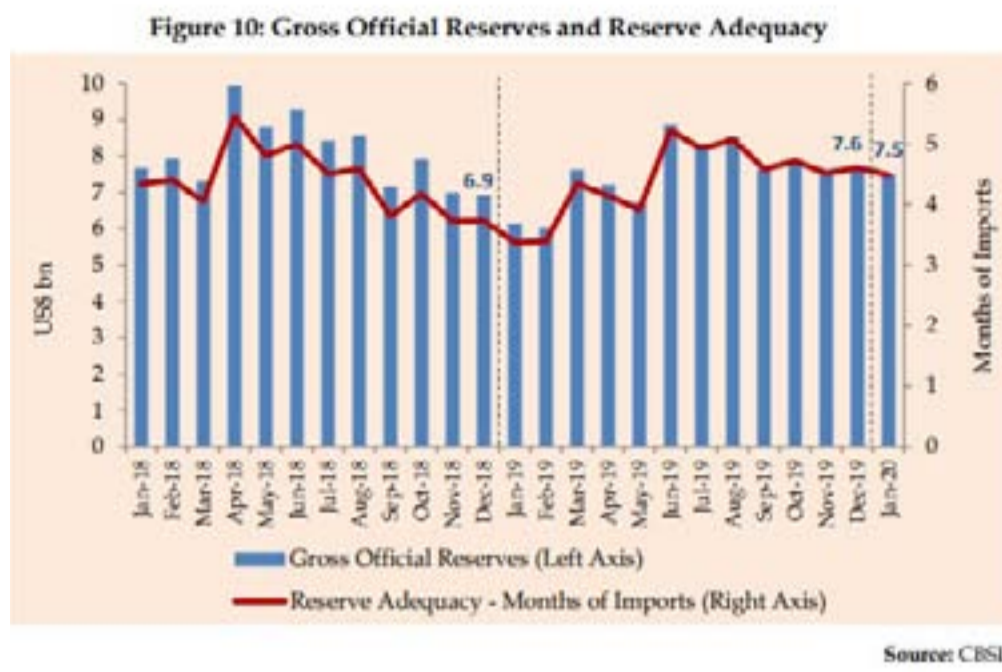
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Trade deficit widens as export earnings dip

The trade deficit widened in January 2020 compared to January 2019, as earnings from exports declined while expenditure on imports increased.

Although the tourism industry rapidly recovered from the Easter Sunday attacks by end 2019, the COVID-19 outbreak reversed the recovering trend in January 2020. Workers' remittances recorded a year-on-year growth in January 2020. Meanwhile, foreign investment in the government securities market recorded a net inflow in January 2020 while a net outflow was observed from the CSE.

The Sri Lankan rupee remained broadly stable and appreciated against the US dollar in January 2020, but depreciated sharply in March in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic following a similar trend of many emerging market currencies due to strengthening US dollar and yen. The deficit in the trade account widened in January 2020 to US dollars 730 million, from US dollars 617 million in January 2019, led by a decline in exports and an increase in imports on a year on year basis. The major contributory factors for the increase in the trade deficit are depicted in Figure 1.



Meanwhile, terms of trade, i.e., ratio of the price of exports to the price of imports, deteriorated by 3.7 per cent (year-on-year) in January 2020, as export prices declined at a faster pace than the decline in import prices.

Continuing the year-on-year declining trend observed since July 2019, earnings from merchandise exports declined by 3.2 per cent to US dollars 1,065 million in January 2020, with all major export sectors recording declines in comparison to January 2019.

Earnings from agricultural exports declined in January 2020 (year-on-year) driven by all of its sub sectors except for minor agricultural products. Earnings from tea exports declined due to the combined effect of lower export volumes and average export prices.

In addition, earnings from spices declined in January 2020, mainly due to lower export volumes of many sub categories, while export prices also declined except for nutmeg and mace. Earnings from seafood exports declined with lower demand from the USA.

Meanwhile, earnings from coconut exports declined, mainly due to lower export earnings from desiccated coconut categorised under kernel products and fibre under non kernel products. In contrast, earnings from export of minor agricultural products increased during the month, mainly led by exports of arecanuts and betel leaves.

Industrial exports decline

Earnings from industrial exports declined in January 2020 in comparison with January 2019, with low earnings from almost all sub sectors, except petroleum products, chemical

products and gems, diamond and jewellery.

Earnings from food, beverages and tobacco exports declined, led by manufactured tobacco exports and miscellaneous food preparations. In addition, earnings from rubber products declined mainly driven by lower tyre exports. Earnings from textiles and garments declined marginally, as a result of lower earnings from the USA and nontraditional markets such as India, South Korea and Mexico, despite an increase recorded in exports to the EU. Further, earnings from machinery and mechanical appliances declined with lower exports in all sub-categories.

Conversely, export earnings from petroleum products increased substantially, due to higher earnings from bunker and aviation fuel exports resulting from higher bunker quantities and prices as well as higher earnings from naphtha exports.

