

Decision on fee hike for licences to regulate labour market

An official at the Ministry of Labour has said that the decision to increase the fee for issuing and renewing licences for recruitment of expatriate workers was prepared before fixing the minimum wage and facilitating procedures for the departure of expatriates. Speaking to a private radio, he said that every country brings laws and legislations to provide job opportunities for its citizens and it is part of the efforts to regulate the labour market. **DETAILS ON P3**



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BAUSER THUMP QURAYAT 6-0 IN HM CUP



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OIL PRICES RISE ON FALLING CRUDE STOCKS



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OMAN'S FIRST FEMALE PADI CHAMPIONS UNDERWATER CONSERVATION



MUSCAT

HM GREETINGS TO LANKA PRESIDENT

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Gotabaya Rajapaksa of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka on his country's Independence Anniversary. In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his sincere greetings and best wishes of good health and happiness to President Rajapaksa and the friendly people of Sri Lanka further progress and prosperity.

— ONA

TEHRAN

IRAN WON'T ACCEPT CHANGES TO N-DEAL

Iran will not accept any changes to the nuclear accord signed in Vienna in 2015, President Hassan Rouhani said on Wednesday. "Not a single paragraph in the nuclear deal will change, nor will there be any new negotiators... Remarks about this are irrelevant and useless", he told state television. Rouhani's comments came in response to calls from the US and European signatories for future talks to address issues including Iran's Middle East policy and missile programme. French President Emanuel Macron also called for Saudi Arabia to join negotiations.

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Ensuring quality of food in restaurants

840 restaurants have been evaluated

KABEER YOUSUF @kabeeryousef

The Inspection and Food Control Department at the Muscat Municipality has started assessing the quality standards of restaurants, food suppliers and caterers to ensure health and safety measures in all the food outlets.

Accordingly, as many as 840 restaurants have been evaluated, while some more are in the pipeline, aiming at raising the level of food quality, services and ambiance offered by them.

"We are assessing the services provided by the food-service providers, mostly in Muscat Governorate. This will cover all restaurants, fast food joints, coffee shops and food suppliers to assess their quality of food, services and other associated requirements", a senior official at the Muscat Municipality told the Observer.

The food service providers are evaluated through a special evaluation form and the quality of food by using theoretical and practical measures by trained inspection officials.

TURN TO P3

Labour Ministry announces 1,683 jobs in pvt sector

SHAMSA AL RIYAMIYAH MUSCAT, FEB 3

The Ministry of Labour has announced the availability of 1,683 job vacancies in the private sector, including 744 news jobs and 939 previously existing vacancies.

The ministry stated that the new job opportunities are technical and specialist jobs of which 144 jobs require college degree and 600 require General Education Diploma certificate (GED) and below.

The ministry has advised nationals looking for jobs to follow up the job vacancies in the local newspapers and recruitment platforms as well as social media sites.

The Ministry of Labour seeks to provide jobs for nationals through replacement and nationalisation of jobs in both the public and private sectors in accordance to the labour market requirements.

The ministry has recently announced that a great number of public sector jobs occupied by non-Omanis are slated for replacement in various sectors mainly in education, healthcare, electricity and water sectors.

In addition, Omanisation of administrative and assistant academic jobs in private higher education institutions as well as technical jobs at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences and medical and assistant jobs, are on the cards.

AstraZeneca vaccine to be given to people above 65 from Sunday

VINOD NAIR @vinot_nair

The Sultanate will launch a new campaign on Sunday to administer a vaccine to a new segment of target groups.

According to the Ministry of Health, the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine will be administered to people in the age group 65 and above in all governorates, irrespective of whether they are healthy or suffer from chronic diseases.

To be available at the previously designated immunisation centres, the second dose of the same vaccine will be given at an interval of four weeks.

The Sultanate received 100,000 doses of Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine produced



at Serum Institute of India.

People who already received the first dose of Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine will not be eligible to take this vaccine as the second dose.

