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Novel Coronavirus Response and Coordination Centre

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AP PHOTO



Vatican City Pope Francis is sick and he skipped a planned Mass with Rome clergy across town yesterday, officials said. The Vatican said the 83-year-old pontiff had a “slight indisposition” and would proceed with the rest of his planned work today [Macau time]. There was no word from the Vatican about the nature of his illness, but the pope was seen coughing and blowing his nose during the Ash Wednesday Mass.

AP PHOTO



Mideast Saudi Arabia yesterday banned foreign pilgrims from entering the kingdom to visit Mecca over the new coronavirus. There is a growing worry across the Mideast about the virus as Iran confirmed that infected cases in the country spiked by over 100, to 254 now, with 26 deaths. Those with the virus in the Islamic Republic now include Iranian vice president Masoumeh Ebtekar, better known as the English-language spokeswoman “Mary” for the 1979 hostage-takers.

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AP PHOTO



USA President Donald Trump faces a critical personal challenge in grappling with the new coronavirus outbreak: asking Americans to believe him after he and some of his top advisers have contradicted federal scientists in playing down the threat. Meanwhile, an American citizen contracted the virus without exposure to infected areas or people.

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CITY BACK TO BUSINESS, EXCEPT SCHOOLS

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XINHUA

CHINA, SOUTH KOREA COUNT OVER 930 NEW VIRUS CASES

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AP PHOTO



50 DRIVERS APPLY FOR HOME QUARANTINE EXEMPTION

Fifty drivers have applied to the Macau local government for an exemption from the 14-day home quarantine measures, according to Nam Yue (Group) Company Limited. The drivers transport vegetables between Zhuhai and Macau. The company said that the exemption application was made to secure Macau's food transportation chains. Nam Yue has approximately 100 drivers transporting vegetables between Zhuhai and Macau on a daily basis. Macau's regulations require non-local workers who have been to mainland China over the past 14 days to undergo a 14-day quarantine period in Zhuhai before arriving in Macau. The local government has exempted approximately 500 non-local workers.

UM MANAGEMENT ASKS FOR TUNNEL UPGRADE

The University of Macau's (UM) management has requested the tunnel connecting the campus to the rest of the city be upgraded, the Infrastructure Development Office (GDI) announced. In reply to lawmaker Agnes Lam's interpellation about the UM tunnel maintenance project, GDI said that the tunnel was leaking water because of its age. The tunnel is still in good condition structurally, however UM's new management has requested that the tunnel be upgraded in order to improve road conditions. The UM tunnel will undergo maintenance and GDI will review the overall building structure and manage various age-related problems, including replacing the expansion joints and improving engine room grids. GDI will also upgrade fire protection systems, surveillance systems, and ventilation systems, among others.

COMPANY BUYS PORTABLE APARTMENTS FOR NON-LOCAL WORKERS

A company in Macau has purchased 376 portable houses to provide accommodation for Macau's non-local workers, according to Chinese-language media reports. The reports did not disclose the name of the company. Furniture for the houses was purchased in Foshan. The Gongbei customs authority noted that, besides the housing units, the company also purchased a large number of air conditioners, washing machines, beds and other items. Since February 20, Macau has had a 14-day Zhuhai quarantine policy in place for non-local workers wishing to enter Macau from mainland China. Before the policy came into effect, over 20,000 non-local workers had moved to Macau with their luggage and personal effects, hoping to continue their work in the city. Over 3,000 non-local workers have been living in hotels, with some employers providing temporary accommodation for their non-local workers.

TWO TAIWANESE MEN CHARGED FOR OPERATING PHONE SCAM

JULIE ZHU

THE Judiciary Police (PJ) has discovered that two men from Taiwan living in a residential unit in northern Macau were responsible for a phone scam. The two men are 21 and 22 years old.

Inside the residential unit was an operations center for the phone scam, which had been operating since last June. It was raided on Wednesday.

The PJ seized eight GoIP machines (one GoIP device can operate hundreds of mobile phone SIM cards at the same time), two routers, two fiber optic decoders, two backup power supplies, two smart timing sockets, and one SD card. The devices were all operating at the time of the PJ's raid.

According to the PJ, between September 30, 2019 and February 13, 2020, the phone scam operation center made 6,145 VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) scam calls on a daily basis and sent 313 text messages.

In each phone call and SMS, the scammers pretended to be



government officials from the police, prosecution, or immigration authorities, or other government departments from both the mainland and Macau, or local courts.

The seven people who fell victim to the scam were all mainland residents and lost in total more than 1 million yuan. As of Wednesday, the PJ was still investigating whether any Macau residents were scammed.

The scammers chose to station their operation center near the border gate because the area

was close to Zhuhai. The location made it easier for the scammers to reach mainland China's telecommunications network, which allowed them to operate mainland SIM cards and devices outside of the mainland territory.

The two men denied the accusations of carrying out phone scams.

They entered Macau on February 25 and checked into a hotel near the Triangle Garden in the Areia Preta area. That same day, one of them entered

the residential unit which housed the operation center. On February 26, the two men were arrested at the Macau International Airport when they were about to leave the city.

The PJ charged them with fraud involving large amounts of money, and organized crime.

Last May, police authorities from Macau and the mainland cracked down on a group operated by Taiwanese residents that also ran phone scams. The PJ is still investigating whether the two cases are related.

MAN ACCUSED OF SCAMMING 12 OVER FACE MASKS AWAITING TRIAL

THE Public Prosecutions Office (MP) has said that a man suspected of swindling 12 citizens by falsely advertising face mask sales will be released on bail, awaiting trial. He will have to regularly present himself to the authorities and will not be allowed to leave Macau.

The case occurred a few days ago, when the man, who was taking advantage of the shortage of face masks in the market and the high demand for the product, falsely advertised the sale of the product using several social media platforms.

According to the MP and after the preliminary investigation, the man requested victims pay him a down payment for the masks, which he was only purporting to sell in large quantities. However, after

the payment was transferred, the victims did not receive the masks and were unable to contact the seller again.

The MP says that, so far, 12 people have filed a complaint against the man.

The suspect is now being indicted for several counts of fraud, an offense punishable under the Macau Penal Code. The penalty is imprisonment of up to three years or an equivalent fine.

In the statement, the MP also noted that the case had been recorded as an aggravated offense, due to the product in question and because the offense was committed during an epidemic. Face masks are considered an essential infection prevention product for mandatory use by citizens, according to government guidelines. **RM**

DRUNK DRIVER IMPERSONATES TWIN BROTHER

A local man has impersonated his twin brother by using the latter's identification card during police questioning.

At midnight yesterday, the Public Security Police Force (PSP) found Ng, a 34-year-old local casino dealer, driving under the influence of alcohol. The PSP caught him during an inspection at Avenida de Venceslau de Moraes. Ng was riding a heavy-duty motorbike at the time of the offence.

The man's blood alcohol level was over the legal limit at 1.62 grams per liter.

Upon further investigation, the PSP realized that the man did not have a driving license. Police questioning revealed that he

was using his twin brother's identification document.

Later, the twin brother told the police that he had asked his brother to buy him face masks, and he was not aware that his brother had taken his motorbike. Ng faces several charges, including driving without a license, using another person's identification and others.

