

# Turkish mosque turned into temporary 'supermarket'

**ISTANBUL:** At the entrance of an Istanbul mosque, the racks usually reserved for the shoes of the faithful are loaded with pasta packages, oil bottles, biscuits - like a supermarket. But they aren't for sale. Instead they are destined for the needy, hard hit by the coronavirus pandemic. The sign on the mosque's window asks anyone who can to leave something, and says those in need can take something.

Abdulsamet Cakir, 33, imam of the Dedeman mosque in the Sariyer district, came up with this idea of reaching out to the poor via the place of worship after Turkey suspended mass prayers in mosques until the risk of outbreak passes. Turkey's official death toll from the virus now stands at 2,259 after 119 more deaths were reported on Tuesday, and major cities including Istanbul will be under lockdown for four days from today.

"After the suspension of mass prayers, I had an idea to revive our mosque by bringing together well-off people with the people in need," Cakir told AFP inside the mosque, where bags of food and cleaning products were piled up on the floor. The young imam, who takes the products from the floor and places them on the shelves at the entrance, said he was inspired by a donation culture in the Ottoman period called "charity stone" - a small pillar stone erected at certain locations of the city to connect rich people with the poor.

## 'Tough situation'

In this Ottoman system aimed at giving charity in a dignified manner without offending the needy, people with means would leave whatever amount they wanted in a cavity on the top of the charity stone. Those who were in need would

then take the amount they needed and leave the rest for others. "After the coronavirus pandemic, we have thought about what we can do to help our brothers in need," said Cakir, who would already help the poor in his neighborhood before the outbreak. "With the inspiration from our ancestors' 'charity stone' culture, we decided to fill the racks in our mosque with the help from our brothers with means," he added.

Cakir hangs a list on the wall of the mosque where citizens who need help write their names and telephone numbers. The imam later sends the list to local authorities who check whether the names are really in need and his team then sends a message that they can visit the mosque and receive whatever they need: Eight items at maximum. "I am really in dire need. My husband doesn't work. I used to clean houses but since the virus, they no longer call," Guleser Ocak, 50, told AFP. "I wrote my name on the list before. I received a message today to pick up aid," she said. "We are in a tough situation."

## 'No cash'

The mosque has been providing services for two weeks and reaches out to 120 people in need per day. And the list includes over 900 people. A maximum of two people wearing masks and gloves enter the mosque and take what they need, while others wait outside, standing a few paces from each other. "We spread the services through the day. We call 15 people for each half an hour, so that we respect social distancing and do not cause big queues," the imam said. "We are doing our best to help our sisters and brothers in the best possible way without offending them,"



**ISTANBUL:** People take their need of food on Tuesday from Dedeman Mosque in the Sariyer district after Turkey suspended mass prayers in mosques until the risk of the COVID-19 outbreak passes. — AFP

he added.

The mosque does not accept cash donations and instead receives aid packages. "Producers also donate. A miller brings in flour, a baker brings in bread, a water distributor brings in water," Cakir said. The mosque's shelves are full of

products sent from all over Turkey and even abroad. "Everyone does whatever they can to help people in need. For example, a brother who lives in France did online shopping and directed the aid to our mosque," he said.

"What the mosque is doing is really,

really good for us. Ramadan is coming," said Duygu Kesimoglu, 29, referring to the Muslim fasting month beginning this week. "I am unfortunately jobless, they don't employ us because of the coronavirus. No job, no money. This help is very, very good," she said. — AFP

## Iran says military satellite launched amid US tensions

**TEHRAN:** Iran's Revolutionary Guards announced they had successfully launched the country's first military satellite yesterday, at a time of fresh tensions with US forces in the Gulf. The United States alleges Iran's satellite program is a cover for its development of missiles, while the Islamic republic has previously insisted its aerospace activities comply with its international obligations. Tensions between the arch foes escalated last week with the US Department of Defense accusing Iranian vessels of harassing its ships in the Gulf.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps hailed the surprise satellite launch as a "great success". "The first satellite of the Islamic Republic of Iran has been successfully launched into orbit by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps," said the Guards' Sepahnews website. It said the satellite - dubbed the Nour - had been launched from the Qassed two-stage launcher from the Markazi desert, a vast expanse in Iran's central plateau.

The satellite "orbited the earth at 425 kilometers," said the website. "This action will be a great success and a new development in the field of space for Islamic Iran," it added. The operation comes more than two months after Iran launched but failed to put into orbit another satellite that it said had no

military purpose. The attempted launch on Feb 9 of the Zafar - "Victory" in Persian - came days before the 41st anniversary of the Islamic Revolution. Arch enemies Iran and the United States have appeared to be on the brink of an all-out confrontation twice in the past year.