Regarding the delay in the arrival of Pfizer vaccine, Dr

Ahmed bin Mohammed al Saeedi, had said earlier: "The company was in the process of developing its factories, which led to a temporary interruption in the export of the vaccine. However, the manufacturer has confirmed that a six-week delay will not impact the effectiveness of the vaccine."

He indicated that 450,000 doses of the vaccine have been reserved and will arrive this month. Priority will be given to those who received the first dose. There are also 2.5 million doses which have been reserved for the Sultanate from vaccine manufacturers, the minister added, hoping that before the middle of this year, all the first target groups should receive the vaccine.

SEE ALSO P3

A PASSION FOR WILDLIFE



Ahmed al Busaidy is a young creative photographer who, since his childhood, developed a passion for wildlife and loves to take photos of snakes and reptiles. Al Busaidy says: "Sometimes I take photos of natural scenes, but the majority of my photos revolve around reptiles and wildlife in general and also my career as reptile and wildlife specialist at the University of Nizwa." Al Busaidy believes that success in choosing the right timing to take a photo has nothing to do with luck and it's not a matter of chance, but has everything to do with experience. I spend a long time waiting for that 'moment' and repeat the process several times until I get what I want, he says.

SULTANATE, UNICEF REVIEW COOPERATION

MUSCAT: Dr Madeeha bint Ahmed al Shaibaniyah, Minister of Education, received Ted Chaiban, Regional Director of UNICEF in the Middle East and North Africa Region, on Wednesday. The meeting discussed ways of educational and scientific cooperation aimed to serve joint interests.

The minister welcomed the guest commending the strong partnership and cooperation between the Sultanate and the UNICEF office which is aimed at supporting children's rights and early childhood development and the protection of children amid the Covid-19 pandemic.

The regional director of UNICEF valued the achievements made by various sectors of the state within the framework of the constructive partnership between the Sultanate and the UNICEF office. He noted that the projects and initiatives currently under implementation have strategic



dimensions and translate the fourth goal of the sustainable development goals as part of the cooperation plan between the Sultanate and UNICEF in the fields of the general framework of life skills and the national educational strategy for people with disabilities.

Al Shaibaniyah underscored the importance of translating the priorities of the Oman Vision 2040 as part of the existing cooperation strategies between the Sultanate and UNICEF. She pointed out the ministry's efforts to ensure the educational rights of children and the protection of school children against Covid-19 since the outbreak of the pandemic.

She praised the fruitful cooperation between the state's sectors in this regard and the orientation to blended learning and online education at different stages of education in the Sultanate.

GCC officials discuss unified travel procedures

MUSCAT: The GCC under-secretaries of health ministries held recently their 14th virtual meeting to discuss the latest developments of the mutant coronavirus (Covid-19).

Dr Amal al Maani, MoH's Acting Director-General of Diseases Control and Surveillance and Director of Infection Prevention and Control, chaired the meeting on behalf of Dr Mohammed bin Saif al Hosni, MoH's Under-Secretary for Health Affairs.

The meeting addressed the latest updates of the mutant coronavirus in the GCC countries and actions taken regarding supplying and administering Covid-19 vaccine to the target groups in the GCC countries as well as the coverage rate for each country.

It further reviewed challenges that face most

GCC countries among which is the provision of adequate doses of the vaccine to realise the specified coverage rate in each country while the manufactured companies failed to deliver the vaccine as scheduled.

Proposals on developing a mechanism for unified travel

The meeting addressed the latest updates of the mutant coronavirus in the GCC countries and actions taken regarding Covid-19 vaccine

procedures among GCC countries were addressed. In addition, the meeting identified unified immunisation standards and reviewed entry procedures at border-crossing points. It also

touched upon mechanisms taken and procedures implemented by the GCC countries regarding quarantine and PCR tests.

The meeting reviewed the number of cases infected by the new strain of the virus and the preventive measures that have been taken by each GCC country.