Another motorbike-related case was also reported yesterday. A motorbike collided with a car near the tunnel of Sai Van Bridge, driving from Macau towards Taipa. The 37-year-old motorbike driver, an employee of the telecommunication authority, sustained multiple bruises but was conscious while being transported to hospital. **JZ**

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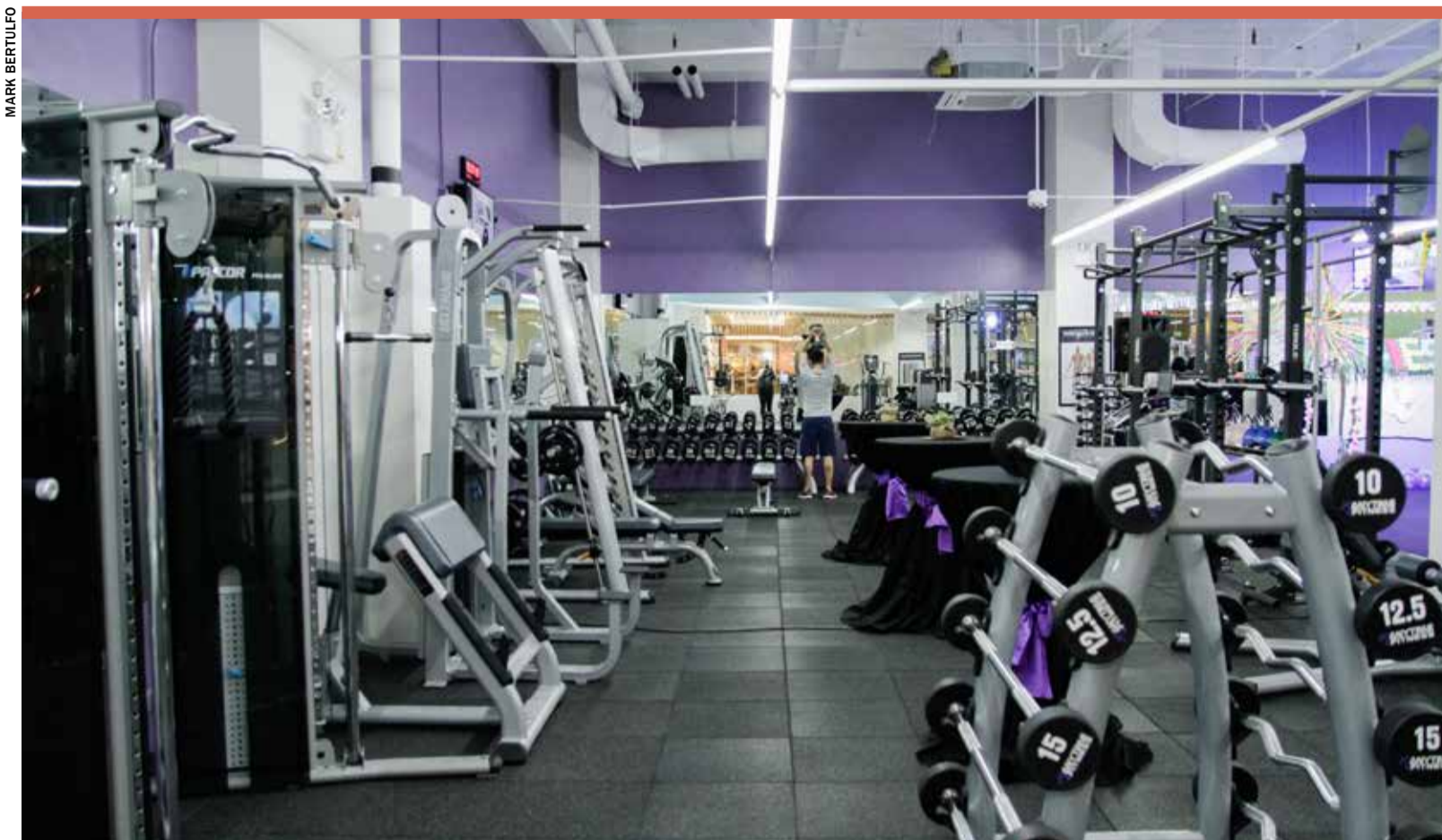
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Tuition centers, entertainment venues to reopen Monday

ANTHONY LAM

TUITION centers and continuing education establishments, along with a series of entertainment and leisure venues, have been allowed to resume operations from March 2 under certain conditions decided by the Health Bureau (SSM), as it was announced at the Novel Coronavirus Response and Coordination Center's daily press briefing yesterday.

The resumption of operations by entertainment and leisure venues was made official by Chief Executive Ho Iat Seng in an Executive Order published yesterday.

Entertainment venues have been mandatorily suspended since February 5. The order came alongside a temporary suspension of 41 casinos across the city, which expired on February 20. Unlike casinos, entertainment venues have not been able to reopen to the public since.

Venues that may reopen starting March 2 include cinemas, theaters, indoor playgrounds and game arcades, snooker and billiards halls, saunas, spas, beauty parlors, gyms and health clubs, as well as bars and karaoke venues.

Yesterday was the 23rd consecutive day without a new infection in Macau. Meanwhile, in neighboring areas, Guangdong saw its second day, Zhuhai its ninth day and Zhongshan its 10th day free from new infections.

Yesterday was also Macau's eighth day of applying quarantine

measures to foreign workers trying to enter via Zhuhai.

Considering the improving situation, the SSM has supported the conditional resumption of tuition centers, continuing education establishments, as well as entertainment and leisure venues.

Nonetheless, Bureau director Lei Chin Ion stressed that precautions must still be used while in these facilities or venues, citing World Health Organization (WHO) recommendations.

"The WHO Director-General has recently pointed out that the outbreak is intensifying elsewhere despite relaxing in China, so all countries should be prepared for a possible major global outbreak," Lei said.

As such, the health regulator has issued guidelines for these establishments, to the effect that all people inside these establishments must wear masks and these venues must not admit anyone with respiratory symptoms.

Furthermore, these venues should only house half of their permitted capacity at the most at one time. Customers or students must be at least one meter apart. Spot checks will be conducted by licensing departments to ensure compliance with the guidelines.

The Health Bureau director admitted that in some cases these restrictions will be difficult to implement. "A beautician and a customer can hardly be one meter apart during service," the director admitted. "But I think this restriction is feasible in karaoke venues."

Despite the reopenings, some venues will remain closed for the time being, such as sports grounds managed by the Sports Bureau (ID) and some facilities managed by the Cultural Affairs Institute (IC).

When asked why these venues would not be reopened, the SSM director declined to give a direct response, but stressed that the IC and the ID would make announcements once a resumption of activities was possible.

He was also questioned about the feasibility of wearing a mask during sport or exercise. "Wearing a mask will not affect breathing or cause breathing difficulties," the director responded. "Medical staff can wear masks for more than 10 hours in stressful situations, such

as in a surgery."

He added that even if taking off a mask is inevitable, it should only be done for a brief period of time.

Next Monday, extracurricular education facilities, namely tuition centers and continuing education venues, will also resume operating. Guidelines similar to those for entertainment and leisure venues will also apply to extracurricular education facilities. Taking body temperatures and making health declarations upon entry will be enforced at the aforementioned venues as well.

As for the reopening of schools, the DSEJ director did not give a definite date. However, he hinted it might take place in early April, or even earlier.

"After constant communica-

tions with schools, we have come up with two criteria to determine the school resumption date," Lou said. This is the first time the education regulator has given specific hints about school resumption.

"The criteria are when no new infection is seen in both Macau and Guangdong for 14 consecutive days," Lou stated, "and schools are [reopened] in Zhongshan and Zhuhai." Once both criteria are met, a resumption date that is two weeks away will be announced.

If a new case is confirmed in either Macau or Guangdong after the resumption announcement is made, Lou said the resumption would be halted.

The reason behind reopening extracurricular education venues but not schools, according to the education bureau, is that schools in Macau hold as many as 80,000 students.

"It is a much larger population [than tuition classes]," Lou said. "Not to mention the pressure on transportation and other community facilities [when school resumes]."

Apart from the above, Lou said extracurricular education is voluntary, as opposed to foundational education being compulsory.

Graduating high school students should not worry too much, Lou said, as university admission exams have been postponed. More importantly, "everyone is now on the same starting line," the education chief stated.

Kindergarten admission interviews have also been postponed to early April. Lou said the feedback from kindergartens show that further postponement, although not desired, is feasible.