Long-standing acrimony between Tehran and Washington was exacerbated in 2018 when US President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew from a deal that froze Iran's nuclear program, before issuing new demands that Tehran curtail its development of ballistic missiles. Tensions have escalated since the US killed Major General Qasem Soleimani, head of the Guards' foreign operations arm, the Quds Force, in a drone strike in January.

Washington has also raised concerns in the past about Tehran's satellite program, saying the launch of a carrier rocket in January 2019 amounted to a violation of limits on its ballistic missiles. Iran maintains it has no intention of acquiring nuclear weapons, and says its aerospace activities are peaceful and comply with a UN Security Council resolution. The Islamic republic, whose novel coronavirus outbreak is one of the world's deadliest, accuses the US of "economic terrorism" over the sanctions.

It says the punitive measures have denied it access to the medicines and medical equipment it needs to fight the virus that causes the COVID-19 disease. Iran says the virus has claimed the lives of nearly 5,300 people and infected almost 85,000 since the outbreak emerged on Feb 19. The number of Iranians killed and sickened by the virus is widely thought to be much higher, however. — AFP

of the contagious disease means that burial or cremation has to take place immediately.

In Saudi Arabia, according to a source in the health ministry who spoke to AFP on condition of anonymity, "until now all the families are asking to bury the bodies inside Saudi because they prefer so". Among them was Wazir Moahmed Saleh, a 57-year-old Afghan who worked and lived in the Muslim holy city of Madinah since the 1980s after he fled his country during the war with the former Soviet Union. The stationery shop owner died of coronavirus last week.

He had family in the holy city where the Prophet's (PBUH) grave is located, but had to be buried with only four people in attendance - all his sons. His nephew Amed Khan, a sales agent born in the kingdom, could only look at photos and videos of his uncle's burial on a smartphone. "His dream was to be buried in Madinah, and his dream came true," he told AFP. "There isn't a person who dies in Madinah and would want to be buried elsewhere. This land is known to be part of heaven."

At the Hindu cremation facility in Dubai, not all coronavirus-related deaths have the name of the virus on their certificates. Vijay, an Indian national, said his 45-year-old brother Ram died of a heart attack after he sank into a severe depression during a 14-day quarantine following a direct contact with someone who had the virus. Standing near the body in the cremation room, under a white ceiling fan, four of his colleagues spread flowers on the body before it was reduced to ashes.

"Ram tested negative after he stayed in a room for two weeks. He was mentally hurt and he got depressed because he stayed alone," Vijay explained. The laundry worker and father of three died in an ambulance while he was being taken to hospital after suffering severe chest pain. "We are going back tomorrow to collect the ashes. We will send them home once the flights are back," his brother said. — AFP

## Lebanon legalizes medical marijuana amid coronavirus

**BEIRUT:** Lebanon's parliament voted to legalize growing marijuana for medical use on Tuesday, amid an economic crisis exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic. The lawmakers met in a 1,000 seat conference hall to maintain appropriate social distancing, while outside anti-government protesters demonstrated in a vehicle convoy. As the country struggles with a battered economy, MPs also approved the re-allocation of \$40 million from a World Bank loan to help fight COVID-19, which has officially infected 677 people and killed 21 nationwide.

Outside the venue, dozens of demonstrators sought to revive a massive anti-government protest movement that had rocked Lebanon from October, before the virus forced a nationwide shutdown. They drove a noisy convoy of cars covered in slogans, drivers honking their horns and passengers brandishing the national flag and leaning out of the windows - while wearing face masks.

Another item on the agenda of the three-day session were proposals for a divisive general amnesty, but that motion was sent back for revision by a parliamentary committee. "Today, instead of passing a general amnesty law... they could pass a law on the independence of the judiciary," said Jad Assaileh, a young demonstrator. "We want to recover the stolen money," he said, referring to allegations that Lebanon's ruling elite transferred billions out of the country while regular citizens were prevented from withdrawing their savings by the banks.

Similar protests took place in the cities of Sidon and Tripoli. The vote to legalize the growing of cannabis for medical use was aimed at boosting revenues for the crippled economy. Lebanon previously banned growing, selling and consuming cannabis, but illicit production in the country's east has developed over decades into a multi-million-dollar industry. Lawmakers also passed a law to fight corruption in the public sector and set up a national body in charge of stamping out graft.

