

## Armenia extends the state of emergency



The Armenian Government on April 13 decided to extend the state of emergency to contain the spread of the coronavirus. The restrictions will be in place until May 13. The National Assembly will now convene a special sitting by virtue of law. According to the Commandant's decision, certain types of economic activity will be allowed. All restrictions on media will be lifted. Health Minister Arsen Torosyan said that his ministry has recommended such an extension. "I think that the state of emergency is very important," he told reporters. A draft government decision to that effect leaked to the Armenian press says that a nationwide lockdown imposed on March 24 should also remain in force. It argues that the coronavirus cases in the country are continuing to increase even if the rate of new infections has slowed thanks to the serious restrictions on people's movement and the closure of many businesses. Armenian health authorities reported 45 coronavirus cases as of March 16. Their number has risen to 1039 since then. 14 people diagnosed with the highly contagious disease have died so far. The daily number of new cases recorded by the authorities dropped significantly in the course of this week. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan said on April 8 that Armenia may have already passed its peak of COVID-19 infections.

China's Xi Jinping says willing to support Armenia in the fight against COVID-19

p. 2

Armenia evacuating nationals from Turkey

p. 4

Russian military sends coronavirus aid to Armenia

p.7

Armenian brothers making COVID-19 face-visors for London hospitals

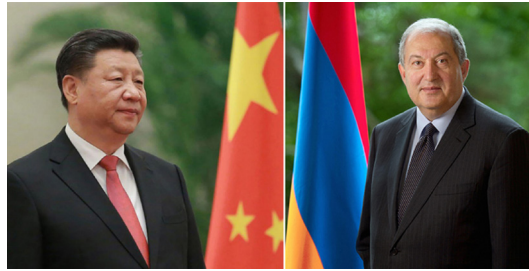
p. 5

## China's Xi Jinping says willing to support Armenia in the fight against COVID-19

In a letter to Armenian President Armen Sarkissian, China's President Xi Jinping has expressed willingness to support Armenia in its fight against the coronavirus pandemic.

"On behalf of the Government of the People's Republic of China and the people of China, I express my sincere support and solidarity with the Government of the Republic of Armenia and the people of Armenia, and wish all the patients a speedy recovery," he wrote.

"The Chinese side strongly supports Ar-



menia's efforts to fight the coronavirus and is ready to provide further assistance," President Xi Jinping said.

The message comes in response to a letter penned by the Armenian President, in which Armen Sarkissian hailed China's

progress in fighting COVID-19.

"China and Armenia enjoy friendly partnership and cooperation. Paying special attention to the development of relations between the two countries, I am ready to make joint efforts with you to strengthen cooperation in the field of healthcare of our two countries to jointly protect the lives and health of the peoples of our countries," said Xi Jinping.

President Sarkissian intends to continue discussions and dialogue with the President of the People's Republic of China.

## Armenian, Iranian FMs discuss joint efforts in fighting COVID-19



On April 8, at the initiative of the Iranian side, Foreign Minister Zohrab Mnatsakanyan had a phone conversation with

Mohammad Javad Zarif, the Foreign Minister of Iran.

The interlocutors exchanged views on the efforts aimed at fighting against COVID 19. On behalf of the Government of Iran, Minister Zarif expressed his condolences over the loss of lives as a result of the novel

coronavirus and expressed solidarity to Armenian people.

Foreign Minister Mnatsakanyan presented the efforts of the Armenian Government aimed at effectively fighting against the spread of COVID-19 and highly valued the solidarity expressed by Iran. The sides touched upon the common fight against COVID-19 and the Armenian-Iranian cooperation in the current situation.

During the phone conversation, a wide range of issues on bilateral cooperation was discussed.

## Turkey's support to Armenia in fighting COVID-19 not on the agenda – MFA

Turkey's support to Armenia in fighting the coronavirus is not on the agenda, Spokesperson for the Armenian Foreign Ministry Anna Naghdalyan has said.

The comments come after the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople said in a press release Turkey was offering assistance to Armenia in fighting the virus.

"We are familiar with the Patriarchate's press release on the phone conversation with the Turkish President. As a third country, we would refrain from commenting on official information. In any case, there is no



such issue on the agenda," Naghdalyan said in comments to Armenpress.

She said the return of Armenian citizens from Istanbul has been organised in agreement with the Turkish and Georgian au-

thorities.

"Armenia is taking all measures to organize the return of its nationals, and preference will be given to those in hardest-hit regions," the Spokesperson noted.

The Foreign Ministry is financing the transportation of about 70 citizens through the Georgian territory. All citizens will be subject to 14-day quarantine upon arrival.

During the phone conversation, a wide range of issues on bilateral cooperation was discussed.

## Health Minister downplays slower spread of coronavirus in Armenia

Health Minister Arsen Torosyan on April 10 sounded a note of caution over a decreased rate of new coronavirus cases in Armenia, saying that the epidemic is not yet ending and requires continued “harsh” measures by the authorities.

According to the Armenian Ministry of Health, the total number of coronavirus cases rose by less than 2 percent, to 937, in the past day. The ministry also reported two more fatalities which raised the country’s coronavirus death toll to 12.

The official figure marked the fifth consecutive day of a relatively slow spread of the virus in the country. The daily number of COVID-19 infections rose by over 10 percent earlier in April and in late March.

“We cannot reckon that the spread is stopping or dying down by 100 percent,” said Torosyan. “Why? Because while we previously had 50 cases [a day,] they typically originated from a single source: for example, 50 employees of a large manufacturing plant. Now we are having 16, 20 or 30 cases a day but from 10 or 20 different sources.”

This is making it harder for the authorities to identify and isolate people who have been in contact with known COVID-19 patients, he told members of an Armenian parliament committee on health-care and social affairs.