Lou emphasized that the DSEJ will not require schools to make up for the suspension period. However, schools have the discretion to extend lectures daily, weekly or into July. August must be considered holiday for students.

Since he was not overseeing higher education, Lou stressed that he was not in a position to make comments about it, so the dates for university resumption are still unknown.

ANOTHER PATIENT RECOVERS FROM COVID-19, BUT STILL IN QUARANTINE

EIGHT out of 10 patients in Macau confirmed to have Covid-19 have now recovered, with the latest case being discharged from the Conde de São Januário Hospital (CHCSJ) yesterday.

However, considering that elsewhere there have been cases where the recovered patient was found positive in follow-up RNA tests after being discharged from the hospital, the SSM have decided to put the 56-year-old recovered hotel shuttle bus driver under "recovery quarantine."

Dr. Lo Iek Long, medical director of CHCSJ, told yesterday's press conference, "the recovered [patient] is now in our facility in Coloane. He will be regularly tested for the virus."

Lo stressed that the quarantine is a precau-

nary measure conducted to lower the risks posed to the community. The hospital doctor did not clarify how long the recovered patient will be in quarantine, but stressed that he should not be discriminated against after he returns to his neighborhood.

The patient's treatment will be free-of-charge, pursuant to the Contagious Disease Prevention and Treatment Law, which stipulates the benefit for Macau residents.

His first respiratory symptoms developed on January 26, the day following his same-day trip to mainland China. He was diagnosed with Covid-19 and admitted to CHCSJ on February 4. He was hospitalized for 24 days. **AL**

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SECURITY AUTHORITY OPEN TO REVIEWING PERSONNEL'S WORK SCHEDULE



PHILIPPINE GOV'T TO DECIDE ON REPATRIATING NATIONALS IN THE SAR

THE Philippine government will soon decide on whether to repatriate its nationals from Macau. Several stranded Filipinos in Macau have been calling on the Philippine government's assistance since flights were first canceled due to the Covid-19 outbreak.

Philippine authorities have now said that they are mulling the repatriation of at least 210 Filipinos who want to return to the Philippines, following the successful repatriation of 30 Filipinos from Wuhan, the epicenter of the new virus.

"We are aware of the possibility that some of our countrymen in Macau want to be repatriated," said Ca-

binet Secretary Karlo Nograles, as cited by Philippine media outlets.

"It started with 210 but now [the numbers] are increasing. Maybe [...] we can have a clearer assessment of the number that signifies those that want to be repatriated," said Nograles, who is also an ex-officio member of the Inter-Agency Task Force on Emerging Infectious Diseases.

The meeting was reportedly held yesterday, but no update was given by press time.

Additionally, Filipino nationals who now wish to enter Macau face strict travel restrictions. Only those who work in Macau or are

permanent residents of the SAR are allowed to leave the country for Macau.

Currently, there are still no flights connecting Manila to Macau as Philippine Airlines, Cebu Pacific Air and AirAsia, the three airlines running the routes, have not yet resumed operations.

Last week, over 100 Filipinos opted to fly back home via Taiwan as repatriation efforts by local migrant groups and the Philippine Consulate General in Macau did not work out.

Some also chose to take the Hong Kong route to go back home.

A note issued by the consulate said it was notified

that discussions with the airlines about the chartered flight "met a setback [due to] concerns by airlines regarding quarantine procedures for their flight crew."

Earlier, a group of 134 Filipinos sent the government a petition requesting a chartered flight back to Manila. Among them were pregnant women, elderly people and people with infants.

These Filipino nationals are mostly tourists stranded in the SAR in the wake of the Philippine government's decision to restrict travel between the Philippines and China and its SARs after news of the Covid-19 epidemic surfaced. **LV**

THE security authority is open to discussing the possibility of its personnel operating on a similar schedule to that of ordinary civil servants.

In response to lawmaker Sulu Sou's interpellation regarding security force's staff benefits, the chief of the Office of the Secretary for Security, Cheong Ioc Ieng, indicated possibilities for a discussion about letting security force workers work the same number of hours and same shift arrangements as ordinary civil servants, as well as similar overtime working hours.

However, Cheong pointed out that if there are any amendments, they should not negatively impact the ordinary operation of the security force.

In 2018, an amendment to the system for Macau's public administration workers proposed four types of holiday compensation, in addition to compensation for four types of working schedules: ordinary, flexible, special and shift work.

However, due to the fact that the security authority's services are always in demand, security force workers were not included in the compensation amendment proposal.

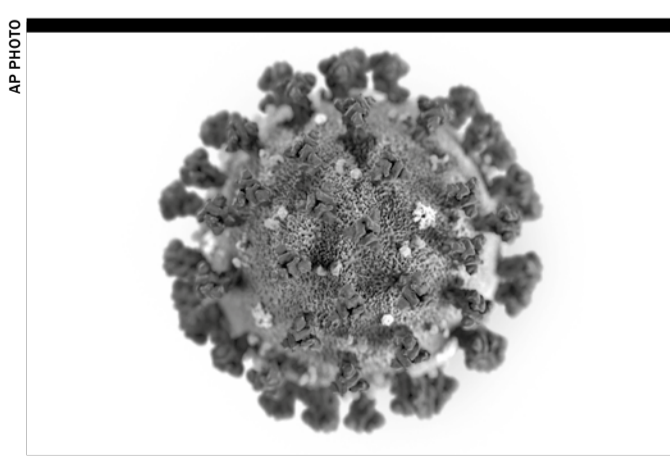
According to the city's administration order, military-trained workers, including customs officers, prison officers, and Judiciary Police officers will not receive extra compensation for working on a public holiday, because they are already entitled to a charge for compensation for overtime work. **JZ**

FDCT RECEIVES 74 PROPOSALS RELATED TO COMBATING COVID-19

THE Science and Technology Development Fund (FDCT) received a total of 74 project applications from various institutions and enterprises after it called for research proposals related to the Covid-19 outbreak.

The call focused on areas relating to Covid-19 detection, disease prevention, drug development, prevention and control mechanisms for sudden infectious diseases, and post-epidemic social recovery, as well as other research areas related to the epidemic.

In just 10 days, the bureau received 54 university



projects, 16 science and technology enterprise projects, one science and technology community project and three individual projects.

The FDCT said in a statement that it has immediately organized and arranged for the projects to undergo assessment by experts.

According to the note, 42

of the projects focus on the detection, prevention and treatment of Covid-19, as well as drug research and development. These were entrusted to the National Clinical Research Center for Respiratory Diseases at the Guangzhou Institute of Respiratory Health for review.

Thirty-two of the projects mainly focus on the prevention and control of sudden infectious diseases, and post-epidemic social recovery.

The bureau pledged that it would continue to coordinate the different groups involved, obtain opinions from professional experts,

and approve the projects as soon as possible.

"We hope that the research can be carried out soon, obtain positive research results, and will strengthen the prevention and control of new and emerging infectious diseases in Macau," the FDCT said.

The call for research proposals related to Covid-19 was open to universities, research institutions, science and technology enterprises, and scientific researchers, with submissions accepted from February 10 to February 20.

The objective of the call was to boost the effective

response of Macau to the recent outbreak of the virus.

"It is essential to strengthen the prevention and control to new and emerging infectious diseases with strong scientific and technological support for epidemic prevention and control," the FDCT remarked.

The amount granted to each application will not exceed 500,000 patacas, and the duration of each project should not exceed one year.

The FDCT is set to review the proposals according to the Financial Aid Grant Regulation. **LV**

XINHUA ANALYSIS

China's governance capacity, system strength highlighted by int'l observers

OBSERVERS around the world said Chinese President Xi Jinping's speech on Sunday has demonstrated the country's governance capacity and social system strength in its fight against the COVID-19.

In his speech, Xi, also general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and chairman of the Central Military Commission, stressed unremitting efforts in the prevention and control of the novel coronavirus disease and coordination in advancing economic and social development.