BBH withdraws from Al Bustan water park

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 3

Oman-based real estate company, BBH Group, has listed the reasons for the delay in the completion of its water park in the Al Bustan area. In the coming days, the company will submit a letter of apology to the government agency that owns the land on which the water park is to be established, stating

that they will withdraw from the project due to financial losses as a feasible solution was not reached over the past few years.

BBH said that one of the reasons for this project running behind its schedule is the delay in obtaining licences from the concerned government agencies. "We were shifted to three different locations, which resulted in company incurring both time and financial losses

at each site assigned to them. It may be noted that such projects need studies by international companies specialised in such activities."

The company said that the usufruct contract was signed two and a half years ago, however it was transferred, and another usufruct contract was issued.

BBH was planning to build the first water park in Muscat at Al Bustan near the seafont,

spread over 50,000 square metres. The park was expected to offer facilities for recreation and outdoor swimming.

Withdrawal of the company from the project will be a major setback to the tourism sector as the long-term strategies include offering both domestic and international visitors several alternatives for recreation for leisure and entertainment in the country.

Expats exit many specialised jobs

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Even as the Ministry of Labour has released a raft of measures including fee hikes for job permits, the number of expatriates in different occupational groups fell significantly during the past 12 months.

Data from the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) shows an across-the-board fall of 15.5 per cent in all categories of foreign workers, especially top-level positions.

According to the latest figures released by NCSI in January, expatriates in top jobs including directors and managers in administrative sections have dropped by 15.3 per cent to reach 31,864 employees at the end of December 2020 against 37,603 in the corresponding month in the previous year.

Although the fall resulted from the nationalisation of several occupations, experts say the trend will continue as "part of the cost-cutting measures that many companies may resort to as an aftermath of the unexpected economic conditions prevailing in the country".

The Ministry of Labour announced last week that fees for issuing and renewing licences to bring in expatriate manpower have been raised according to some professions.



intensified the Omanisation in various sectors that aim to reserve jobs for Omani citizens and replace expatriate workers with trained Omanis.

Specialists in scientific, technical and human resources sections fell by 13.6 per cent to reach 62,124 against 71,940 during the one year from December 2019 to the same month in 2020.

The highest drop of 28.6 per cent was recorded in the clerical occupations with only 1,286 expatriates currently working in different sectors, while 10,246 lost jobs in various sales jobs.

There are 97,009 expatriates working in different sales occupations against 107,255 a year back.

Top jobs in education including the engineering section saw a fall of 18.9 per cent with many expatriates principals and others leaving the country. Presently there are 569,375 expatriates holding positions in this section against 702,100 at the end of December 2019.

While experts and specialists in industrial, chemical and food industries dropped by 15.4 per cent to reach 99,712 against 117,845, agriculture and stock breeding jobs occupied by expatriates saw a marginal fall of 7.9 per cent.

The Ministry of Labour recently met with officials from major banks, finance companies and money exchange houses to start job training and skill transfer to Omani staff.

EXPATRIATES IN TOP JOBS HAVE DROPPED BY 15.3 PER CENT TO REACH **31,864** EMPLOYEES AT THE END OF DECEMBER 2020 AGAINST **37,603** IN THE CORRESPONDING MONTH IN THE PREVIOUS YEAR

The most significant increases will apply to top/senior level, middle level and technical and specialised roles.

According to NCSI, a total of 569,670 expatriates of different

nationalities left the Sultanate in 2020. There were 1,443,128 expatriates in Oman against 1,712,798 at the end of December 2019.

The Sultanate has recently



■ **STAYING TRUE TO TRADITION**



Khor Al Milh is a natural source of salt which is located in the Wilayat of Qurayat. From the top of Khor Al Milh you can see a magnificent riot of colour. Khor Al Milh which is well-known not only in the region but across the country for the production of salt. Khor Al Milh means salt creek. Staying true to its name, sea salt is harvested in a traditional way and sold across the country. The process of extracting salt starts with digging deep square basins, sometimes 10 or more in a row. Once filled with sea water, the water is left undisturbed in bright sunshine for water to evaporate. Soon the water starts evaporating, leaving behind raw salt deposits inside these deep basins.

