

Mind the gap: Affordable Net vital for coronavirus recovery

KUALA LUMPUR: From online schooling to working from home or video calls with family, the Internet has helped billions of people adapt and survive during the coronavirus pandemic. But as lockdowns ease and social-distancing rules remain, human rights experts say countries must now ensure all citizens – especially women, the elderly and rural communities – get access to affordable internet to avoid being left behind.

“This virus is going to be around for a while,” said Kanni Wignaraja, head of the UN Development Program for Asia-Pacific. “One of the biggest drivers of inequality today comes with who has access to technology and particularly to internet services,” she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. “That is widening the gap and COVID has just put that right at the center.”

More than 7 million people have been reported infected with the coronavirus globally, according to a Reuters tally. As authorities sought to contain infection rates during the health crisis, lockdowns and strict restrictions on movement were introduced that led to more businesses, government agencies and other support groups going digital, said Wignaraja.

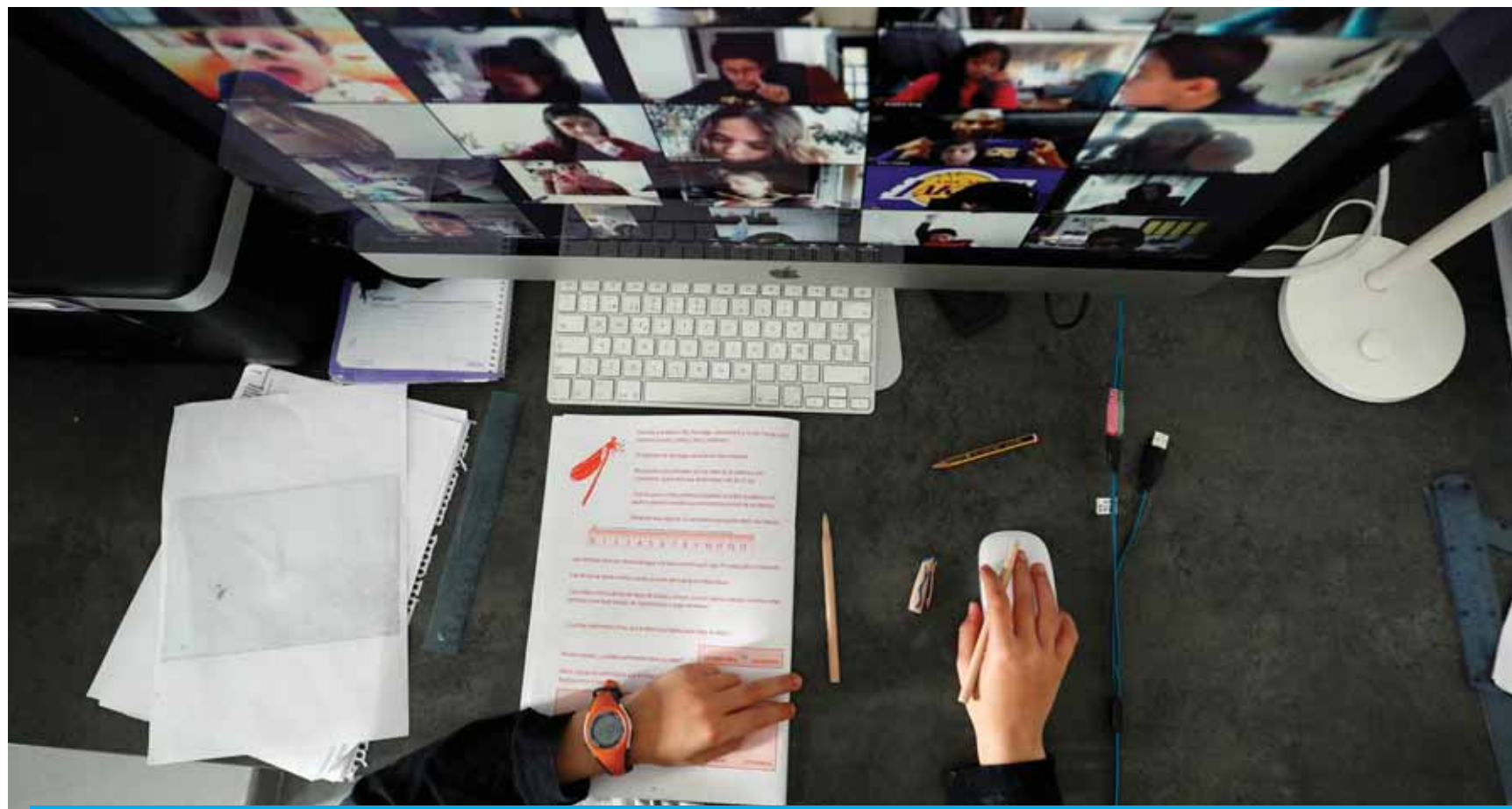
Queuing for hours to obtain a death certificate or social benefits could become a thing of the past, human rights and digital experts say, while shopping, education and even cultural events have gone digital amid coronavirus lockdowns. That makes it vital for countries to look at how they can improve affordable Internet access when rebuilding their economies and disbursing post-coronavirus benefits, they added.