Earnings from mineral exports recorded a decline in January 2020, year-on-year, with weaker performance in all subcategories.

The export volume index in January 2020 improved by 2.9 per cent (year-on-year), while the export unit value index declined by 6.0 per cent, indicating that the decline in exports was driven entirely by lower prices when compared to January 2019.

Performance of Merchandise Imports

Expenditure on Merchandise imports increased, on a year-on-year basis, in January 2020 for the second consecutive month, by 4.8 per cent to US dollars 1,735 million, driven by

higher consumer and investment goods imports.

Expenditure on consumer goods imports increased in January 2020 with the increase in expenditure on both food and beverages and nonfood consumer goods imports. Accordingly, vegetables (mainly big onions), dairy products (mainly milk powder), sugar and spices (mainly chillies) imports, categorised under food and beverages, increased. Meanwhile, under nonfood consumer goods category, expenditure on personal motor vehicle imports recorded a growth, on a year-on-year basis, for the second consecutive month in January 2020.

Meanwhile, expenditure on investment goods imports increased in January 2020 due to higher imports of machinery and equipment and transport equipment. The increase in expenditure on machinery and equipment imports was mainly driven by turbines, telecommunication devices and electrical machinery and equipment.

Vehicle imports declines

However, expenditure on personal vehicle imports declined significantly when compared with December 2019. In contrast, expenditure on beverages (mainly alcoholic beverages) and seafood (mainly canned fish) imports declined, in comparison to January 2019.

Meanwhile, expenditure on transport equipment increased with higher expenditure incurred on railway equipment such as locomotive engines and carriages, and Lorries.

However, expenditure on building material imports decreased mainly due to low expenditure on iron and steel and those articles imports such as iron bars and rods although higher outlays on the importation of the bridges and bridge sections continued to increase in January 2020.

Expenditure on imports of intermediate goods declined in January 2020, mainly due to lower expenditure on fuel, owing to lower import volumes of all subcategories namely crude oil, refined petroleum and coal, although average import prices of crude oil and refined petroleum increased, when compared with January 2019.

In addition, expenditure on base metals (mainly iron and steel), wheat and mineral products (mainly cement clinker) imports declined in January 2020. However, import expenditure on

External Sector Developments amidst the COVID-19

The initial pressure created by both global and domestic market uncertainties was felt in the domestic foreign exchange market, particularly in the second half of the month of March 2020.

A notable depreciation of the Sri Lanka rupee was observed, primarily due to

speculative market behaviour and foreign investment outflows from the government securities market.

The Central Bank undertook a number of emergency operational and policy measures, including some intervention in the domestic foreign exchange market, suspension of all

personal motor vehicle and non-essential consumer goods imports, limiting issuance of foreign currency notes as travel allowance up to a maximum of US dollars 5,000 and suspension of purchase of Sri Lanka International Sovereign Bonds by licensed banks in Sri Lanka.

The government established a fuel price stabilisation fund to maintain stable energy prices domestically, while enabling the utilisation of benefits accruing on account of the sharp decline in international crude oil prices more productively.

textiles and textile articles increased, led by higher expenditure on fabric and fibre imports. The import volume index increased by 7.3 per cent, while the unit value index declined by 2.3 per cent in January 2020, indicating that the increase in imports was driven entirely by higher volumes when compared to January 2019.

Tourism suffer a setback

The tourism sector suffered a setback in January 2020 following the outbreak of COVID-19 reversing the recovering trend of the tourist arrivals since the Easter Sunday attacks. Tourist arrivals in January 2020 declined by 6.5 per cent to 228,434 compared to 244,239 in January 2019.

Tourist arrivals from Russia, Poland and Ukraine increased in January 2020

(year-on-year), while arrivals from key destinations, such as Australia, France, the United Kingdom, Germany and China, declined. Earnings from tourism were provisionally estimated at US dollars 431 million in January 2020, in comparison to US dollars 460 million in January 2019.

Meanwhile, workers' remittances recorded a growth of 6.5 per cent in January 2020, year-on-year, amounting to US dollars 581 million.

Gross official reserves stood at US dollars 7.5 billion at end January 2020, equivalent to 4.5 months of imports.

Meanwhile, total foreign assets consisting of gross official reserves and foreign assets of the banking sector amounted to US dollars 10.3 billion at end January 2020, equivalent to 6.2 months of imports.

Rupee depreciates sharply

The Sri Lankan rupee, which remained broadly stable in the month of January as well as until the first week of March, depreciated sharply with the speculative behavior in the market with the spread of COVID-19 outbreak.

Accordingly, the rupee recorded a depreciation of 4.7 per cent against the US dollar by 30 March 2020.

Reflecting cross-currency movements, the rupee depreciated against the US dollar, the euro and the Japanese yen while appreciating against the pound sterling, the Canadian dollar, the Australian dollar and the Indian rupee during the year up to 30 March 2020.