PHOTO BY **NASSER AL HARRASI**

Licence fee for hiring expats won't hit investment

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 3

The decision to raise the fees for issuing and renewing licences for the recruitment of expatriate workers was prepared before fixing the minimum wage and facilitating procedures for the departure of expatriates, a top Ministry of Labour official said.

Speaking to a private radio, he said that the decision will not affect the local economy or foreign investment and the cost of recruitment in Oman is still lower than that of neighbouring countries.

He said that the problem is not the cost of bringing in an expatriate worker, but those related to delays in transactions and lack of clarity of procedures, which the Ministry of Labour is trying to resolve with other government agencies.

"After all these years of development in education and qualification in all sectors we have trained and qualified Omanis and there is no problem in employing them."

On the possibility of companies changing work status to pay fewer fees, he said the private sector was given an opportunity for more than a month to change the status.

He said the green card is the privilege given to companies committed to good Omanisation rates and the fees have been reduced for small and medium enterprises.

PASI's goal is to ensure social welfare

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The Public Authority for Social Insurance (PASI) is working to implement strategic goals, including improving the adequacy of benefits, expanding social protection coverage, improving the services system to enhance its sustainability, and raising the efficiency of investment performance.

It has an ambitious strategy to keep pace with the aspirations of the new Basic Law promulgated by the Royal Decree No 6/2021 and its principles seeking to continue with the efforts to ensure a sustainable and better future.

A PASI report issued on Wednesday said, "The Authority works to improve the efficiency of revenue and expenditure, enhancing the digital culture of society, increasing the level of knowledge of social

Work is a right and an honour, and every citizen has the right to practise the work he chooses for himself within the limits of the law

PASI REPORT

protection, enhancing the level of productivity, as well as enhancing the level of technical readiness, and strengthening the system of good governance."

The report emphasised citizens' right to work and said, "work is a right and an honour, and every citizen has the right to practise the work he chooses for himself within

the limits of the law. No citizen may be compelled to work except following the law, and to perform a public service for a specified period, and fair remuneration. The state enacts laws that protect the worker and the employer, regulates the relationship between them, provides conditions for security, safety and occupational health, based on social principles (Article 15) in the Basic Law of the State, which emphasises the importance of social insurance."

Commenting on the new PASI strategy, Salem bin Abdullah al Rahbi, Director of Planning, indicated that building a new phase that commensurates with the level of national and international aspirations comes in continuation of the efforts of the Authority since 2009, and towards implementing the principles of sound strategic planning following the best internationally available practices.

Know history through coins, notes

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The best way to know about a country is to go through the history of coins. The Currency Museum at the Central Bank of Oman takes you to explore the world and it also hints at the world rivalries – all through the coins.

According to the exhibit at CBO, one of the first areas of the Islamic world to be occupied by the west were the harbours of Muscat and Hormuz, "which were held by Portuguese during most of the 16th and the first half of the 17th centuries M."

The interiors of Oman, meanwhile experienced none of these and remained largely undisturbed. The major feature of that era for expansion and exploration was sea routes and this also became the reason for the clashes.

The exhibition interestingly points out how all of them brought coins with them in times of both war and peace.

The showcases at the Currency Museum introduce us to two denominations that came to dominate the world trading



system – the gold Venetian ducat or Islamic ashrafi weighing about 3.45 grams and the Spanish 8 reales or silver Thaler weighing about 28.00 grams.

Coins used to come in different shapes too – they were not always circular; for example, a coin from the Mughal era. On display in the showcase at the Currency Museum is a square gold coin. There is yet another coin which, looks like a clip. The Chinese coins have a hole in the middle of the coin and the ones on display at the museum were found at Al Baleed, Dhofar.

