

Local

In midst of pandemic, one team is staying far from home to help keep lights on in Kuwait

Team logged more than 7,000 work hours in less than a month

KUWAIT: For now, Abdulsattar Mohammed can't go home. The mechanical field engineer is living in a hotel room in Kuwait where, like so many people, he is sheltering in place and helping to reduce the spread of COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus that has swept the globe. In between remotely supporting colleagues on other outages — not only in Kuwait but across Africa, India and the Middle East — Mohammed spends his days praying and working out in the hallways. When he's hungry, he orders food from the hotel restaurant or takeout. And every day he gets on a video call with his wife and two sons back in the United Arab Emirates, where the oldest child is just learning how to read.

Mohammed made the choice to stay away from home. In early February, he and a group of other engineers and expert technicians from the Middle East, Asia, Europe and Africa headed to Kuwait to do regular maintenance on two power plants that GE operates in the country. They were meant to be home within six weeks. But as the COVID-19 pandemic picked up in the Middle East, they had a small window in mid-March where they all could have returned home. However, the work they had flown in to execute in Kuwait was still in progress so instead, they decided to stay to help keep the lights on in this country of 4 million.

The team is part of FieldCore, GE's field services maintenance teams that work on equipment at power plants around the world. In mid-March as Kuwait was shutting down, Ibrahim Zein, service manager for Kuwait and Qatar at FieldCore, and GE Gas Power's team of three contract performance managers (CPMs) — Abdulla Alshalabi, Mohamed Abulfetoh and Djamel Bouhali — faced a difficult decision.

The men were in a sense the "field commanders." As service manager, Zein was ultimately responsible for the FieldCore team and their activities on the ground. The CPMs are the local

experts on the ground in Kuwait, GE's primary point of contact with its customers, responsible for ensuring that customer requirements are met. They work hand in hand with FieldCore: Helping to plan activities on the ground; liaising with the power plant owners and operators; assisting with obtaining permits and visas for the movement of tools, equipment and people; and other activities so that various services can be executed safely and on time.

Should they try and get the crew out of the country and risk Kuwait being without essential electricity supplies right at the onset of the summer months when temperatures routinely exceed 110 degrees Fahrenheit (44 C) and power demand is at its peak? Or could they ask the workers to stay, isolating them far from their loved ones for who knew how long?

Opportunity to leave

So they gave the team a choice. "You have an opportunity to leave," Zein told them. All of them opted to stay and continue servicing customers alongside another group of FieldCore employees who had already been in the country prior to travel restrictions being introduced.

As the weeks went by, the team did not just execute the services they had originally planned to work on at the two power plants but also took on other plans, as well as emergency service, and work across another two sites. "We were determined to help our customers because we knew other experts couldn't fly into the country to take on these jobs," says Zein.

In less than a month, the men have logged more than 7,000 work hours. "If we did not have these people in the country, we could have up to 1,500 megawatts down, which is 10 percent to 15 percent of the power in Kuwait," Zein says. In all, GE-built technologies can generate over 40 percent of Kuwait's electricity and GE's teams help to service and maintain this equipment.

The engineers sometimes had to

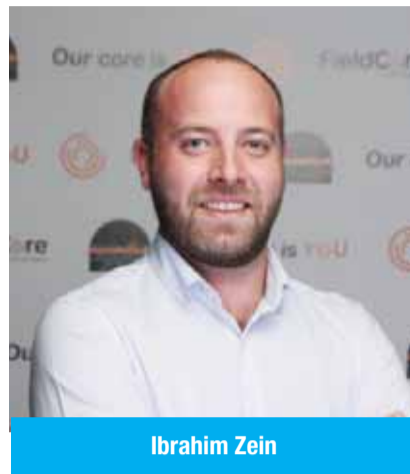
learn on the job. For example, during routine maintenance the field team would normally shut down power generation equipment such as gas or steam turbines and generators, inspect and service the equipment, update software and run diagnostic tests to ensure the plant was operating properly. Then, they'd turn the project over to a separate 3-person team of commissioning engineers, who would bring the equipment back online.