Under the leadership of the CPC, China has pooled its resources to the maximum in the shortest time to combat the virus, showcasing advantages of its social system, said Russian political analyst Victor Porozhenko.

Nina Ivanova, chairwoman of the Belarusian Society of Friendship and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, said the progress China has made in the fight against COVID-19 proved that the decisions and measures adopted by the CPC Central Committee are "accurate and effective."

She noted that China is strengthening measures to stabilize its economy and adjusting policies, which will release huge development potential and inject strong impetus into the country's efforts to achieve economic and social development goals.

The Chinese government has taken swift and forceful measures to prevent the epidemic from spreading, actively carried out international cooperation in the research and development of anti-virus medicine and vaccine, and continued to adjust its policies to explore economic dri-

ving force, said Eduardo Regalado, researcher at Cuba's Center for International Policy.

Regalado said he believes that China will continue to give full play to its advantages in political leadership and allocate its resources to eliminate the epidemic as early as possible and to minimize the negative impact on the economy.

Pui Jeng Leong, a media veteran in Brunei, said China's firm measures in combating the COVID-19 have shown "openness," "transparency" and "a highly responsible attitude."

Despite some disturbance brought by the epidemic, the observer said he believes that China can do a good job in the overall planning of epidemic prevention and socio-economic development, as "the broad Chinese market is highly resilient" and "the nationwide system to combat the COVID-19 has great advantages."

Ismatulla Bekmuratov, a professor of the Tashkent State Institute of Oriental Studies in Uzbekistan, said Xi's speech comprehensively reviewed the measures taken by China since the novel coronavirus outbreak, and put forward clear guidance for the next steps on epidemic control and advancing economic and social development.

These practical actions demonstrated the CPC's principle of serving the people wholeheartedly, Bekmuratov said, adding that China's resolute and forceful measures to combat the virus have once again proved that the strength of China's social system is an essential factor for the country to overcome all difficulties including the epidemic. **XINHUA**



OFFICIALS: CHINESE INDUSTRY RECOVERING, MORE AID COMING

JOE McDONALD, BEIJING

SMALL, mostly private companies that are the engine of China's economy are back to operating at one-third of normal levels after anti-virus controls shut factories, shops and restaurants, regulators said yesterday, and they promised more low-cost loans and other aid.

The ruling Communist Party has ordered areas that are at lower disease risk to revive manufacturing and other businesses that have been shut for a month. That comes at a time when outbreaks in South Korea, Italy and Iran are leading to travel bans and other controls abroad.

At a news conference, officials expressed confidence China's 18 million small and medium-size enterprises are recovering quickly. The category includes most of the privately owned restaurants, factories, stores and other companies that generate its new jobs and wealth.

Activity overall is back to 33% of normal levels, while manufacturing reached 43%, said an official of the Cabinet's planning agency, Zhang Kejian, at a news conference. He said activity was

increasing by about 1% per day.

Beijing imposed the most sweeping anti-disease controls ever attempted after the virus emerged in the central city of Wuhan in December.

Most access to Wuhan was suspended Jan. 23. The Lunar New Year holiday was extended to keep factories and offices closed. Restaurants and cinemas were shuttered and the government told millions of people to stay at home. It is unclear how many might have close for good, unable to pay rent and other expenses without revenue.

"Many companies want to resume work as soon as possible," said Zhang. "But they also worry about risks due to the spread of the epidemic. There is a dilemma."

Forecasters say automakers and other manufacturers won't return to normal production until at least mid-March. Auto and other sales are expected to rebound, but tourism and other service industries might not be able to recover lost sales.

Beijing has promised tax breaks and low-interest loans. Economists caution that aid alone won't solve all their problems because travel curbs and other

controls still in place have disrupted shipments of goods and kept employees from getting back to work.

Global automakers are reopening factories but say the pace will depend on how quickly they can get components.

Other officials earlier gave higher operating levels of up to 70% for steel mills and manufacturing in export-oriented coastal areas. That reflected the gap between more prosperous state industry and coastal provinces and companies in lower-income regions.

Many factories in Hubei, the inland province where Wuhan is located, are still closed. Wuhan, a city of 11 million people, is a center for automakers and suppliers of components for smartphones and other products.

The government said earlier more than 1,000 companies have received low-interest loans from a 300 billion yuan (\$42 billion) recovery fund set up by the central bank.

Banks that have lent as much as they are allowed will be helped to replenish their capital to "further promote the development of the real economy," said a central bank vice president, Liu Guoqiang. **AP**

AS the worst-hit areas of Asia continued to struggle with a viral epidemic, with hundreds more cases reported yesterday in South Korea and China, worries about infection and containment spread across the globe.

For the first time, the coronavirus has caused more new cases outside China, the epicenter of the outbreak, than inside the country. With Brazil on Wednesday confirming Latin America's first case, the virus has reached every continent but Antarctica.

As the epidemic expanded geographically, worries about the COVID-19 illness multiplied.

"The sudden increases of cases in Italy, the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Korea are deeply concerning," WHO director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said.

Though the virus has pushed into countries both rich and poor, its arrival in places with little ability to detect, respond and contain it brought worry that it could run rampant there and spread easily elsewhere.

Major gatherings have been eyed warily, with schools closing, churches moving services online, food deliveries booming and many business conferences and sporting events canceled. The Summer Olympics begin July 24 in Tokyo, and Japan's top government spokesman said Olympics preparations would proceed and the games would go on as planned.

South Korea reported 505 more cases yesterday, bringing its total to 1,766. Most of the new cases were in the country's fourth-biggest city, Daegu, where the outbreak has hit hardest and the national government has mobilized public health tools to help the region's overwhelmed medical system.

The South Korean and U.S. militaries postponed their annual joint drills out of concerns over a viral outbreak that has infected soldiers in both countries'

AP PHOTO

Hardest-hit China, South Korea count 938 new virus cases



armed forces, put many troops in quarantine and closed base facilities. Twenty South Korean soldiers and one American service member in South Korea have tested positive for the new coronavirus. South Korea has already suspended some unilateral field training, and the U.S. military was urging its personnel to avoid handshakes and large gatherings if possible.

But there are signs the virus is spreading further in South Korea, with 56 cases reported so far in the capital, Seoul, and 61 in the second-largest city, Busan. The country also confirmed its 13th death; most of them are still in and near Daegu.

China reported 433 new cases along with 29 additional deaths. Yesterday's updates bring mainland China's totals to 78,497 cases, and 2,744 deaths.

Of the new cases, 383 were in the epicenter of the city of Wuhan,

where the virus first emerged in December. Wuhan also accounted for 19 of the new deaths.

South Korea followed China in expressing dismay at travel restrictions imposed by other countries.

About 40 nations and regions so far have prohibited or restricted South Korean visitors, according to Lee Tae-ho, Seoul's second vice minister of foreign affairs, who described such moves as excessive and said his government has been effectively utilizing its "world-best quarantine capabilities."

But calls have grown inside South Korea for expanding its own entry ban, which currently covers only visitors from China's Hubei province, where Wuhan is the capital.

China has put Wuhan and nearby cities on lock down, many airlines have reduced Chinese flights, and many places have

increased monitoring of arrivals from China, all resulting in far fewer Chinese arrivals around the globe. Lee said the inflow of Chinese into South Korea has been reduced by more than 80%.

In Europe, an expanding cluster of more than 440 cases in northern Italy was eyed as a source for transmissions. In the Middle East, blame was directed at Iran, which had 19 deaths, the highest toll outside China. Saudi Arabia said yesterday it would ban tourists from places with confirmed outbreaks, including pilgrims coming for the Umrah or to visit the Prophet's Mosque in Medina.

Shortly after Trump spoke about U.S. efforts on the virus, health officials identified what could be the first community spread U.S. case. The patient in California was not known to have traveled to a country with an outbreak or had ties to a known patient. Most of the previously con-

firmed U.S. cases had traveled to China, were evacuated from the virus-stricken Diamond Princess cruise ship, or were family members of those cases.