“We must take these [epidemiological] actions as long as we can,” Torosyan went on. “When we become exhausted ... we will have to give up some of these actions and keep only testing and treatment and stop doing isolations because the spread will be very serious and they won’t make sense.”

The Armenian government declared a state of emergency on March 16 and went on to issue stay-at-home orders and close non-essential businesses in an effort to contain the epidemic. It has to decide by Monday whether to extend the one-month emergency rule and the resulting lockdown.

Torosyan signaled support for such an extension, saying that the



restrictions on people’s movement have already saved hundreds of lives.

“All that is due to our measures taken in the last two months,” he said, pointing to Armenia’s small death toll. “They are very harsh for the economy, people’s psyche and the workload of medical personnel, but these are the results we have at the moment.”

“Our task is to move forward while keeping the number of deaths and the burden on hospitals low,” added the minister. “We now feel a bit more confident in terms of the number of hospital beds and lung ventilation devices at our disposal.”

Armenia imported 120 such ventilators, 60,000 coronavirus test kits, 340,000 medical masks, 100,000 pieces of protective medical clothing as well as medication from China earlier this week. The medical supplies were purchased by the Armenian government or donated by Chinese authorities and private benefactors from the two countries.

Deputy Prime Minister Tigran Avinyan said on Friday that Armenia will receive another 100,000 test kits “in the coming days.” He reaffirmed government plans to significantly expand COVID-19 testing.

## Armenia to gradually open up businesses

Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan announced that certain types of businesses will be opened up and allowed to carry on their operations from April 13th.

“Agriculture, forestry, fishery, mining, electricity, gas, steam air conditioning supply, water supply, waste management and reprocessing, wastewater, transportation and warehouse operations, financial and insurance operations, public administration protection and mandatory social insurance sector, healthcare and social servicing sector of the population and the



operations of foreign organizations will be entirely allowed. We have also decided to allow from April 13th the outdoor construction and tobacco industry,” he said.

Starting April 20th, other business areas

such as clothing production, textile industry, household stores, scientific studies and processing sectors will be opened up.

“We understand that people must work and soon we will have a detailed consultation with our businessmen in the textile industry to show them how to organize the manufacturing maximally safe,” Pashinyan said.

Earlier Pashinyan said that the government will extend the coronavirus state of emergency for another 30 days starting April 14th.

## Armenia evacuating nationals from Turkey

Armenia's government is evacuating at least 70 Armenian citizens from coronavirus-hit Turkey in coordination with Turkish and Georgian authorities, the Foreign Ministry in Yerevan said on April 9.

Three buses carrying them left Istanbul on Wednesday morning and were due to reach Armenia via Georgia early on Friday.

"The transportation was agreed with relevant Turkish and Georgian authorities whose assistance is appreciated," the Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, Anna Naghdalyan, said in written comments to the Armenpress news agency.

Naghdalyan said that just like Armenians returning from other countries, all of the evacuees will be placed in a two-week quarantine on their arrival in Armenia.

One of them, Gagik Musheghyan, confirmed that the Armenian government paid for the bus service.

"The Armenian authorities have helped



us a lot," Musheghyan told RFE/RL's Armenian service by phone. "They've paid our bus fares; they've covered all our expenses."

"The buses will pass through a transit corridor in Georgia and enter Armenia through the Bagratashen crossing," he said.

It was not clear whether more Armenians living and working in Turkey will be repatriated in the coming days. According to Naghdalyan, about 100 of them have so far contacted Armenia's Foreign Ministry for the purpose of their possible evacuation.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip reportedly expressed readiness to assist in the

repatriation of Armenian citizens when he spoke to the spiritual leader of Turkey's ethnic Armenian community, Patriarch Sahak Mashalyan, on Wednesday.

According to the Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul, Erdogan also said that Ankara is ready to provide Yerevan with medicines that could be used for treating coronavirus.

Commenting on the reported offer, Naghdalyan said: "As a third party, we will refrain from commenting on unofficial information. In any case, such information is not on our agenda."

The Turkish authorities have reported more than 38,000 coronavirus cases and 812 deaths resulting from them so far.

Armenia and Turkey do not have diplomatic relations. Successive Turkish governments have kept the border between the two neighboring states closed because of the unresolved conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh.

## Armenian President sends message to Boris Johnson

Armenian President Armen Sarkissian has sent a letter to UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who was admitted into intensive care at a hospital on Monday after his condition worsened.

President Sarkissian wished him health, strength and speedy recovery.

In a statement on Tuesday, a Downing Street spokesman said: "The prime minister has been stable overnight and remains in good spirits. He is receiving standard oxygen treatment and is breathing without any other assistance."

"He has not required mechanical ventilation or non-invasive respiratory support," he added.

Mr Johnson does not have pneumonia, Downing Street added.



## IDBank offers Online Rocket Loan

IDBank has launched the service “Rocket Loan”, which will give you an opportunity to get up to 5 million AMD loan, with the speed of a rocket, without leaving home. The service is available as through ID-Banking.am online platform, as through Idram application.

Any moment, just a few simple steps from any place are needed and the loan amount will be on your account; there are no hidden commission fees, the loan amount can be transferred to any other account or card.

Head of Marketing department of ID-Bank, Tatevik Hovhannisyan, noted that taking into consideration the importance of the digital tools and products at present



conditions, the Bank has replenished its already existing digital toolset with this proposal.

“Fortunately, we offer our clients a complete range of remote services, with an opportunity to get more than 250 services, from making payments to getting online loans through IDBanking.am online platform and the Idram app. “One of

the advantages of “Rocket Loan” is that even without being a client of the Bank, with the help of Idram, in the process of submitting a loan application, you can pass a full remote identification and receive the loan without having to visit the Bank. Directly from the Idram app, customers can make payments for utilities, for various services, online and offline remote payments, QR and NFC payments for products and services in stores,” said Tatevik Hovhannisyan.

