

IMF praises Oman's fiscal and pandemic measures

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has praised the swift efforts and the financial measures taken by the Sultanate during in 2020 to contain the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic and mitigate the financial impacts of low oil prices. This came in the final statement issued by the IMF at the end of pre-meetings for this year's Article IV consultations by experts that took place remotely in January. IMF has been conducting these consultations with various countries. **DETAILS ON P13**



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AL RUSTAQ HAMMER AL NAHDA; AL SUWAIQ WIN BIG



P13

OMANI PORTS POST POSITIVE GROWTH IN 2020



P19

NO SKI RESORTS? NO PROBLEM FOR ONE URBAN SKIER IN PARIS



MUSCAT

NEED TO MONITOR PRICES IN MARKET

The Consumer Protection Authority (CPA) did a review of the prices of certain commodities and called for the need to monitor the market. It has decided to keep an eye on prices in the coming days to ensure price stability and check the vested interests from exploiting the situation by raising prices without any justification. To ensure price stability, the authority has also decided to strengthen the mechanism to monitor the markets in the Sultanate. At a virtual meeting with the director generals in the governorates and department directors, Salim bin Ali al Hakmani, Chairman of the CPA, reiterated the authority's resolve to provide a safe and secure consumer environment in the Sultanate. **DETAILS ON P2**

VISA-FREE TRAVEL TO UZBEKISTAN

From March 1, citizens of Oman can enter the Republic of Uzbekistan without a visa and stay for 10 days, provided they have return tickets to the Sultanate or to another country, the Embassy in Tashkent said. Uzbekistan recently expanded its visa-free regime for citizens of Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman and China. Tourism in Uzbekistan has become one of the most seriously affected destinations as a result of the global crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic. **DETAILS ON P5**



INSIDE



NORTH KOREAN URGENT PRIORITY FOR THE US

P7



DRAGHI TAKES THE REINS AS PM, NOW COMES THE HARD PART

P9

Foreign direct investment in Sultanate at RO 15.4 billion

MUSCAT: The total Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in the Sultanate at the end of the second quarter of 2020 stood at RO 15.4 billion, recording an increase by 13.2 per cent compared to the same period of 2019, when it was RO 13.6 billion.

The foreign investment flow in Oman reached RO 1,797.9

million, according to the data on the preliminary results of the performance of FDI issued by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

UK ON TOP

The United Kingdom ranked first for its FDI in Oman at the end of the second quarter of 2020 with

RO 7,808.3 million, up from RO 7,084.2 million in the same period of 2019; followed by the United States of America, with RO 1,818.9 million, an increase from RO 1,675.7 million in the same period of 2019; and then by the United Arab Emirates, with an amount of RO 1,265.2 million, compared to RO 1,166.1 million at the end of

the second quarter of 2019.

The FDI from Kuwait reached RO 933.5 million, compared to RO 826.9 million, and that of China reached RO 848.5 million, up from RO 75 million. The FDI from Bahrain at the end of the second quarter of 2020 reached RO 436.1 million compared to RO 391.2 million at the same

period of 2019, and that from Qatar reached RO 404.8 million, up from RO 345.4 million.

The investments of India in Oman until the end of the second quarter of 2020 reached RO 317.5 million, followed by the Netherlands at RO 337.4 million, up from RO 298.7 million in the same period of 2019. **TURN TO P6**

SEEKING SAILING GLORY



HH Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth, visited Oman Sail's headquarters at Al Mouj Muscat, on Saturday. During the visit, HH Sayyid Theyazin was acquainted with the work of the foundation and its national contributions on various fields. He met the Olympic team which is seeking to qualify for Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games. He commended the effort being exerted in preparation for the games. **DETAILS ON P11**

Strong quake hits off Japan coast

IWAKI: A strong earthquake hit off the coast of eastern Japan on Saturday, injuring dozens of people and triggering widespread power outages, but there appeared to be no major damage and no tsunami warning was issued.

The earthquake had a 7.3 magnitude and its epicentre was off the coast of Fukushima prefecture at a depth of 60 km, the Japan Meteorological Agency said. It shook buildings for some time after it hit, shortly after 11:00 pm.

Houses and offices in the capital Tokyo, hundreds of kilometres away, also swayed and



File folders and other items are seen scattered on the floor of the Hirono town office after a strong quake in Fukushima Prefecture. — Reuters

shook. No tsunami warning had been issued, the meteorological agency said.

INJURED

At least two dozen people were injured, according to reports from the Kyodo news agency.

A Reuters cameraman on location in Fukushima said his 10th floor hotel room shook for some time.

One man at the hotel was taken to hospital after falling and hitting his head on a door, the cameraman said.

Although injured, the man was still able to walk, the cameraman said. — Reuters

Senate prolongs Trump trial

WASHINGTON: The US Senate voted on Saturday to allow witnesses at the impeachment trial of Donald Trump, a surprise move likely to prolong the proceedings, even as the top Republican senator said he would vote to acquit the former president of inciting

insurrection.

Republican Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell's reported decision to vote to acquit means Trump is unlikely to be convicted of the charge of inciting the deadly January 6 assault by his supporters on Congress. **SEE ALSO P8**

Drone system to trace suspected Covid-19 cases

MUSCAT: Dr Ahmed al Maashri and his team from the College of Engineering at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) have invented a drone-based system equipped with artificial intelligence technology for detecting suspected Covid-19 cases remotely.

The team has developed a prototype cable of detecting Covid-19 symptoms from a distance between 10 to 15 metres, and has passed field tests conducted under varying conditions such as the drone altitude, location and projection angles.



Virus to last 'indefinitely'

STOCKHOLM: The head of the EU's disease control agency warned that the novel coronavirus could last indefinitely even as global infections slowed by nearly half in the last month and vaccine rollouts gathered pace in parts of the world.

In an interview, ECDC chief Andrea Ammon urged European countries in particular not to drop their guard against a virus that "seems very well adapted to humans" and may require experts to tweak vaccines over time, as is the case with the seasonal flu. **SEE P8**

other for identifying symptoms associated with Covid-19. Those databases can also be utilised by similar projects", Al Maashri said, noting that the project was aimed at utilising thermal imaging to calculate body temperature as well as the artificial intelligence for detecting Covid-19 symptoms.

INTRODUCING OMAN TO THE WORLD



With just one man, the interest of hundreds if not thousands can be piqued by using the proper platform and showcasing a particular theme. Such has been the case for one Omani man whose main mission is to introduce Oman to the world through virtual channels. Meet Amer Nasser Ammar, an Omani citizen whose efforts to bring the Oman tourism brand to the masses through his videos is proving to be successful. **DETAILS ON P18**

Hotels come out with institutional quarantine packages from tomorrow

KABEER YOUSUF
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With offers and freebies ranging from competitive rates to homely stay, authentic dishes, free Wi-Fi, airport pick and drop, free tracking bracelet removal, hotels and furnished apartments have come out with many lucrative offers following the Supreme Committee's decision of institutional quarantine that comes into force from February 15.

Contrary to what has been widely circulated on social media, authorities have confirmed that inbound passengers can choose any hotel or quarantine centre, besides the listed hotels earlier, to their choice to spend the isolation period.

"While the hospitality sector has been severely impacted by the pandemic, the institutional quarantine will increase hotel occupancy and revenue across all categories of hotels in the country," said Samir Messaoudi, General Manager, Sheraton Oman Hotel.

The doomsday for the global hospitality sector, along with various other sectors began last March as countries began to close air passage or closed airports and restricted travels. In Oman, some were fully closed while some partially operated.

While the star hotel offers include a wonderful selection of

institutional quarantine packages, quarantine centres and other apartments have different packages as well. In keeping with the needs of the diverse profile of guests, hoteliers' packages include all-inclusive meals with a focus on guest's food preferences, in addition to laundry services and value-added discounts. Within the hotel, they have dedicated quarantine floors and service teams to ensure both guest and staff safety. For them, their guests must be comfortable, safe and well taken care of during these uncertain times. Their rates start from RO30 or 40 per day to several hundred depending upon their rating with the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism.

Rates at the apartments or quarantine centre begin from RO 20 and above depending upon the services needed such as airport pick up/ drop off, dine-in, and the like.

"Institutional quarantine will help tide over the losses incurred during the pandemic and centres and hotel, apartments can heave a sigh of relief to a great extent," says Seeniya Biju, Director — Medstar Quarantine Center which runs a complex of many rooms aiming at providing quarantine to the passengers.

She feels that the institutional quarantine is a good move from the government to aid in the reduction of the virus spread.

"We are trying our best to make

it feasible and affordable for our customers."

Many apartments also have tailor-made various packages towards the same.

"Institutional quarantine will provide a regular and much-needed cash flow to the hospitality sector and we have a package from RO 20 inclusive of all meals and laundry services," said Anooj Singh, CEO of Manam Hotel Apartments.

He feels that keeping the rates affordable and low and for cash on this scenario, should focus on as many reservations as possible.

"This is a unique opportunity from an industry perspective as one of our main goals is to always offer an all-inclusive environment for our guests and the community at large. Our commitment is to provide safe, value-driven, five-star offerings and services to help reassure guests and minimise stress at every possible level."

Given the due precautions and Covid-19 protocols issued by the Supreme Committee are strictly adhered to, the institutional quarantine will be a breather to the hotels that were closed for nearly 10 months and a few months without banquets.

Anyone who requires information on state institutional quarantine can connect with the Relief and Shelter Operations Centre at 24994267, 24994266, 24994265.

CPA to keep tabs on commodity prices, rein in vested interests



KAUSHALENDRA SINGH
@patkaushal

The Consumer Protection Authority has reviewed the prices of certain commodities and called for the need to monitor the market. It has decided to keep an eye on prices in the coming days to ensure price stability and check the vested interests from exploiting the situation by raising prices without any justification.

To ensure price stability, the Authority has also decided to strengthen the mechanism to monitor the markets in the Sultanate.

At a virtual meeting with the directors general in the governorates and department directors, Salim bin Ali al Hakmani, Chairman of the Consumer Protection Authority (CPA), reiterated the Authority's resolve to provide a safe and secure consumer environment in the Sultanate.

He called for a follow-up action on efforts made by the Authority's staff in various governorates.

During the meeting, Al

To ensure price stability, the Consumer Protection Authority has decided to strengthen the mechanism to monitor the markets in the Sultanate

Hakmani praised the efforts being made by the CPA staff in various directorates and departments distributed in the governorates which are entrusted with the task of monitoring the markets.

He called for the need to tighten control over prices in coming days to ensure price stability and check the vested interests from exploiting the situation by raising prices without any justification.

Al Hakmani also exhorted the CPA officials to strengthen cooperation and coordination with other authorities, especially those related to the markets and the consumers so that there is harmony in performance to serve the public interest in a better way.

He sought to achieve even better coordination between entities that deal with the interests

of the consumers.

The meeting also reviewed the authority's efforts to keep track of the prices of certain commodities which were raised in the recent past.

"After extensive study, we found that rise in prices of certain commodities necessitated by global market forces and commodity indicators in addition to the markets of neighbouring countries."

The Authority said to have held a series of meetings with suppliers, during which it urged them to take into account the consumers when raising prices, and they need to lower the prices locally when prices of commodities in question decline globally. The Authority will start implementing its monitoring campaigns to ensure the implementation of policies related to global price indicators.

The CPA chairman stressed the importance of exerting more effort to serve the country and the citizens and follow up the markets first. He directed the suppliers to abide by the laws and decisions issued by the Authority.

Oman Post launches first e-commerce service centre

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 13

As part of building e-commerce capabilities, Oman Post Asyad Express, a member of Asyad Group, has signed a Service Level Agreement (SLA) with Sohar Port and Freezone, the up-and-coming gateway to the GCC region, to open the company's first service centre for postal and e-commerce services. The launch of the new centre came in line with Oman Post Asyad Express' strategy to offer a comprehensive logistics network locally and regionally.

The SLA was signed by Nasser al Sharji, Acting Chief Executive Officer of Oman Post Asyad Express and Omar Mahmood al Mahrizi, CEO of Sohar Freezone — DCEO of Sohar Port.

"The new Oman Post Asyad Express service centre in Sohar Port and Freezone is a key facility on our list of investor-friendly services. This is an extension to our previous collaborations, as we



already have more than 200 PO addresses across the development to ensure we continue to provide unique services and outstanding amenities to our growing base of businesses," said Al Mahrizi.

"The opening of the new centre is part of Oman Post Asyad Express' strategy to continue expanding our network ensuring our products and services are available to our customers across the Sultanate. Our suite of postal and logistics services is delivered with a focus on quality, convenience, and the know-how locally and internationally," said

Nasser al Sharji, Acting CEO of Oman Post Asyad Express.

The SLA will allow Oman Post Asyad Express access to SOHAR Port and Freezone's database of investors in order to promote its services and businesses. Once the service centre is open, Oman Post Asyad express will carry out fast track procedures to enable businesses in the development to benefit from postal and logistics services including: PO Boxes, domestic and international document and parcel delivery, e-commerce and fulfilment services.



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UNDER SUPERVISION OF MINISTRY
OF ENDOWMENTS & RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS





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Al Amerat rich in history, flora and fauna

TEXT & PHOTOS BY YAHYA ALSALMANI

The valleys in the Wilayat of Al Amerat are dotted with archaeological sites and are home to rich biodiversity. On the trail from Wadi Adai to the border adjacent to Wadi Al Mih in the wilayat one can find remains of ancient stone homes and tombs.

These valleys are also home to many plants and trees namely Al Sumur (Acacia Tortilis), Al Sidr (Ziziphus spina-christi), Al Ghaf (Prosopis Cineraria) and Al Showa (Moringa Peregrina). Moreover, there are a wonderful variety of medicinal herbal plants used by locals for a long time.

It is also a bird watchers' paradise as one can find Egyptian eagles, sparrows, nightingales, pigeons and many other birds that nest in trees.

What distinguishes this mountain trail is the presence of stone houses that were previously used as quarantine centres for smallpox patients. The guide who led us through the trail said that these



health centres have been destroyed due to rain. There are many rocks adorned with a number of carvings, most of which depict Ibex. These drawings were intended to detail the mountain paths and document some of the events that occurred at that time. These drawings are proof for the presence of a large number of animals during that period of time. They are hard to spot now due to urban expansion and hunting.

"Our goal in organising these trail walks is to introduce the importance of these archaeological and ecological sites, and to raise awareness about the need to protect and preserve them for the future generations", the guide told the *Observer*.

"More than 30 people participated in this activity. They all completed 20 km hiking in around 7 hours. This is a good indication of the desire of Omanis and residents to rediscover what nature hides among its fertile mountains and plains in the Sultanate", the guide said.

Gas oil production up 28% in Dec last year

MUSCAT: The Sultanate recorded a fall in the production of standard grade petrol (M-91) by the Omani refineries at the end of December 2020 by 28 per cent as the output reached 9.59 million barrels until the end of December 2020, compared to 13.32 million barrels produced during the same period in 2019.

The output of super grade petrol (M-95) reached 12.80 million barrels until the end of December 2020, according to data released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCISI).

Gas oil (diesel) output increased by 28 per cent to 33.96 million barrels while aviation fuel oil production fell by 51 per cent to 6.98 million barrels at the end of December 2020, compared to the same period of 2019.

Production of Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG) dropped by 10 per cent to 6.12 million



until the end of December 2020.

Of the total production of M-91 grade petrol, 7.83 million barrels were sold in the domestic market.

However, domestic sales of M-95 grade petrol declined by 12 per cent to stand at 11.53 million barrels while sales of gas oil (diesel) within the country was at 13.30 million barrels during the until the end of December 2020.

Domestic sales of aviation fuel oil dropped by 67 per cent to reach 1.68 million barrels while the LPG sales rose by 1 per cent to reach at 2.76 million barrels at the end of December 2020.

— ONA

Oman to allow return of camels stuck abroad

STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT, FEB 13

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources said it has decided to allow the entry of camels stuck outside the Sultanate and exempt owners and carriers of camels from all the fines incurred by them during the period between September 2020 and March 2021.