## Discord over amnesty plan

The proposal for a general amnesty to free thousands of detainees and to suspend arrest warrants for thousands more remains a contentious issue. Supporters - which include Shiite movements

Hezbollah and Amal as well as the Sunni Future Movement - say an amnesty could lessen overcrowding in jails housing 9,000 prisoners. But its detractors, including the president's Christian parliamentary bloc, say the bill is merely an attempt to boost popular support.

The amnesty has long been a demand of the families of some 1,200 so-called "Islamist detainees", most of whom hail from the Sunni-majority city of Tripoli, where the former premier's Future Movement is dominant. They are accused of carrying out crimes including fighting and assaulting the army, taking part in clashes in the city, and planning explosives attacks.

Families have also clamored for the release of thousands more detainees from the eastern regions of Baalbek and Hermel, where Hezbollah and the parliament speaker's Amal Movement are powerful. Most of these are accused of drug-linked crimes including growing hashish illegally, or other offences such as stealing cars.

## No dollars

Lebanon's worst economic crisis since the 1975-1990 civil war is now compounded by the lockdown. Poverty has risen to 45 percent of the population, according to official estimates. Protests had petered out after a new government took office in January, and demonstrators have largely remained at home since the coronavirus lockdown started mid-March. But on Friday, hundreds again protested in Tripoli to mark six months since the street movement started to demand an overhaul of a ruling class widely deemed inept and corrupt.

One of the most indebted countries in the world with a debt equivalent to 170 percent of its GDP, Lebanon defaulted on payments for the first time last month. As the country faces an acute liquidity crisis, banks have banned transfers abroad and gradually restricted dollar withdrawals until suspending them last month. The Lebanese pound has for decades been pegged to the dollar, but in recent months lost half of its official value on the black market.

The official exchange rate remains 1,507 Lebanese pounds to the dollar. The banks earlier this month set their rate at 2,600 pounds to the dollar, but money changers were offering more than 3,200 pounds for the greenback on Tuesday on the black market. On Tuesday, the central bank asked banks to allow depositors with foreign currency accounts to withdraw their savings in Lebanese pounds at the "market rate", likely to signify 2,600 pounds to the dollar. — AFP

## No last goodbye for Gulf workers...

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But a death from coronavirus means that the body cannot be sent home, and that it has to be cremated or buried in the country where the person dies.

"The whole world is changing. Nobody comes anymore, nobody touches, nobody says goodbye," said Ishwar Kumar, a manager of the Hindu Cremation Ground located in a desert area south of Dubai. Before coronavirus "people would come here, around 200 to 250, to grieve and bring flowers. Now they die alone," he told AFP. The majority of the 166 deaths and 26,600 registered cases in Gulf countries so far have been foreigners, according to health ministries, most of them from Asian countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and the Philippines.

A few hours before the cremation of the Indian man - aged in his 50s and a partner at a tourist company in Dubai - the body of another victim, a 40-year-old Filipino beautician, was also cremated at the facility. Both had one thing in common on their death certificates - "covid pneumonia" as the cause of death. The silver boxes, bought from a hypermarket, are handed over to the next of kin if they are in Dubai, or to the embassy.

"They work as laborers so most of them don't have family members. Sometimes their work colleagues come," said Suresh Galani, another manager at the facility. Despite halting commercial flights to stop the spread of the pandemic, governments in the region have been trying to lay on repatriation flights for foreign workers who are now out of a job as the economy grinds to a halt. But dealing with victims' bodies is another challenge, as the presence

## Call to halt loans, recruitment...

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the coronavirus. The committee also asked the bureau to include any other opinions pertinent to the report, in addition to its recommendations.

The budgets committee meanwhile pointed out that the state budget deficit for the current 2020/2021 fiscal year which began April 1 is expected to soar to KD 20 billion if spending remains intact in light of the sharp drop in oil prices, more than twice the deficit projected in the original budget prepared before the coronavirus outbreak. The committee however informed the government

that around KD 5 billion in deficit could still be posted in the fiscal year if spending is limited only to paying wages and related expenditures.

Kuwait has calculated oil revenues on the basis of an oil price of \$50 a barrel, a daily production of 2.7 million barrels per day and a dollar exchange rate of 305 fils to the dollar. But all these three variables deteriorated during the coronavirus pandemic. Oil is trading at around \$15 a barrel, Kuwait's production is under \$2.2 million bpd and the dollar is now equal to 310 fils.

Meanwhile, the Central Tenders Committee has approved contracts with two companies worth KD 28 million to import 300 million facemasks amid media reports that there is some shortage of masks. The committee also approved other contracts worth some KD 3 million to purchase medical equipment for the ministry of health.