“If you don’t have Idram app yet, then download it from the App Store or Google Play and take advantage of the complete range of remote services.

The Bank is controlled by the CBA”, reads the statement issued by the Bank.

## Armenian brothers making COVID-19 face-visors for London hospitals

An A-level student and two former pupils have turned their school into a factory to produce protective equipment to help the NHS during the COVID-19 crisis, Sky News reports.

The trio are using 3D printers from their classroom to make face-visors for A&E workers and other health staff.

They are providing the equipment for free and using crowd-funding to pay for the raw materials and delivery costs with orders coming in thick and fast.

George Dzavaryan, 22, technical director at Augment Bionics and former pupil at Latymer Upper School in Hammersmith, west London, had the idea when he realized there was a shortage of protective equipment,



and the capability to make it on 3D printers at his old school.

He recruited his brother Alex, who is an A-level student at the City of London

School.

They were joined by another former pupil from Latymer Upper School, Finlay White, 19, an engineering student at Newcastle University, who answered an advert on social media.

They started work on Monday and have already created and delivered 90 visors to a hospital in Wales and have orders for 500 units from GP surgeries and hos-

pitals in London, Liverpool and parts of Scotland.

## The EU will provide overall €92 million to Armenia to support immediate and short-term needs

The European Union has pledged to nearly double its promised financial assistance to Armenia aimed at helping the country tackle the coronavirus epidemic and its severe socioeconomic consequences.

The EU said last week that its aid package will be worth 51 million euros (\$55 million).

The EU Delegation in Yerevan announced late on Wednesday that the 27-nation bloc has decided to increase the assistance to 92 million euros after “further restructuring” of ongoing projects in Armenia financed by it.

“The funds will be directed towards sup-



plying medical devices and equipment, training for medical and laboratory staff, support to [small and medium-sized enterprises] and business community, as well as social and humanitarian assistance to those affected by the coronavirus outbreak,” it said in a statement.

The statement added that they will be part of the EU’s 20 billion-euro aid program for “partner countries” around the world hit hard by the disease.

The Delegation specified on its Facebook on April 2 that the EU will spend 30 million euros on supporting Armenian businesses by improving their “access to cheap loans, working capital and guarantees.” It also promised to deliver “humanitarian aid packages” to over 3,000 poor families living in three Armenian provinces.

The EU announcements mark the largest coronavirus-related aid allocation secured by Yerevan so far.

## World Bank forecasts 1.7 GDP growth in Armenia in 2020

Armenia’s economy performed strongly in 2019. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and declining commodity prices lowered the 2020 GDP growth projection sharply (to 1.7 percent), provided a recovery starts in mid-summer, the World Bank says in a new report.

“Recent developments Armenia’s economy expanded strongly in 2019, with real GDP growth reaching 7.6 percent, the third consecutive year of robust expansion. Growth was driven by private consumption, with investment making a modest contribution. Exports grew by 10 percent year on year but were offset by an acceler-



ation in import spending to meet growing domestic demand,” the World Bank said.

The Bank says the 2020 outlook has been strongly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and the slump in commodity prices. Under the baseline scenario, which envisaging the start of a gradual recovery in the third quarter of 2020, GDP growth in

2020 is expected to moderate to 1.7 percent, one-quarter of the average growth rate recorded over the past three years due to lower exports private domestic demand.

The external deficit will remain wide as external demand scales back and remittance inflows drop sharply due a weaker Russian economy and a depreciated ruble. This could put pressure on the exchange rate. In the first half of March 2020, the dram lost more than 2 percent of its value against the U.S. dollar. Central bank reserves and a precautionary arrangement with the IMF provide some buffers, but policies may need adjustment in case of stronger depreciation pressures.

## A large number of medical supplies brought to Armenia from China

A large number of medical supplies have brought to Armenia from China.

The supplies have been purchased on state funds of the Republic of Armenia or been donated by China’s authorities and by Armenian and Chinese philanthropists.

The cargo includes 120 lung ventilation devices, two oxygen supply stations, 60 000 COVID-19 test kits, 280 000 protective masks, 20 000 protective glasses, 100 000 protective garments, as well as medicines.

“May our Friendship be higher than Mount Ararat and longer than Yangtze River,” reads a note on some of the parcels.



The budget will provide some fiscal stimulus, with the fiscal deficit forecast to widen to about 4.7 percent of GDP, including a 2.2 percent of GDP fiscal stimulus package as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. With government debt at near 50 percent of GDP, the escape clause of the fiscal rule may need to be invoked. GDP growth is forecast to recover over the medium term, to around 4.5 percent in 2021–22, supported by stabilizing external conditions and catch-up of delayed activities. Given historical growth elasticity, the poverty rate is expected to return to a declining path.

## Aznavour Foundation contributes to fight against COVID-19

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The Aznavour Foundation has announced joining the fight against the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The Foundation issued a statement, which says: “The COVID-19 outbreak in the beginning of 2020 has already affected more than one million people in every corner of the world. It is a historic disaster that disrupted every aspect of our lives, including health care systems, education, tourism,

and many others”. “Today, all countries are facing challenges in the field of healthcare. However, we are certain that together we can overcome this disease by being more united, more caring and more responsible. Many years ago, Charles Aznavour stood by Armenia

and its people in a difficult time and commenced the humanitarian activities. Pursuant to Charles Aznavour’s values, the Aznavour Foundation joins the worldwide fight against COVID-19”, highlighted Nicolas Aznavour, Co-founder and Chairman of Board of the Aznavour Foundation. “In close cooperation with Ministry of Health of the Republic of Armenia, the

Aznavour Foundation has enabled the purchase of more than 5’000 N95 masks and 1’000 protective jumpsuits for the doctors and nurses, as well as the delivery of more than 7’000 liters of disinfectant to medical care facilities, which will suffice for the 2 months needs and thus create a safer environment for specialists who have been working with exceptional dedication and altruism for months, saving many lives. The Aznavour Foundation expresses its gratitude to all health personnel and volunteers who risk their lives to save others and will allow us to overcome this disease. This initiative of the Aznavour Foundation was made possible with the generous support of the Foundations “Armenia” and “Philippossian et Pilossian” from Switzerland, Armen Grishkyan and other donors who wished to remain anonymous. Please follow the instructions in your countries to keep safe and save lives!” the statement said.