The decision will be based on Article 5 of the Ministerial Resolution 2017/66 issued regarding the regulation of the temporary exit of Omani camels through border crossings outside

the Sultanate.

The ministry said that this decision comes in view of the precautionary measures and measures that have been taken to confront the pandemic, stressing that all owners and transporters of camels must bring forms for the identification of camels, according to which they were allowed to leave the border crossing during the specified period.

The Supreme Committee on Covid-19 has announced the closure of land checkpoints for entry into the Sultanate till further notice.

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According to a representative from Saud Bahwan Automotive, "Now a days, customers are looking for opportunities where they get more value with every purchase. At Toyota, we understand this customer need and are catering to it with an opportunity they shouldn't miss. Own a Toyota today and save now. The campaign that began on February 11, 2021 will last until April 11, 2021."

Customers looking to own a Toyota vehicle can benefit with Cash Gift from RO 500 up to RO 5,400, Interest 0% up to 2 years RO 1.99 % up to 4 years RO 2.99 % up to 5 years, Service from 2 years/20,000 kms up to 5 years/50,000 kms (Whichever is earlier).

On Land Cruiser 4.6L and 5.7L models only) and One Year Comprehensive Insurance. (Prospective buyers may be advised that the benefits vary between model variants, model year and manufacturing year. Terms & Conditions apply. Visit the showroom for exact details, please).

In Oman the Toyota range includes:

ALL-NEW HIGHLANDER: Toyota Highlander, a sophisticated 7-seater SUV brings a new level of bold, distinctive design to a foundation built on safety, comfort, quality, durability and reliability.



Highlander amplifies all qualities while taking on a dramatic new design direction that combines a powerful SUV presence with sophisticated detailing. The Highlander is equipped with Panoramic Moonroof, 8" Navigation System, 7" Multi Information Display, Leather Seat Material with Front Seat Air Conditioner, Toyota Safety Sense, Power Back Door and more.

ALL-NEW C-HR: Toyota C-HR, a stylish Compact High Rider, represents a leap forward in design, manufacturing and engineering for Toyota. The iconic gemstone of the Toyota C-HR evokes universal notions of luxury, attractiveness, sophistication and strength.

TOYOTA AVALON: The Avalon is a statement of luxury. Right from its design to its plush comfort, the Avalon offers a remarkable feeling on every journey. The Avalon truly belongs in a league of its own.

TOYOTA CAMRY: The Camry has been one of the best-sellers owing to its design, driving dynamics, fuel-efficiency and ownership experiences. The Camry is now available with 8" Navigation System, 7" TFT Multi Information Display, Remote

Engine Starter, Moonroof, Wireless Charger, Leather Seat Material and more. The Camry is also available in a Hybrid option.

TOYOTA COROLLA: The Toyota Corolla is built on the Toyota New Global Architecture, called TNGA platform. The New Corolla has been developed from a driver and passengers' point of view first.

LAND CRUISER: The Land Cruiser is the benchmark by which other off-road vehicles are measured. The Pride of the Land, the Toyota Land Cruiser is a symbol of strength, durability and reliability. Rugged yet luxurious, the Land Cruiser delivers high-end performance and advanced off-roading capabilities and safety features.

PRADO: Visually stunning, the Prado features a unique design which appears even more dynamic, yet maintains three core strengths essential to the Prado's celebrated 'go-anywhere' credentials.

FORTUNER: Equipped to offer you the best experiences both on and off the road, the Fortuner is one of the finest 4WD SUVs available. The Fortuner is equipped with 4.0L, V6 Engine, 18" Alloy Wheels, LED Projector Headlamps with DRL, Navigation System, Power & Ventilated Driver & Front Passenger Seats, Power Back Door and more.

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VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

Citizens of most of the developed countries are used to living with indirect or direct taxes, irrespective of what they get in return from their governments.

While here in the Gulf region, including Oman, citizens and expatriates are used to availing different types of benefits from their governments through subsidies and a variety of welfare schemes.

The situation is going to change this year for the first time when Valued Added Tax (VAT) on most of the non-essential commodities will be introduced in the country. Adding to that, electricity and water will go up with the gradual removal of subsidies from this year.

SPENDING
For citizens and residents of Oman, for the first time how they spend will be key to how they will save for the future. Speaking to the *Observer*, an analyst said, “As all basic items, including health and education expenses, will be exempted from VAT, the impact on the cost of living will depend on one’s lifestyle.”

The prices of the luxury items such as cars, jewellery, cosmetics, and accessories will cost more, but it is the increase in utility services that will have an impact on our lives.

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FOR SERVICES

“The luxury products are one-time purchases and customers will not mind a marginal increase. Most of the expatriates are used to stricter tax regime on various services and products,” said a senior officer of a company that distributes luxury brands in Oman.

“What customers must worry about is the electricity bills, which will naturally have an impact on all goods and services. The current slack in the rental market will neutralise the price impact, but what the people have to think is about the long-term and realise that new services, even if it is their right, will come for a price.”

Already many apartment owners have started installing prepaid meters for electricity, smart ones for water and even solar roof panels, which will also offer a solution to their tenants, including shop owners.

“We are living in a digital world and everything will depend on electricity and its use, even for running of vehicles. It is important to spread awareness about no-wastage and rational use of all resources irrespective of where we are,” a senior employee in one of the utility companies said.

“Even if they go to a hotel paying good rates, they should just not waste electricity or water only because the intention is to recover the cost of the hotel stay. Rational use needs to be applied everywhere, be it a hotel, office, or home,” he said.

Rights Issue of 300,000,000 shares at a price of Baiza 101 per share
(with a share price of Baiza 100 per share plus issue expenses of Baiza 1 per share)

RIGHTS TRADING PERIOD	RIGHTS SUBSCRIPTION PERIOD
Opening Date: 25 th February 2021	Opening Date: 1 st March 2021
Closing Date: 9 th March 2021	Closing Date: 15 th March 2021

The contents of this advertisement are extracted from the unofficial translation of the Arabic Prospectus approved by the Capital Market Authority through Administrative Decision No. E/19/2021 Dated: 11th February, 2021. Investors are advised to carefully review the Prospectus before deciding to subscribe to the shares offered.

Issuer	Ahli Bank SAOG.
Commercial Registration No.	1558560 (established on 1 March 1997).
Principal place of business	PO Box 545, PC 116, Mina Al Fahal, Oman.
Bank's duration	Unlimited.
Authorised Share Capital	RO 250,000,000 (Two hundred fifty million Omani Rials only) divided into 2,500,000,000 shares (Two billion five hundred million).
Issued Capital (pre-issue)	RO 164,965,746.600 (One hundred sixty-four million nine hundred and sixty-five thousand seven hundred forty-six Omani Rial, six hundred Baizas) divided into 1,649,657,466 shares (One billion six hundred and forty-nine million six hundred fifty-seven thousand four hundred and sixty-six) shares after issuance of rights shares (assuming full subscription).
Issued Capital (post-issue)	RO 194,965,746.600 (One hundred ninety-four million nine hundred and sixty-five thousand seven hundred forty-six Omani Rial, six hundred Baizas) 1 towards issue expenses, payable in full on submission of the Application Form.
Issue size	300,000,000 Shares (Three hundred million) offered at Baizas 101 per Offer Share, aggregating to RO 30.3 million (Thirty million three hundred thousand Omani Rials).
Issue Price	Baizas 101 per Offer Share, consisting of issue price of Baizas 100 plus Baizas 1 towards issue expenses, payable in full on submission of the Application Form.
Rights Entitlement	Each Eligible Shareholder is entitled to participate in the Rights Issue pro rata based on their percentage shareholding in the Bank as on the Record Date, rounded down in the case of fractional entitlements (the "Rights Entitlement"). Accordingly, each Eligible Shareholder is entitled to approximately 18.185593 Offer Shares for every 100 Shares held by them on the Record Date, duly rounded down, or to 1 Offer Share for approximately every 5.498858 Shares held by them on the Record Date, duly rounded down.
Eligibility for Subscription	Each Eligible Shareholder, and each person who purchases all or part of the Rights Entitlement of an Eligible Shareholder during the Rights Trading Period, is entitled to participate in the Rights Issue. A failure to validly apply for Offer Shares during the Subscription Period will constitute a waiver of rights of participation in the Rights Issue. An Eligible Shareholder (or purchaser of their Rights Entitlement) wishing to subscribe for Offer Shares shall complete the required details in the Application Form and submit it during the Subscription Period to the Collecting Bank together with the requisite subscription amount. The 'rights' in respect of a Rights Entitlement may be traded on the MSM during the Rights Trading Period. A Shareholder has the option to either subscribe for its Rights Entitlement or sell all or part of its Rights Entitlement on the MSM. The eligibility to subscribe for Offer Shares shall lapse in case the Shareholder neither subscribes for their Rights Entitlement nor sells their Rights Entitlement on the MSM during the Rights Trading Period.
Application for Additional Shares	An Eligible Shareholder wishing to apply for Additional Shares shall complete the required details in the Application Form and submit it during the Subscription Period to the Collecting Bank together with the requisite subscription amount. A Shareholder who does not subscribe for their full Rights Entitlement during the Subscription Period or who sells their Rights Entitlement (either in part or in full) is not eligible to apply for Additional Shares. An Applicant that is not a Shareholder on the Record Date but that has acquired a Rights Entitlement is not eligible to apply for Additional Shares. The application and allotment of Additional Shares shall be subject to the terms and conditions stipulated in Chapter 14 of the Prospectus.
Record Date	21st February, 2021
Start of Trading of Rights Entitlement	25th February, 2021
End of Trading of Rights Entitlement	9th March, 2021
Subscription Opening Date	1st March, 2021
Subscription Closing Date	15th March, 2021
Allotment	The Offer Shares shall be allotted against valid Application Forms, subject to the provisions of Chapter 14 of the Prospectus. The Offer Shares shall be allotted and refunds will be made (if required) within 6 working days from the Subscription Closing Date, after obtaining CMA approval for allotment. The Applicant, after the announcement of the allotment, shall ensure that the allotted shares are appearing in its account with MCDC.
Refund of Application Money	Refund of application money, if any, shall be made to the Applicants within 6 working days of the Subscription Closing Date.
Listing	As the shares of the Bank are already listed on the MSM, the Offer Shares shall also be listed on the MSM.
Approvals for the Issue	- Board approval vide its resolution at its meeting on 12th November, 2020 - CBO approval vide its letter no. BOD/CBS/AB/2021/503 dated 31st January, 2021 - CMA approval vide its Administrative Decision E/19/2021 dated 11th February, 2021
Issue Manager	Ubhar Capital SAOC P.O. Box 1137, P.C. 111, CPO, Sultanate of Oman Tel: +968 24949010 Fax: +968 24949099 Email: ubhar-corporatefinance@u-capital.net
Legal Advisor to the Issue	Said Al Shahry & Partners (SASLO) P.O. Box 1288, P.C. 112, Ruwi, Sultanate of Oman Tel: +968 24636 999, Fax: +968 24636 900 Email: mail@saslo.com
Statutory Auditor	PricewaterhouseCoopers P.O. Box 3075, P.C. 112, Ruwi, Oman Tel: +968 24559110, Fax: +968 24564408 Email: om_pwc@om.pwc.com
Collecting Bank	Ahli Bank SAOG P.O. Box 545, PC. 116, Mina Al Fahal, Oman Tel: +968 24577000, Fax: +968 24568001 Email: info@ahlibank.om

Use of Proceeds

The purpose of the Rights Issue is to increase the Tier I capital of the Bank by increasing its paid-up capital, so as to enable its business growth and capital adequacy compliance.

Overview

The Bank was established under the name of Alliance Housing Bank, and was registered on the Commercial Register maintained by the MOCIP pursuant to the Commercial Registry Law (Royal Decree 3/74, as amended) in June 1997. It was reconstituted as a commercial bank and received its commercial banking licence from the CBO in December 2007. In January 2008, Alliance Housing Bank changed its name to Ahli Bank SAOG and commenced its commercial banking operations.

As a full-fledged commercial bank, it is active in all banking segments including retail banking, corporate banking, investment banking and Islamic banking in Oman.

In addition to being regulated by the CBO, as a public joint stock company whose shares are listed and traded on the MSM, the Bank is also regulated by the CMA. Apart from this, the Bank's business operations are subject to compliance with the Bank's own policies and procedures and the laws and regulations of Oman.

For more information visit www.ahlibank.om.

Bank's Major Shareholders as of 31 December 2020

Name	Country of incorporation	Number of shares	%
Ahli United Bank	Bahrain	577,380,102	35.00%
Oman Investment Authority	Oman	213,251,128	12.93%
Southern Orbit Investments LLC	Oman	163,183,750	9.89%
Civil Service Employees - Pension Fund	Oman	142,717,963	8.65%
Ubhar Capital SAOC - Asset Management	Oman	140,787,812	8.53%
Ministry of Defense - Pension Fund	Oman	95,436,060	5.79%
Others		316,900,651	19.21%
Total		1,649,657,466	100%

Historical Financial Statements

The following information has been extracted from the audited financial statements of 2019 and 2018 and unaudited financial statements for the nine (9) months ending 30 September 2020. For full financial statements, please visit MSM website at www.msm.gov.om or Bank's website at www.ahlibank.om.

Balance Sheet

In RO '000	30 Sep 20	31 Dec 19	31 Dec 18
Cash and balances with the Central Bank	53,481	108,492	153,406
Due from banks	17,506	50,276	24,027
Loans and advances and financing net	2,159,208	2,054,986	1,870,677
Investment securities	311,462	258,148	214,073
Property, equipment and software and other assets	50,661	46,625	28,231
Total assets	2,592,318	2,518,527	2,290,414
Due to banks	168,417	197,705	146,777
Customer deposits	1,775,124	1,711,726	1,661,645
Share capital	259,782	265,195	255,004
Total shareholders' funds (including capital)	383,782	389,195	359,004
Total liabilities	2,208,536	2,129,332	1,931,410
Total liabilities and shareholders' funds	2,592,318	2,518,527	2,290,414
Book value per share (Baizas)	157	169	170

Income Statement

In RO '000	For the financial period ended		
	30 Sep 20	31 Dec 19	31 Dec 18
Net interest income	36,273	44,735	44,121
Net income from Islamic Financing and investments	9,316	12,304	7,933
Other operating income	8,143	12,710	10,099
Operating income	53,732	69,749	62,153
Net impairment on financial assets	9,938	5,871	5,108
Operating expenses	22,453	27,649	23,252
Profit before tax	21,341	36,229	33,793
Tax expense	2,188	5,214	5,007
Net profit	19,153	31,015	28,786
Earnings per share (Baizas)	12	20	18

Un-audited results for the year 2020

The Bank's total assets grew by 7.3 per cent in 2020, reaching RO 2.70 billion, compared to RO 2.51 billion in 2019. Customer deposits went up by 12.4 per cent to reach RO 1.92 billion compared to RO 1.71 billion. Loans and advances and financing, net grew by 8 per cent, reaching RO 2.21 billion. The Bank's operating income increased by 2.6 per cent, reaching RO 71.50 million in 2020. Operating expenses increased by 9.1 per cent, while the profit for the period was lower by 22.6 per cent, largely due to the pandemic-related slowdown and additional impairment charges on account of the prevailing operating environment due to the COVID-19 impact.

RO Million	31-Dec-20	31-Dec-19	Growth %
Total assets	2,702.5	2,518.5	7.3%
Loans & advances and financing, net	2,218.9	2,055.0	8.0%
Customers' deposits	1,924.7	1,711.7	12.4%
Equity	388.4	389.2	-0.2%
Operating income	71.5	69.7	2.6%
Operating expenses	30.1	27.6	9.1%
Profit for the period	24.0	31.0	-22.6%

Dividend Policy

The Bank's dividends policy complies with the CBO and CMA guidelines. The Board of Directors follows a conservative dividend policy and provides recommendations on the distribution of the dividends to the shareholders after due consideration of the regulatory guidelines, the future growth expectations, and other factors.

