

Hajj, 1MDB, Van Gogh: Your Wednesday Briefing

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Highlight: Here's what you need to know.

Body

Here's what you need to know.

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Good morning.

We're covering the beginning of this year's hajj, a guilty verdict in the first of five major 1MDB trials and a protest movement that has electrified a town in Russia's Far East.

This year, a very different hajj

In any other year, Muslims undertaking a pilgrimage to Mecca would drink from a holy well and kiss the Kaaba's Black Stone as they thronged the Grand Mosque. Before they left Mecca, they would collect pebbles to ritually stone the devil.

During the coronavirus edition of the hajj, which begins today, the Black Stone is off limits. The authorities in Saudi Arabia are issuing bottled water instead of letting pilgrims drink from the source. A special package for hajjis includes sterilized pebbles to hurl at the devil and personal prayer rugs.

It's another example of a major gathering that has been drastically scaled back to ensure safety and prevent contagion during the pandemic. Across the Middle East, celebrations for Eid al-Adha, the festival that marks the end of the hajj this weekend, will likewise be toned down.

Numbers: Last year, 2.5 million Muslims went on the hajj. This year, Saudi Arabia said it would allow only 1,000 pilgrims from within the kingdom.

Here are the latest updates and maps of the pandemic.

In other developments:

- Social media platforms scrambled to halt the rapid spread of a video shared by President Trump with misinformation about hydroxychloroquine.
- The Venice Film Festival is back on for September, but with temperature checks and outdoor screening sites.

Hajj, 1MDB, Van Gogh: Your Wednesday Briefing

- China recorded 68 new virus infections on Monday, its National Health Commission said on Tuesday, including 57 in the Xinjiang region.

Malaysia's ex-prime minister found guilty in 1MDB trial

Najib Razak suffered a stunning setback when a court found him guilty on seven corruption counts and sentenced him to up to 12 years in prison. He was also fined nearly \$50 million.

The trial was the first of five related to the theft of billions from the investment fund, known as 1MDB. About \$1 billion of it ended up in Mr. Najib's personal bank accounts.

The court rejected Mr. Najib's defense that the theft was carried out without his knowledge by Jho Low, a wealthy Malaysian businessman who is accused of masterminding the crime.

Political fallout: His conviction could undermine the credibility of the current government headed by his ally, Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin, which came to power without an election and holds a bare majority in Parliament.

What's next: The appeals process is expected to take years and experts say the verdict could be overturned. Mr. Najib still faces dozens of additional charges.

Recap: The 1Malaysia Development Berhad fund, backed by Goldman Sachs, was set up to promote economic development, with Mr. Najib as chairman. But the fund went into debt and billions were diverted to offshore accounts and shell companies, according to the U.S. Justice Department.

Fake abductions scam targets Chinese in Australia

The authorities are accusing criminals of exploiting Chinese students in Australia and their families back home, taking advantage of isolation and uncertainty during the coronavirus pandemic.

On Tuesday, the police in New South Wales said there had been eight confirmed cases of "virtual kidnappings" this year, with more than \$2 million paid in ransom.

How it works: The scammers pose as Chinese Embassy officials during phone calls to lure Chinese students to hotels, telling them they will be prosecuted if they do not comply. They then send an image of the students, making it appear as if they have been kidnapped, to their parents back home and ask for ransom.

Quotable: "The victims of virtual kidnappings we have engaged are traumatized by what has occurred, believing they have placed themselves, and their loved ones, in real danger," said an Australian official.

If you have 5 minutes, this is worth it

Van Gogh's last days

A discovery in France could shed light on how Vincent van Gogh spent his final days. Wouter van der Veen, a researcher, found a clue on a postcard from 1905, above, as to the precise location where the artist painted "Tree Roots," thought to be his last piece.

"Tree Roots" was painted on a main road in Auvers-sur-Oise, north of Paris, Mr. van der Veen found. The tangled, gnarled tree roots and stumps can still be seen in the slope of a hill there today. The painting, he said, "is a farewell note in colors."

Here's what else is happening

Hong Kong: The University of Hong Kong's governing body voted Tuesday to fire Benny Tai, a legal scholar who has been a key figure in the city's pro-democracy movement. The university had faced calls from members of the pro-Beijing establishment to dismiss Mr. Tai.

Taliban cease-fire: The insurgent group said it would observe a three-day cease-fire this week during the Muslim festival of Eid al-Fitr, as President Ashraf Ghani of Afghanistan suggested long-delayed talks between his government and the Taliban could start in a week.