Figure 1: Major Contributory Factors for the Increase in the Trade Deficit in January 2020 (in US\$ million)



Sources: SLC, CBSL

New infrastructure financing guide for COVID-19 affected economies

TOKYO, (MARCH 31) – A newly published set of policy proposals details ways to ensure infrastructure growth that drives economic and social development while overcoming limitations in public funding, against the backdrop of increasing demands on government revenue due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Building the Future of Quality Infrastructure provides a timely guide to promoting innovative financing of infrastructure such as transportation networks, water and sanitation facilities, and digital networks vital to realizing more resilient and inclusive economies.

The report presents recommendations based on research conducted by ADBI and other top think tank experts under the Think20 (T20), the G20's research and policy advice network, during Japan's 2019 G20 presidency.

The implementation benefits are potentially significant, promoting greater private sector investment, as well as long-term sustainable development in Asia and beyond.

"Budget deficits will be impacted by government spending to address the new coronavirus, making it more difficult to publicly finance infrastructure," explained ADBI Dean Naoyuki Yoshino, co-editor of the report and former Chair of T20 Japan. "Policies that enable private project investment will become even more important for sustaining the build-up of quality infrastructure that triggers development spillover effects critical to the future of our societies."

"In the long run, new transport infrastructure will still be needed to connect people and support trade," Dean Yoshino continued.

"Building roads and railway stations will ultimately support new businesses in surrounding areas, including small businesses, which boost jobs, economic opportunities for women, and growth."

Broadening access to clean water, electricity, and digital connectivity will also remain crucial to improving people's quality of life. Such progress will increase tax revenues that can be utilized to attract further infrastructure investment," he concluded.

The policy proposals highlighted in the report offer policy makers and experts guidance on enhancing infrastructure financing sustainability, rates of investment returns, and project viability.

They also provide strategies for advancing green and resilient infrastructure.



A COVID-19 testing tent in Hanoi, Vietnam -AFP

COVID-19 worsens financial woes

USA Rugby files for bankruptcy

LOS ANGELES, TUESDAY - USA Rugby, its financial troubles exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic, has filed for bankruptcy, the federation said on Monday.

In a statement posted on its website, USA Rugby said it had filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy, which allows financially struggling organizations to reorganize and restructure debt.

"Existing financial challenges have been accelerated by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on rugby activities," USA Rugby said.

Sport around the world has been brought to a vir-



tual standstill by the COVID-19 pandemic as authorities banned large gatherings in a bid to slow the spread of the virus.

USA Rugby said the suspension of competition resulted in "significant loss of revenue from spring and summer membership dues,

sponsorship drawbacks and additional revenue sources."

The bankruptcy filing includes a plan for a financial support package approved by the executive committee of the global governing body World Rugby.

That will bolster the federation through reorganization, with World Rugby and other creditors to sign off on an eventual restructuring plan.

The men's and women's national teams, in 15s and Sevens, will continue "to compete as normal" when rugby returns after the pandemic.



"While the current climate is of course much larger than rugby, we remain focused with stakeholders and supporters in the continued effort

toward a balanced rugby community where the game can truly grow," USA Rugby chair Barbara O'Brien said.

- AFP



Cristiano Ronaldo has reportedly splashed out £8.5million on a limited edition Bugatti

Juventus star buys one of only 10 in the world during his lockdown

Cristiano Ronaldo 'splashes out' £8.5m on a Bugatti Centodieci'

Cristiano Ronaldo has passed the time during lockdown by reportedly splashing out £8.5million on a limited edition Bugatti - one of only 10 in the world.

The Juventus superstar is currently in lockdown in his native Madeira in Portugal as the footballing world continues to be at a standstill due to the coronavirus pandemic.

As many of us may do at times like these, Ronaldo has resorted to retail therapy to help get himself through the situation by ordering the luxury sports car Bugatti Centodieci, according to Bild.

If the Portuguese goes through with the sale he would add to his incredible collection of cars which already includes a Bugatti Chiron and a Bugatti Veyron Grand Sport Vitesse.

The French car manufacturer is known for creating some of the most high performance and grandest sports cars in the world and their latest model the Centodieci is believed to be a tribute to the legendary Bugatti EB110.

Bugatti's official website describes Ronaldo's reported new toy as 'breath-taking', although offered no comment as



The superstar has a stunning collection of cars which already includes two other Bugattis

to whether the 35-year-old was a buyer when contacted by Bild.

The description reads: 'Inspired by the historical model, the Centodieci pushes all boundaries of imagination with its breathtaking performance and pioneering design.'

Featuring a modern interpretation of the classic wedge shape and with the iconic W16 engine, the Centodieci transports the EB110 gracefully into a new millennium. 'The ten limited-edition vehicles are distinguished by their perfect elegance and sculptural beauty, making the Centodieci a true, tangible work of art.' The supercar has an 8.0 litre, quad-turbocharged W16 engine and can go 0-62mph in just 2.4 seconds, with a top speed of 236mph. - Daily Mail

Scenarios for a potential return of the Premier League

LONDON, TUESDAY - English football's major stakeholders will meet on Friday to discuss their options to rescue a season derailed by the coronavirus outbreak.

