

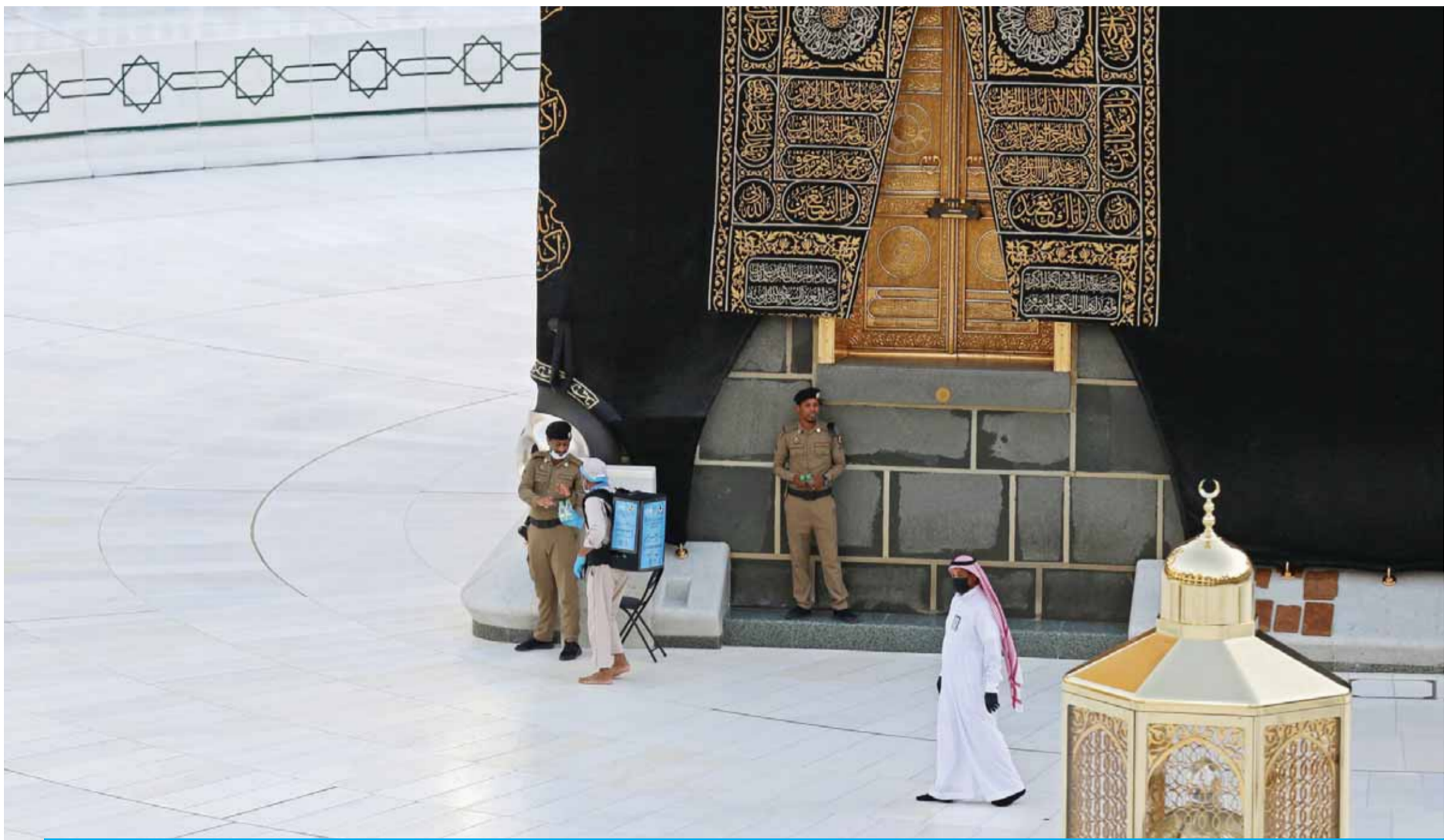


Students return to class in Shanghai and Beijing

India's rural poor may lose out as drones map village land

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MAKKAH: Saudi policemen stand guard next to the Kaaba in Makkah's Grand Mosque during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, amid unprecedented bans on family gatherings and mass prayers due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. — AFP