The historical dividend details of the Bank are given below:

For Year	Cash dividend	Stock dividend
2015	10%	-
2016	10%	-
2017	10%	5%
2018	10%	5%
2019	10%	5%

Source - MSM

Price Justification

Average Share Price

Period Ending 31 December 2020	Average Closing Price (RO)	Discount of Issue Price to Average Closing Price
1-month average closing price	0.126	20.0%
3-month average closing price	0.128	21.0%
6-month average closing price	0.129	22.0%
1-year average closing price	0.131	23.0%

Source: MSM, U Capital research

Note: Above calculations based on 31 December 2020

Peer Comparison

Name	Mkt Cap (OMR mn)	Last Px (OMR)	Current P/B	P/B'20e, (x)	P/E'20m (x)	ROE'20e, (%)	Cash Div Yield, %
Bank Muscat	1280.3	0.394	0.70	0.67	8.15	8.3%	6.3%
Bank Dhofar	290.6	0.097	0.54	0.53	8.08	6.7%	3.1%
Oman Arab Bank	317.2	0.19	0.89	0.94	18.22	5.3%	2.1%
NBO	260.2	0.16	0.64	0.62	14.53	4.2%	4.1%
Bank Sohar	221.5	0.091	0.68	0.65	9.73	6.8%	4.4%
Ahli Bank	209.5	0.127	0.81	0.74	7.88	9.7%	3.9%
HSBC Oman	182.0	0.091	0.54	0.51	38.18	1.3%	1.6%
Bank Nizwa	144.0	0.096	0.92	0.97	14.15	7.1%	-
Average		0.71	0.70	14.87	6.2%	3.7%	

Source : Bloomberg, U Capital Research

Note: Above calculations based on 31 December 2020

Based on the aforesaid factors and considering the Issue Price of Baizas 101 per share, the Bank believes that the Issue Price compares favorably with the peer average, and is at a discount of more than 20% as compared to the pre-issue one, three, six months and one-year average closing prices.

As of 31 December 2020, the market capitalization of the Bank is RO 209.506 million, and subject to full subscription of RO 30 million, the post-issue weighted average price is expected to be Baizas 123 per share approximately.

Board of Directors

The Board comprises nine members, elected in the Annual General Meeting held on 3 June 2020. Details of the current Board members are as follows:

Name of Director	Capacity	Represents
Hamdan Al Nasser Al Hinal, Chairman	Independent	-
Anwar Hilal Hamdoun Al Jabri, First Deputy Chairman	Independent	-
Sanjeev Baijal, Second Deputy Chairman	Non-Independent	Ahli United Bank
Keith Gale	Non-Independent	-
Abdul Hameed Ahmed Mohamed Al Bulushi	Independent	Civil Service Employees Pension Fund
Rajeev Gogla	Non-Independent	-
Ibrahim Said Badar Al Eisri	Independent	-
Juma Rashid Saif Al Jahwari	Independent	-
Salim Ali Hamed Al Hasni	Independent	Ministry of Defense – Pension Fund

SUBSCRIPTION CONDITIONS & PROCEDURES

Eligibility for Subscription

The subscription for the Rights Issue is open to all Eligible Shareholders and to each person who purchases all or part of the Rights Entitlement of an Eligible Shareholder.

Each Eligible Shareholder is entitled to approximately 18.185593 Offer Shares for every 100 Shares held by them on the Record Date, duly rounded down, or to 1 Offer Share for approximately every 5.498858 Shares held by them on the Record Date, duly rounded down. The Rights Entitlement will be listed on the MSM and can be sold or purchased during the Rights Trading Period through the MSM.

Rights Subscription Period and Issue Price

Issue opens on – 1st March 2021

Issue closes on – 15th March 2021

The Collecting Bank will reject any Application Form that reaches it after its official working hours on the Subscription Closing Date.

The Rights Entitlement, and any right to participate in the Rights Issue, will lapse if a valid application is not made during the Subscription Period. A failure to validly apply for Offer Shares during the Subscription Period will constitute a waiver of rights of participation in the Rights Issue.

Issue Price – **Baizas 101** per Offer Share (with a share price of Baizas 100 per Offer Share plus issue expenses of Baizas 1 per Offer Share).

Trading of Rights

The Rights Entitlement is tradable on the MSM in accordance with applicable laws/ regulations of the CMA and the MSM. Such rights can be traded i.e. bought and sold during the Rights Trading Period. The purchaser of a Rights Entitlement shall contact and coordinate with the Issue Manager to collect the requisite Application Form, complete and submit the Application Form to the Collecting Bank, together with application money and required documents, in each case on or before the Subscription Closing Date in accordance with the terms contained in this Prospectus. An unexercised Rights Entitlement shall lapse at the end of the Subscription Period.

Subscription for Additional Shares

- Only Eligible Shareholders are eligible to apply for Additional Shares.
- An Eligible Shareholder who does not subscribe to their full Rights Entitlement or sells their Rights Entitlement (either partially or in full) is not eligible to apply for Additional Shares.
- A non-Shareholder as on Record Date who purchases a Rights Entitlement, is not eligible to apply for Additional Shares.
- Eligible Shareholders validly subscribing for their full entitlement of Offer Shares may apply for Additional Shares.
- Eligible Shareholders who wish to apply for Additional Shares should indicate this by writing the desired number of Additional Shares in their Application Form and making the required payment with submission of the Application Form to the Collecting Bank.
- The minimum Additional Shares that can be applied for is one Offer Share with the maximum up to a number such that the total application (including such Eligible Shareholder's Rights Entitlement, any Rights Entitlement purchased from another Eligible Shareholder, and Additional Shares) does not exceed the entire Rights Issue size.
- Additional Shares will be allotted simultaneously with the Offer Shares, subject to CMA approval.
- If the total Additional Shares applied for exceeds the under-subscription (before considering Additional Shares) in the Rights Issue, all eligible Applicants will be allotted Additional Shares on a pro-rata basis proportionate to the number of Additional Shares applied for, and the balance will be refunded.
- If the total Additional Shares applied by Applicants is less than the under-subscription (before considering Additional Shares) in the Rights Issue, all eligible Applicants will be allotted all of the Additional Shares applied for by them.
- If there is any balance under-subscription even after allotment of Additional Shares, then the Board of Directors shall offer such shares for subscription pursuant to the provisions of the Capital Market Law, or reduce the amount of the increase of the share capital by an amount equal to the value of the shares

that have not been subscribed for, as per Article 140 of CCL

The decision of the Issue Manager, in consultation with the CMA, shall be final and binding in respect of the allotment of Offer Shares, including Additional Shares.

Note: Applicants should ensure that their post-rights issue shareholding is within the shareholding limits prescribed in the Bank's Articles of Association, Laws of Oman and applicable regulatory requirements.

The following is a worked example using illustrative numbers to show the methodology for allotting Additional Shares:

Particulars	Shares
Rights Issue Offer Subscription	100,000,000
Unsubscribed	10,000,000
Additional Shares applications received from Eligible Shareholders	15,000,000
Allotment of unsubscribed shares on pro-rata basis based on applications received for Additional Shares	10,000,000
Percentage allotment of Additional Shares (10,000,000/15,000,000=66.67%)	
Refund of amount to Shareholders applying for Additional Shares equivalent to	5,000,000

Based on this example, a person applying for 3,000 Additional Shares will be allotted 2,000 Shares.

Subscription on Behalf of Minor Children

- An individual of age less than 18 years as on the Record Date will be considered a minor.
- Only a father may subscribe on behalf of his minor child(ren).
- If a subscription is made on behalf of a minor by any person other than the minor's father, the person submitting the subscription shall be required to attach a valid Sharia (Legal) Power of Attorney issued by the competent authorities authorizing him to deal in the funds of the minor through sale, purchase and investment.

Minimum and Maximum Application

The minimum application can be for one Share and the maximum application cannot exceed the Rights Issue size (including original Rights Entitlement, any Rights Entitlement purchased from another Eligible Shareholder, and Additional Shares).

Particulars of the Bank Account

- Each Applicant shall be required to furnish the particulars of their bank account (registered in the name of the Applicant). The Applicant shall not use the bank account number of any other person except in case of minor children only.
- If the bank account of the Applicant is registered with a bank other than the one receiving the Application Form, they shall be required to submit a document in evidence of correctness of the bank account particulars as provided for in the Application Form. This can be done by submitting any document from the Applicant's bank which clearly shows the account number and name of the account holder (Applicant), such as an account statement issued by the bank or a letter / document issued by the Applicant's bank containing the aforesaid information. The Applicant shall ensure that such evidence submitted is readable in a clear manner. The Applicant is not obliged to submit evidence of their bank account if they are subscribing through the bank wherein they maintain their account. In this case, the bank receiving the subscription shall verify and confirm the Applicant's account details in its specific system and procedure.
- The bank account provided in the Application Form would be used only for refunds.
- The Application Form containing the bank account number of a person other than the Applicant shall be rejected.

Documentation Required

- A copy of Applicant's Civil ID / Passport / Commercial Registration certificate, as applicable.
- Submission of a document confirming correctness of the bank account details written in the Application Form, only if the application is made through a bank other than the one with whom the Applicant has their bank account.
- A copy of a valid Power of Attorney duly endorsed by the competent legal authorities in the event the subscription is on behalf of another person.
- In case of applications by non-individuals, which are signed by a person in their capacity as an authorized signatory, a copy of adequate and valid documentation should be attached.

Mode of Subscription

- The Collecting Bank has been instructed to only accept applications for subscriptions that comply with all the requirements as provided for in the Application Form and this Prospectus. It is the responsibility of the Applicant however, to ensure that the particulars and information contained in the Application Form are true, accurate and complete.
- The Applicant shall be required, before submitting the Application Form, to peruse the Prospectus and read the conditions and procedures governing the subscription with care and importance.
- Only the original Application Form (with preprinted details) sent to Eligible Shareholders should be used. Photocopies of Application Forms will not be accepted. If any Eligible Shareholder does not receive the Application Form, such person must contact the Issue Manager sufficiently in advance of the Subscription Closing Date to obtain a duplicate Application Form duly stamped by the Issue Manager.
- Those who validly purchase a Rights Entitlement in the MSM during the Rights Trading Period should contact the Issue Manager and submit a copy of their purchase invoice issued by their broker or statement of account issued by MCDC showing their holding of the Rights Entitlement. The Issue Manager will issue the Application Form to such Applicants. Only the Application Form issued by the Issue Manager should be used by such Applicants.
- The Applicants are required to complete the Application Form for the subscription and furnish all their particulars including the shareholder number available with MCDC, civil number/passport number/commercial registration certificate, date of birth in case of minor children and contact phone number.
- The Applicants are required to sign the Application Form to confirm that the particulars and information contained therein are true, accurate and complete. In case of minor children, only the father or legal guardian may sign the Application Form, on behalf of his minor children.
- The Applicant shall submit the Application Form to the Collecting Bank and make payment at the Issue Price for all Offer Shares (including any Additional Shares) that are the subject of such application. The Applicant shall make such application in accordance with this Prospectus and shall ensure that all documents in support of the information furnished (referred to above) are enclosed.
- If any overseas investor or Shareholder wishes to subscribe to the Rights Issue, they must pay in the currency of the Sultanate of Oman, i.e., Omani Rial.
- In case of payment of the value of the subscription by cheque, it shall be in favor of 'Ahli Bank Rights Issue'.
- In case of payment through bank transfer, the Applicant is responsible for ensuring the successful transfer of the subscription amount to the Collecting Bank within the subscription period and must attach a copy of the transfer acknowledgement copy to the Application Form. The transfers should be made to:

Ahli Bank Rights Issue a/c

A/c no. 9800-920908-519

Ahli Bank SAOG

Swift Code: AUBOMRUXXX

Availability of Duplicate Application Forms

Only the original Application Form (with pre-printed details) sent to Eligible Shareholders should be used. A photocopy of Application Forms will not be accepted. If any Eligible Shareholder does not receive the original Application Form, such person must contact the Issue Manager or the Collecting Bank sufficiently in advance of the Subscription Closing Date to obtain a duplicate Application Form. Applicants submitting a duplicate Application Form should not use the original Application Form, even if it is received/ found subsequently.

In brief

■ KATHMANDU



NEPALIS PROTEST PROPOSED TRAVEL RULES FOR WOMEN

Nepalis last week protested against proposed new travel rules that could force young women to require permission from their family for travelling in some circumstances, calling them an attack on fundamental rights. The government says the regulation is to prevent human trafficking, but demonstrators gathered outside Nepal's immigration department argued the government should be looking at other measures, not hampering women's mobility.

"I am here as a Nepali woman. It is shameful that in this century we have to demand rights," a 19-year-old student at the protest, Abhishu Karki, said. — AFP

■ BRUSSELS



LIBYAN COASTGUARD INTERCEPTS ALMOST HALF OF BOAT MIGRANTS

The Libyan coastguard intercepted 9,541 migrants at sea last year, according to the commander of the EU naval mission Irini.

This was almost half, or 47 per cent, of all people who made their way to Europe from the North African war-torn country in 2020, according to a confidential report by Operation Commander Fabio Agostini to EU states, a copy of which was obtained.

The Libyan coastguard continues to show important operational performance in rescuing people in its own search and rescue zone, according to the report. — dpa

■ TEHRAN



ROUHANI: VIRUS COULD TAKE DECADE TO OVERCOME

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said that the coronavirus pandemic could take years to overcome despite the availability of vaccines. "Even with the vaccines, it could take up to 10 years until the virus is finally defeated... so people should not hope for normalcy or a return to the past for the time being," Rouhani said on state television.

The president said that Iranians should continue to adhere to all hygiene regulations, at least for another year.

Iran started its vaccination programme on Tuesday. Doctors and nurses are being vaccinated first, followed by people over 65 years of age. — dpa

US: North Korea an urgent priority for the United States

WASHINGTON: North Korea's nuclear weapon and ballistic missile programmes are an urgent priority for the United States and Washington remains committed to denuclearisation of the country, the US State Department said on Friday.

The Biden administration's lack of direct engagement with North Korea should not be seen as an indication that the challenge posed by its weapons programmes was not a priority, department spokesman Ned Price said.

North Korea continued to make progress in its nuclear and missile programmes in recent years "which makes this an urgent priority for the United States and one that we are committed to addressing together with our allies and partners," Price said.

"And... the central premise is that we remain committed to de-



US State Department spokesman Ned Price during a press briefing in Washington, DC. — AFP

nuclearisation of North Korea," he said.

Price said the lack of direct engagement to date was "a function of us making sure that we have done the diplomatic legwork, that we have been in close contact in touch with our partners and allies," aiming for a coordinated ap-

The central premise is that we remain committed to denuclearisation of North Korea

NED PRICE
US Dept spokesman

proach.

The Biden administration, which took office last month, says it is conducting a full review of North Korea policy in consultation with allies, particularly South Korea and Japan, following former president Donald Trump's unprecedented engagement with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, which failed to persuade Pyongyang to

give up its nuclear weapons.

A confidential UN report seen by Reuters on Monday said North Korea developed its nuclear and ballistic missile programmes throughout 2020 in violation of international sanctions, helping fund them with some \$300 million stolen through cyber hacks.

President Joe Biden's top Asia official, Kurt Campbell, has said the administration must decide quickly on how to approach North Korea and not repeat an Obama-era delay that led to "provocative" steps by Pyongyang that prevented engagement.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who discussed North Korea with his South Korean counterpart on Thursday, has said additional sanctions could be used in coordination with allies to press North Korea to denuclearise.

— Reuters

Strong quake hits off coast of Fukushima

TOKYO: A strong earthquake with a preliminary magnitude of 7.1 hit off the coast of eastern Japan on Saturday, shaking buildings in Tokyo, but there appeared to be no major damage and no tsunami warning was issued.

The epicentre of the earthquake was off the coast of Fukushima prefecture at a depth of 60 km, the Japan Meteorological Agency said.

The earthquake hit at 11:08 pm. local time and shook buildings in the capital. There were no reports of irregularities at the Tokaimura nuclear facility, public broadcaster NHK said. The Meteorological Agency said no tsunami warning had been issued.

The quake hit off of Fukushima just weeks before the 10-year anniversary of the March 11, 2011, quake that devastated northeast Japan and triggered a massive tsunami. — AFP

Two white tiger cubs in Pakistan likely died of Covid: Zoo officials

LAHORE: Two 11-week-old white tiger cubs that died in a Pakistani zoo last month appear to have died of Covid-19, officials said.