## Russian military sends coronavirus aid to Armenia

The Russian military has sent a team of medics and special equipment to Armenia to help it detect and prevent coronavirus cases among Armenian and Russian military personnel serving in the country. Two Russian military transport planes delivered the assistance to Yerevan on Tuesday night. According to the Armenian Defense Ministry, it includes Russian army specialists in virology and epidemics, a coronavirus testing lab and a sample collection system for COVID-19 tests.



In a statement, the ministry said the assistance was provided in line with an agreement reached by Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu and his Armenian counterpart Davit Tonoyan. It will “substantially enhance the effectiveness of anti-epidemic measures” taken

at the Armenian army units and the Russian military base in Armenia, added the statement. “It’s a mobile team equipped with an epidemiological laboratory and it will be working together with our sanitary epidemiological service,” Tigran Avetisian, a high-ranking Armenian army medic, told the Defense Ministry’s Zinuzh TV program. Avetisian spoke as the equipment was unloaded from the Russian planes at a Yerevan

airport. He said the mobile lab will be able to process up to 100 coronavirus tests a day with secretion samples to be collected at all military bases in the country. In Avetisian’s words, Russian brigades of army medics dispatched to Italy and Serbia earlier are using the same equipment. The Armenian military has so far confirmed six coronavirus cases within its ranks. It said that the infected and hospitalized soldiers served in a noncombat army unit. The Russian base in Armenia has reported no such cases among its 5,000 or so troops. Russia and Armenia have close military ties cemented by bilateral agreements and their membership in the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization.

## “We must be ready to take advantage of such economic opportunities as may arise in the post-crisis period” - PM Pashinyan attends Eurasian Intergovernmental Council videoconference

Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan on April 10 attended a videoconference session of the Eurasian Intergovernmental Council.

The meeting was attended by RF Premier Mikhail Mishustin, Prime Minister of the Republic of Belarus Sergey Rumas, Prime Minister of the Republic of Kazakhstan Askar Mamin, Prime Minister of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan Muhammedkaly Abylgaziev, and Eurasian Economic Commission Board Chairman Mikhail Myasnikov.

Addressing the videoconference, the Armenian Prime Minister noted that despite the emergency, everything has to be done to ensure the Organization's smooth operations. In this regard, Nikol Pashinyan welcomed the holding of meetings in this format at all levels and shared information with EAEU partners on the situation with Covid-19 pandemic in Armenia.

“First, I must say that the situation is under control in the country. A state of emergency has been imposed since March 16, and a strict quarantine - March 24. Like almost all those nations that were hit by the ongoing pandemic, we have imposed severe restrictions on air and land communications.

As of yesterday, we had 937 cases of infection, 149 recovered patients, and unfortunately, 11 deaths. In the vast majority of infections, the disease proceeds in quite a mild form, even asymptomatic. But we are not relaxing. We intend to intensify measures to combat the pandemic specifically by increasing the number of testing.

In the fight against the pandemic, we are working with our key international partners. And I would like to take this opportunity to thank my Russian colleagues for prompt response and effective cooperation. In this regard, I would like to note that Armenia is ready to provide support and as-



sistance to its EAEU partners as much as possible. I do believe that we are bound by duty to coordinate our efforts in the fight against pandemic.

Second, I wish to inform you that the Government of Armenia recently adopted a package of 10 measures to mitigate the socio-economic impact of the pandemic for both the population and businesses. In particular, we earmarked more than USD 50 million for the needs of the most vulnerable segments of the population, and the same amount to support the private sector. The Armenian government is also taking measures to stimulate the economy and curb crisis phenomena, the occurrence of which is no longer called into question.

Yes, unfortunately we are directly on the verge of a recession. Apparently, this will no longer be possible to avoid. Moreover, no one knows what the scenario of this crisis will be. How long will the pandemic last? Will it have relapses and repercussions in the future? How deep will the crisis be, and what will be the behavior of the global economy in these conditions?

We believe that the present unprecedented conditions first of all oblige us to ensure uninterrupted functioning of the free trade regime within the EAEU. Restricting the movement of goods and services within the EAEU is unacceptable even amid the pandemic.

Secondly, it is crucial to ensure the smooth running of freight. Uninterrupted

freight traffic with the EAEU is of paramount importance to Armenia. The Russian-Georgian border in this regard is of vital importance. In this regard, I would like to thank for the support provided by the Government of the Russian Federation. Thank you, Mikhail Vladimirovich.

Finally, as we can see it, it is necessary to speed up the adoption of measures to significantly increase the share of payments in national currencies in trade within the EAEU.

I am more than convinced that we must strengthen our Union, even in a pandemic and in the face of serious challenges of an imminent recession. We must prove the viability of our organization, its viability in times of crisis and be prepared to take advantage of all those economic opportunities that may arise in the post-crisis period.

In that regard, I would like to note that we fully support the Secretary-submitted joint statement by the Eurasian Supreme Council members. It goes in tune with our vision of challenges to cooperation stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic. This is perhaps the range of issues that I wanted to share with you.

To conclude my speech on an optimistic note, I would like to once again express Armenia's readiness to host the next meeting of the Intergovernmental Council this fall. We hope that the pandemic will have been overcome by this time. Thank you.”