COVID-19: Asia's mosques deserted

Coronavirus keeps Ramadan faithful away

JAKARTA: It is a Ramadan like never before for Muslims across Asia as mosques that would normally be packed for prayers are deserted and in some places locked up as governments enforced measures to stem the spread of the novel coronavirus. At Indonesia's main Istiqlal mosque, the biggest in Southeast Asia, the call to evening Maghrib prayers and a message asking people to pray at home echo in the empty hall - a stark contrast to last year when thousands thronged in to pray.

Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim country, has confirmed 8,882 cases of the coronavirus and at least 743 people have died. In Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, the gates of the Mayor Mohammad Hanif Jame Mosque were padlocked. In the Pakistani city of Karachi, police patrolled

outside the Faizan-e-Madina, one of the city's biggest mosques, to stop worshippers from gath-



Iran plans to reopen mosques

ering and no one was performing Taraweeh, a special prayer during Ramadan.

Pakistan has reported more than 11,000 cases of the coronavirus, including 237 deaths. In India, only five worshippers joined an evening prayer on the first day of Ramadan in New Delhi's imposing Jama Masjid as the call to prayers drifted out over the deserted courtyard. Last year, worshippers spilled onto the ornate front terrace of the red-brick 17th century mosque.

India has reported 26,496 cases of the coronavirus and 824 deaths. Health experts have warned that the rapid spread of the coronavirus in poor, densely populated parts of South Asia - home to a fifth of the world's population - could easily overwhelm weak public health systems.

Iran to reopen mosques
Meanwhile, Iran plans to reopen mosques in

parts of the country that have been consistently free of the coronavirus outbreak as restrictions on Iranians gradually ease, President Hassan Rouhani said on Sunday. Iran, one of the Middle Eastern countries hardest hit by the pandemic, will be divided up into white, yellow and red regions based on the number of infections and deaths, Rouhani said, according to the presidency's website. Activities in each region will be restricted accordingly, so an area that has been consistently free of infections or deaths will be labeled white and mosques could be reopened and Friday prayers resumed, Rouhani said. He said the label given to any region in the Islamic Republic could change and he did not specify when the color-coding program would come into force. — Agencies

Saudi ramps up COVID testing

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia has announced a \$265 million deal with a Chinese firm to ramp up coronavirus testing as the kingdom eased a 24-hour curfew, except in hotspots including Islam's holy city of Makkah. The agreement with China's Beijing Genome Institute (BGI) will provide for nine million COVID-19 tests, the government said in a statement. It said in line with the agreement "500 experts, specialists, and technicians" would come from China to conduct the tests.

The deal, which has a total value of 995 million riyals, also includes "the establishment of six large regional laboratories in a number of areas in the kingdom, including a mobile laboratory with a production capacity of 10,000 tests daily", it added. Earlier the government decided to relax a nationwide curfew between 9am and 5pm, with malls and retailers allowed to reopen until May 13, according to the official Saudi Press Agency.

But a round-the-clock lockdown will be maintained in some areas including Mecca, where the highest number of infections have been recorded in recent days despite the city being sealed off. Many countries around the Middle East and North Africa have the easing of lockdown restrictions to coincide with the holy fasting month of Ramadan which began on Friday. Saudi Arabia, which has reported the highest number of infections in the Arab world, is scrambling to limit