The cubs died in the Lahore Zoo on January 30, four days after beginning treatment for what officials thought was feline panleukopenia virus, a disease that zoo officials said is common in Pakistan and targets cats' immune system.

But an autopsy found the cubs' lungs were badly damaged and they were suffering from severe infection, with pathologists concluding they died from Covid-19.

Although no PCR test for the new coronavirus was conducted, zoo deputy director Kiran Saleem said the zoo believes the cubs were the victims of the pandemic that has killed 12,256 people in Pakistan.

"After their death, the zoo administration conducted tests of all officials, and six

were tested positive, including one official who handled the cubs," Saleem said. "It strengthens the findings of the autopsy. The cubs probably caught the virus from the person handling and feeding them."

Pakistan's zoos regularly draw the ire of animal rights activists, who say hundreds of animals have died from poor living conditions there.

"The last two white tiger cubs have died at Lahore Zoo and once again the negligence of the management and authorities has come out," Zufishan Anushay, founder of JFK (Justice for Kiki) Animal Rescue And Shelter, said.

"White tigers are extremely rare and need a specific habitat and environment to live a healthy life.

"By caging them in unhygienic conditions with no medical arrangements, we will keep witnessing these incidents." — Reuters



Nurses hold up signs as they march during a demonstration against the military coup in Yangon. — AFP

Myanmar protesters block arrests

YANGON: Opposition to Myanmar's new military regime intensified on Saturday as spontaneous neighbourhood watch groups mobilised to thwart arrests of anti-coup activists and the UN demanded the release of ousted leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

The army takeover that brought a decade-old democracy to an end last week has unleashed a storm of anger and defiance, with huge daily protests bringing urban centres around the country to a standstill.

Since taking Suu Kyi and her top allies into custody, troops have stepped up arrests of civil servants, doctors and others joining strikes to call on the generals to relinquish power.

Crowds defied overnight curfews to mass on the streets as night fell, hours after finishing a seventh straight day of rallies, following rumours that police were launching a fresh wave of arrests.

One group swarmed a hospital in the city of Patheingyi on rumours

that a popular local doctor would be taken, chanting a Buddhist prayer urging protection from harm.

"If I have problems, I will ask for your help," Than Min Htut told the group who had come to aid him, flashing the three-finger salute that has come to symbolise resistance to the coup.

Than Min Htut said on Saturday he was still free and would continue participating in a civil disobedience campaign opposing military rule. — AFP

Algeria turns to bananas in trade gap battle

SIDI FREDJ, Algeria: Faced with dwindling energy revenues and costlier imports, Algeria's government is turning to farmers like Mostefa Mazouzi to help narrow its trade gap — so it's lent him a hectare of land on condition he use it to grow bananas.

Mazouzi, who already owns a tomato farm, has built greenhouses and already harvested a banana crop on the new land near the Mediterranean coast.

While he won't give figures, he says the venture is "very profitable", and the government, reaping the benefits of early domestic plantings of a crop that cost \$35 million to import in the first



Algerian farmer Mostefa Mazouzi checks on bananas at his banana farm in Sidi Fredj, about 40 km west of the capital, Algiers. — Reuters

quarter of 2019, is happy too.

Mazouzi says bananas earn more for him than other crops because mostly imported fruit is more expensive.

He plans to create an association for banana producers and wants the government to develop the crop more widely along the coast.

"Banana cultivation will help Algeria gain employment and wealth," he said at his banana farm west of the capital, Algiers. "We are looking for investment support."

For Algeria, an OPEC member that failed to develop its non-energy sectors before oil prices

fell, the need to push the state-controlled economy to produce goods it currently buys abroad is growing ever more urgent.

Food imports, accounting for around 20 per cent of Algeria's purchases from abroad, totalled \$8.07 billion in 2019, and the government has been providing loans at low interest rates for farmers to grow other crops too.

Agriculture Minister Abdelhamid Hamdani last week announced plans to cut that annual bill by at least \$2.5 billion by boosting domestic output and rationing spending on purchases from abroad. — Reuters

Draghi sworn in as Italy’s PM

ROME: Former European Central Bank chief Mario Draghi was formally sworn in as Italy’s new prime minister on Saturday, against the backdrop of the deadly coronavirus pandemic and a crippling recession.

The appointment of the 73-year-old known as “Super Mario” capped weeks of political instability for the country still in the grips of the health crisis that has killed more than 93,000 people.

“I swear to be loyal to the Republic,” recited Draghi, as he stood before President Sergio Mattarella in the ornate presidential palace in a televised ceremony. Members of his new cabinet, who include technocrats, veteran politicians and ministers held over from the previous government, each took the oath of office.

Draghi was parachuted in by Mattarella after the previous centre-left coalition under premier Giuseppe Conte collapsed, leading Italy rudderless amid the worst recession since World War II. After assembling a broad-based coalition, on Friday night he formally accepted the post of premier, publicly revealing the new cabinet for the first time.

On Wednesday, Draghi will be presented to the Senate, the upper house of parliament, followed by the lower Chamber of Deputies on Thursday for a confidence vote that will give the final official



Italian outgoing prime minister Giuseppe Conte hands over the cabinet minister bell to new Prime Minister Mario Draghi, during a handover ceremony at Palazzo Chigi in Rome. — AFP

blessing to his government.

“Break a leg,” read the headline on *La Stampa* daily Saturday, as an Ipsos poll in the *Corriere della Sera* daily showed 62 per cent of Italians supporting Draghi.

Following the swearing-in, Conte greeted his successor in Chigi Palace, the prime minister’s office, during a short ceremony, receiving sustained applause from civil servants in the courtyard before departing in an official vehicle.

Conte’s final months in office

The appointment of the 73-year-old known as ‘Super Mario’ capped weeks of political instability for the country still in the grips of the health crisis

were marked by political turmoil but the former law professor — who rose to power in 2018 with no prior political experience —

represented for many Italians a comforting, steady hand during the darkest moments of the pandemic last year.

Draghi has the support of a rainbow coalition ranging from leftists to Matteo Salvini’s far-right League.

It includes the populist Five Star Movement (M5S), the centre-left Democratic Party (PD) and Italia Viva — who made-up the previous government before falling out over the handling of the Covid-19 pandemic. — AFP

EU expert: Coronavirus could last indefinitely

STOCKHOLM: The coronavirus could last indefinitely, warned the head of the European Union’s disease control agency on Friday, despite global infections having decelerated in the last month and vaccine rollouts having begun.

In an interview, ECDC chief Andrea Ammon urged European countries in particular not to drop their guard against a virus that “seems very well adapted to humans” and may require experts to tweak vaccines over time, as is the case with the seasonal flu.

“So we should be prepared that it will remain with us,” according to Ammon, head of the Stockholm-based European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control.

After the latest harsh wave of a pandemic that started in China more than a year ago, glimmers of hope flickered as an AFP database showed the rate of new Covid-19 infections has slowed by 44.5 per cent worldwide over the past month.

More than 107 million people have been infected worldwide and nearly 2.4 million have died from Covid-19.

But disease experts warned



ECDC chief Andrea Ammon

that vaccines won’t end the pandemic unless all countries receive doses in a fast and fair manner.

Writing in an open letter published in *The Lancet* medical journal, the authors said with vaccine stockpiling in wealthier countries, “it could be years before the coronavirus is brought under control at a global level.”

The warning came as US vaccine maker Moderna said it was seeking clearance with regulators around the world to put 50 per cent more coronavirus vaccine into each of its vials as a way to quickly boost current supply levels.

In Britain, a marked drop in infections and accelerating vaccinations have prompted some within the governing Conservative Party to push for stay-at-home rules to be lifted in early March. — AFP

Top Republican McConnell says will vote to acquit Trump

WASHINGTON: The US Senate’s top Republican Mitch McConnell revealed on Saturday that he will vote against convicting Donald Trump, US media reported, as the impeachment trial of the former president nears its conclusion with a likely acquittal.

While describing the vote on whether to convict as a “close call,” he told colleagues in a letter that “I am persuaded that impeachments are a tool primarily of removal and we therefore lack jurisdiction,” according to Politico which obtained a copy of the message.

“I will vote to acquit,” McConnell added.

The revelation leaves it highly likely that the Senate will fail to reach the two-thirds majority necessary to convict Trump on the single charge of incitement of insurrection for his role in whipping up a mob that besieged the US

Capitol on January 6.

With the Senate split 50-50, 17 Republicans would need to defect from the former president in order to reach a conviction.

McConnell remains hugely influential within his party, however, and his acquittal vote will carry weight.

But the top Republican, who broke with the president in December over Trump’s insistence that the election was stolen, signalled in his letter that he does not believe Trump is innocent of wrongdoing.

“The Constitution makes perfectly clear that presidential criminal misconduct while in office can be prosecuted after the president has left office, which in my view alleviates the otherwise troubling ‘January exception’ argument raised by the House,” McConnell said according to Politico.



Republican Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell arrives at the US Capitol for the impeachment trial of former US president Trump in Washington, DC. — AFP

House impeachment managers have warned that acquitting Trump would open the door for future presidents to violate their office in the final weeks of their

presidency and suffer no accountability.

Much of this week’s trial focused on how much Trump knew about the rioters’ actions as they

rampaged through Congress on Jan. 6 seeking to prevent lawmakers from certifying Democrat Joe Biden’s victory in the November election.

Herrera Beutler, one of 10 in her party who voted last month in the House of Representatives to impeach Trump, recounted in a statement late on Friday the details of a call between Trump and the top House Republican, Kevin McCarthy.

“Well, Kevin, I guess these people are more upset about the election than you are,” Beutler quoted Trump as saying. She said Trump initially denied his supporters were involved in the attack, claiming the mob were members of the left-leaning Antifa movement, a false claim that McCarthy rejected.

Trump, who left office on January 20, is the first US president to be impeached twice and the first

to face trial after leaving office. If convicted, the Senate could then vote to bar him from running for office again.

Conviction is seen as unlikely, however, as at least 17 Republicans in the 100-seat chamber would have to join all 50 Democrats to find the former president guilty. Top Senate Republican Mitch McConnell will vote to acquit Trump, a source familiar with the situation said on Saturday.

The Senate is expected to convene at 10 am, and a final vote could come as early as Saturday afternoon, though a call for witnesses could delay that.

The trial has highlighted the extraordinary danger lawmakers faced on January 6, when Trump urged his followers to march on the Capitol and “get wild” in an effort to overturn his election loss. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

RIYADH

US set to lift ‘terror’ tag on Ansar Allah

Saudi Arabia said it foiled a drone attack by Ansar Allah on a southern airport just days before the new US administration is to stop designating the Yemeni fighters as a “terror” group.

Saudi air defences “intercepted and destroyed a drone rigged with explosives which had been launched by Ansar Allah against Abha airport,” a statement quoted by state television said. Abha airport was already targeted by fighters on Wednesday, when a drone strike left a civilian aircraft



ablaze. Ansar Allah says that the airport, little more than 100 kilometres from the border, is a legitimate target as it has been used as a base for the coalition’s widely condemned bombing campaign in Yemen. — AFP

BERLIN

Germany wants troops to stay on in Afghanistan

Germany wants to extend its military presence in Afghanistan, where it has the second largest contingent after the United States, Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said. Peace negotiations between the government and the Taliban “will not be concluded before the end of March,” when Germany’s annual mandate is due to expire, he told the Funke media group.

“That is why we must prepare for different scenarios, including a new mandate with the Bun-



destag”, Germany’s lower house of parliament.

An agreement between the United States and the Taliban stipulates that all US forces should withdraw by May 2021.

— AFP

MOSCOW

‘Snow apocalypse’ blankets frozen Moscow

Heavy snowfalls have buried Moscow in massive snow piles, disrupting transport, delaying flights and making it tough to get around for pedestrians braving strong winds and temperatures of minus 15 Celsius.

The snowfall started late on Thursday and was expected to end on Sunday. Russia’s emergency service advised people to stay away from trees, warning of winds gusts of 18 metres per second.

“It’s a real snowstorm, a snow



Armageddon, a snow apocalypse. This is not a practice alert, but a combat alert,” Evgeny Tishkovets from the weather service Fobos was quoted by RIA news agency as saying before the snowfall began. — dpa

You can't always get what you want...

I'm going to share this young woman's experience, as a reminder that so much of life is about perspective.

Let's call our young woman Jenny. That's not her real name, but it will do. Currently in her late-teens, and incredibly articulate and intelligent, she has always wanted to be older and has always lamented the fact that as the youngest child, all her brothers and sisters have had, and experienced, everything, before she has and consequently has had a 'hand-me-down' life experience. I don't think she is at all bitter about it but finds it irksome more so than cause for regret.

"It's funny really, all I have ever wanted to do was to grow up, or be grown up, and do all the things that adults take for granted," Jenny told me.

"Like being able to go out wherever and whenever they want and eat what they want, when they feel like it. I mean, there are times when I want an avocado spread on toasted brown whole-wheat bread, something healthy and ummm, vibrant. Other times I want biryani, or some lovely fish (I'm not really into chicken), and occasionally I just want to roll my sleeves up and polish off a whole



Ray Petersen
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IT'S FUNNY
REALLY, ALL
I HAVE EVER
WANTED TO DO
WAS TO GROW UP,
OR BE GROWN UP

anchovy pizza, all on my own." She laughed out loud at that, betraying the fact that she had done so, at some time during her young past.

Jenny went on, "Like being able to stay out late, or even stay up late, or go to bed early. Or to sleep-in and throw my alarm clock away instead of just tapping the snooze button and delaying the inevitable. Like being able to choose clothes of a style and fashion that suit their build and complexion, of colours and styles that they like, that suit them, and reflect their personality.

"Like being able to drive a car. Maybe even to select the car they want, either a big car to keep them safe, or a neat little 'town car,' in a feminine pink, yellow or fluorescent green. A car that tells the world exactly who they are. How cool would that be?"

She expresses so well her enthusiasm for life, her personality, and her individuality there for all to see, and yet here is this girl, in such a hurry to grow up, it clearly causes her some angst. Then, as she picked at a cookie she said, in a very grown-up, yet childish way, frowning her brow... "I do remember though, while all I've wanted is to grow up, and yet it

sometimes seems I never will."

Pondering a moment, Jenny asked, "How is that for irony? All I want to do is get older, while Mum worries about getting older. She says she wishes she didn't feel so old, that she wasn't so stiff and sore in the mornings, and that she wasn't putting on weight and losing her figure. She worries about gray hairs, bags under her eyes, and crow's feet. She wishes she were younger, while I wish I were older. How crazy is that?" Not at all, as it's all about perspective? If you are 6 feet tall, whether you are associating with basketballers or jockeys dictates whether you are, in that moment, short or tall. It's all about perspective, and like Sara and her mother, young and old are also matters of perspective.

There is nothing that will accelerate youth except age, and it appears there is no elixir of youth for the more mature.

But ye of tender years, and tender maturity take hope, for to paraphrase Carolyn Hart... "The true elixir of youth is expectation, with its grandeur, its glory, its magnificent hopes and dreams, enhancing the belief that all things are yet possible."

LONG JOURNEY

Hope as US steps up pharmacy vaccinations

ISSAM AHMED

For some, it represents the chance to be reunited with grandchildren. For others, the first step on the long journey back to normal, knowing they'll soon be protected against Covid-19.

Retail pharmacies across the United States on Friday began administering a million vaccine doses sent to them by the government of President Joe Biden, the latest sign the country's immunisation campaign is gathering pace.

On a bitterly cold day in Bethesda, just outside the capital Washington, a steady stream of elderly people arrived for their first dose of Moderna's two-shot course at their local CVS pharmacy.

"This is wonderful, it's really convenient," said Ted Pochter, 76. His wife, Liz Pochter, added their daughter had signed them up online the day before at 6:30 am.

"I was trying to get on my phone and it was already full, but she was on the computer and did it," said the 67-year-old who works for the National Gallery of Art.

"It did hurt a little bit," she said of the jab, laughing.