In South Korea, the largest cluster of infections was connected to a Daegu branch of the Shincheonji Church of Jesus. Health workers have finished testing 1,300 churchgoers who have exhibited symptoms, said Kim Gang-lip, South Korea's vice health minister.

The church gave a list of its 212,000 members nationwide to government authorities, who plan to widen screening.

After many countries restricted travel from China to try to prevent the illness from spreading, China itself is now heavily regulating arrivals from abroad. State broadcaster CCTV reported South Koreans were being monitored after Chinese authorities detected fevers in five arrivals. AP

Saudi Arabia halts pilgrimages over virus; Iran cases spike

JON GAMBRELL, DUBAI

SAUDI Arabia yesterday banned foreign pilgrims from entering the kingdom to visit Islam's holiest sites over the new coronavirus, potentially disrupting the plans of millions of faithful ahead of the holy fasting month of Ramadan and as the annual hajj pilgrimage looms.

The decision showed the growing worry across the Mideast about the virus as Iran's confirmed that infected cases spiked by over 100, to 254 now. A total of 26 peo-

ple have died so far, it said. That pushes the region's overall cases to above 350. Iran's death toll is highest outside of China where the outbreak began.

Saudi Arabia's barring of pilgrims from Mecca, home to the cube-shaped Kaaba that the world's 1.8 billion Muslims pray toward five times a day, and Medina appeared unprecedented in modern history. The kingdom's Al Saud ruling family stakes their legitimacy in overseeing and protecting the sites. Authorities also suspended entry to travelers

from nations affected by the new virus who hold tourist visas for the kingdom.

It appeared Saudi officials worried about the risk of pilgrims spreading the virus as they had in Iran. The virus' epicenter in the Islamic Republic is the holy Shiite city of Qom, where the faithful in reverence reach out to kiss and touch a famous shrine. That shrine and others have remained open, despite Iran's civilian government calling for them to be closed.

The tiny, oil-rich nation of Kuwait announced a sudden jump to 43 cases from 26 on

Thursday as well, all linked to travelers who recently came from Iran. There have been no confirmed cases of the new coronavirus in Saudi Arabia amid the outbreak.

"Saudi Arabia renews its support for all international measures to limit the spread of this virus, and urges its citizens to exercise caution before traveling to countries experiencing coronavirus outbreaks," the Saudi Foreign Ministry said in a statement announcing the decision. "We ask God Almighty to spare all humanity from all harm." AP

AP PHOTO



Muslim pilgrims circumambulate around the Kaaba during the minor pilgrimage this week, known as Umrah in the Muslim holy city of Mecca

AP PHOTO



COVID-19

US identifies first coronavirus case without outbreak ties

U.S. health authorities said they've identified the first case of coronavirus that doesn't have known ties to an existing outbreak, a worrying signal that the virus is circulating in the U.S. despite reassurances from the Trump administration that it's contained.

The hospital where the patient is being treated in California described one of the more serious cases of infection seen so far in the U.S., according to a report in a local newspaper, with the patient arriving after being intubated and put on a ventilator.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said the patient doesn't appear to have traveled to China or been exposed to another known case of the coronavirus. Health authorities are increasingly concerned about what's known as community spread, where the virus begins circulating freely among people outside of quarantines or known contacts with other patients.

"At this time, the patient's exposure is unknown," the CDC said in a statement. "It's possible this could be an instance of community spread of Covid-19, which would be the first time this has happened in the United States." Covid-19 is the technical name for the disease caused by the virus.

The CDC said the case

was picked up by doctors in California, and that the patient may have been infected by a traveler who brought in the disease. It didn't give more information on the patient's status. The new case brings the total of known infections in the U.S. to 15, not counting repatriated Americans.

PATIENT'S CONDITION

The patient is now being treated at UC Davis Medical Center after being transferred from another hospital on Feb. 19, according to the Davis Enterprise newspaper, citing a letter from hospital officials. The hospital said the patient had arrived having been intubated, on a ventilator, and with an unknown illness.

It took four days for the patient to be tested for the coronavirus by the CDC, according to the letter, because the patient didn't fit the initial criteria of a likely patient. The CDC confirmed the diagnosis yesterday [Macau time], according to the report.

The hospital said it is "committed to saving this patient's life," and has put in place upgraded precautions for staff that weren't initially used when the patient arrived. "We believe there has been minimal potential for exposure here," the hospital said in the letter cited by the Davis Enterprise, but it will ask several workers to stay at home in self-isolation.

The California Depart-

ment of Public Health said the patient is a resident of Solano County, an area between San Francisco and Sacramento. The patient didn't have a close contact with a known case or a travel history to China, the state said, a sign that health workers are examining the patient's history to try and find out how they may have caught the virus and whether other people may be infected without knowing it.

"We have been anticipating the potential for such a case in the U.S., and given our close familial, social and business relationships with China, it is not unexpected that the first case in the U.S. would be in California," Sonia Angell, the director of the California Department of Public Health, said in a statement. The state said the risk to the general public remains low.

TRUMP PRESS CONFERENCE

The announcement came minutes after President Donald Trump finished a news conference describing the virus as largely contained.

"Because of all we've done the risk to the American people remains very low," Trump said Wednesday at the White House. Markets have been roiled by increasing concerns that an outbreak that began in China, infecting more than 75,000 people there and killing over 2,700, has sli-

pped through global efforts to contain it and is now propagating around the world.

"Whatever happens we're totally prepared," Trump said yesterday [Macau time], adding later: "There's a chance it could get worse; there's a chance it could get fairly substantially worse, but nothing's inevitable."

The new case in the U.S. may upend that hope.

Trump was informed of the new case before the press conference and the CDC announcement, and was told that it was apparently not linked to other outbreaks, according to people familiar with the matter. But because he didn't yet have the full details, he made only a passing reference at the press briefing.

The expansion of outbreaks to Italy, South Korea and Japan has made the spread of the virus to the U.S. more likely, brought in by people traveling to and from those countries.

"The chances that there will be more importation of the virus into the U.S. has increased in a noteworthy way," said William Schaffner, a professor of preventive medicine and infectious diseases at Vanderbilt University School of Medicine. "With the virus spreading in those countries, that just means there are more opportunities for the virus - which doesn't need a passport - to get onto those planes and come to the United States." **MDT/BLOOMBERG**

this day in history



1986 SWEDISH PRIME MINISTER ASSASSINATED

The Swedish prime minister has died after being shot in a street ambush in central Stockholm. His wife was wounded.

Olof and Lisbeth Palme were attacked as they were leaving a cinema at about 2330 local time. Mr Palme was shot twice in the stomach, his wife was shot in the back.

Police say a taxi-driver used his mobile radio to raise the alarm. Two young girls sitting in a car close to the scene of the shooting tried to help the Prime Minister.

He was rushed to hospital but was dead on arrival. Mrs Palme is being treated for her injury, but it is not thought to be life threatening.

Mr Palme, 59, and a social democrat, was serving his second term as leader. He believed in open government and shunned tight security.

He had two bodyguards to protect him on official functions but frequently walked unattended through the Swedish capital and went on holidays unescorted to his summer cottage on the island of Gotland.

His assassination will come as a shock to the Swedes. They have always taken great pride in the fact their prime minister could walk openly in the streets without the security which accompanies other heads of state.

Mr Palme will be remembered as a campaigner for the working classes and Third World causes. He was first elected as prime minister in 1969.

He became a leading advocate of peace and non violence and campaigned for an end to the war in Vietnam.

He saw himself carrying the banner of Social Democracy through Europe at a time when the Right was only temporarily in triumph.

He once said: "I know that the Thatchers and the Reagans will be out in a few years. We have to survive till then."

Courtesy BBC News

IN CONTEXT

Olof Palme's deputy Ingvar Carlsson was chosen to succeed him as Social Democratic party leader.