The Premier League campaign has been postponed until at least April 30 because of the pandemic, but the chances of a return in May look bleak.

AFP Sport takes a closer look at the various scenarios that are likely to be considered in the talks over if and how to finish the season:

GO BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

One option is for clubs to converge on a neutral location in which all remaining games are played behind closed doors, with only essential personnel and broadcasters allowed to attend.

There is believed to be growing support among clubs for this plan, with nine rounds of matches potentially in line to be staged in June and July.

Fixtures would reportedly be played in one or two locations in the Midlands and London.

That could mean players and coaches being quarantined away from their families in World Cup-style camps to avoid infection, with stadiums, hotels and training facilities undergoing a deep clean.

A radical upturn in testing for the virus in the United Kingdom over the next two months is the key to this plan for a number of reasons.

Firstly, to ease players' concerns of contracting COVID-19 while playing, but also to avoid criticism of privileged professional players being tested with mild or no symptoms if that is not available to the general public and in particular frontline workers.

If the curve of cases is not significantly flattened come the summer the optics for the Premier League to have medical officials at non-essential events would also not be good.

PLAY THE WAITING GAME

Given the massive impact of the virus on society in general, it is seen in some quarters as morally inappropriate for football to return too soon. Instead of rushing back to action, waiting until the virus is completely under control before play resumes is the preferred strategy in this scenario.

With the virus reportedly set to peak in the UK in June, that could mean remaining in sporting lockdown until August or September.

Waiting would allow the current season to be completed in full, ensuring the Premier League does not have to repay an estimated £750 million (\$930 million, 842 million euros) to television companies for breach of contract.

But it would have a huge knock-on effect for next season, potentially leading to a shortened schedule in 2020-21 in a bid to be ready for the



An English Premier League match in progress.

delayed European Championship. Tottenham striker Harry Kane believes the campaign should be cancelled if it cannot be finished by the end of June.

"Playing into July or August and pushing next season back, I don't see too much benefit in that," Kane said.

"Probably the limit for me is the end of June. If the season's not completed by the end of June we need to look at the options and just look forward to next season."

CANCEL THE SEASON

In what would be the worst-case scenario for the Premier League, some clubs reportedly want to abandon the current season immediately. Senior figures in English club football believe there is "no place for sport at the moment", according to a recent report in the Athletic.

FA chairman Greg Clarke reportedly told the Premier League earlier this month he does not believe the season will be completed. Declaring

the season over could trigger legal action from a host of clubs, regardless of whether or not the standings are allowed to count.

Liverpool need only two more wins to confirm their first league title since 1990 and hold a 25-point lead over Manchester City.

Cancelling the season would scupper their hopes of ending a 30-year title drought, unless it was agreed to declare them champions anyway.

Manchester United, Wolves, Sheffield United and Tottenham, all currently outside the top four, would surely claim they had been unfairly been denied a chance of Champions League qualification. Aston Villa would be relegated along with Norwich and Bournemouth, but Dean Smith's team would point to the game in hand that would lift them above Watford to safety if they won it.

In the Championship, the current top two are Leeds and West Bromwich Albion and they would be furious if a 'null and void' ruling robbed them of a lucrative promotion.

- AFP

Wimbledon will be cancelled, says German tennis official - report

LONDON, TUESDAY - Wimbledon organisers will announce the cancellation of the grasscourt Grand Slam this week due to the coronavirus pandemic, German Tennis Federation (DTB) vice-president Dirk Hordorff has told Sky Sports.

All England Lawn Tennis Club (AELTC) officials earlier said the June 29-July 12 event would not be played behind closed doors and postponement was not without significant risk and difficulty.

"Wimbledon has stated that they will have a board meeting next Wednesday and will make the final decision there," Hordorff told Sky Sports Germany.

"I am also involved in the bodies of the ATP and WTA. The necessary decisions have already been made there and Wimbledon will decide to cancel next Wednesday. There is no doubt about it. This is necessary in the current situation."

"It is completely unrealistic to imagine that with the travel restrictions that we currently have an international tennis tournament where hundreds of thousands of people from all over the world would travel. That is unthinkable."

The AELTC did not respond to a request for comment.

The postponement of the Tokyo Olympics opened up a two-week window in the tennis calendar in July/August but it is less likely that it will be feasible for Wimbledon, which has only two covered courts and cannot be held past late summer. French Open organisers stunned the tennis world by unilaterally postponing the claycourt Grand Slam at Roland Garros from May until late September because of the pandemic.

The French Tennis Federation (FFT) came under heavy fire from tennis players around the world at the lack of communication as the new dates clashed



General view of the Wimbledon logo on the base of the handle of a tennis racket.

with several other events already featuring on the calendar. The men's ATP Tour and the WTA, which runs women's tournaments, require their players to participate at the four Grand Slams, but the new French Open dates are yet to feature on the calendars of either association.

"The unilateral behaviour of the organizers has been criticized by everyone and I can simply predict that the French Open will not be relocated as it was intended," Hordorff said.