Some 6,500 drugstores and supermarket pharmacies have started administering their

first doses under a federal partnership, and the programme is set to expand to 40,000 outlets.

It's seen as a way to reduce the burden on state health departments while making it more convenient for people already used to getting their flu shots at

places like CVS, Rite Aid and Walgreens.

After a fitful start, the US vaccination rate is ticking up, and 35.8 million people have now had at least one dose, about 10 per cent of the population.

Like the Pochters, Tahmineh Mirmirani needed her son's assistance to get on the web and book her appointment early on Thursday.

Now, the 81-year-old, who once worked as a journalist in her native Iran, said she looks forward to soon seeing her grandchildren.

Lee, a 72-year-old retiree who gave only his first name, said he was happy to get his vaccine after trying for weeks. "We've registered everywhere we can, in the county and in the state."

But his relief was dampened by the fact that his wife, who accompanied him, couldn't get her vaccine on Friday and the couple would have to return on Monday for her appointment.

"We have a graduating grandchild, who's a graduating senior. And we would like to be able to go to the graduation," he said, if it does take place.

"We're hoping that summer brings better results with Covid and with the vaccine. I hope that they're able to vaccinate a lot of people between now and then."

Many others have found navigating the vaccination sign-up system frustrating.

Faye Elkins, 74, said she spent Thursday lining up to get a vaccination at a local high school, only to be told they were available only for over-75s, not over-65s, as advertised.

"We were turned away, along with many other people, some of whom waited in line for up to three hours in the cold," she said.

Elkins and her husband Jim Barnett said they hadn't managed to get an appointment at CVS despite their best efforts, but were there to try their luck in case someone cancelled. — AFP

TWIN PROBLEMS

Draghi takes the reins as Italian PM, now comes the hard part

ANGELO AMANTE

Italians' hopes in Mario Draghi could hardly be higher. But the former European Central Bank chief, who was sworn in as the country's new prime minister on Saturday, will have a tough time fulfilling them.

His main tasks will be the efficient management of over 200 billion euros (\$241 billion) Italy expects from a European Union fund to help the bloc's recovery, and ensuring smooth progress of the Covid-19 vaccination campaign.

Draghi has several advantages. He comes to power with one of the largest majorities of any government in Italy's post-war history, huge international prestige and an approval rating of 71 per cent, according to a survey published this week. But his broad parliamentary backing may also be a problem.

He will have to manage an unwieldy coalition made up of parties from left to right, including traditionally bitter foes such as the 5-Star Movement and Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia, the right-wing League and centre-left Democratic Party.

Giovanni Orsina, head of the LU-ISS university school of government in Rome, said Draghi's popularity and credibility will assure him of an easy ride at the beginning.

"The party system is difficult to manage, but Draghi, with his prestige, can make it hard for them to thwart him," he said. Party horse-trading over cabinet posts is normally a central part of forming an Italian government, yet Draghi unveiled his ministerial team on Friday without any apparent negotiations or opposition from the coali-



Italy's Prime Minister Mario Draghi poses during a group photo of the new government following a swearing-in ceremony at the Quirinale Presidential Palace in Rome on Saturday. — AFP

HIS MAIN TASKS
WILL BE THE
EFFICIENT
MANAGEMENT
OF CASH FROM A
EUROPEAN UNION
FUND AND COVID
VACCINATION

tion parties.

His picks will not have pleased everyone, however, and it may be only a matter of time before resentment and dissatisfaction surface.

Draghi's first job will be redrafting Italy's Recovery Plan, which must be handed to the European Commission by April to tap funds desperately needed to revive the recession-hit economy.

The Commission will disburse the money in instalments dependent on the government reaching milestones and meeting benchmarks. The previous government of Giuseppe Conte was brought down partly by squabbles over how to manage the plan and which projects to include, so Draghi will want to swiftly stamp his authority

on a revised version.

Italy has a dismal track record of using EU funds and making productive investments in its economy, with projects often bogged down by red tape or hit by corruption probes.

"We need to accelerate the procedures. It's unthinkable to achieve what we have to with the slowness of our bureaucracy," Enrico Giovannini, Draghi's new infrastructure and transport minister said shortly before his appointment.

It will not be easy for the prime minister to overcome these deep-rooted problems, but his past performance at the Italian Treasury, the Bank of Italy and the ECB shows he can act decisively and effectively. — Reuters

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Al Rustaq hammer Al Nahda; Al Suwaiq win big

ADIL AL BALUSHI

MUSCAT, FEB 13

Southern Batinah team, Al Rustaq, clinched crucial three points from the hosts, Al Nahda, as they routed them 3-1 on Friday at the ninth week of Omantel League at the Al Buraimi Sports Complex.

Cosmos Dauda put his team Al Rustaq ahead as he netted the opening goal in the tenth minute.

Mohsin Darwish's battalion scored the equaliser through Ahmed al Matrooshi after seven minutes from the guests goal at the 17th minute. In the second half, Al Rustaq club showed a different style and the strikers registered a strong comeback as Ahmed al Siyabi scored the second goal for his team after six minutes from the commencement of the second half.

Omar al Fazari increased the

margin as he struck the third goal in the 77th minute.

After the triumph, Al Rustaq climbed to sixth spot with 14 points while Al Nahda, who suffered their fourth loss, are struggling at 12th place and in the danger zone with three points.

The victory will encourage Al Rustaq in the forthcoming round as they will meet Musannah in the Southern Batinah derby on February 21 at Al Rustaq Sports Complex.

Four times winner, Al Suwaiq, overwhelmed Oman club 4-1 at Seeb Stadium on Friday night.

After their fifth victory in the league, Northern Batinah team reached the fourth place and have 16 points while Oman club suffered their second consecutive loss after Saham in the previous round, remained at ten points and at the eighth place. Despite to



Oman club's leading goal by Ganio Oseini in the 46th minute, Al Suwaiq team registered a powerful return as they netted four goals in the second half by Roudolphe Patrick, Diego Hernriqu, Abd al Noufli and an own goal by Abduladheem al Ajmi.

Oman Chairman club, Sayyid Said bin Sultan al Busaidy, expressed his dissatisfaction on the referees' performance at Omantel League. In a tweet, he said: "With continuation of the referees errors, Oman's football will not move towards better development."

Al Ittihad missed a thrilling win as Nizwa's Elei Sesse scored the equaliser in the dying minutes to spoil the winning points of the hosts as the match ended in a 1-1 draw at Al Saada Sports Complex.

The result did not benefit both teams as they were looking for catching up three points to climb

some spots above in the league order.

Al Ittihad positioned in the ninth place and possess nine points while Nizwa at 11th place and have six points. The first half of the match ended in a goalless draw while both the goals were scored in the second half.

Abdullah Zaher took the lead as he scored the first goal to lead the hosts in the 67th minute while Elei Sesse found the equaliser in the last three minutes prior to ending the match.

Al Nasr stunned Muscat with a solitary goal scored by Kabero Abdullah Mossa in the 53rd minute at Al Saada Sports Complex late on Friday.

With the triumph, the Salalah-based team raised their tally to 15 points at fifth place while Muscat remained at the relegation zone with three points only.

Nassaruddin clinches Kais Celebration Trophy spoils

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH

MUSCAT, FEB 13

Mohammad Nassaruddin clinched the men's title in the annual Kais Celebration Golf Trophy 2021 at Ghala Golf Club.

Nassaruddin claimed the honours with 40 points while Yousuf al Balushi and Yuri Gijselman settled for the joint second place with 39 points.

Maralyn Hayes bagged the spoils in the Ladies section with 39 points while Jacky Franssen was the runner-up with 25 points. Kaiser James Acebedo was the winner in the Juniors category with 39 points and Adam al Barwani finished in the second place with 37 points.

The event was held with a full strength field and keeping up with the Covid-19 guidelines the participants were reduced.

On the occasion, His Highness



Hamoud bin Kais bin Tarik al Said reflected, "I am proud to be part of this event held in honour of my father and his legacy of Golf in Oman and in promoting



the youth development in the country. And we have a great team here in Ghala Golf Club. It was good weather today and everyone seemed to have enjoyed it."

"This tournament is a legacy and we hope it will always continue as Sayyid Kais has been one of the founders of golf in Oman and we are very grateful

to the sponsors for the support – Mohsin Haider Darwish and HKT International," said Faiz Mohammed, golf player and board member of Ghala Golf

Club. Captain Ewan Simpson of Ghala Golf Club stated that the Kais Celebration Golf Trophy is one of Ghala's premier event.

"It is one of our most respected events as it is only played here. It is a challenging competition because the handicap levels are much lower than some of the other competitions. And so it brings forward a much higher standard of golf. The challenge is of course the weather and the course itself, especially the greens."

Talking about the course, Russ Wilson, Golf Course Superintendent, Ghala Golf Club, explained how they had speeded up the greens for the players.

"We started at about 3.30 am in the morning and double rolled the greens which increases the speeds of the greens and makes the ball roll better."



West Indies 41-3 against Bangladesh

West Indies were 41-3 at stumps on the third day of the second Test against Bangladesh at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Dhaka on Saturday. Nkrumah Bonner was on eight with nightwatchman Jomel Warrican, two not out, after Kraigg Brathwaite (six), Shayne Moseley (seven) and John Campbell (18) were dismissed.



Ali's Kohli scalp 'world-class', says Leach

The ball with which England's Moeen Ali bowled India's Virat Kohli for nought on Saturday was "world class", fellow spinner Jack Leach said at the close of the first day of the second Test. Ali deceived the Indian captain with a perfect off-spinners' delivery that pitched outside the off stump and spun sharply between bat and pad.

HH Sayyid Theyazin visits Oman Sail



MUSCAT: HH Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth, visited Oman Sail's headquarters at Al Mouj Muscat, on Saturday.

During the visit, HH Sayyid Theyazin was acquainted with the work of the foundation and its national contributions on various fields. He watched a visual display about the organisation's message in reviving Oman's maritime glories and its role in highlighting the Sultanate's name at the international events as well

as its efforts in the field of youth empowerment.

The visual display showed that the foundation's work is aligned with the priorities of Oman Vision 2040 and the strategic goals on the field of sailing as well as the economic and marketing levels. It displayed the international tournaments which will be hosted by the Sultanate.

HH Sayyid Theyazin met with the Olympic team that is seeking to qualify for Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games. He commended the effort



being exerted in preparation for the games.

During the visit, HH Sayyid Theyazin met with the junior players who had excelled in the Gulf and Asian sailing championships, and the parathletics who are currently training with the Sail Freely programme with the aim of forming a national team to represent the Sultanate at the international championships.

Dr Khamis bin Salim al Jabir, CEO of Oman Sail, expressed his happiness over HH Sayyid

Theyazin's visit to Oman Sail noting that this visit will boost the morale of Oman Sail's employees and will encourage them to continue their efforts to achieve the objectives of the foundation and enhance its contribution to the national sustainable development.

He added that the visit represents a strong motivation for the members of the Olympic teams who are currently preparing to qualify for Tokyo Games.

— ONA

Rohit ton helps India weather top-order collapse against England



CHENNAI: Opener Rohit Sharma smashed 161 while India's other top-order batsmen fell cheaply, helping the home side build to 300-6 on the opening day of the second match against England at Chennai's MA Chidambaram Stadium on Saturday.

At 86-3, India looked to have thrown away any chance of batting themselves into a strong position on a pitch where runs are going to be harder to come by as the match progresses.

But Rohit's 162-run partnership with Ajinkya Rahane dragged the hosts back into the contest, before England dismissed both in the final session.

Rishabh Pant was batting on 33 at stumps, with debutant Axar Patel on five at the other end.

"On this wicket, 350 will be a pretty good score. We still have

“On this wicket, 350 will be a pretty good score. We still have four wickets and I'm sure they'd try to bat as long as possible

ROHIT SHARMA
Indian opener

four wickets and I'm sure they'd try to bat as long as possible," Rohit told a video conference.

"I'm little disappointed to get out like that but happy that the team is in a good position."

Earlier, Olly Stone had dismissed opener Shubman Gill for a duck with his third delivery

after India captain Virat Kohli had elected to bat.

Rohit added 85 runs with Cheteshwar Pujara to steady the innings, but spinners helped England reclaim control with two quick wickets before the lunch break.

Pujara made 21 before edging Jack Leach to slip, and in the next over Moeen Ali marked his test recall by spinning one through Kohli's defence to clean bowl the India captain for a duck.

Kohli initially stood frozen in disbelief, his dismissal illustrating just how spin-friendly the track is.

After the opening test was played behind closed doors, 15,000 fans were allowed back in the stadium, and Rohit gave them plenty to cheer about.

The opener pulled Ben Stokes for a six and hit Moeen over the

SCOREBOARD	
INDIA	
R Sharma c Ali b Leach.....	161
S Gill lbw Stone	0
C Pujara c Stokes b Leach.....	21
V Kohli b Ali	0
A Rahane b Ali	67
R Pant (not out).....	33
R Ashwin c Pope b Root	13
A Patel (not out).....	5
Total (For 6 wkts, 88 overs).....	300
Fall of wickets: 1-0, 2-85, 3-86, 4-248, 5-249, 6-284	
Bowling: Broad 11-2-37-0, Stone 15-5-42-1, Leach 26-2-78-2, Stokes 2-0-16-0, Ali 26-3-112-2, Root 8-2-15-1	

long-off ropes en route to scoring 100 of India's first 147 runs.

Rohit and Rahane denied England a wicket in the second session, but both then fell to spinners after tea.

Rohit, who smashed 18 fours in his knock, slog-swept a Leach delivery to Moeen, who also bowled Rahane for 67.

"It was a hard-fought day, I think we have to be quite patient," Leach said.

"We got a couple of wickets towards the end, which is obviously good. With that new ball, hopefully tomorrow morning we get a couple of quick wickets and get back."

Beaten by 227 runs in the first match of the four-test series, India dropped Washington Sundar and Shahbaz Nadeem, while resting Jasprit Bumrah for the match.

All-rounder Patel made his Test debut while left-arm wrist-spinner Kuldeep Yadav and quick Mohammed Siraj were recalled.

England made four changes, with wicketkeeper Ben Foakes, seamer Stuart Broad, spin all-rounder Moeen and quick Stone drafted in to replace Jos Buttler, James Anderson, Dom Bess and the injured Jofra Archer.

— Reuters

Sandeep bowls Muscat to big win against winless AER

MUSCAT: Riding on Sandeep Goud's superb 5 for 29, Muscat CT thrashed winless AER by nine wickets in a Premier Division 50-over League game at OC Turf 1 in Al Amerat on Friday.

Having played eight matches without a win already, AER had another forgettable outing, getting dismissed for a dismal 80 in 20 overs as Muscat pacers Sandeep and Ganesh Chandrashekhar (3 for 25) bowled sizzling spells. Asim Kamal topscored with a defiant 30.

League leader Muscat raced to the target in only 7.4 overs, scoring 81 for 1. Shoaib Khan hammered 45 not out off only 23 balls while Kashyapkumar Prajapati scored equally aggressive 27 off 14. **BRIEF SCORES (PREMIER DIVISION):** AER 80 all out in 20 overs (Asim Kamal 30 - 3x4, 1x6, Sandeep Goud 5-29, Ganesh Chandrashekhar 3-25) lost to Muscat CT 81 for 1 in 7.4 overs (Shoaib Khan 45 - 6x4, 2x6, Kashyapkumar Prajapati 27 - 3x4, 2x6) by 9 wickets.

SARCO TOO GOOD FOR OCT MUSCAT

Dileepa Srilal and Murad Khan struck solid half centuries while Sandip Patel picked up 5 for 34 as Sarco trounced OCT Muscat by 156 runs in an A Division 50-over League game at OC Turf 2 on Friday.

Sarco posted a robust 261 on the board thanks to major contributions by Dileepa (72), Murad (66) and Sameer Mohammed (46). Muthir al Balushi bowled well, taking 5 for 46.

OCT Muscat failed to fight, folding up for a meagre 105 in the 23rd over. Rashad Mohammed (49) and Majid Hussain (32) were its main scorers. Sandip was the pick of Sarco bowlers with a five-wicket haul.