RIYADH: Customers queue to pay for groceries at a supermarket during a nationwide curfew to stem the spread of COVID-19 in the Saudi capital Riyadh. — AFP

the spread of coronavirus at home. On Sunday, the health ministry said the number of deaths from COVID-19 had risen to 139, confirmed infections to 17,522 while 2,357 people have recovered. Last month, Saudi Arabia suspended the year-round "umrah" pilgrimage over fears of the coronavirus pandemic spreading in Islam's holiest cities. Authorities are yet to announce whether they will proceed with this year's hajj, scheduled for the end of July, but they have urged Muslims to temporarily defer preparations for the an-

nual pilgrimage. Last year, some 2.5 million faithful travelled to Saudi Arabia from across the world to participate in the hajj, which Muslims are obliged to perform at least once during their lifetime. The Arab world's biggest economy has also closed cinemas, malls and restaurants and halted flights as it attempts to contain the virus. King Salman has warned of a "more difficult" fight ahead against the virus, as the kingdom faces the economic impact of virus-led shutdowns and crashing oil prices. —AFP

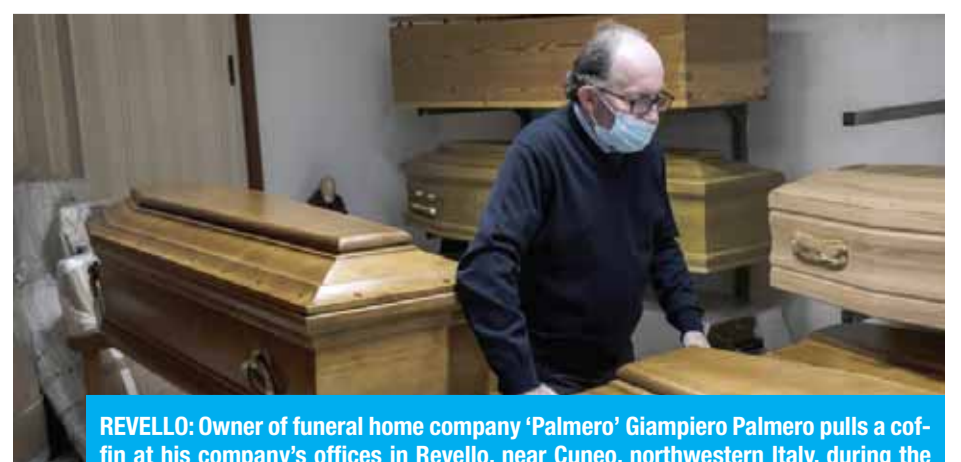
Virus breaks funeral traditions in Italy

REVELLO: The coffins are sealed directly at the hospital morgue near the tiny Italian town of Revello on the French border. Everyone in Revello understands it is safer that way since so many of those who have died across Italy's pandemic-hit north first contracted the novel coronavirus. The tradition of families passing by open caskets to say silent farewells to the deceased at churches or at funeral parlors has been abandoned. "It is much more difficult, emotionally," Revello's funeral parlor owner Giampiero Palmero told AFP. Large funerals have been banned in Italy for more than a month because of the new illness that has officially killed more than 26,000 people in the Mediterranean country since February. The real toll is unknown since many of those

who pass away in old age are never tested for the virus.

The rushed funeral arrangements mean grieving families have almost no time to say their final goodbyes. Palmero takes it personally. "We really are living in abnormal times," Palmero says. "There is more demand for our services." Italy is cautiously approaching the moment when it is ready to lift some of its harshest restrictions on everyday life. People might be allowed to walk the streets freely starting on May 4. Mores stores and churches will probably reopen.

And weddings and funerals might soon again involve more than just the pastor and immediate family members. But Italy is not there yet - and Palmero still collects his bodies at the hospital in nearby Saluzzo. "The bodies are already wrapped in a shroud," he explains. "We put the body in the coffin and seal it immediately." Social distancing measures are even observed at the crematorium. Only one person is allowed inside at a time. Not catching or spreading the virus is the overriding consideration in Palmero's business. "There are no more real funerals," he laments. — AFP



REVELLO: Owner of funeral home company 'Palmero' Giampiero Palmero pulls a coffin at his company's offices in Revello, near Cuneo, northwestern Italy, during the country's lockdown aimed at curbing the spread of the COVID-19 infection. — AFP