But that commissioning team couldn't make it to the plants, so the field engineers stuck in Kuwait had to do their jobs as well. Typically, one commissioning engineer would monitor the software and readouts. A second would check the turbines, the motors and the valves, calibrating them and making sure everything worked correctly. Finally, an emissions engineer would set up tools to measure the plant emissions to ensure compliance with local regulations and confirm the plant was operating as it should. Now, the commissioning work fell to the field engineers working via phone and video calls with colleagues outside Kuwait.

Although the team is now mostly confined to their hotels, they are still doing what they can, working remotely with the skeleton crews at electricity plants around Kuwait to help them monitor and repair any issues that come up.

Act of camaraderie

But it was not only on the frontline that the solidarity of team members was evident. When the Egyptian-born FieldCore engineer Mohamed Khedr was confined to his hotel room because of the lockdown, he was dismayed that he would be unable to stick to his daily exercise regime — a habit he had developed more than a decade-and-a-half ago. Even the hotel gym was a restricted area. But when his GE Gas Power colleague Abdulla Alshalabi, a resident in Kuwait, heard about Khedr's plight, he quickly arranged for a set of dumbbells to be

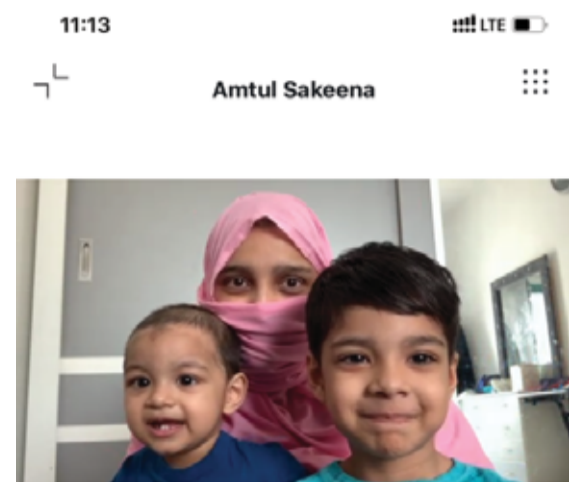


Ibrahim Zein

delivered to the hotel. This act of camaraderie allowed Khedr to keep some form of exercise routine in between video calls with his family and offering remote assistance to other sites where field teams were still engaged in outages.

Prior to the lockdown, Khedr managed eight startups since Feb 28 until his hotel confinement on March 29. During that period, he was responsible for testing and verifying valve calibrations and monitoring crucial signals to ensure the units could be started up safely within the prescribed manufacturing parameters and handed over to the customers with zero defects. Khedr explained that the "intensity of the work" was unusual. He recalled an incident where he was summoned to a site around midday to conduct a tuning. However, the job that could normally take up to 12 hours had to be completed before the 5 p.m. curfew. He handed over the unit to the customer team in 4 hours, 20 minutes after starting the job — with barely enough time to make the 30-minute journey back to his hotel.

"At this point, it's not clear what will happen next," Zein says. "We don't know when the airports will officially open. It's a difficult situation but we are extremely proud of our team members on the ground, who are more than willing to face any challenge."



Abdulsattar Mohammed talks to his family via video call.

News in brief

Random testing in two areas

KUWAIT: The Ministry of Health announced conducting random testing in Khaldiya and Adailiya during the curfew period overnight. The testing started Monday and continued yesterday from 9 pm until 1 am.

Corporate registration

KUWAIT: Kuwaiti Ministry of Interior has decided to scrap companies' appointments at the General Department of Residency due to the nationwide total curfew, but to keep its online corporate registration service. The code of e-services will be available on the ministry's website, the ministry said in a press statement. In case of failed registration, the ministry could be reached via the following website: moi.gov.kw@kesupport, it added.

Hotels handover

KUWAIT: The Finance Ministry has ended contracts with four hotels out of 20 that were used as institutional health quarantines for citizens arriving from abroad, as the required time for quarantine was completed. The Ministry of Health will hand over quarantine places gradually. The cabinet had asked the finance ministry during its meeting on March 21 to manage the health quarantines and coordinate with concerned authorities to allow the health ministry to carry out its duties in preventing the spread of COVID-19.

Curfew violations

KUWAIT: Police arrested 14 curfew violators on Monday, including nine Kuwaitis and five expats. Eight were arrested in Farwaniya governorate, three in Jahra, two in the Capital, and one in Al-Ahmadi.