South Korea rocket: Seoul will be able to launch military surveillance satellites to monitor the North after loosening an arms agreement with the U.S. that limits the kind of rockets it is permitted to develop.

Iran prisoner: A British-Australian academic, Kylie Moore-Gilbert, serving a 10-year sentence for espionage, has been moved to a prison south of Tehran that is said to be riddled with coronavirus cases, according to rights activists, raising further concerns about her health.

Snapshot: Above, Valentin Kvashnikov, a construction worker in Khabarovsk and one of the leading voices in protests against President Vladimir Putin. The city in Russia's Far East has been the site of weeks of demonstrations that have electrified residents and turned them into activists overnight.

Booker Prize: Hilary Mantel's "The Mirror and the Light" — the conclusion to her Thomas Cromwell trilogy — is one of 13 novels competing for this year's Booker Prize, the British literary award. C Pam Zhang's "How Much of These Hills Is Gold," about a Chinese-American family during the Gold Rush, is also on the short list.

What we're reading: This article in The Atlantic on how the pandemic is changing work friendships. It's a bit of nostalgia for the hallway chats and occasional long lunch breaks with work friends, writes Carole Landry, from the Briefings team.

Now, a break from the news

Cook: This farro risotto with sweet corn and tomatoes doesn't require as much attention or stirring as traditional risotto and is a heartier, whole-grain alternative.

Dining: Our restaurant reviewer wrote about dining out in Melbourne, where chefs are getting creative during reopening, but dinners are getting more expensive.

Watch: Olivia de Havilland, who died on Sunday at age 104, won two Oscars and took on risky parts. Here are nine films that illustrate the dramatic chops that won her awards.

Do: Many people are now financially struggling in new and conflicting ways. But a conversation about money doesn't have to be awkward.

At Home has our full collection of ideas on what to read, cook, watch and do.

And now for the Back Story on ...

Mars is great, but there's lots more out there

China and the United Arab Emirates have recently launched missions to Mars, and the United States plans to send its fifth NASA rover, Perseverance, to the red planet on Thursday.

Scientists are cheering these missions, but many are asking why we're going back to Mars yet again. Our Science team invited Rebecca Boyle and David W. Brown, two space journalists, to discuss the state of space exploration. Here's an excerpt.

Rebecca Boyle: So we're going back to Mars. Again, with another rover. Two, perhaps, if both NASA and China's space agency succeed. Sigh.

It's not that this is disappointing. But there's a certain level of déjà vu with NASA's Perseverance mission, modeled so closely after the successful Curiosity rover in 2011. I have written a lot about the value of exploring Mars and the particularly Earthlike qualities that endear it to us. But even I can't help but wonder what's next in our quest to explore the solar system, and whether so many journeys to Mars are blocking other important science.

Hajj, 1MDB, Van Gogh: Your Wednesday Briefing

David W. Brown: There's an entire solar system waiting to be explored. Since 2001, NASA has flown eight consecutive successful missions to Mars, including five landers. Humanity now has a library of Mars data sitting on servers that no one has had a chance to study. Data collected from brief encounters by spacecraft with the moons of Jupiter, on the other hand, or the ice giants, Uranus and Neptune, have been squeezed dry.

Rebecca: Meanwhile, as planetary scientists debated how to pay for their missions, some geologists salivate for a second look at Venus, the second planet from the sun. Venus is about the same size as Earth, it's rocky, it has an atmosphere. And, it orbits the sun in a zone where temperatures are just right for liquid water — and maybe life.

We know Mars had water at some point in its past, but it's long gone. By contrast, Venus might have had oceans more recently and for longer periods, and may have been comfortably livable for billions of years.

That's it for this briefing. See you next time.

— Melina

Thank you

To Theodore Kim and Jahaan Singh for the break from the news. You can reach the team at briefing@nytimes.com.

P.S.

We're listening to "The Daily." Our latest episode is about the battle over unemployment benefits in the U.S. Congress.

Here's our Mini Crossword, and a clue: Fuel for a campfire (three letters). You can find all our puzzles [here](#).

Abrahm Lustgarten recently spoke with KGO about his Times Magazine article about climate migration.

PHOTO: Workers cleaned in front of the Kaaba at the Grand Mosque in Mecca on Monday. (PHOTOGRAPH BY Saudi Ministry Of Media, via Reuters FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

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