“There is a lot of talk about defining the new normal in the post-Covid world and for me ‘new normal’ needs to include broadband access for all,” said Doreen Bogdan-Martin, director at the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), the UN’s Internet and telecoms agency.

Digital gap

By the end of 2018, about half of the world was connected to the internet, according to the Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI). This still left about 4 billion people offline, said Anju Mangal, Asia lead for the global body, which works with governments, business and civil society groups to promote affordable Internet policies. In the developed world, 87 percent of people are connected, compared with 47 percent in developing nations and 19 percent in the least developed countries, according to the ITU.

In addition, women are also 23 percent less likely than men to use Internet on their mobile, with the



EL MASNOU, Spain: A student takes classes online with his companion using the Zoom app at home during the coronavirus outbreak on April 2, 2020. — Reuters

gap widest in South Asia, it said. “Gender gap is a major issue,” said Fiji-based Mangal, adding that having access to the Internet and technology could help girls from rural communities get access to home schooling and the same benefits as others who live in urban areas.

Examples of technology projects that target women and girls included those that look to improve digital literacy, enable access to benefits and help with farming techniques to boost food security, she added. The ITU has set a target of connecting 75 percent of the world’s population to fast internet via cable or wireless by 2025.

Cyber crime

Some governments and telecom operators have

restricted to staff and same-day travellers.

Other measures outlined in their guidelines include the redesign of gate areas to reduce congestion, faster and smoother boarding and baggage collection procedures, and even “prohibiting queues for the washrooms” to limit passenger interaction. “The COVID-19 crisis is the biggest disruption in the history of the aviation industry. The recovery is going to be long and slow,” Albert Tjoeng, regional spokesman for IATA, told AFP.

Implementing new regulations is already proving challenging – and chaotic. While some US airlines require masks be worn in-flight, it has proven difficult to enforce this rule if passengers are defiant. In India, which resumed domestic flights last week, some cabin crew wore protective suits with masks, plastic visors and blue rubber gloves, but, according to media reports, had no idea if they were supposed to quarantine post-flight.

Mumbai airport put in place social distancing rules but these quickly fell apart when angry travellers harangued staff after flights were cancelled last-

perature structure. The second, a high-resolution imager that will provide information about the ozone; and a third, an ultraviolet spectrometer to measure oxygen and hydrogen levels from a distance of up to 43,000 km from the surface.

The three tools will allow researchers to observe the Red Planet “at all times of the day and observe all of Mars during those different times”, Amiri said. “Something we want to better understand, and that’s important for planetary dynamics overall, is the reasons for the loss of the atmosphere and if the weather system on Mars actually has an impact on loss of hydrogen and oxygen,” she said, referring to the two components that make up water.

Sharaf said that fuelling of the probe is to begin next week. It is scheduled to launch on July 15 from Japan’s Tanegashima Space Centre and return to Earth in Feb 2021, depending on many variables including the weather. “If we miss the launch opportunity, which is between mid-July and early August, then we’d have to wait for two years for another window,” Sharaf said.

But hopes are high that the mission will take place as scheduled, and not be derailed by the coronavirus pandemic. In a new sign of warming ties between Israel and Gulf Arab nations, the Jewish state Tuesday wished the UAE success with the mission. We “hope this step will contribute towards deeper cooperation between all countries in the region,” its foreign ministry’s “Israel in the Gulf” Twitter account wrote in Arabic. — AFP

ways to improve the population structure currently tilted in favor of expats. The committee will meet with representatives of the Public Authority for Manpower, Supreme Planning Council and the Central Statistics Bureau, in addition to the interior ministry to discuss draft laws submitted by MPs related to the population structure.