He said either the FFT would go ahead with the new dates and feel the wrath of the entire tennis world or they have the option to start working with others to draw up a plan that makes sense for everyone.

"They will be deprived of the points and they will degenerate into a chaos event," he said. "Even those there have understood that and they are slowly crawling back. Solidarity is the order of the day, it is a matter of being together and not going it alone, as the president of the French Tennis Association did."

- Agencies

South Africa sets deadlines for tours

JOHANNESBURG, TUESDAY - The South African team will require six weeks of preparation before embarking on any tours, Cricket South Africa's acting director of cricket, Graeme Smith, said on Tuesday.

With South Africa in official lockdown until April 16 because of COVID-

19, Smith said in a video media conference that the players needed to take responsibility for maintaining their fitness while at home but would also need to work on cricket skills as a group before touring. "We have to review the situation every week," he said, "but we estimate we would need around six

weeks before any tour." South Africa are due to tour Sri Lanka in early June for three one-day internationals and three Twenty20 internationals.

Smith's timetable would appear to make the tour unlikely to happen. It would mean a lifting of travel bans as well as the current lockdown ending as

scheduled for the tour to take place. South Africa's next engagement is a Test and T20 tour of the West Indies, scheduled to start on July 15, which would require a return to normal activity in South Africa by the end of May.

Former Test captain Smith seems set to be appointed to a permanent role.

"We are in final negotiations and hope to make an announcement next week," said acting chief executive Jacques Faul. Faul said it was impossible to estimate when normal cricket activities would resume but said CSA had budgeted for and had the capacity to pay nationally-contracted and franchise players through

the 2020/21 season. "The players will lose out on match fees and win bonuses if there is no cricket," said Faul. He said a third edition of the Mzansi Super League T20 competition was planned for November and December. The first two tournaments involved several international players. - AFP



The Billie Jean King National Tennis Center which is set to transform into a 350-bed temporary hospital.

U.S. Open venue to host 350-bed temporary hospital amid coronavirus pandemic

NEW YORK, TUESDAY - A portion of the Billie Jean King National Tennis Center is set to transform into a 350-bed temporary hospital on Tuesday, the USTA said, as the coronavirus outbreak strains resources in New York City, which has been dramatically affected by the pandemic.

The site of the U.S. Open and the crown jewel of American tennis, the venue has been thrust into the fray amid a medical crisis that has gripped the world and brought professional sports to a sudden and indefinite halt.

Chris Widmaier, spokesman for the U.S. Tennis

Association, which owns the tennis centre, said that the conversion of an indoor tennis facility on the venue would begin Tuesday.

"We're here to help - no two ways about it," Widmaier said. "New York is our home, we're all in this together."

New York City Emergency Management (NYCEM) informed the USTA of its plans on Monday, after previously telling the organisation that the tennis centre was a potential venue for auxiliary medical care.

"The site is likely to be non-Covid patients, and

we will evaluate based on need," NYCEM spokesman Omar Bourne said.

He added that the city is "actively working to identify spaces that can be used to expand hospital capacity throughout the five boroughs," but did not elaborate.

News of the Flushing Meadows facility comes a day after New York began construction on a 68-bed field hospital in Central Park, as the city strains to accommodate the volume of patients at its medical centres.

- Agencies

COVID-19 curtails star all-rounder's successful comeback trail from injury

Health is more important than playing cricket - Mathews

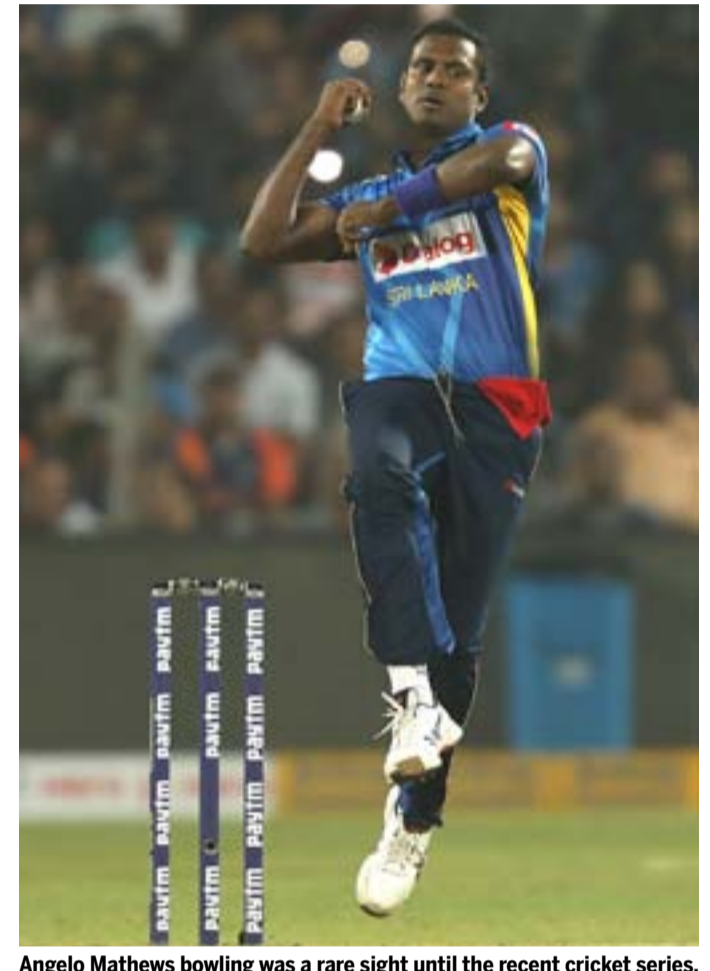
SAADI THAWFEEQ
Having struggled for the best part of his international cricket career with a string of injuries that had prevented him from displaying his outstanding talents as an all-rounder, Angelo Mathews was showing signs of having gradually coming out of that rut with some eye-catching performances against Zimbabwe and West Indies and lining himself up for battle with Joe Root's Englishmen when the coronavirus broke out and put all sports around the world on hold.
"I was keenly looking forward to playing but at the same time we have to do with the current situation, health is more important than anything else so we have to do what is told by the government and adhere to it," Mathews told the *Daily News*.
"We need to help the tri-forces, the health sector the police and everyone that is our duty. Health is number one priority. Before playing cricket we want to try and stay at home and hopefully the situation gets better soon," he said.
Mathews who has a history of injuries that has affected his career throughout was coming to terms with it when he started to play like the Mathews of old