At the time of his death, Mr Palme had been accused of being pro-Soviet and not safeguarding Sweden's interests. Arrangements had been made for a trip to Moscow to discuss Soviet submarine incursions into Swedish waters.

A drug addict and social outcast, Christer Pettersson, 42, was sentenced to life imprisonment for the murder in July 1989.

The verdict immediately became controversial as the court's two judges voted for acquittal but six lay assessors disagreed. In October 1989, Pettersson was cleared. Although several witnesses thought they could place him at the scene of the crime, no motive was ever found for the killing.

Pettersson died in September 2004. He was reported to have confessed to the killing before his death.

The investigation into Olof Palme's death remains open.

In November 2006 police recovered a Smith and Wesson revolver believed to have been used in the murder. It was found in a lake in central Sweden.

MACAU'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

YOUR STARS

ARIES Mar. 21-Apr. 19
A special relationship is growing a little bit more tense, but these are normal growing pains you're experiencing, not signs that trouble is brewing between you two.

TAURUS Apr. 20-May. 20
There are times that you should be conservative and take things nice and slow, and then there are times you should throw all caution to the wind and just go for it! Guess what time it is today?

GEMINI May. 21-Jun. 21
Step up and play peacemaker between the warring co-workers or friends around you. You may be the only person who can let cooler heads prevail. Suggest they see things from the opposite person's point of view.

CANCER Jun. 22-Jul. 22
Perfection doesn't exist. Even those perfect-looking celebrities you see in photos have been airbrushed by professionals! You need to stop holding yourself to such impossibly high standards.

LEO Jul. 23-Aug. 22
Their insightful intelligence is greater than their communication skills, so be patient and be prepared to ask a lot of questions to clarify what they're talking about.

VIRGO Aug. 23-Sep. 22
Not everyone can be as open-minded as you usually are, and that fact might frustrate you today. There could be a person near you who makes a comment that you find disappointing, to say the least.

LIBRA Sep. 23-Oct. 22
From dealing with something as minor as a broken zipper to handling something as major as work fallout from a missed deadline, you will master every little (unpleasant) surprise that comes your way.

SCORPIO Oct. 23-Nov. 21
This person could be anyone - a family member, friend, or even a stranger. Your task is to stay present in the moment and be ready to gain inspiration from someone else's remarkable transformation.

SAGITTARIUS Nov. 22-Dec. 21
One car cutting you off might make you a few minutes late for work, but one person holding the elevator door could put you face-to-face with the person of your dreams for seven floors.

CAPRICORN Dec. 22-Jan. 19
You need to embrace the little fires that erupt throughout your day because they offer you some great opportunities to show what you're really made of.

AQUARIUS Jan. 20-Feb. 18
Little changes in your life can create bigger and more inspiring changes down the road, so don't be afraid of them. Once the ball gets rolling, you can ride it to some amazing adventures.

PISCES Feb. 19-Mar. 20
Your imagination, dreams, and fantasies are offering you some amazing insights into the questions you've been asking yourself, and they could confirm a few suspicions.

The Born Loser by Chip Sansom



SUDOKU

EASY					EASY+				
8	7	1		5	8		9	7	
	2			8	9				
		8	4			4			5
2		6			2				4
9		2	4			3	7	9	6
4			1		5				1
	1		5	7	6			1	
	9	4				1			4
		3		9	2		8	5	6

MEDIUM					HARD					
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	4		1				6	2		
		8	9		7		5		3	
9			5			4	8	1		
3	7				1		3		6	
			2		6					5
	9		3	8			4			8
		4		3		6		3		
5	6		2			1				

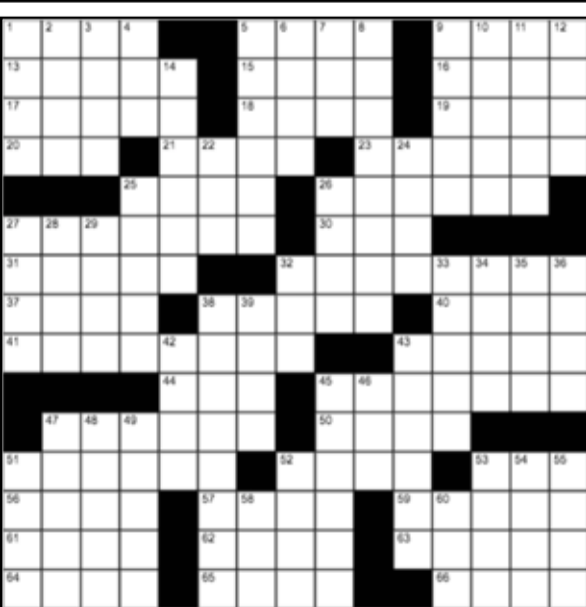
WEATHER

	MIN	MAX	CONDITION
CHINA			
Beijing	-3	9	cloudy
Harbin	-12	-2	moderate snow
Tianjin	1	9	overcast
Urumqi	-4	0	flurry
Xi'an	2	13	cloudy
Lhasa	-5	10	clear
Chengdu	12	20	cloudy
Chongqing	12	15	drizzle
Kunming	9	18	shower
Nanjing	8	11	drizzle
Shanghai	8	13	drizzle
Wuhan	8	10	drizzle
Hangzhou	8	20	overcast
Taipei	18	22	overcast
Guangzhou	17	26	cloudy
Hong Kong	18	22	cloudy
WORLD			
Moscow	-1	3	drizzle
Frankfurt	3	9	drizzle
Paris	8	11	cloudy
London	7	9	cloudy
New York	-5	11	clear

CROSSWORDS

ACROSS: 1- Pond organism; 5- High-pitched tone; 9- Wagon; 13- Washer cycle; 15- Lhasa ___; 16- Neighborhood; 17- Springs; 18- Barbie, e.g.; 19- Drum sound; 20- Unsafe?; 21- Duds; 23- Sardonic; 25- Super; 26- Right-leaning?; 27- Fin; 30- Tear; 31- Vows; 32- Undiplomatic; 37- ___ want for Christmas...; 38- Peaks of Peru; 40- Quickly, quickly; 41- Republic in the Indian Ocean; 43- Unconventional; 44- Born, in France; 45- Makeshift solution; 47- On deck, perhaps; 50- To ___ (perfectly); 51- Expects confidently; 52- Somewhat; 53- Posed; 56- Ethereal; Prefix; 57- Emilia's husband; 59- Orchard; 61- Capri, for one; 62- Store sign; 63- Beast of Borden; 64- Interstellar dist.; 65- Capone foe; 66- Back talk;

DOWN: 1- He sang about Alice; 2- Stead; 3- Midge; 4- Snake; 5- Burrowing, carnivorous mammal; 6- Epic narrative poem; 7- Alien's subj.; 8- What senators play?; 9- Christmas song; 10- Rice-___; 11- Piece of history; 12- Apply powder to oneself; 14- Bars legally; 22- Washington bill; 24- Deeply moved; 25- Plant louse; 26- Dies ___; 27- Froth; 28- In ___ land; 29- ___ never work!; 32- NFL scores; 33- Diploma word; 34- This, in Tijuana; 35- Dress often worn by Hindu women; 36- Raced; 38- Distaste; 39- Require; 42- ___ the finish; 43- Nervous; 45- Conductors' rods; 46- Loss leader?; 47- Give it ___; 48- Big and strong; 49- Bendable twig, usually of a willow tree; 51- Follow; 52- Aeons; 53- Cubs slugger Sammy; 54- Thrifty competitor; 55- Driving aids; 58- Copycat; 60- Literary monogram;