The meeting participants went on to discuss measures to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus in the territory of the Eurasian Economic Union, economic development in the current situation, as well as joint steps to deal with existing problems. The participants agreed to follow up the discussion in the nearest future in the same format. In the meantime, the deputy prime ministers and ministers will continue to work on the joint agenda.



## Armenian Telecom Firm's CEO, Employees 'Quit in Protest'

(RFE/RL – Yerevan) - The chief executive and hundreds of other employees of a leading Armenian telecommunication company have reportedly tendered their resignations in protest against its majority shareholders' plans to buy a rival firm.

The company, Ucom, owns one of

Armenia's three mobile phone networks and is also the country's largest Internet service provider. It announced late last year plans to purchase the Armenian subsidiary of VEON, an Amsterdam-based operator partly controlled by a Russian tycoon.

VEON Armenia too provides mobile and fixed-line telephony and Internet services. Its Beeline wireless network is the oldest in the country.

VEON and Ucom appeared to have agreed the terms of the deal in December and have since been awaiting its approval by Armenia's government as well as utility and anti-trust regulators. The authorities are understood to be looking into the proposed merger's impact on competition in the domestic telecom sector.

A Ucom employee who asked not to be identified told RFE/RL's Armenian service that the company's executive director, Hayk Yesayan, resigned after it emerged that Ucom will be run by Beeline's current Russian chief executive, Andrey Pyatakhin, if the deal goes through. At least 350 other Ucom employees also decided to quit in protest, claimed the source.

According to the source, Yesayan and his brother Aleksandr oppose Beeline's take-



over also because it would dilute their 6 percent stake in Ucom.

Ucom, which employs around 1,800 people, did not comment on this information as of Friday evening. Yesayan also did not make any public statements.

A spokeswoman for Beeline, Nara Nazarian, said Pyatakhin is "continuing to occupy his post and not planning to leave it." "The deal [with Ucom] is still under discussion and we are not commenting on it," she told RFE/RL's Armenian service.

Asked whether Pyatakhin indeed wants to manage Ucom if Beeline's takeover is cleared by the Armenian authorities, Nazarian said: "Such questions should be put to Ucom's shareholders."

Ucom is controlled by the extended family of Gagik Khachatryan, a controversial former Armenian finance minister who was arrested last August on corruption charges denied by him. Khachatryan's two sons and a nephew own a combined 77 percent of its stock.

Late last month, the three men's assets were frozen as part of the continuing criminal investigation into Khachatryan. The ex-minister's lawyers condemned the investigators' decision as illegal.

Meanwhile, Armenia's Ministry of High-Tech Industry expressed concern about

the controversy. In a statement, it urged the telecom operators and their workers to "display responsibility" and act in conformity with a coronavirus-related state of emergency. As part of the emergency rule declared last month, the government banned all strikes in the country.

The ministry also stressed that it is continuing to weigh up the proposed deal between Ucom and VEON and has not agreed to it yet.

A spokeswoman for Armenia's Public Services Regulatory Commission likewise said: "The deal has not been concluded and is still being examined."

Ucom's acquisition of VEON Armenia also needs to be approved by another regulatory body, the State Commission for the Protection of Economic Competition.

Ucom's mobile phone network was built and launched by the French telecom giant Orange in 2009. The Armenian company bought it from Orange for an undisclosed amount in 2015 after growing rapidly and becoming the country's leading Internet and cable TV service provider. The Yesayan brothers are widely credited with turning Ucom into one of Armenia's most successful businesses.

For its part, VEON paid \$376 million to buy its Armenian phone networks from a Greek firm in 2006. The company was headquartered in Moscow and known as VimpelCom at the time. Russian billionaire Mikhail Fridman's LetterOne fund remains VEON's largest shareholder.

## Yervant Zorian: Turn each day into a journey with Armenian Virtual College “Learning Zone”

The COVID-19 pandemic has seriously transformed a number of sectors of daily activities, however, each challenge is also first of all an opportunity. ARMENPRESS had an exclusive interview with Dr. Yervant Zorian, Chief Architect and Fellow at Synopsys, President of Synopsys Armenia, the founder of the Armenian Virtual College about remote learning, personal development and the changed reality.



Dr. Zorian, how did you come up with such an interesting and useful idea of creating the AVC Learning Zone?

The “Learning Zone” is a new offering by AGBU Armenian Virtual College (AVC) designed to turn each day into a journey of learning, discovering and making friends, while staying home. The idea appeared naturally once the government of Armenia and other countries announced school closures and the shelter in place mode. We thought that it should be our responsibility to reuse our valuable resources in a new format to allow online education and collaboration that would keep people happy and busy while staying home.

Earlier in March, AGBU AVC was invited to participate in working group discussions initiated by the Armenian Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport. As an educational institution with over 10 years of experience in online education, AVC immediately took the action to redeploy AVC’s unique capabilities to meet the immediate needs of our Armenian communities during this global covid19 pandemic. So, we launched the AVC Learning Zone initiative on March 26, free for all participants.

With a primary goal of encouraging self-education during this crisis and allow-

ing discoveries in a way that is actually exciting and fun, the Learning Zone offers daily themes covering interesting aspects of Armenian heritage and identity, which includes Armenian culture, language, history, religion, architecture, cuisine, and chess. These daily topics are mostly derived from AVC’s interactive eBooks, multimedia courses and virtual tours, and are made available in seven languages: Eastern and Western Armenian, English, French, Russian, Spanish and Turkish. The Learning Zone also offers opportunities to collaborate among the participants, through interactive daily meetup sessions, forums, group projects, and other activities to create virtual social communication among participants worldwide. It’s noteworthy that the Learning Zone was publicly endorsed by the Armenian Minister of Education Arayik Harutyunyan and supported by the Diaspora communities and prominent people of Armenian descent around the globe.