that we all know on the Test tour to Zimbabwe where he spent ten hours in the middle in stifling heat and a slow unresponsive pitch that did not invite stroke play of any sort to compile his maiden Test double century at Harare. He followed this innings up with 64 and 13 in the second Test also at Harare to pick up the Player of the Series award.
The 32-year-old all-rounder and former captain followed this effort with some exceptional performances on the field in the three-match ODI series against West Indies helping Sri Lanka make a clean 3-0 sweep. He was outstanding on the field but more than that it was his contribution with the ball that counted most containing the strong West Indies batting with his nippy slow medium-paced deliveries that included a match-winning performance in the final ODI at Pallekele where he bowled his full quota of ten overs - the first time he had done since July 2015 to take 4 wickets for 59 and clinch for Sri Lanka a nerve-wracking six-run win. When captain Dimuth Karunaratne was left one bowler short losing his death bowler Nuwan Pradeep to a hamstring injury, Mathews put his hand up

to make up for the remaining overs and what a game-changer it turned out to be.
These performances illuminated that Mathews was back to his best and in the two series had not shown any hint of the injuries that had beset him in his career. Further testimony to Mathew's fitness was when he was included in the Sri Lanka team for the two T20 Internationals against West Indies. Due to his constant battle with injuries Mathews was never an automatic choice for the T20I side playing just two matches in the past three years.
Sitting on the sidelines is something that Mathews has experienced quite often in his career with the number of injuries he has suffered, but he said the present situation was different.
"Being out of action with injury and the present situation they are completely two different scenarios. This one I have never faced something like this before. It has put the entire world to a standstill," said Mathews.
"Whatever precautions the government wants taken we have to appreciate, it is not easy shutting down a country but that is what it is and, it is the

way forward in terms of getting rid of this dangerous Covid-19. Everyone has to take this very seriously and adhere to all the rules. It is something very serious," said the elder statesman of the Sri Lanka team with 86 Tests and 217 ODI appearances.
Mathews said that he was catching up on lost time with his family - wife and two kids aged 3 and 2 during this period and also concentrating on his fitness regime.
"I am doing a lot of gym obviously we can't go to any ground. The trainer has sent us individual programs which we are following. At the same time I am spending a lot of time with the kids -practically just playing along with them. That way we are not basically confined to home," said Mathews.
"Basically it's the same over and over again each day because we are just blocked and the curfew is not lifted in most parts of the country. Watching a few movies, spending time in the gym I have a small gym at home with a few equipments, doing some gardening, basically that's what I am doing," he said.
Speaking further Mathews said, "We are helping as much as we can in terms of the doctors and whatever requests that

comes. We had a couple of them which we have already helped; one is together with some lawyers to buy equipment for the National hospital especially for the corona patients. We also donated money to purchase PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) to the Homagama hospital."
Mathews said that he has no complaints not being able to play cricket.
"Definitely I miss playing cricket no doubt. You would like to be on the park that is our job and our passion but at the same time we get time to spend at home and with the family, so can't complain."
"When you are staying at home the good thing is get to spend a lot of time with the family and I am being very positive. This is a good break but hopefully everything will be over soon and we can get back to our daily routine soon."
Mathews said that he had no problem with regard to getting food items. "We are trying to order it online and it's been okay so far. The government has put some sort of service in place where the distributors can come door to door and deliver it to us. That takes the pressure off from everyone."



Angelo Mathews bowling was a rare sight until the recent cricket series.