Crossword puzzles provided by BestCrosswords.com

USEFUL TELEPHONE NUMBERS

- Emergency calls 999
- Fire department 28 572 222
- PJ (Open line) 993
- PJ (Picket) 28 557 775
- PSP 28 573 333
- Customs 28 559 944
- S. J. Hospital 28 313 731
- Kiang Wu Hospital 28 371 333
- Commission Against Corruption (CCAC) 28326 300
- IAM 28 387 333
- Tourism 28 333 000
- Airport 59 888 88
- Taxi 28 939 939 / 2828 3283
- Water Supply - Report 2822 0088
- Telephone - Report 1000
- Electricity - Report 28 339 922
- Macau Daily Times 28 716 081



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- [Macau] Waterfront Duet- New studio 1 1/2 469 ft² \$5,100,000 (ref: 20016001)
- [Taipa] Nam Long 1 1/2 1 1/2 785 ft² \$4,780,000 (ref: 20016009)

FOR RENT

- [Taipa] Buckingham 2 1/2 2 1/2 1,439 ft² \$20,900/mth (ref: n/a)
- [Macau] Central Macau unit 2 1/2 2 1/2 n/a ft² \$20,000/mth (ref: 20011001)
- [Macau] Vai Fung Triplex 2 1/2 2 1/2 n/a ft² \$15,800/mth (ref: 19121001)
- [Taipa] Nam Long 2 1/2 1 1/2 645 ft² \$11,800/mth (ref: 1911 1001)

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EURO HOPEFUL FLAGS LAUNDERING CONCERN IN WIDE BANKING PROBE

ANDRA TIMU & IRINA VILCU

ROMANIA'S central bank has launched a probe over alleged money laundering after questionable transactions at half of the euro aspirant's commercial lenders raised suspicions from outside the country.

The central bank is checking as many as 17 lenders - half of the banking sector - that have opened personal and corporate accounts containing transactions that can't be explained or "raise the suspicion of illegality," said Nicolae Cinteza, the head of the bank's supervision department, in a phone interview yesterday. He didn't identify which banks are included in the probe.

"We've received some warnings from abroad and after a routine check we discovered some suspect accounts at more banks," Cinteza said. "The investigation started last year and it's a pretty complicated process, so we don't know how long it will take to finalize



it. It's too early to talk about potential sanctions."

Romania is following other European Union countries in boosting efforts to tackle money laundering as it strives to adopt the euro later this decade and the EU cracks down on money laundering with new regulation. Scandals have roiled some member states, such as Latvia and Estonia, and banks including Danske Bank

over the past years, making the road to the single currency more difficult among the newest EU members in the south.

Bulgaria, which lies to the south of Romania, put off a key step in its bid to adopt the euro, saying it will advance on the project only if assured that banks are ready and there is consensus among the public.

As another example of the

difficulties euro aspirants face in regulating their banks, Croatia's central bank last month criticized an attempt by a local unit of Raiffeisen Bank International AG to hire a PR agency to pressure the country's courts.

Croatia still hopes to join the ERM-2, the pre-adoption waiting room, by midyear and the eurozone by 2023.

Cinteza said one of the banks in Romania was involved in the scandal surrounding Danske Bank, but the current investigation is separate. Prosecutors from the anti-organized crime and terrorism unit are also looking into the matter, he said.

The Romanian banking association declined to comment when contacted by Bloomberg.

"If we find out that the banks were knowingly involved in the transactions, then it's a criminal matter. If not, it's a matter of banking supervision and we'll be the ones applying potential sanctions," Cinteza said. **BLOOMBERG**

CORPORATE BITS

Sands China donates MOP1.65 million to 33 elderly and rehab centers

Casino operator Sands China is donating MOP1.65 million to 33 elderly centers and rehabilitation centers identified by the Social Welfare Bureau to assist them in taking measures to combat the spread of the novel coronavirus and to safeguard the health of their over 3,100 service users.

Each of the 33 beneficiaries - government-funded and private elderly homes and rehabilitation centers - will receive 50,000 patacas that will be used for cleaning and sanitizing the centers and for purchasing hygiene products for additional preventive measures.

"As Macau works to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, Sands China is pleased to be able to use our coronavirus relief fund to assist Macau's elderly homes and rehabilitation centers in keeping their residents and service users safe and healthy," said Dr. Wilfred Wong, president of Sands China Ltd.

"We are grateful to the Social Welfare Bureau for their efficient coordination, assistance and support, and we hope all in Macau will continue working together to keep the city safe during this trying time, under the guidance of the government's virus prevention efforts."

Sands China's donation is part of the company's pledge to donate MOP5 million toward Macau's novel coronavirus relief effort, and is part of Sands Cares, the global corporate citizenship program of parent company Las Vegas Sands Corp.

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MACAU'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

TALES AZZONI, MADRID

FOOTBALL | CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

REAL MADRID 1, MAN CITY 2

Man City rallies to beat Real Madrid

WITH two late goals in five minutes, Manchester City turned the tables on Real Madrid and boosted its chances of finally winning an elusive Champions League title while it can.

Gabriel Jesus scored an equalizer in the 78th minute and Kevin De Bruyne netted an 83rd-minute winner from the penalty spot as Man City came from behind for a 2-1 win over Madrid in the first leg of the last 16 at the Santiago Bernabéu Stadium yesterday [Macau time].

"It's a great satisfaction to be able to win at the Bernabéu," Man City coach Pep Guardiola said. "We are not used to these types of results. It shows that we can go to any stadium and win."

City is likely playing in its last Champions League before having to serve a two-year UEFA ban from European competitions for breaching financial regulations and failing to cooperate with investigators. The club has yet to win a Champions League title despite the heavy spending that helped it win two straight Premier League crowns under Guardiola, and was eliminated by Tottenham in last year's quarterfinals.

Francisco "Isco" Alarcón op-



Manchester City's Gabriel Jesus scores his side's first goal

ned the scoring in the 60th for Madrid, which played the final minutes without defender Sergio Ramos after he was shown a straight red card for a foul to stop an 86th-minute breakaway by Jesus.

"Those last 10 minutes changed the game," Madrid coach Zinedine Zidane said. "We played a good match, it hurts to see those mistakes in the end. We didn't deserve that, but in football you have

to be fully focused for the entire 90 minutes."

The return match in England will be on March 17.

"Happy for the victory, of course, but for the performance as well," Guardiola said. "They started really well in the first 15 minutes, but after these 15 minutes we played really good. But it's still not over. If there is one team in the world that can overcome this, it's

this club [Real Madrid]."

Guardiola's team was the most dangerous team throughout the match but couldn't get past Madrid goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois until Jesus' close-range header. The Brazilian forward, a surprise starter over Sterling and Sergio Agüero, jumped behind Ramos to meet a well-placed cross by De Bruyne.

Sterling, back in action after

nursing a muscle injury, made a crucial impact after coming off the bench by setting up the penalty that De Bruyne calmly converted past Courtois.

Madrid struggled to get clear chances but took the lead after Rodri gave the ball away near midfield. The blunder allowed Vinícius Júnior to make a run into the area and find Isco free from markers for an easy goal.

Courtois made a few difficult saves in both halves, while Madrid's best chance until Isco's goal was a close-range header by Karim Benzema saved by Ederson before the break.

"We created good chances but we were off-target and Courtois made some great saves," Guardiola said.

Madrid historically has thrived at the Bernabéu in the Champions League, but it has won only three of its last 10 European matches at the stadium, drawing three and losing other four. It was eliminated by Ajax in last year's round of 16 after a 4-1 home loss. That marked the first time since 2009-10 the Spanish powerhouse failed to reach at least the semifinals. **AP**

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OPINION

World Views

Bobby Ghosh, Bloomberg

IRAN CAN'T BE TRUSTED TO DEAL WITH CORONAVIRUS

If the leadership of the World Health Organization can spare a moment from their genuflecting to Beijing, they should direct their attention to another authoritarian state struggling to contain the coronavirus: Iran. The Islamic Republic's mismanagement of the contagion represents an imminent threat not only to Iranians but to all of the Middle East and Central Asia — and possibly, given the menacing nature of the microbe, the larger world.