Embassies coordinate expats' repatriations

By Faten Omar

KUWAIT: Kuwait's International Airport remains closed, but some repatriation flights for expats wishing to leave are still operating. People wishing to travel home are asked to check with their embassies to know what flights are available and if their country is allowing returns at the moment.

Some embassies in Kuwait are repatriating their citizens, as citizens of Egypt, India, Turkey, Syria, and others can contact their embassies for information. Meanwhile, others are allowed to book

by themselves if there is an available flight. In that case, people have to keep an eye on airlines' websites or subscribe to their email service to receive the latest updates on operating special flights from Kuwait to some destinations. Flights can sometimes be canceled in short notice, however.

The UK embassy in Kuwait announced that Qatar Airways is still offering commercial flights out of Kuwait via Doha. However, with these challenging circumstances, airlines confirm/cancel flights at very short notice, sometimes the day before. The embassy also informed that people who are leaving from Mahboula should send full details to obtain special permission for them and for a person who will pick them up by sending WhatsApp to +965 9727-1877 a day before the flight.

Meanwhile, the US Embassy also affirmed that Qatar Airways is currently operating outbound flights from Kuwait to Doha (Hamad International Airport) with connections to selected US cities.

These one-way flights are available for US citizens and US Lawful Permanent Residents (LPRs). The US embassy, on the website, notes that all other flight announcements will be sent to Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP) registrants (<https://step.state.gov/STEPMobile/Default.aspx>), posted on the Embassy website (<https://kw.usembassy.gov>) and amplified by the Embassy's social media platforms.

In the meantime, the Australian embassy also asked people who are traveling to Australia during the curfew (especially if they are resident in Mahboula or Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh), to email the Embassy on consular.kuwaitcity@dfat.gov.au.

For Jordanian citizens, the embassy in Kuwait launched a website (www.safelyhome.gov.jo) to register the names of people who wish to return, but priority is given for students, visa violators, then others. All foreigners in Kuwait should register with their embassy to stay updated on important news and information from their home government regarding repatriation and other issues.

Group arrested for fighting during 'exercise' period

By Hanan Al-Saadoun

KUWAIT: Police arrested several men who were involved in a fight in Hawally on Monday during the period designated for walking exercise within residential areas during the total curfew. They were taken to concerned authorities to face legal action. The arrest came after a video showing people fighting in a street in Kuwait went viral on social media.

Meanwhile, the interior ministry

announced that the electronic crimes fighting department suspended nine accounts on social media for broadcasting fake news and rumors, noting that charges were filed against their operators. The department said it monitors activity on social media, and detects attempts to publish rumors before taking legal action in coordination with the information ministry and concerned prosecution. It urged the public to take news from official sources only.



KUWAIT: People walk in a Salmiya neighborhood on Monday during a two-hour period allowed for exercise during total curfew. — Photo by Fouad Al-Shaikh

EPA: Vehicles' CO2 emission down in Kuwait

KUWAIT: A study of air quality, carried out by Kuwait's Environment Public Authority (EPA), had shown a considerable lowering of CO2 emission and other harmful gases from vehicles due to the partial curfew measures set counter the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) spread in the country, said an official Monday. Deputy Direct for EPA's environmental monitoring Sameera Al-Kanderi said that the air quality had improved with emissions of nitrogen oxide (NOx) and Carbon

monoxide (CO) going down by 25 and 30 percent respectively. The study — carried out by stations throughout the country — had shown that the air quality had improved recently, she indicated. In a connected COVID-19 matter, Kanderi said that the EPA would be holding a joint study with the Kuwait Institute for Scientific Research (KISR) and the Health Ministry to determine how the coronavirus spreads in closed and open environments. — KUNA

Ministry examines 53 supermarkets, pharmacies

KUWAIT: The Ministry of Commerce and Industry has completed the inspection of 53 supermarkets, commercial establishments and pharmacies to ensure the flow of purchases and food deliveries and price stability. The ministry is also currently monitoring 64 subsidised food outlets and will continue to dispatch its inspection teams around the country during the

coronavirus lockdown measures, it said in a statement yesterday. Some 284 consumer complaints were received by the ministry on its 135 hotline. The need to comply with laws and regulations amid these unprecedented circumstances was strongly underlined, and the ministry warned it would be on the lookout for those seeking to take advantage of the current situation. — KUNA

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