Dr. Zorian, a few days ago the AVC Learning Zone hosted a masterclass with the Armenian Chess Champion of 2017 Hovhannes Gabuzyan. What made that event so special? What were the advantages of the online masterclass?

Indeed, as the meetup session for yesterday’s daily theme on chess, AVC Learning Zone in cooperation with the Armenian Chess Federation hosted an online master-

class with the Armenian Chess Champion of 2017 Grandmaster Hovhannes Gabuzyan, as the Chess is a key element of our Armenian heritage, therefore we decided to pay a special tribute to it.

What was special about the online event is that it allowed anyone interested in chess to join a free online class via Zoom with a professional chess player who could answer all the questions in real-time. It’s important to note that the masterclass was held in multiple instruction languages therefore it was available for a wide audience. We were pleased to see a great interest in chess among the AVC Learning Zone, especially the young generation. Given the high demand for chess classes, AVC plans to offer new online chess sessions with Armenian champions.

Dr. Zorian, could you please tell us how to register and attend these sessions?

Registering at the AVC Learning Zone is very easy, you simply visit our website [www.avc-agbu.org](http://www.avc-agbu.org), choose your language and sign up, of course, free of charge. In case you need further instructions, see our video guides posted on our web site, social media pages, Facebook, YouTube, etc., or just contact our IT help.

AVC Learning Zone has been functioning for two weeks already. How would you evaluate its progress?

Ever since its launch, the AVC Learning Zone is becoming more popular day over day. We are happy to witness very positive interactions. It’s so overwhelming seeing how the public benefits from using the Learning Zone, which is a product of combining the advantages of multimedia digital technologies and interactive collaboration. In addition, the enrollment to our regular

class with the Armenian Chess Champion of 2017 Grandmaster Hovhannes Gabuzyan, as the Chess is a key element of our Armenian heritage, therefore we decided to pay a special tribute to it.

page 10 

quarterly courses, I mean the current AVC Spring Term, has attracted three times more students than our average. Also, it is worth mentioning that AGBU offers several other digital educational resources, including learning applications for children, concise web talks on a variety of topics, and most importantly the Atlas platform, which contains a wide range of curated digital educational resources from a variety of providers.

Dr. Zorian, you perfectly combine the roles of a Fellow and Chief Architect at the #1EDA company Synopsys and the President of Synopsys Armenia. At the same time, you exemplify the devoted Armenian patriot who initiates and puts into action numerous projects that contribute to the prosperity of Armenian and preservation of the Armenian identity... How do you manage to do that?

That's a difficult question to answer (smiling). But I will try to formulate it in a simple way - I do love what I do. On the one hand, Science and engineering are my passion, and as a fellow and chief architect at Synopsys, I enjoy working with my US and Armenia teams to bring into market new innovative products that help make our surrounding smarter, safer and more secure. As the President of Synopsys Armenia, I am responsible for driving R&D activities in Armenia that support Synopsys' strategy to maintain its leadership in microelectron-

ics. On the other hand, it gives me pleasure to contribute to the prosperity of Armenia, via supporting the IT industry and pushing the technological innovation in Armenia to the next level. And this objective is quite accomplishable by cooperating with academia, government, and the business community.

The rest of my other initiatives are also meant to serve my nation by boosting the Armenian identity in Diaspora and strengthening the prosperity of the homeland, which are the precisely the objectives of AGBU – with this, I just continue my family's tradition to perform my responsibilities through this dedicated global organization.

I think every Armenian around the globe should do his/her best, and we can only do so by staying connected and merging our efforts and resources. In order to keep Armenians connected, last fall together with Serj Tankian, Eric Esrailian and Alexis Ohanian, we co-founded a new pan-Armenian platform called HyeConnect.

That same year during the visit of the Prime Minister to Silicon Valley, I was very pleased to sign an agreement on behalf of AGBU Silicon Valley with the Minister of HighTech Industry, launching the "Armenian Virtual Bridge" program to proactively support the Armenian IT startups by providing them incubation and acceleration

periods in Silicon Valley. This new partnership between AGBU and the Armenian government will formalize, support and expand what we have been already doing as AGBU Silicon Valley for many years.

In 2019, we also launched an Armenian branch of IEEE Computer Society. IEEE is the world's largest technical professional organization for the advancement of technology. As an organization that fosters technological innovation and excellence, it gives a great opportunity for Armenian professionals to be integrated into the worldwide community and help to better contribute to the advancement of the high tech industry of Armenia, as well as raising its visibility on a global scale.

Beyond the abovementioned achievements, is there any dream, which for some reason you couldn't fulfill or haven't fulfilled yet?

I believe that education is the means to prosperity. I am dreaming of a day when every school in Armenia including rural villages will be fully equipped with state-of-the-art interactive and immersive online learning solutions, of course with their corresponding infrastructure, so our kids will have access to first-class education and thus allow the best chances of prosperity as a nation.

Interview by Gayane Markosyan

## No mass events on Armenian Genocide Commemoration Day

No mass events will be held on April 24, the Day of Commemoration of the Armenian Genocide victims, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan said through Facebook Live.

He said the same applies to the Day of Liberation of Shushi and the Victory in World War Second celebrated on May 8 and 9.

"It's obvious that if we allow those events



to be organized as usual, we'll have an uncontrollable outbreak of the epidemic,"

Pashinyan said.

Only "protocol events" featuring some officials will be allowed, the Prime Minister added.

The Government is expected to convene a sitting early next week to adopt a decision on extending the state of emergency for at least a month.

## Maragha massacre a crime against humanity with no statute of limitations – Artrtsakh MFA

The massacre in Maragha is an unprecedented war crime committed by the Republic of Azerbaijan, on the basis of hatred against Armenians aimed at the annihilation of the Armenian population, the Artsakh Foreign Ministry said in a statement on the 28th anniversary of the massacre of civilians of the Armenian settlement of Maragha.