Iran already accounts for more deaths from the virus than any country outside China. It is widespread: Cases have been reported from most of Iran's provinces. The official death toll, which stands at 19, is almost certainly understated. An Iranian lawmaker has put the count at 50 in the holy city of Qom alone. Officials in Tehran dismiss this as an exaggeration, but they have even less credibility than Iran's currency.

Iranians know not to trust their government, and reports from Tehran tell of a growing panic. This will get worse, now that the official responsible for managing the outbreak has admitted that he has himself contracted the virus. Only the previous day, Deputy Health Minister Iraj Harirchi had been underplaying reports of a government cover-up — at a press conference in which he was already showing signs of illness. To keep up the lie, Harirchi went on TV and made jokes about his coughing.

The mind boggles at the irresponsibility. It is hard to know how many scores, or hundreds, of people were exposed to Harirchi alone. But singling out the deputy minister for putting his body in service of his government's policy of dissimulation may be unfair. Even after Harirchi's revelation, President Hassan Rouhani was warning that the crisis could be an "enemy weapon" to hurt the Iranian economy. He refused to quarantine any city or district, disregarding appeals to lock down Qom, where the virus claimed its first Iranian victims.

We shouldn't be surprised. The regime in Tehran has long regarded reckless endangerment — of its own citizens as much as of neighboring nations — as a governing precept. Its reflexive tendency to lie about crises, recently on display with the shooting down of a Ukrainian airliner, adds credence to reports that the first signs of the outbreak were evident on Feb. 13, six days before the government owned up.

Iran's neighbors are as skeptical as Iranians of the regime's claims. Most have already sealed off borders and cancelled flights. In Iraq, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Oman and, Lebanon, this came after the virus had already made landfall, carried by people arriving from the Islamic Republic.

Iraq is a particular worry. Its shrine cities attract droves of Iranian pilgrims, where they mingle with worshipers from across the Muslim world. The Shiite militias controlled by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps care little for borders. Iraq is also an important export market for Iran. Other countries are sure to follow the example of Kuwait, which has suspended flights to and from Iraq, as well.

But this piecemeal approach does not inspire much confidence, especially since Iranian authorities continue to conceal the true extent of the contagion. (The head of Qom's medical university, himself in quarantine, has said he was ordered by the health ministry not to publish any data on the outbreak.)

Iran's willful mismanagement of the crisis can no longer be overlooked. The international community must pressure the regime to get serious. To make sure this happens, the WHO should deploy medical teams across the country, to audit the government's efforts to combat the virus, and provide assistance where required.

For its part, the Trump administration should recognize the danger Iran's incompetence represents to the wider world and waive sanctions on medical supplies and personnel, just as it has done for the Swiss banking channel for humanitarian aid.

The regime in Tehran may be sanguine about endangering its people and neighbors. The world cannot afford to be so blasé.

The cruise ship MSC Meraviglia, turned away by two nations due to fears of a virus outbreak, is being allowed to dock at Mexico's Caribbean island of Cozumel and passengers will be allowed to disembark, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador said yesterday.

López Obrador said Mexico had to act with "humanity" after the ship was refused entry at ports in Grand Cayman and Jamaica.

The cruise line had expressed frustration with the rejections, which came after it reported one crew member from the Philippines was sick with common seasonal flu. It said no passengers had

shown evidence of the Covid-19 virus.

"The ship is being allowed to dock and the passengers, those who are aboard the cruise ship can disembark," López Obrador said, adding that health inspections will be carried out.

"We cannot act with discrimination," he said. "Imagine if a ship arrived and it wasn't even allowed to dock, and they were told, 'Keep going on your way, see where you can dock.' That is inhuman."

He added "we cannot close our ports, nor can we close our airports."



AP PHOTO

VENICE FACES NEW THREAT FROM VIRUS AFTER REELING FROM FLOODS

STILL reeling from the effects of major flooding just a few months ago, Venice faces a new emergency: the threat of a new virus outbreak across Italy that is worrying international visitors worldwide and hitting the economy hard.

The fragile lagoon city, renowned for its unique cultural and artistic heritage, is already grappling with the effects of the worst flooding in a half-century at the end of last year. It caused more than 1 billion euros in damage to residents and businesses, hurting iconic landmarks like St. Mark's Basilica and La Fenice theatre.

The Italian government is taking extraordinary measures to contain the two main virus outbreaks that hit the northern regions of Veneto and Lombardy, two areas that together produce more than 30% of Italy's economic output.

As of now, Venice — whose historic center has around 53,000 residents and more than 30 million tourists a year -- has registered at least four cases of COVID-19, with 71 in the whole of Veneto — the worst-hit region after Lombardy, where 10 towns are on lockdown.

The Venice local hoteliers' association noted that in the immediate aftermath of the virus outbreaks, hotel reservations saw a drop

of about 50%. The numbers were rebounding for Carnival, with 95% occupancy reported just last weekend, only to have them drop by 40% when officials took the precaution — unprecedented in modern times — of canceling the last two days of celebrations.

"We understand the fear that is spreading but at the same time we are aware that our health care system is holding and we believe that the image of efficiency of our area will win out," said Daniele Minotto, the hotel association's deputy director.

Venice city councilor for economic development Simone Venturini said that the economic impact of the new virus outbreak should worry national authorities as much as the impact on public health.

In the city of Carnival, the virus threat forced visitors to observe strict precautions. Regional authorities also closed museums in the city — along with schools and other official offices — until March 1.

Many tourists visiting Venice's central St. Mark square enjoyed much free space on what normally be a crowded plaza, while restaurants, hotels and souvenir stores counted their losses. Below their Venetian masks, they also wore white sanitary masks.

"We can see the square is relatively empty. If I

can say, from my 39-year work experience, there is a very heavy fall, around 40% compared to previous years," said Roberto Nardin, a Venice gondolier.

Following the outbreak escalation, Italian Premier Giuseppe Conte has raised the specter of an economic recession, as Italy's ailing economy struggles with moribund growth, massive debt, and high youth unemployment. Economic experts and business associations predict the virus spread to take a heavy toll on Italy's output, now seen falling between 0.5% and 1% this year, causing the loss of up to 60,000 jobs.

While there are measures in place to contain the outbreak, authorities also warned against unjustified panic. However, finding the balance between appropriate measures without repelling tourists and breaking the festive atmosphere remains a challenge.

This year's succession of damaging events has also left some Venetian store owners desperate. Flavio Gastaldi said he is considering closing the souvenir store he has run for 30 years. Although business has highs and lows, his rent does not.

"At this point we won't recover anything (from the losses he has endured this year)," he said. "We will return the keys to the landlords soon." **MDT/AP**

Australia Universities are offering Chinese students stranded in their homeland travel money and discounted tuition and the largest campus delayed the start of the academic year, trying to keep their lucrative enrollments amid a viral outbreak. Australia's ban on travel from mainland China will not be lifted before classes begin at most universities next week, the government said yesterday.



AP PHOTO

Germany's health minister said that the country was "at the beginning of an epidemic" as authorities in the west tested dozens of people who had contact with a couple infected with the coronavirus gaining a foothold in Europe. Germany has been bracing for an increase in confirmed cases since the number of infected people spiked Friday nearby Italy. The testing came after a 47-year-old man with the virus was hospitalized in serious condition in Duesseldorf.



AP PHOTO

Internet Facebook said that it is banning ads that make false claims about products tied to the new coronavirus. The social network said it is removing ads that feature a product and imply a limited supply, seeking to create a "sense of urgency" in their mention of coronavirus. Ads that guarantee a cure or prevention are also banned, it said.

Sports Ireland's Six Nations rugby match against Italy in Dublin was postponed Wednesday because of concerns about the spreading virus in Europe. The Italians were scheduled to play at Ireland on March 7, part of the annual rugby competition that also includes England, France, Scotland and Wales. A women's game the following day was also postponed.