BRIEF SCORES (A DIVISION): Sarco 261 all out in 49.2 overs (Dileepa Srilal 72 - 6x4, 1x6, Murad Khan 66 - 6x4, 4x6, Sameer Mohammed 46 - 5x4, Muthir al Balushi 5-46) beat OCT Muscat 105 all out in 22.3 overs (Rashad Mohammed 49 - 2x4, 4x6, Majid Hussein 32 - 2x4, Sandip Patel 5-34, Jeethesha Shridhara 2-31) by 156 runs.

GURVIR, ARIF STEER ORIENT TO BIG WIN

A splendid 92 by Gurvir Singh and Arif Hussain's excellent all-round show powered Orient Travels/Gitacs to a thumping 174-run victory against OCT Al Hail A in a 30-over B Division League clash at Muscat Municipality ground 1.

Apart from Gurvir's top knock, Arif's 33-ball 63



Sandeep Goud of Muscat CT

In a 'B' Division game, star Omani all-rounder Shuaib Ismail was the star of OCT Ruwi's 62-run win over OCT Seeb at Muscat Municipality Ground 2

was the other main feature of Orient Travels' 268 for 7. Abdul Ghani and Nadhir Ghulam bagged two wickets each.

OCT Al Hail's response was dismal to say the least as it was bowled out for 94 in 22.1 overs, Arif and Umar Rahman taking three wicket each.

BRIEF SCORES (B DIVISION): Orient Travels/Gitacs 268 for 7 in 30 overs (Gurvir Singh 92 - 9x4, 2x6, Arif Hussain 63 - 12x4, Abdul Ghani 2-54, Nadhir Ghulam 2-53) beat OCT Al Hail 'A' 94 all out in 22.1 overs (Abdul Ghani 37 - 4x4, Faris Said 28 - 3x4, 1x6, Arif Hussain 3-22, Umar Rahman 3-23, Ihsan Khan 2-26) by 174 runs.

SHUAIB POWERS OCT RUWI TO VICTORY

In another B Division game, star Omani all-rounder Shuaib Ismail was the star of OCT Ruwi's 62-run win over OCT Seeb at Muscat Municipality ground 2.

Zubair Ali (58) and Shuaib (52) topscored in Ruwi's 214 for 6 as Younis Murad took 2 for 38.

OCT Seeb never really recovered from a disastrous start of 56 for 6 in 13 overs and could manage to score only 152 for 9 in 30 overs, Younis Murad topscoring with 30. Shuaib was outstanding with the ball, taking 3 for 15 in five overs while Mohammed Ali claimed 3 for 35 in his six-over spell. **BRIEF SCORES (B DIVISION):** Oct Ruwi 214 for 6 in 30 overs (Zubair Ali 58 - 4x4, Shuaib Ismail 52 - 6x4, 2x6, Younis Murad 2-38) beat Oct Seeb 152 for 9 in 30 overs (Salim al Balushi 31 - 1x4, 1x6, Younis Murad 30 - 4x4, Shuaib Ismail 3-15, Mohammed Ali 3-35, Imran al Balushi 2-24) by 62 runs.



NADAL EASES PAST NORRIE INTO LAST 16

MELBOURNE: World number two Rafael Nadal said his minor back injury was improving by the day as he accelerated his pursuit of a record 21st Grand Slam title with victory over Cameron Norrie at the Australian Open on Saturday.

The Spanish second seed has altered his service motion due to lower-back tightness that has plagued him all tournament, although it didn't stop him emphatically demolishing his first two opponents in straight sets.

Britain's 69th-ranked Norrie proved a tougher assignment, with Nadal pressed much harder before emerging a 7-5, 6-2, 7-5 winner in an empty Rod Laver Arena as Melbourne went into a five-day coronavirus lockdown. It put him into a Slam last 16 for the 49th time, behind only Roger Federer

(67) and Novak Djokovic (53).

"Today is better. First day I feel an improvement, and that's the most important thing for me today, more than any other thing," he said of his back.

"Today is the first day that I started to serve again my normal serve. It was an important victory for me. The biggest victory is the back is better for the first day."

Nadal next faces fiery Italian Fabio Fognini, who beat Australian Alex de Minaur in straight sets. The Spaniard is bidding to win his 21st major title and claim sole ownership of the men's record, which he currently shares with Federer.

TOUGH NUT
His victory keeps him on course to meet Djokovic in the final,

Australian Open results

Men's singles

3rd rd: 7-Andrey Rublev bt Feliciano Lopez 7-5, 6-2, 6-3; 24-Casper Ruud bt Radu Albot 6-1, 5-7, 6-4, 6-4; Mackenzie McDonald bt Lloyd Harris 7-6 (9/7), 6-1, 6-4; 4-Daniil Medvedev bt 28-Filip Krajinovic 6-3, 6-3, 4-6, 3-6, 6-0; 5-Stefanos Tsitsipas bt Mikael Ymer 6-4, 6-1, 6-1; 9-Matteo Berrettini bt 19-Karen Khachanov 7-6 (7/1), 7-6 (7/5), 7-6 (7/5); 16-Fabio Fognini bt 21-Alex De Minaur 6-4, 6-3, 6-4; 2-Rafael Nadal bt Cameron Norrie 7-5, 6-2, 7-5.

Women's singles:

3rd rd: 1-Ashleigh Barty bt 29-Ekaterina Alexandrova 6-2, 6-4; Shelby Rogers bt 21-Anett Kontaveit 6-4, 6-3; 18-Elise Mertens bt 11-Belinda Bencic 6-2, 6-1; 25-Karolina Muchova bt 6-Karolina Pliskova 7-5, 7-5; 28-Donna Vekic bt Kaia Kanepi 5-7, 7-6 (7/2), 6-4; 22-Jennifer Brady bt Kaja Juvan 6-1, 6-3; Jessica Pegula bt Kristina Mladenovic 6-2, 6-1; 5-Elina Svitolina bt 26-Yulia Putintseva 6-4, 6-0.

although the defending champion is under an injury cloud after suffering what he called an abdominal "muscle tear" in the third round on Friday.

It remains unclear whether the top-seeded Serb will be able to play his fourth-round match against Milos Raonic on Sunday.

The odds were heavily stacked in Nadal's favour against Norrie, as he has never lost an Australian Open match to a player ranked as low as the Briton at 69.

STELLAR RECORD
He also holds a stellar record against fellow lefties, winning 103 of 117, with the last loss coming against Denis Shapovalov in Montreal in 2017.

Nadal signalled his intent by opening with a serve to love, but

Norrie proved a tough nut to crack, going blow-for-blow in a baseline battle and breaking the second seed.

But Nadal quickly refocused to fight back and take the set 7-5 when Norrie sent a forehand long.

The Spaniard created plenty of break point opportunities and finally converted an overhead to go break for 4-2 in the second set.

Another break sealed the set as Norrie, who was aiming to reach a Grand Slam last 16 for the first time, wilted under Nadal's relentless firepower.

Little separated them in the third set until Nadal made his move in the 11th game, forcing a match point with a screaming forehand and booking the win when Norrie send a backhand wide. — AFP

AO TOP QUOTES



"Tonight was something I have never experienced before, it was new. I almost had to cut myself some slack and give myself the time to get used to it and adjust to it." **Ash Barty** on playing without spectators.



"I just like sugar... sweet desserts, tiramisu, panna cotta, anything. I don't eat sugar during the tournament and I've got five cakes in my room. After the tournament it's going to be a big fight with the cakes." **Daniil Medvedev** on his love for desserts.



"I might watch them a little bit on TV if it happens that the TV is on or the right channel is on. Otherwise I just switch to History Channel." **Stefanos Tsitsipas**, when asked if he plans to watch title favourites Novak Djokovic and Rafael Nadal in action.



"Zero. To be able to play at this level at her age is admirable, both her and Venus... Once I have children, I don't think I'll be out here grinding." **Jennifer Brady**, 25, on the odds of her still playing at the same level as Serena Williams when she is 39.



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Omani ports post positive growth in 2020

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 13

Despite the impact of Covid-19 on the global trade and economy, Oman's strategically located and well-equipped ports, offering end-to-end comprehensive logistics solutions, have witnessed a surge in their operational and commercial business, according to Asyad Group.

In all, more than 9,000 vessels called at Omani ports in 2020. General cargo handled at Omani ports totalled about 54.0 million tonnes. Liquid bulk volumes rose 3.45 per cent to 18.4 million tonnes, while container throughput climbed 5 per cent to 5.2 million TEUs.

Livestock direct imports saw a noteworthy increase in 2020, marking a 38.7 per cent rise versus 2019, with 2.5 million heads of cattle imported through Omani ports in 2020.

Imports and exports of around 106.9 thousand vehicles and machineries in 2020; 13.4 per cent lower than the previous year, due to the slowdown of the global economy and its direct impact on the local and regional markets.

Working in close co-operation with government agencies, Asyad Group endeavoured to facilitate cross-regional trade and secure

local market requirements for commodities and goods from their country of origin, through linking Omani ports with 86 regional and global counterparts.

"The resilient and prompt response of Omani ports to the repercussions of the global pandemic is a testament to the effectiveness of their operations, leadership and the integrated model and collaborative efforts amongst the logistics sector in Oman," the group stated.

An upward momentum in volume of handling and cargo operations featured the annual performance of Omani ports in 2020 at a time direct imports from global and regional destinations also saw a boost, thanks to tremendous efforts exerted by Asyad Group, which linked the Sultanate's ports with 86 regional counterparts.

Asyad Group continued to put into practice the National Logistics Strategy 2040 (SOLS 2040) to reinforce Oman as a global logistics hub through increasing direct shipping lines; operating 200 cargo ship weekly trips; facilitating direct export and import of goods from their countries of origin; and boosting the government's returns on investments in seaports, free zones, shipping, and logistics companies.

IMF LAUDS OMAN'S FISCAL AND PANDEMIC RESPONSES

POLICY REFORMS: Substantial measures were also implemented to mitigate the impact of the Covid-19 and oil sector shocks on households, firms, and banks, the Fund noted

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 13

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has commended the Omani government on its actions to help mitigate the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as measures adopted by the authorities to alleviate the impacts of low international oil prices and ensuing economic downturn on the country's fiscals.

In a statement issued at the end of virtual mission to the Sultanate last month, the multilateral institution said deliberations with the Omani government during the fortnight mission focused on the impact of Covid-19 and related oil price shock, and policy priorities during the recovery phase and beyond.

"The authorities of Oman responded rapidly in 2020 to contain the spread of Covid-19 infections," the world body said. "Measures included closure of non-essential businesses, social distancing requirements, and border restrictions, while increasing health and medical support and social assistance to the population. The swift and well-coordinated response effectively limited the spread of the coronavirus in the latter part of 2020, but the social distancing



Fiscal measures to support the economy included interest-free emergency loans, waiving or reducing selected taxes and fees, flexibility to pay taxes in instalments, and establishing the Job Security Fund to support citizens who lost their jobs

IMF



and other restrictions weighed heavily on economic activity, particularly those requiring close human contact," it stated. Substantial measures were also implemented to mitigate the impact of the Covid-19 and oil sector shocks on households, firms, and banks, the Fund noted.

"Fiscal measures to support the economy included interest-free emergency loans, waiving or reducing selected taxes and fees, flexibility to pay taxes in instalments, and establishing the Job Security Fund to support citizens who lost their jobs. In addition, the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) eased financial conditions through lower interest rates and liquidity injections, deferred loan installment payments, and relaxed macro prudential requirements on capital buffers and liquidity ratios," it said.

The statement also noted efforts by the government to address rising fiscal vulnerabilities through the roll-out of an ambitious medium-term fiscal adjustment plan and broad public-sector reforms. "The fiscal adjustment plan (Tawazun) targets the elimination of the fiscal deficit over 2021-25 by boosting non-oil revenues while keeping nominal fiscal expenditures broadly constant. To improve public asset management, the government established the Oman Investment Authority (OIA) with a mandate to strengthen the governance and efficiency of public enterprises. Also, a new holding company — Energy Development of Oman (EDO) — was created to manage and finance government investments in oil, gas, and renewables," it said.

A modest recovery is

anticipated for 2021, with further strengthening of growth over the medium term, the Fund said, noting that the outlook however remains clouded with uncertainty "Overall, a mild recovery of 1.5 per cent in non-oil GDP growth is projected for 2021, rising thereafter to 4 per cent by 2026 as the drag from fiscal adjustment subsides.

Steady implementation of fiscal adjustment plans would strengthen fiscal and external balances substantially over the medium term.

Upside risks to the outlook could come from a stronger rebound in global activity with the ending of the pandemic, the boost to confidence from successful implementation of fiscal adjustment plans, and the successful implementation of plans to strengthen public enterprise governance," it added.

Omanisation of fuel logistics positions to create 1,700 jobs

NEW OPPORTUNITIES: While around 655 openings will be created by the Omanisation of Fuel Station Manager positions, a further 1,000 jobs will become available when the operation of fuel tanker-trucks is restricted to Omanis

CONRAD PRABHU
@conradprabhu

The Oman Society for Petroleum Services (OPAL), the umbrella organisation of energy sector entities in the Sultanate, is spearheading a pair of initiatives that will result in the creation of more than 1,700 jobs for Omani nationals in fuel logistics and fuel station management services.

The jobs are among thousands of potential positions that are expected to be spawned over the next several years as OPAL joins forces with the Ministry of Labour and other stakeholders to ramp up Omanisation in a number of key sectors.

"We are happy to be working alongside the Ministry of Labour and other public and private sector organisations in facilitating the creation of new

career opportunities for Omanis in various spheres within and outside the energy sector," said Abdulrahman al Yahyai (pictured), CEO.

"OPAL is leveraging its considerable expertise and market insight to support the ministry in the identification of trades and occupations for Omanisation,

as well as to ensure the timely and effective delivery of these initiatives."

The first initiative calls for the complete localisation of Fuel Station Managers positions across the Sultanate.

With all 655 filling stations distributed across the Sultanate currently managed by expatriates,

The jobs are among thousands of potential positions that are expected to be spawned over the next several years as OPAL joins forces with the Ministry of Labour and other stakeholders to ramp up Omanisation in a number of key sectors

the move will effectively open up 655 positions for qualified nationals, according to Al Yahyai.

"There's a clear-cut timeframe for the achievement of this objective," said the CEO. "If all goes according to the plan, we expect to see the majority, if not all, of the Station Manager positions Omanised. In fact, a high-level panel with representatives from

OPAL, the ministry and the three fuel marketing companies of Oman will be meeting every quarter to monitor progress in the implementation of this programme based on a time-bound performance dashboard. All of the stakeholders are committed to seeing this through."

Despite previous efforts to Omanise some positions in fuel stations, Omanisation has long remained elusive in this sector, says Al Yahyai.

"Barring the odd national working in the convenience store or some other retail outlet leased to a private business, it's unlikely that fuel stations employ any Omanis. But, going forward, the Ministry of Labour will stop issuing new clearances or the renewing licenses of expat Station Managers.

TURN TO PAGE 14

Industrial sector committed to national development

WINNERS OF HM AWARD FOR INDUSTRIAL EXCELLENCE 2020 AFFIRM THEIR RESOLVE TO STRENGTHEN THE SECTOR'S CONTRIBUTION TO GDP

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 13

A number of CEOs and decision makers of companies which won the HM Award for Industrial Excellence 2020 emphasised on the continuation of exerted efforts to increase their companies' productivity, in order to strengthen the Sultanate's GDP, to enhance the quality of Omani products, raise Omanisation levels, support social responsibility activities, and look for alternatives and solutions to develop Omani industries.



Eng Said bin Mohammad al Masoudi, CEO of Sohar Aluminium, stated: "A number of factors contributed to the company winning the first place in HM Award for Industrial Excellence, including the adopting of the best international standards and practices in the production processes, strengthening the production sustainability, continuous endeavour towards maintaining the quality improvement, giving attention to the environmental, health and



safety concerns, improving the human competencies, enhancing customer satisfaction, supporting innovation, maintaining financial performance, and enhancing shareholder value and community service." Investment in Sohar Aluminium, he said, has reached RO 496.972 million, while the company recorded 76.5 per cent Omanisation percentage, indicating that, the Sultanate's industrial sector over the past years has proven its ability to compete at the regional and global levels, where it has strengthened its position as one of the most important sectors contributing to the GDP, to the economy diversification and to the sustainability of the national economy.