“On April 10, 1992, after several hours of shelling, the Azerbaijani armed units invaded Maragha. Prior to this, a significant part of the population was evacuated, but the people who remained in the village, were subjected to inhuman torture and massacre by the Azerbaijani servicemen. The self-defense forces of Artsakh managed to liberate Maragha, but two weeks later, the Azerbaijani troops attacked the settlement again and committed new crimes against the civilians who had returned to bury their relatives,” the Ministry said.

Maragha was captured by the Azerbaijani armed forces and to this day is under the occupation of Azerbaijan. According to various data, including the reports of the human rights organizations Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, as a result of the war crimes committed by the Azerbaijani armed forces in Maragha over 50 civilians, including 30 women, were brutally killed. About 50 more people, including 29 women and 9 children, were taken captive, and the fate of 19 civilians



is still unknown.

“As testified by Member and former Vice Speaker of the House of Lords of Great Britain, human rights activist Baroness Caroline Cox, who visited the village with representatives of the organization Christian Solidarity Worldwide immediately after the tragedy, the bodies of the brutally murdered residents of Maragha were dismembered, mutilated, and burned. Lady Cox called Maragha “contemporary Golgotha many times over”.

“The massacre of Armenians of Maragha became another manifestation of the consistent policy of ethnic cleansing carried out by the Azerbaijani authorities against the Armenian people, first in Sumgait, Baku and other settlements of Azerbaijan in 1988-1990, and later in Northern Artsakh. The fact that commander of the Azerbaijani armed units Taghiyev Shahin Taliboglu, who had committed the massa-

cre in Maragha, was awarded the title of national hero of Azerbaijan testifies that the responsibility for this crime lies entirely with the Azerbaijani authorities,” the statement reads.

“The impunity of the crimes committed by Azerbaijan against Armenians and the lack of an adequate political and legal assessment by the international community created favorable conditions for rooting an atmosphere of hatred towards Armenians and all Armenian at the state level in Azerbaijan. 24 years later, in April 2016, during the aggression unleashed against Artsakh, Azerbaijan attempted to use the same methods to carry out new genocidal acts in Artsakh that were prevented by the decisive actions of the Defense Army of the Republic of Artsakh,” the Ministry said.

It noted that “the massacres of civilians in Maragha are a crime against humanity with no statute of limitations, and they must be condemned by the international community, and their organizers and executors must be justly punished.”

“Today we bow our heads in commemoration of the victims of the massacre in Maragha and assure that the authorities of the Republic of Artsakh will take all measures to guarantee the inalienable right of the people of Artsakh to live freely and safely in its homeland,” the statement reads.

## Ani stands as a powerful reminder of Armenia’s losses and its astonishing endurance – National Geographic

The capital of medieval Armenia, the city of Ani was a thriving center of trade and faith, survived by its haunting ruins, the National Geographic writes.

“East of the Turkish city of Kars lies a complex of lonely medieval churches. Octagonal towers, crumbling walls, and fallen columns lay scattered across vast grasslands. In the gorge that drops away to the Akhuryan River—which forms Turkey’s border with the modern state of Armenia—is an ancient bridge, broken in the middle,” author Antonio Ratti writes.

These ruins are all that remain of Ani, the cosmopolitan capital of medieval Armenia, one of the earliest kingdoms to adopt Christianity as its state religion in the early A.D. 300s. The site of a fifth-century fortification, Ani was chosen to be Armenia’s



capital in the 10th century. It became home to as many as 100,000 people, and was so richly endowed with sacred buildings that it came to be known as the “city of 1,001 churches.”

“Its strategic position along trade routes between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea made it an attractive possession, condemning it to centuries of invasion—and even-

tually, a long period of abandonment,” the article reads.

The author notes, that the medieval kingdom of Armenia once extended far beyond the modern boundaries of today’s nation.

Christianity became a central part of Armenian history when it was still a young faith. The religion took hold and Christian Armenia existed alongside the Byzantines, the Sassanians, and then the Arab-Muslims, Antonio Ratti writes.

“The serene ruins of the city, once swarmed by armies through the ages, has always been a special place for Armenians. In the wake of the Armenian Genocide, it stands as an even more powerful reminder of Armenia’s losses and of its astonishing endurance,” the article notes.

## Viva-MTS: Special Cheap Tariff for Education under COVID19 Pandemia



In response to a call of the Minister of Education, Science, Culture and Sports Arayik Harutyunyan to set a special cheap tariff for education, Armenia's leading telecom operator (Founding GM *Ralph C. Yirikian*) have

megabytes is important.

Viva-MTS introduces the “+ Meeting” service for online work meetings and classes with “Zoom” and “Skype” applications, as well as for friendly contacts.

In response to the high demand for Zoom u Skype applications,



including if the relevant tariff plan is active.

The service is currently available and automatically activated for Viva-MTS “X” and “Y” prepaid and postpaid, as well as for subscribers of “Z” prepaid tariff plans.

Zoom, Skype, as well as Viber, Whatsapp, Messenger, Zangi, Telegram within the framework of “X”, “Y” and “Z” tariff plans (in case of “X” and “Y” tariff plans, also: Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, ” In the case of the “X” tariff plan, the megabytes of the main internet package are not used when using Netflix applications, in case the tariff plan is active.