Mahanama, Vaas join to aid daily wage earners



Roshan Mahanama



Chaminda Vaas

Former Sri Lanka cricketers Roshan Mahanama and Chaminda Vaas have got together in an initiative to support the daily wage earners of Sri Lanka who are facing severe difficulties due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
With the ongoing lockdown, many people have lost their method of earnings and are in a difficult position to feed their families. The initiative will help the daily wage earners by providing them with essential goods.
Initiated by Dr. Krishan Thalagahage and team, Vaas and Mahanama have joined the cause, urging the public to donate essentials such as rice, noodles, dhal, salmon, dry fish, sprats, sugar, chillies, curry powder and biscuits.
"They are our own fellow citizens, if we don't feed them, who will? Let's get together to make a difference," said Mahanama.
"You can always make a difference in the lives of others," said Vaas.
The essential items are requested to be delivered to Premier Health Care, 282 A2, Galle Road, Mount Lavinia (Second Floor of Bank of Ceylon Building in Mount Lavinia). Due to the ongoing islandwide curfew, the public are informed that they can also make cash donations. They are kindly requested to make online transactions. -KR

U13 Division 3 Schools Cricket

Sandaruwan puts Muthukandiya 3rd Step School in the spotlight

Malka Sandaruwan of Muthukandiya 3rd Step School Siyambalanda took a match bag of ten wickets in their 3rd round (knockout) match of the Singer Trophy Under 13 division three schools cricket tournament against St. Thomas' College, Bandarawela 'B' recently which they won by eight wickets.
Stafford International School Colombo, St. Peter's College Bambalapitiya 'C', St. Benedict's College Ampitiya, Nalanda College Naula, Delta Gemunupura College Pussellawa and Asian Grammar International School Colombo won on first innings, while Lyceum International School Nugegoda won by bonus points against St. Joseph's Boys College Nugegoda.



Malka Sandaruwan

RESULTS:
● **At Siyambalanda: Muthukandiya 3rd Step School Siyambalanda won by 8 wickets.**
S.Thomas' Bandarawela 'C': 31 (16.3) (Malka Sandaruwan 7/5, Lasitha Kumara 2/6) and 87 (25.1) (Pansilu Ratnayake 2/3, Kalthara Dissanayake 2/0, Malka

Sandaruwan 3/35, Mayodya Lankeshwara 3/11)
Muthukandiya 3rd Step School Siyambalanda: 76 (23.1) (Mayodya Lankeshwara 3/3, Hashan Lakshan 2/3, Minon Resandu 5/6, Kalthara Dissanayaka 2/9) and 43/2 (15.3) (Devinda Sandaruwan 27 n.o.)
● **At Mattegoda: Stafford International School Colombo won on first innngs.**
Stafford International School Colombo: 170/9 decl.

(41.2) (Leshan Nanayakkara 31, Shakkim Kailmohan 31, Venuk Wickramaratne 28, Dinuk Wijeratne 22, Jehan George 4/28, Dinoo Atigala 3/26) and 96/2 (13) (Dinuk Wijeratne 39, Thisal Pathirana 22 n.o.)
Defence Services School Colombo: 71 (31.2) (Nikitha Ramanayake 5/16, Thisal Pathirana 2/5)
● **At Padukka: St. Peter's College Bambalapitiya 'C' won on first innings.**
Vipulanantha Tamil MV Colombo: 106 (34.2) (Chandramohan Abishek 35, Ganesh Santhush 26, Rafayal Thirimanne 3/23, Janith Panditharathne 3/24)
St. Peter's Bambalapitiya 'C': 193/7 decl. (47) (Inosh Karunanyake 74, Romesh Fernando 34 n.o., Dewaraj Rawarakanthan 2/23)
● **At Galagedara: St. Benedict's College Ampitiya won on first innings.**
Holy Trinity Pussellawa: 77 (35.2) (R. Gobikrishna 47, Kanilka Juvel 4/10, Ruvini Bimsara 3/6, Azmy Aazim 2/38) and 90/6 (19)

(R. Gobikrishna 38, Kanilka Juvel 3/13)
St. Benedict's Ampitiya: 199 (48.2) (Sadeesh Thejan 72 n.o., Jevon Analesh 34, R. Gobikrishna 4/52, J. Jayathurshan 3/40)
● **At Naula Public ground: Nalanda College Naula won on first innings.**
Nalanda Naula: 110 (32.1) (Amith Kavinda 48, Sithija Suwas 22, Janith Amarakoon 3/21, Ashane Dharmaratne 2/1, Gihan Dissanayake 2/19) and 79/5 (27) (Harshana Akash 50 n.o., Dhenuka Wijesundara 2/6, Ashen Darmaratne 2/16)
Ranabima Royal College Kandy 'B': 92 (34) (Dhanuka Wijesundara 36, Pawan Madusanka 20, Amith Kavinda 7/17, Sahil Sandaruwan 2/14)
● **At Ukuwela: Delta Gemunupura College Pussellawa won on first innings.**
Delta Gemunupura College Pussellawa: 148 (45.3) (Dineth Ranmika 37, W. D. Thulan 28, Kanishka Rajapaksha 5/15, Pramod Premaratne 2/25, Anusha Udayakumara 2/30)
Kandy Model School: 131