Eng Musallam bin Mubarak al Jabri, Deputy CEO of Jindal Shadeed Iron and Steel Company, welcomed the award of the second place in overall categories of HM the Sultan's Award for Industrial Excellence 2020. Investment in Jindal Shadeed, established in 2010, has reached RO 1.113 billion. Total output is valued at RO 415.174 million to date, with exports worth RO 306.505 million achieved so far, accounting for 74 per cent of total production. The company has so far achieved a financial return of RO 283.294 million on the investment. Omanisation

stands at 40 per cent. Mohammad bin Harith al Barashdi, CEO of Oman Fiber Optic Company, which won the third place in HM Award for Industrial excellence said the award is a testament to the company's support for development of the telecommunications sector locally and regionally. Its strategic business plan 2019-2023 seeks to optimise utilisation of available capabilities of its new plants while focusing on the innovation to provide high-quality products with high completion capabilities. Oman Fiber Optic Company

is managed by qualified Omani cadres in various administrative levels, while the total Omanisation percentage reached 60 per cent in all the company divisions, and 58 per cent in the fiber optic cable factory.

Dr Waleed bin Khalid al Zadjali, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the National Pharmaceutical Industries Company, said: "Winning the fourth place of HM award for the industrial excellence will motivate the company's employees to continue their efforts to meet the needs of the community in terms of health care in a scientific methods, while the company gains a wide reputation in the domestic and foreign markets."

National Pharmaceutical Industries Company is planning to enter the European and United States markets during the next stage in cooperation with major companies in the pharmaceutical industries, and it is also planning to involve in the field of manufacturing vaccines for various type of diseases, he said.

The company, with production capacity of 1.3 billion tablets annually, 32 million packages

of syrups annually, 70 million packed bags of powder annually and of 263 million capsules annually, which is exporting 70 per cent of its production, has also achieved 36.9 per cent of Omanisation, as it has appointed more than 50 Omani employees who hold bachelor's and diplomas of pharmacy and chemical engineering in previous years, he added.

Saud bin Suleiman al Riyami, Chairman of National Aluminium Products Company (Napco), the company which won the fifth place in HM Award for the Industrial excellence, said the company is expanding the distribution of its products to cover the Americas, Australia and Europe, where it has a great ambition to open new markets for its products.

Total investment in Napco's capital exceeds RO 3 million, while it exports about 25,000 tonnes of aluminium per year, accounting for more than 75 per cent of its total production. Revenues reached approximately RO 40 million per year, while Omanisation stands at 37 per cent.



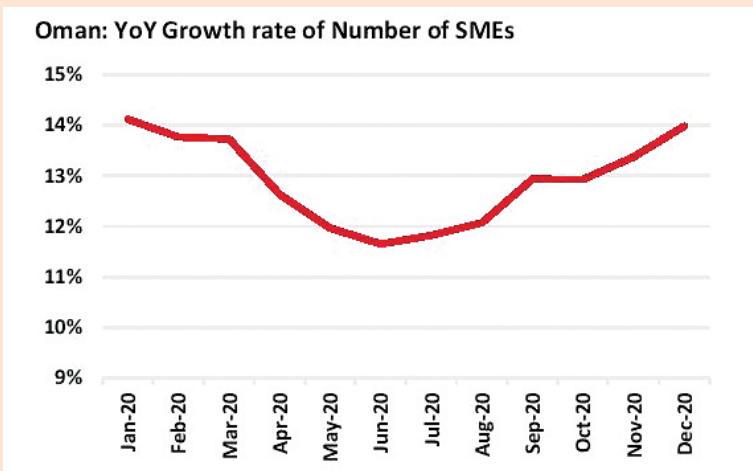
MSM WEEKLY REVIEW

MSM30 Index weighed down by financial and services indices

The MSM30 Index ended the week down by 1.29 per cent. The Financial index declined 2.05 per cent and Services Index declined by 0.46 per cent. The Industrial Index rose by 1.19 per cent week-on-week. The MSM Shariah Index was lower by 0.39 per cent. Energy Development Oman Co SAOC (EDO), the newly established energy holding company, has been listed on the Third Market of the Muscat Stock Exchange, following an administrative decision by the Capital Market Authority (CMA).

The wholly Omani government-owned entity's share capital of RO 500,000 has been listed on the Third Market, the Authority said. EDO was instituted by Royal Decree on December 6, 2020 as an Omani joint stock company to invest in conventional as well as renewable and alternative energy resources within and outside the Sultanate. Its most significant asset is the government's 60 per cent shareholding in Petroleum Development Oman (PDO).

In Oman, a slump in electricity demand growth has prompted a major review of power sector policies. Saddled for the first time with excess electricity generation capacity in the face of a decline in demand growth, attributable to the



protracted economic crunch as well as the pandemic, the Sultanate is moving to overhaul longstanding capacity planning and procurement policies to support the growth of a more stable sector.

The proposed review is in response to impacts from the downturn that have disrupted, among other things, the planned delivery of a number of market liberalisation initiatives, including the launch of a much-anticipated Spot Market.

The latter initiative will allow generators to compete for the opportunity to offer their surplus capacity to the grid.

The Sultanate's oil production, including condensates, stood at 347.94 million barrels until the end of December 2020, compared with 354.39 million barrels a year earlier, according to the National Centre for Statistics & Information (NCSI).

Of the total output, crude oil

production was down by 9.1 per cent at 278.84 million barrels, while condensate production rose by 45.2 per cent to touch 69.10 million barrels.

The total number of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) registered with the Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises Development (Riyada) as at the end of December 2020 stood at 48,669, a rise of 14 per cent compared to the same period of 2019, according to the data released by NCSI.

Among the governorates, Muscat topped the list with 33.6 per cent of the total SMEs registered till the end of December 2020, followed by North Al Batinah with 15.8 per cent, Al Dakhiliyah with 12.6 per cent, Dhofar with 8.3 per cent and the rest of governorates at 29.7 per cent. It must be noted that the YoY growth has picked up since June 2020.

(Courtesy: U-Capital)

Omanisation of fuel logistics positions to create 1,700 jobs

FROM PAGE 13

OPAL, for its part, will also provide a list of the owners of these filling stations to the ministry, which will prohibit new expat hires as fuel station managers."

Speaking to the *Observer*, Al Yahyai urged qualified Omani candidates to consider promising careers as Fuel Stations Managers. "This localisation programme offers a great opportunity for Omanis to grow their managerial skills and capabilities. As Fuel Station Manager, they will supervise a full complement of staff and oversee the full value chain of the business, encompassing sales and marketing, finance and accounts, HR, inventory management, real estate

services, and so on. This experience will prepare the candidates as entrepreneurs in the future, should they plan to start their own business."

To ensure that localisation of these positions is carried out in the spirit of the programme, OPAL has been tasked with certifying the competency of the Omani candidates selected for the posts through its Sector Skills Unit, which will conduct assessments and issue competency cards for a wide range of jobs in the energy sector.

This will help safeguard against sham appointments designed to maintain the status quo, he said. Candidates with the requisite qualifications will also receive

training support from the fuel marketing companies covering all aspects of the retail business.

Significantly, OPAL is also supporting the Ministry of Labour in the delivery of close to 1,000 jobs for Omanis following a decision by the government to Omanise the operation of fuel tanker trucks in the Sultanate by June 1, 2021.

"OPAL, along with the ministry and fuel marketing companies, are working together to ensure that qualified Omanis will be the sole drivers of the road tanker fleet transporting fuel to the different parts of the Sultanate. We hope we can achieve our target of creating around 1,000 jobs for Omanis as a result", Al Yahyai added.

PRESS RELEASE

BANK MUSCAT WINS BEST FOREIGN EXCHANGE PROVIDER IN OMAN AWARD

Bank Muscat has won the Best Foreign Exchange Provider in Oman (2021) award from Global Finance.



The foreign exchange and international payments landscape is an essential part of banking relationships in today's global economy.

Given the dynamic environment and continuous enhancement in technology, the responsibility for quicker and efficient processing is a shared effort by all financial institutions.

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The new bold exterior styling and athletic silhouette of the 2021 IS signifies the agile changes that have taken place below the surface. The new IS evokes lower, wider proportions with muscular fenders, reflecting the vehicle's high performance.

The sleek lines are also complemented with aggressive sharpness carved into the side and shoulder character lines.



The endless opportunities in web development (Part 2)

This is the second part of an article meant to get anyone started with web development.

If you have read the first article last week, you should have done your homework and learned the foundation of HTML and CSS from the WorldWide Web consortium's website: <https://www.w3.org/>

But HTML and CSS alone would not be sufficient to make a living out of web development.

In fact, as soon as I realised the limitations of static websites programmed in HTML and CSS I started exploring dynamic Content Management Systems — better known as CMS — such as Wordpress, Drupal and

my favourite Joomla, formerly known as Mambo.

The difference a static website and a dynamic one has nothing to do with animation, but rather the way content is published.

If write two pages of HTML and upload them on a server, I would need to link them in order to connect to each other.

In a CMS, on the contrary, the content is loaded by a PHP page (let us imagine this as the older brother of HTML) and “pulled” from a database where the content is stored.

In other words, each HTML page is stand-alone, while using a CMS, a single PHP page can render thousands of “views” within the same page, thus creating the illusion that multiple



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THE DIFFERENCE A
STATIC WEBSITE AND
A DYNAMIC ONE HAS
NOTHING TO DO WITH
ANIMATION, BUT RATHER
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PUBLISHED

pages are created. This is what they dynamic refer to: The fact that each view (or page) is generated dynamically through the content in the database.

That is a far more efficient way to develop websites as reduces the need to actually program from scratch, giving a massive head-start when creating a new website.

If we were to start from scratch all the times, web development might not be seen as a profitable business opportunity because of the time wasted in redoing the same tasks over and over.

Whereas with CMS we can upload on our server a basic package of files and folders that get us ready to work in a matter of minutes. The three CMS that

I have mentioned are by far the most popular and they are all OpenSource and free to use.

Getting started is super easy.

Step 1: Register a web domain. You can do so in many ways. In Oman we can use <https://www.registry.om/>

A web domain is simply a string of text that points to a server. A server is identified by a numeric public address that can be accessed through an alphanumeric domain.

So, step 2: Get a hosting plan. There are thousands of them that you can choose, and in Oman we have world class hosting services.

Once you sign up for a server subscription, you will be given access to a remote folder where you will put your files and folders.

But first, step 3: Point the web domain to the server through the registrar admin panel. You can enquire with your host and registrar to get help. They are usually very friendly and willing to help. Once you have your server you can host multiple websites and start your business as a web developer.

Start exploring the CMS world by exploring the resources on the main 3 free services (from the easiest to the most difficult):

Wordpress: <https://wordpress.org/>

Joomla: <https://www.joomla.org/>

Drupal: <https://www.drupal.org/>

[The writer is a member of the International Press Association]

Canada authorizes first exchange-traded bitcoin fund



A bitcoin is seen in this illustration picture. — Reuters

OTTAWA: Canada's main securities regulator has cleared the launch of the world's first exchange-traded bitcoin fund, the investment manager and the regulator said on Friday, giving retail investors greater access to the booming cryptocurrency.

The Ontario Securities Commission gave Purpose Investments Inc the nod to roll out the Purpose Bitcoin ETF (exchange-traded fund) on the Toronto Stock Exchange.

It is to start trading under the ticker BTCC “as early as next week”, a company spokesman said.

“The ETF will be the first in the world to invest directly in physically settled bitcoin, not derivatives, allowing investors easy and efficient access to the emerging asset class of cryptocurrency without the associated risk of self-custody within a digital wallet”, the asset management company said in a statement.

Gemini Trust Company will be sub-custodian for the fund, while CIBC Mellon Global Securities Services will administer it.

Launched in 2009, bitcoin has been on a meteoric rise since March, when it stood at \$5,000, spurred by online payments giant PayPal saying it would allow account holders to use cryptocurrency.

It hit a record-high near \$45,000 on Monday after Elon Musk's electric carmaker Tesla invested \$1.5 billion in the digital currency. Canadian and US fund companies had tried unsuccessfully in recent years to launch bitcoin ETFs.

Several in recent weeks filed preliminary prospectuses with the Ontario Securities Commission and the Securities and Exchange Commission in the United States. — AFP

IMF wants more progress from Ukraine for new tranche

KIEV: An International Monetary Fund mission held productive talks with Ukraine, but the country must show more progress on reforms to reach an agreement for a new tranche under the \$5 billion programme, the IMF representative in Kiev said on Saturday.

“Discussions will continue”, Goesta Ljungman said in a

statement.

The discussions focused on strengthening governance of the National Bank, improvements to the legislative and regulatory framework for bank supervision and resolution, policies to reduce the medium-term fiscal deficit, legislation restoring and strengthening the anti-corruption framework and the



A man arranges a board outside a currency exchange office in central Kiev, Ukraine.

judiciary, as well as on energy policy, he said.

Ukraine expects to receive \$2.2 billion spread across three equal tranches from the International Monetary Fund in 2021, Central Bank Governor Kyrylo Shevchenko said.

Last June, the IMF approved the \$5 billion loan programme and disbursed the

first tranche of \$2.1 billion to help the Ukrainian economy, which has been hit hard by the coronavirus pandemic. Further loans have been frozen due to the slow pace of reforms in Ukraine.

The IMF was also concerned about the government's decision made in January to regulate household gas prices. — Reuters

Investors eye shares of hotels, cruise lines as US vaccinations pick up

NEW YORK: Investors are watching next week's earnings reports from hotels, cruise lines and other businesses that have been hard hit by Covid-19 for indications of which companies could be the first to bounce back when the pandemic recedes.

For nearly a year, money managers have largely looked past earnings in the travel and leisure sector, where coronavirus-fuelled lockdowns and travel restrictions battered companies' businesses and crushed their stock prices: Shares of Marriott and Norwegian Cruise Lines, for example, are down 12 per cent or more in the last year, compared to a nearly 17 per cent gain for the S&P 500.

Next week's numbers, however, may offer clues on which companies are in the best financial health and would benefit the most from economic reopening, while also allowing investors to better gauge where companies should be valued.

“The results across the board are going to be bad, but it's really going to be about who is coming back”, said Adam Trivison, a portfolio manager at Gabelli Funds. The focus on travel and leisure companies comes as investors more broadly gauge the effectiveness of the US vaccination effort and the degree to which it will help the economy get back on track.

The White House announced February 2 that it will start shipping vaccines directly to retail pharmacies alongside regular shipments to states, increasing weekly supplies of shots to 11.5



Tourists ride inside a vintage car as they pass by the Norwegian Sky cruise ship in Havana, Cuba, in this file photo. — Reuters

million. Approximately 10.5 per cent of the US population through February 11 had received at least one of the two shots required for full vaccination, according to estimates by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Will Hilkert, Portfolio Manager of the Fidelity Select Leisure fund, said that earnings results over the next two quarters will serve as a gut check for investors who had bet on the leisure sector as a play on the economy reopening.

“Over the next six to nine months you're going to get a chance to make sure that what you think the world is going to look like after the pandemic is being matched by company fundamentals”, he said.

Hilton Worldwide Holdings Inc and Hyatt Hotels Corp are expected to release their results on February 17, followed by Marriott, Norwegian Cruise Lines and TripAdvisor on February 18.

Trivison, of Gabelli Funds, said he will be keeping an eye on hotel bookings in the group meeting business, which he expects to offer clues on the scale of employee travel in the week ahead. Business travelers typically make up 25 per cent of a hotel chain's customers, though that number may be higher in destinations such as Orlando and Las Vegas.

Historically high valuations in the hospitality sector may give some potential investors a pause

before buying at current levels, said Daniel Kane, a portfolio manager at Artisan Partners who bought shares of Marriott while its stock was tumbling last March and April.

