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Lockdown eased; Harbi resists MPs' calls to end school year

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Expired visas extended till Aug 31 for free

KUWAIT: In implementation of instructions by Interior Minister Anas Al-Saleh and in view of the suspension of commercial flights in most countries due to the COVID-19 pandemic, security sources said the interior ministry will automatically extend the validity of all types of expired visit and residency visas until August 31.

The sources added that starting

from June 1, visas of visitors who had been facing problems renewing them, such as having their fingerprints registered, would be automatically renewed until Aug 31. Notably, the ministry had earlier extended the validity of such visas until May 31.

The sources stressed that students who are almost 18 and Bangladeshis and Nepalis who need to be mandatory fingerprinted to renew their visas are not included in the exemption. The ministry had started online visit visa renewals for a KD 1 fee for a few days before the service was suspended and replaced by the automatic extension. — Al-Anbaa

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: Authorities yesterday began implementing the first of a five-stage plan to return to normal life by mid-September by easing the lockdown on most areas in the country, while keeping over a million expatriates under total isolation. Barring the predominantly expat areas of Hawally, Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh, Farwaniya, Khaitan and Mahboula, which are placed under total isolation, other areas will enjoy a 12-hour easing of the curfew every day.

Authorities however said that shopping at cooperative societies and supermarkets will continue by prior booking through the same online sites. The same applies to isolated areas. The interior ministry explained that people in isolated areas can move freely within those areas but are not

allowed to leave them without a valid permit from the government.

The current phase will last for three weeks and health authorities will assess progress before moving to the next phase. The ministry of Islamic Affairs said it will start cleaning and sterilizing mosques and taking all necessary health precautions before reopening them later this week.

Meanwhile, scrapping the school year as has been repeatedly demanded by MPs has become a political issue, with MP Faisal Al-Kandari vowing to file to grill Education Minister Saud Al-Harbi for not ending the school year because of the coronavirus. Harbi said on Kuwait Television Saturday night that the final decision on the school year will be taken on July 15 after evaluating all the developments on the coronavirus crisis.

Harbi said the ministry prioritizes the safety of students and staff but also takes into account the huge negative repercussions of a hasty decision in this regard. He pointed out that ending the year and giving students marks based on their performance in the first semester would harm nearly 60,000 students, mainly those who failed to attend first semester exams for medical or other reasons and those who performed badly and were counting on the second semester to improve their scores.

The statement was strongly criticized by a number of lawmakers, who want the academic year prematurely ended over health concerns. Kandari said his grilling will center only on the minister's insistence not to end the school year, thus endangering the lives of hundreds of thousands of students.

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Aqsa mosque reopens after two months

JERUSALEM: Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa mosque compound, Islam's third holiest site, reopened yesterday after being closed for over two months because of the coronavirus pandemic. Dozens of worshippers in protective masks were let into the compound before the first prayers of the day, held in cool and windy conditions.

Chanting "God is greatest, we will protect Al-Aqsa with our soul and blood", the worshippers who gathered in front of the large wooden doors were welcomed by mosque director Omar Al-Kiswani, who thanked them for their patience. The prayers followed a fraught previous day in annexed east Jerusalem, where the compound is located.

Israeli police on Saturday shot dead a disabled Palestinian they mistakenly thought was armed, prompting furious condemnation from the Palestinians. The religious site, which houses Al-Aqsa mosque and the Dome of the Rock, had closed its doors in March as part of measures to limit the spread of COVID-19.

As part of ongoing efforts to tackle the virus, worshippers' temperatures were taken and staff distributed masks to those entering the compound. Tape inside the mosque and on the stones outside marked where people should pray at a safe distance. Israeli soldiers were stationed at the gates to the site, which has often been a flashpoint in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Muslims believe Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) ascended to heaven there, and it is Islam's third holiest site, after Makkah and Madinah.

On the first day of the Eid holiday earlier this month, scuffles had broken out between Israeli police and Palestinians as worshippers tried to break through barriers to enter the compound. The holiday marked the end of the holy month of Ramadan, during which Muslim leaders asked worshippers to pray at home.

"For me as a muezzin, when I say at the end 'pray in your homes', it breaks my heart," said Firas Al-Qazzaz last month, whose family has led prayers at Al-Aqsa for more than 500 years. Known to Muslims as the Haram al-Sharif, the site is under the custodianship of neighboring Jordan, which controlled the West Bank, including east Jerusalem, up until occupation by Israel in the Six-Day War of 1967.

With the number of COVID-19 cases declining, in recent days both Israel and the Palestinian

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JERUSALEM: Palestinians perform Fajr prayers inside the Al-Aqsa mosque compound in Jerusalem's Old City yesterday after a two-month closure. — AFP



LOS ANGELES: Demonstrators smash a police vehicle in the Fairfax district as they protest the death of George Floyd on Saturday. — AFP (See Page 8)

Curfews, clashes as race protests escalate in US

MINNEAPOLIS: Curfews were imposed on major US cities as clashes over police brutality escalated across America with demonstrators ignoring warnings from President Donald Trump that his government would stop the violent protests "cold". Minneapolis, the epicenter of the unrest, was gripped by a fifth consecutive night of violence on Saturday with police in riot gear firing tear gas and

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Astronauts head to ISS on historic SpaceX flight

CAPE CANAVERAL, Florida: Two veteran NASA astronauts were headed for the International Space Station on Saturday after Elon Musk's SpaceX became the first commercial company to launch a rocket carrying humans into orbit, ushering in a new era in space travel. SpaceX's two-stage Falcon 9 rocket with astronauts Robert Behnken and Douglas Hurley aboard blasted off flawlessly in a cloud of bright orange flames and

smoke from Florida's Kennedy Space Center for a 19-hour voyage to the space station.

"Let's light this candle," Hurley, the mission commander, told SpaceX mission control in Hawthorne, California, before liftoff at 3:22 pm (1922 GMT) from NASA's storied Launch Pad 39A. The SpaceX launch is the first of American astronauts from US soil since the space shuttle program

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CAPE CANAVERAL, Florida: US Vice President Mike Pence and US President Donald Trump watch the SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket carrying the SpaceX Crew Dragon capsule lift off from Kennedy Space Center in Florida on Saturday. — AFP

Ambulance start-up joins Mumbai battle

MUMBAI: With bodies piling up in wards and patients sharing beds, the coronavirus has crippled Mumbai's healthcare system. But an ambulance service launched by three 20-somethings is trying to do its bit. But even though the non-profit's services cost as little as a few dollars, many in the teem-

ing slums of the Indian megacity — ideal breeding grounds for the virus — cannot afford to use it.

Aditya Makkar, 20, was inspired to start HelpNow three years ago when his father suffered a cardiac arrest and was told he would have to wait 47 minutes for a government ambulance. Fortunately his family owned a car, enabling his father to receive prompt medical treatment. Many others in Mumbai, a city of 18 million where the high-rises of the super-rich soar over the shacks of the dirt poor, are not as lucky.

Together with two former classmates at the elite Indian Institute of Technology, also in their early

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MUMBAI: In this photograph taken on May 24, 2020, ambulance staff from HelpNow put on protective gear before starting a journey. — AFP