(39.3) (Imesha Dewmitha 33, Ashan Ranasinghe 26, Thinura Pahan 5/30, Ruchira Ihalagama 3/33)
● **At Panadura: St. Joseph's Boys College Nugegoda won on bonus points.**
Lyceum International School Nugegoda: 271/5 decl. (45.4) (Karunyan Ponkovan 77, Aritha Vinnal 87, Chinmayan Daheeradan 27 n.o., Sethika Balasuriya 25, Sithila Thisera 2/45)
St. Joseph's Boys College Nugegoda: 184/4 (55) Chanul Withanachchi 72, Anjana Logus 64 n.o., Abilash Sasidharma 2/31)
● **At Ratmalana: Asian Grammar International School Colombo won on first innings.**
Weera Puranappu School Moratuwa: 29 (26) (Mayusha Shenal 5/6, Isala Liyanage 4/6)
Asian Grammar International School Colombo: 250/6 (69) (Semitha Bandara 69, Yoshana Sirimanne 61 n.o., Dasun Viranga 2/47, Vihanga Sathsara 2/68)
- (YK)

Australia captain Paine sees crowded test calendar to end championship

SYDNEY, TUESDAY - Australia captain Tim Paine believes test cricketers would be prepared to play a lot of matches in a short space of time once the coronavirus crisis is over to ensure the World Test Championship can be completed as scheduled next year.
International cricket, like most other sports, has been shut down while the world battles the pandemic and Paine said it did not take "Einstein" to conclude that Australia's tour of Bangladesh would probably not go ahead in June.
With other tours also on hold, it has been suggested that the International Cricket Council might need to push back the conclusion of the inaugural edition of the test championship.
Paine hoped it would not be pushed back too far and said he thought players would favour playing catch-up to finish it as planned with a final between the top two teams at Lord's on June 10, 2021.
"Maybe the players are going to have to go through a period where we play quite a bit of cricket if we want to complete the test championship as it is," the 35-year-old wicketkeeper said in a teleconference on Tuesday.



Australian Test captain Tim Paine

"I think the players are certainly enjoying that points system and the fact that every test match counts for something ... I think all players would be in favour of trying to finish that any way we can."
Paine reiterated that winning the championship was a big goal for his team, who are currently second in the standings behind India. The Indians are scheduled to play four tests in Australia at the end of the year.
With Steve Smith's two-year ban on holding a leadership role in the team - imposed after the Newlands ball-

tampering scandal - having expired at the weekend, Paine was also quizzed about the batsman's possible return to the captaincy.
Making it clear he would not be standing aside prematurely to make way for the former skipper, Paine said he would support it if that is what Smith wanted.
"I haven't had that conversation with Steve, I probably will at some stage no doubt," Paine said.
"It's obviously something that he loves doing ... so if Steve Smith decides that's the way he wants to go, then I will fully support him in trying to do it again."
Paine also said the players accepted that a delay to the announcement of Cricket Australia's contract list might mean pay cuts.
"We've certainly got to do our bit to make sure the game survives and remains really healthy for years to come," he said.
"So if it comes to that, I'm sure that's something that the players will look at. But there are bigger issues around the world at the moment beyond what sportsmen are being paid."
- Agencies

Tottenham cut pay of non-playing staff by 20% due to coronavirus

LONDON, TUESDAY - Tottenham Hotspur have imposed a 20% pay cut on 550 non-playing staff in April and May due to the coronavirus pandemic, the Premier League club said on Tuesday.
Spurs chairman Daniel Levy said in a statement the move was to protect jobs and the club planned to use a government furlough scheme where appropriate.
He hoped also that talks between the Premier League and players' and managers' associations would result in players and coaches "doing their bit for the football eco system."
"When I read or hear stories about player transfers this summer like nothing has happened, people need to wake up to the enormity of what is happening around us," said Levy.
"With over 786,000 infected, (over) 38,000 deaths and large segments of the world in lockdown we need to realise that football cannot operate in a bubble."
"We may be the eighth largest club in the world by revenue according to the Deloitte survey but all that historical data is totally irrelevant as this virus has no boundaries."
Levy said the North London club's operations had effectively ceased, some fans had lost their jobs and sponsors were concerned about their businesses.
Barcelona, Bayern Munich and Juventus are among those to have cut player and staff wages to reduce costs. - Agencies

SLTA postpones tournaments

ANURADHA ABEYSEKARA

The governing body for tennis in the country the Sri Lanka Tennis Association (SLTA) has announced that they have postponed all their tournaments indefinitely due to prevailing Covid-19 pandemic.
The Clay Court Nationals which commenced on February 26 is the most important tournament to be postponed. The tournament came to an abrupt halt during the first round and according to SLTA sources, the tournament will most probably resume after July, subject to the Corona virus situation in the country.
SLTA also confirmed that the ITF Junior tournament which was due to be played in April and the Hill Club tournament too have been postponed indefinitely.