Most stocks in the hospitality sector are now trading based on estimates of their 2023 results, pushing their current valuations well above their long-term averages, said Robin Farley, an analyst at UBS. Marriott, for example, trades at a trailing price to earnings multiple of 240.7, while Hilton is currently unprofitable but trades at 515.7 its current fiscal year's full year earnings, according to Refinitiv data. — Reuters

India's RBI tightens investment rules for shadow banks

NEW DELHI: India's central bank said new investors who operate from jurisdictions not in compliance with the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) must hold less than 20 per cent of the voting power in non-banking finance companies (NBFCs).

In a bid to stop money laundering, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) said investors from non-FATF compliant jurisdictions would not be treated on a par with those from other countries or regions.

“New investors from or through non-compliant FATF jurisdictions, whether in existing NBFCs or in companies seeking Certification of Registration (COR), should not be allowed to directly or indirectly acquire ‘significant influence’ in the investee, as defined in the applicable accounting standards”, the RBI said.

The move comes days after the central bank had proposed tighter, bank-like regulation of the so-called shadow lending sector to prevent the turmoil caused by the collapse of an infrastructure financing firm in 2018. — Reuters



A man makes a phone call while standing near a Reserve Bank of India crest at the RBI headquarters in Mumbai. — Reuters

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SUNDAY FEBRUARY 14, 2021 RAJAB 2, 1442 AH

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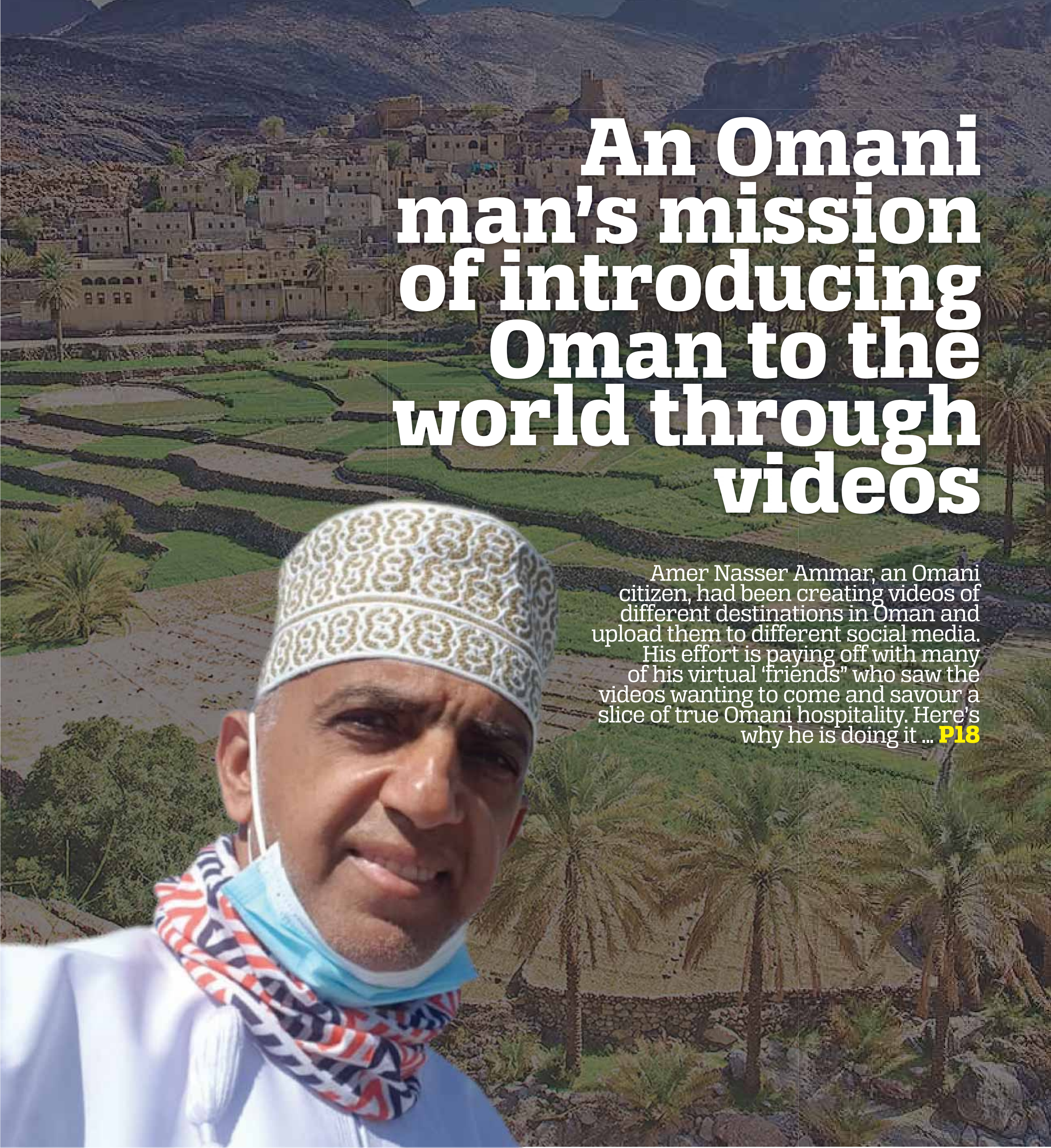
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features



An Omani man's mission of introducing Oman to the world through videos

Amer Nasser Ammar, an Omani citizen, had been creating videos of different destinations in Oman and upload them to different social media. His effort is paying off with many of his virtual "friends" who saw the videos wanting to come and savour a slice of true Omani hospitality. Here's why he is doing it ... **P18**

INSIDE STORIES

HUMAN INTEREST



EAT YOUR HEART OUT: COVID-SAFE VALENTINE'S DAY DINING

It's a Covid-era conundrum for Valentine's Day: how to eat out with your beloved when you live in a country where all restaurants are closed?... **Story on Page 20**

CHANGING WORLD



IN VIENNA, GETTING A HAIRCUT CAN BE EASIER FOR DOGS THAN THEIR OWNERS

Austrian hairdressers came out of lockdown this week grappling with coronavirus testing and capacity restrictions – the city's pampered dogs, however, have long had no trouble getting a trim... **Story on Page 19**

READ



GOD HELP THE CHILD

BY TONI MORRISON

It revolves around the life of a Bride. She's a young black woman in her early twenties who has had to overcome many obstacles in her life, particularly moving on from her childhood, to become the successful business woman she is today.

ENTERTAINMENT



JORDAN MAKE-UP ARTIST LIGHTENS LOCKDOWN WITH CELEBRITY IMPRESSIONS

A young Jordanian make-up artist has beaten the lockdown blues and shot to online fame with videos of herself imitating famous figures from across the Arab world and beyond... **Story on Page 19**

TRAVEL TALES



NO SKI RESORTS? NO PROBLEM FOR ONE URBAN SKIER IN PARIS

France's ski resorts are closed because of the Covid-19 pandemic, so one French winter sports enthusiast did the next best thing on Wednesday – skiing down a steep street in Paris



An Omani man's mission of introducing Oman to the world through videos

BY KABEER YOUSUF

With just one man, the interest of hundreds if not thousands can be piqued by using the proper platform and showcasing a particular theme or focus. Such has been the case for one Omani man whose main mission is to introduce Oman to the world through virtual channels.

Meet Amer Nasser Ammar, an Omani citizen whose efforts to bring the Oman tourism brand to the masses through his videos is proving to be hugely successful.

He already has followers from various countries and, inspired by his videos on Oman's tourist destinations, his 'friends' want to come and savour a slice of true Omani hospitality.

"I always wanted to add value to my beloved nation, Oman, and make the name known to even more people and I ended up making videos of different destinations within Oman, mostly unseen, and the response is overwhelming," Amer said after his video on Qurum Natural Reserve went viral.

This sexagenarian visits different places and shoots with his Android phone and Nikon P900 Camera then edits and shares the videos on social media platforms.

But before venturing out to a destination, he carries out some research on the place, people, landmarks, geographical features and the like to be more authentic in what he is doing.

A one-man mission to add value to Omanis and expats as well as the visitors, Amer has so far covered many local destinations and made nearly 250 videos using his snapping gadgets.

"We have lots of places about which we are not fully aware of hence this effort of filming them and showing to the people with a narration"

His intention of becoming a globetrotter and travel across the country is simple.

"First, I want to promote Oman tourism both internally and externally. Secondly, I want to make both citizens, expat residents and tourists aware of the beauty and diversity of the country. Besides these, I think I'm also able to encourage people to visit and learn more about our beautiful country"

It all began when he visited nearby museums and did some hiking and mountain climbing in 2019. He posted the videos on social media and they were received with overwhelming response by his friends who wanted him to do more.

He has all his videos posted on his YouTube channel called 'Amer's Tours'

He is fuelled by several plans for the future which makes him run without rest. And of course, on top of the list is to savour more of Oman, see more places of Oman of different features and share with others what he has seen, experienced and felt.

Amer admits that all his 'expeditions' have not been without challenge.

"Editing and producing videos takes more time than the actual visit and it's a time consuming and daunting effort, however, the love and passion of the country deserves this effort"

"Oman is a very beautiful country, rich in its heritage and offers many opportunities in tourism with plenty of cultural traditions and history to explore and it is my aim and mission to picture them and preserve it for the generations to come and to generate an interest to go out and see more of Oman," added Amer.





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AROUND THE WORLD

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In Vienna, getting a haircut can be easier for dogs than their owners

Austrian hairdressers came out of lockdown this week grappling with coronavirus testing and capacity restrictions — the city's pampered dogs, however, have long had no trouble getting a trim.

Dog salons were allowed to stay open throughout the last two of Austria's three lockdowns, and there is no requirement for owners to show a negative coronavirus test result as they would at the hairdresser.

"Since the previous lockdown my wife has just cut my hair occasionally with clip-pers," said Roland Vitecek with his 10-year-old Yorkshire Terrier Lili at the Zirkusgasse Dog Salon.

"It is a bigger priority for the dog to get groomed," he conceded while booking Lili an appointment for a wash, brush, trim and blow dry.

The salon's owner Grazyna Jedrasiak said the closure during the first lockdown from mid-March to mid-April created a backlog, meaning it then had "twice the work". Now business is slower than usual as some customers are worried about getting infected or are out of work, she said.

"My dog was the first one (of us) to get a full salon treatment," Zlatka Cular said with her six-year-old dog Archie, also a Yorkshire Terrier. "I unfortunately didn't get time to go to the hairdresser's so I'm going in two days."

The requirement to present a negative coronavirus test no more than 48 hours old to get a haircut has caused a rush to testing centres. The last lockdown lasted more than six weeks.

"Sometimes people are not as well groomed as their dogs because the dogs come to me every six to eight weeks but the people haven't been to the hairdresser in a longer time. That will probably still take a while because with the testing now they also won't get an appointment straight away," Jedrasiak said. — **Reuters**



Jordan make-up artist lightens lockdown with celebrity impressions

A young Jordanian make-up artist has beaten the lockdown blues and shot to online fame with videos of herself imitating famous figures from across the Arab world and beyond.

From Donald Trump and Queen Elizabeth II to Egyptian superstars like singer Umm Kulthum and actor Adel Imam, her characters have made Alaa Bliha a star in her own right with tens of thousands of social media followers.

The 27-year-old says she started making the clips to stave off depression, after losing her job as a theatre make-up artist in Bahrain and returning to a grim coronavirus lockdown in Jordan.

Based in a basement apartment in northern Amman where she lives with her mother and young brother, she has transformed herself into Angelina Jolie, Michael Jackson and Cristiano Ronaldo.

"Everyone was bored and under psychological pressure when the pandemic began," she said. "So I decided... to bring people a bit of happiness."

Months later, she has some 30,000 followers on TikTok and another 24,000 on Instagram, where comments on her videos are full of praise.

"I was surprised by people's positive reactions and encouragement," Bliha said.

Her imitations of Lebanese singer Fairuz and Egyptian mega-star Umm Kulthum have been big hits, while her sketch of Emirati singer Abdullah Bilkhair has been watched more than half a million times on TikTok.

But while they may be light-hearted, each video takes



No ski resorts? No problem for one urban skier in Paris

France's ski resorts are closed because of the Covid-19 pandemic, so one French winter sports enthusiast did the next best thing on Wednesday — skiing down a steep street in Paris.

"Because the government has closed down ski resorts, we do what we can," said the urban skier, who gave his name as Nathan. "We're reduced to doing this, unfortunately."

Paris was blanketed in snow, but skiing conditions were far removed from the wide, sweeping pistes of the French Alps.

In the city's hilly Montmartre district, Nathan tried to ski down a steep section of cobbles running alongside a flight of steps that visitors climb to reach the Sacre Coeur church.

But his skis skittered over the thin snow covering and he fell repeatedly, colliding several times with trees.

Later, he moved on to a small patch of grass directly beneath the church, where he was able to get in several successful, if short, runs. — **Reuters**



EAT YOUR HEART OUT: COVID-SAFE VALENTINE'S DAY DINING

It's a Covid-era conundrum for Valentine's Day: How to eat out with your beloved when you live in a country where all restaurants are closed?

The answer hit upon by a handful of hotels in Belgium's capital is to convert empty rooms into private dining salons for two, where a four-course meal with champagne and wine can be enjoyed without breaking the household "bubble".

"We're over the moon about being here tonight, just like in a restaurant", said Marine Deroo, a 34-year-old Frenchwoman living in Brussels who was trying out the concept just ahead of Valentine's Day.

"We've been cooped up at home for months. We've tried setting up pretend 'evenings out' at home — but to actually go out, like to a restaurant, it's a super opportunity that we just jumped on", she said.

She and her boyfriend had just been greeted and shown to a candle-lit table set up

where a bed used to be, as music travelled into their room in the Qbic Hotel, which says it pioneered the idea.

A waitress hovered to take their choices from the menu, including a bottle of wine, which had to be ordered before a government coronavirus ban on serving alcohol past 8:00pm kicked in.

It's not just room service, the hotel manager, Bert Vandewaetere pointed out. The 149-euro (\$180) package covers a hotel room to sleep in, a separate room to dine in, the dinner — not including any drinks — and breakfast.

"Basically, people dress themselves up for a really good night on a Saturday evening — children at home, only couples are coming here, just two people", he said.

FINALLY WE CAN GO OUT

He said he came up with the idea after Belgium closed restaurants and bars in November to slow the spread of the coronavirus, aggravating an already steep drop in hotel business because of cancelled trade fairs and other events.

It was especially important that the Qbic prove itself, as it had opened in late 2019, just before the pandemic hit.

Providing free rooms to frontline medical workers in the pandemic's first wave and a lobby co-working area

for university students kept activity ticking over, providing at least some work for the hotel's staff, most of whom are furloughed.

But it was only two months ago, when some of the empty rooms were turned into two-person dining chambers, that business really took off on weekends.

"The idea came because a lot of people were frustrated to stay at home", Vandewaetere said.

"We have plenty of rooms — so why not combine them with a really nice offer, to offer them the time of their life on a Saturday when half of Belgium wants to go out?"

The reaction was swift. "The comments that we receive from people were really: 'Finally, I had some time alone with my partner. Finally, I had some other walls to look at, not just my living room at home. Finally, we can go out again'", he said.

Other hotels in Brussels have followed suit, opening up the possibility to dine out while respecting social distancing rules.

The Qbic Hotel usually has 23 such private dining rooms set up for a Saturday night service. That means it has 46 rooms that can be occupied by couples: 23 for dining and 23 for sleeping.

On Valentine's Day weekend, though, 60 dining rooms have been configured, for

both on Friday and Saturday nights. And all but a couple of the Friday night slots are sold out.

In the hotel's bustling kitchen, chef Joao Silva said the idea has been invaluable in forging his new team and seeing what they could do.

Initially, he thought cooking and catering to two dozen separate dining rooms could be "a little bit overwhelming, considering the numbers that we might reach".

"But at the end of the day, we did our first month, and I have no regrets. It was just fluid, straight through and through. The staff are amazing," he said.

As he spoke, employees with facemasks darted between the kitchen and the rooms, carrying trays along hallways where music was punctuated by corks popping and intimate chatter.

For that brief period, the hotel appeared almost normal, almost like in pre-pandemic times — with only the facemasks to remind patrons of the here and now.

— AFP