Package activation prices:

“Z” tariff plan – 1800 AMD / 30 days

“Y” tariff plan – 2800 AMD / 30 days

“X” tariff plan – 5000 AMD / 30 days

Until 2020 “When using Zoom u Skype applications through the” + Meeting “service on May 31, 2012, the megabytes of the internet package provided within the framework of tariff plans will not be consumed,” the mobile operator’s statement reads.



presented package for the organization of distance learning. See below:

**“+ Meeting” service. Possibility of online meetings with “Zoom” and “Skype” applications for subscribers of “X”, “Y” and “Z” tariff plans #wecare**

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Viva-MTS has taken care to ensure that students, pupils, their teachers and lecturers, and all those in need of long-distance communication during this difficult period, are unlimited and without “Meeting” service. These additional mobile applications will be available for an additional fee until 31.05.2020,

## US Indicts Turkish Halkbank for Illegal Transfer of Billions of Dollars to Iran



By Harut Sassounian

Halkbank, whose majority shareholder is the Turkish government, pleaded not guilty in New York on March 31, 2020, to criminal charges that it helped Iran illicitly transfer tens of billions in dollars and gold, wrote Aykan Erdemir and Philip Kowalski in an essay published on April 3 by the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a policy institute based in Washington, D.C.

On October 15, 2019, the Federal Southern District Court of New York accused Halkbank of “fraud, money-laundering and sanctions offenses,” alleging that Halkbank and its executives aided Iranian-Turkish gold trader Reza Zarrab in a “multi-billion-dollar scheme to circumvent U.S. sanctions on Iran.”

Initially, Halkbank refused to appear in court “claiming that the criminal charges are beyond the U.S. court’s jurisdiction,” Erdemir and Kowalski wrote. However, when “prosecutors proposed escalating contempt fines which could have totaled \$1.8 billion after eight weeks,” the bank agreed to respond to the court charges.

Originally, the Turkish and Iranian officials had concocted a scheme to exchange gas for gold to circumvent the U.S. sanctions, by claiming that the gold was headed not to Iranian government entities but to Iran’s “private sector.” Erdemir and Kowalski stated that “the scheme ultimately yielded the Iranian regime some \$13 billion in Turkish gold between 2012 and 2013. Once the U.S. Congress introduced legislation to close the ‘golden loophole’ in 2013, Iran used Turkish front companies to issue invoices for fake transactions of food and medicine that fall under the

humanitarian exception to U.S. sanctions. In one infamous case of over-invoicing, a Turkey-based luxury yacht company used Halkbank to sell nearly 5.2 tons of brown sugar to Iran’s Bank Pasargad at the price of approximately \$240 per pound.” This scheme was first exposed in December 2013 by Turkish investigators who implicated then Prime-Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, several of his ministers and other senior officials, including Halkbank’s managers. Erdogan shut down the probe by firing the police officials, prosecutors and judges!

The scandal resurfaced in March 2016 when Iranian-Turkish ring-leader Reza Zarrab was arrested in Miami after he flew to Florida to visit Disney World with his family. In March 2017, U.S. authorities arrested Halkbank Deputy CEO Mehmet Hakan Atilla upon his arrival in New York. Zarrab pleaded guilty and agreed to testify in court against Atilla. Zarrab confessed that he had bribed senior Turkish ministers and top Halkbank executives. He even implicated Erdogan in the corruption scheme, stating that Erdogan had personally approved the illegal actions.

“Halkbank’s Atilla received a 32-month prison sentence in May 2018, a significantly shorter one than prosecutors had originally sought,” according to Erdemir and Kowalski. “After Atilla’s return to Turkey, Erdogan rewarded the convicted sanctions buster by appointing him CEO of the Istanbul stock exchange, following the president’s established pattern of rewarding other senior accomplices of Zarrab with cushy appointments.”

Erdogan personally appealed to Pres. Trump and other senior officials to block the court case of Halkbank, claiming that US courts have no right to try Turkish citizens. The Courthouse News Service reported that “One of Zarrab’s shell companies, Royal Holding A.S., listed its address as a 35th floor unit in Trump Towers Istanbul. Before pleading guilty to money laundering, sanctions evasions and bribery, Zarrab retained Trump’s personal attorney Rudy Giuliani to lead a campaign of shadow diplomacy

that echoed the one in Ukraine. Shuttling between Turkey’s capital of Ankara and the White House, Giuliani met with Erdogan, Trump, former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, and other senior U.S. and Turkish officials in an attempt to negotiate a prisoner swap. The New York Times reported that Tillerson resisted the White House pressure for a deal that would have effectively killed the Zarrab case.”

Erdogan’s and Giuliani’s efforts succeeded in stalling the prosecution for almost two years, but ultimately failed when the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the Southern District of New York went forward with the charges last October.”

Senator Ron Wyden, the Senate Finance Committee’s top Democrat, told Courthouse News Service: “It sure looked like Donald Trump was doing the bidding of Erdogan and Giuliani, and there were real questions about whether this was about getting Halkbank off the hook, even though there were allegations that they were orchestrating the largest sanctions evasion scheme in history.”

During President Trump’s Senate impeachment inquiry earlier in 2020, Senators Wyden, Robert Menendez and Sherrod Brown asked a joint question which was read aloud in the Senate by Chief Justice John Roberts: “Has the president engaged in a pattern of conduct in which he places his personal and political interests on top of the national security interests of the United States?”

Wyden told Courthouse News Service: “Donald Trump has significant financial interest in Turkey,” referring to Trump Towers Istanbul. “We read regularly that his family has forged personal relationships with important Turkish officials. And so, you have to ask — which is what is part of our inquiry — whether the Trump policy toward Turkey is in a significant way colored by his personal and political interests and not the national security of the country.” If Halkbank is found guilty of violating U.S. sanctions, the court could impose a hefty penalty, regardless of Trump’s wishes.

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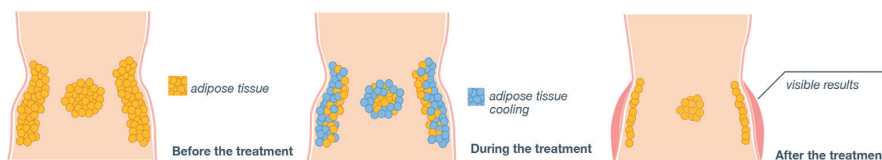
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