MPs have submitted at least two draft laws in the past few weeks calling to replace all expat employees in the government and for imposing quotas on expat communities in the country. MP Mohammad Hayef meanwhile said he submitted a draft law to appoint more Kuwaitis as judges to replace a large number of Arab judges, mostly from Egypt. The draft law sets guidelines for Kuwaitis eligible to apply to become judges.

taken steps to help more people go online during the coronavirus crisis. In Bangladesh, coronavirus contact tracing apps and helplines were made free to use, while telecom firms in other developing countries have provided free calls, texts and data to both students and customers. But to improve Internet affordability and access longer-term, governments, telecom companies and mobile operators should work together, said Mangal, adding that this would avoid silos developing that can hinder such efforts.

Public consultations when developing new policies will also help tailor solutions to communities, she said. Goals include providing smartphones, improving coverage areas and frequency of connection, increasing data allowance, ramping up download speeds and introducing laws to protect the vulnera-

minute. The most hotly debated measure in the industry has been whether to leave middle seats empty. Japan Airlines and Delta are among carriers doing so but Michael O’Leary, the boss of Irish low-cost airline Ryanair, has said the idea is “idiotic” and would stop his firm making money.

The emergence of COVID-19, which was first reported in China last year and has since infected more than seven million people worldwide, brought air travel to an almost complete halt with entire fleets grounded and mass layoffs. IATA forecasts international carriers are in line to make a combined net loss of more than \$84 billion this year. “We don’t know exactly how the trajectory of this recovery will look,” Singapore Airlines chief executive Goh Choon Phong said, after the carrier reported the first full-year loss in its 48-year history.

There are some signs of recovery as major economies ease lockdowns – with IATA pointing to a growth in flight numbers from April to May – but flying looks set to struggle to return to pre-virus levels. A

ble from cyber-crimes, said Mangal.

The ITU’s Bogdan-Martin said the coronavirus pandemic has also resulted in a “huge surge” of online criminal activity. Cyber crimes that have increased as internet and technology access has improved include online bullying and sex abuse, hacking, revenge porn and trafficking. “Bad actors have been exploiting fear and uncertainty,” she said in a statement last month.

Furthermore, as most internet service providers are private businesses, authorities must also ensure monopolies do not form and control prices, Wignaraja and others said. Where Internet coverage is not profitable – especially the “last mile” in remote or rural areas – states must step in to ensure they are reached, said Wignaraja. — Reuters

confusing patchwork of rules imposed by countries at different stages in tackling their outbreaks makes it tricky for consumers to plan holidays or visit family abroad.

Some nations are maintaining bans on travellers from hard-hit nations or requiring people to enter quarantine on arrival, typically for a 14-day period. Countries that have kept the virus in check are looking at creating “travel bubbles”, or reciprocal agreements with other places on similar outbreak curves, but these can have onerous requirements.

A “fast lane” for essential business and official travel between some parts of China and Singapore has been launched, but travellers need sponsorship and have to take a virus test before departure and on arrival. Many who previously flew frequently may simply choose not to for the time being. Fazal Bahardeen, chief executive of Singapore-based Islamic travel specialist HalalTrip, told AFP: “If I have to go through all the hassle, I might as well not travel unless I really have to.” — AFP

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Endau Analytics. While the fallout from the 2001 attacks could be used as an “indicator” of what to expect, the COVID-19 challenge was a “far more serious... global event”, he said.

The United Nations’ civil aviation agency has drawn up a set of guidelines for safe flying in the wake of the pandemic, from mandatory wearing of masks to the disinfection of areas people come in contact with. In addition, industry body the International Air Transport Association (IATA) has suggested governments collect passenger data – including health information – ahead of travel, and that access to airports be

Arab mission to Mars designed...

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“The UAE wanted to send a strong message to the Arab youth and to remind them of the past, that we used to be generators of knowledge,” he told AFP.

“People of different backgrounds and religion coexisted and shared a similar identity,” he said of the Arab world, where many countries are today wracked by sectarian conflicts and economic crises. “Put your differences aside, focus on building the region, you have a rich history and you can do much more.”

Sarah Al-Amiri, the mission’s deputy project manager, said it was imperative that the project have a long-term scientific impact. “It is not a short-lived mission, but rather one that continues throughout the years and produces valuable scientific findings – be it by researchers in the UAE or globally,” she told AFP. She said that the probe will provide a comprehensive image of the weather dynamics in Mars’ atmosphere with the use of three scientific instruments.

The first is an infrared spectrometer to measure the planet’s lower atmosphere and analyze the tem-

Joy, sacrifice as mosques reopen...

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MPs have filed draft laws calling to suspend the payment of rent for commercial uses throughout the shutdowns ordered by the government, while one bill calls for exempting commercial tenants for six months.

Meanwhile, a parliamentary committee in charge of developing human resources will hold two days of meetings with various government bodies to discuss

Tributes, calls for justice at...

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the brutality,” he said, charging: “The signals that we’re sending is that if you are in law enforcement, that the law doesn’t apply to you.” Acknowledging the presence of the parents of previous victims of police violence – including Eric Garner, Botham Jean and Michael Brown – Sharpton said they “know better than anyone else the pain” of the Floyd family.

“Until we know the price for black life is the same as the price for white life, we’re going to keep coming back to these situations over and over again,” the preacher told The Fountain of Praise Church in southern Houston. Though the occasion was solemn, the church echoed with music and words of fond remembrance for a man whose savage death galvanized a movement.

“Even in a pandemic, people are walking out in the streets not even following social distancing because you’ve touched the world,” Sharpton said. “And as we lay you to rest today, the movement won’t rest until we get justice.” Floyd died on May 25 as a white Minneapolis officer pressed a knee into his neck for almost nine minutes, his pleas of “I can’t breathe” becoming a rallying cry for protesters.

His death has come to embody fractured relations between communities of color and police in the US and beyond as tens of thousands of protesters have taken to the streets. The Fountain of Praise was the final stage in a series of ceremonies before Floyd’s coffin was conveyed by horse-drawn carriage in the early evening to his final resting place by his mother’s grave.

On the way to the Houston Memorial Gardens cemetery, the cortege passed hundreds of well-wishers who chanted Floyd’s name. “Rest in power” was scrawled in blue chalk on the road, while one held up a sign saying: “We will never forget.” Some 500 guests – all masked due to the coronavirus pandemic – were at the funeral, including actors

Channing Tatum and Jamie Foxx, filmmaker Tyler Perry, singer Ne-Yo and boxing champion Floyd Mayweather who is reportedly paying all expenses.

Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden, who has visited the family, offered words of condolence to Floyd’s children in a video message urging them to “change the world for the better” in their father’s name. “Today now is the time, the purpose, the season to listen and heal,” said Biden, who suffered his own tragedy with the deaths of a wife and two children. “Now is time for racial justice... Because when there’s justice for George Floyd we will truly be on our way to racial justice in America.”

The funeral comes after the Minneapolis authorities pledged to dismantle and rebuild the police department in the city where Floyd died during an arrest for allegedly passing a counterfeit \$20 bill. Derek Chauvin, the 44-year-old white officer who was filmed pressing his knee on the handcuffed Floyd’s neck, faces up to 40 years if convicted on charges of second-degree murder, third-degree murder and manslaughter. His bail was set on Monday at \$1 million with conditions, or \$1.25 million without.

Three other policemen involved in Floyd’s arrest are charged with aiding and abetting his murder. All four officers have been fired. The arrest was caught on chilling cellphone video played in all corners of the world over the past two weeks.

Floyd was born in North Carolina, but grew up in Houston’s predominantly African American Third Ward where he was remembered as a towering high school athlete and good-natured friend. Demonstrators have taken to the streets for two weeks of the most sweeping US protests for racial justice since the 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.

The demonstrations were marred by several nights of violence that focused attention at home and abroad on police brutality as numerous videos have emerged that allegedly show incidents of heavy-handed policing. The Democrats have introduced legislation in both chambers of Congress, that they hope will make it easier to prosecute officers for abuse, and rethink how they are recruited and trained. Some US cities have already begun to embrace reforms – starting with bans on the use of tear gas and rubber bullets. — AFP