The curator of the museum, Ibrahim al Fadheli, explained further, "The object that looks like a pin or a clip is also a coin made of silver. There are three of them here – one of them is from Iran, the other is from India and the third is from Saudi Arabia. These coins were circulated in Oman too. The square gold coin is from Mughal Period in India – during emperor Akbar's time. The coin with a square hole in the middle is a Chinese coin from the 11th century. The Chinese traders had come to Salalah for trade in the past."

Message from Sri Lankan envoy on 73rd Anniversary of Independence

Ambassador hails Oman-Lanka ties

Today, Sri Lanka celebrates 73rd Anniversary of her Independence. I wish to extend my warmest greetings and felicitations to all Sri Lankans living in the Sultanate of Oman and back home on this special occasion.

73rd Anniversary is a significant occasion in our bilateral relations with the Sultanate of Oman as it coincides with the establishment of 40th Anniversary of the establishment of Diplomatic Relations between Sri Lanka and the Sultanate of Oman which falls on February 17. We are planning to organise a series of events to celebrate this historic occasion throughout the year. I firmly believe that this remarkable year will serve as a catalyst to further elevate bilateral relations between Sri Lanka and the Sultanate of Oman to new heights in the years ahead.

Sri Lanka has embarked on a journey and adopted policies that focus on the socio-economic growth. The vision of Gotabaya Rajapaksa, President of Sri Lanka, "Vistas of Prosperity and Splendour", is a clear roadmap to march towards a prosperous Sri Lanka. Oman's Vision 2040 engineered by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, is a blueprint for the Sultanate's future socio-economic development. I believe that these two visions offer enormous opportunities for partnership and collaboration between the two countries particularly in the economic diversification drive, for the mutual benefit of the two peoples.

People to People contact is the bedrock of the relations between Sri Lanka and the Sultanate of Oman. A vibrant Sri Lankan Community in Oman has been an important component in our bilateral relations and they have been playing a significant role in furthering the relations between the two countries. I wish to thank the Government and the people of Oman for extending their warm hospitality to the Sri Lankan community in Oman who had the opportunity to



Omar Lebbe Ameer Ajwad,
Ambassador of Sri Lanka

contribute towards the Sultanate's progress for last five decades under the blessed renaissance spearheaded by the visionary leadership of Late His Majesty Sultan Qaboos.

On this auspicious occasion, I wish to thank all the members of the Sri Lankan community in the Sultanate of Oman for their unwavering support extended to the embassy as well as for their outstanding sense of social responsibility and solidarity shown to the host country during the challenging times in the aftermath of Covid-19 outbreak.

I wish to place on record my sincere gratitude to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik for granting an amnesty to the Sri Lankan nationals who overstayed in Oman, to return back to their homeland with the exemption of fines or penalties.

While I extend my sincere appreciation to the Government of Oman for taking care of the health and welfare of the Sri Lankan community in the Sultanate during the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic, I am also grateful, in particular, to the enormous support extended by the Foreign Ministry of the Sultanate of Oman towards the Embassy of Sri Lanka in Muscat.

I take this opportunity to extend my best wishes for the good health, happiness and personal well-being of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik and for the continued progress and prosperity of the friendly people of the Sultanate of Oman.

Ensuring quality of food in restaurants

FROM PAGE1

"We have trained 710 food supervisors and workers intending to help them to achieve the desired results of the assessment drive."

Regarding the municipality's efforts to ensure food safety among restaurants and other food outlets in the country, the official said the Inspection and Food Control Department has established departments to make sure that health requirements at the restaurants were closely adhered to and the inspection teams have been provided with scientific and technical capabilities to implement their tasks assigned to them.

The assessment drive covers all wilayats to ensure that the approved health requirements are applied to make sure that food items are preserved in proper conditions. All employees should follow good

health practises to ensure the safety and hygiene of food items which are being sold.

"We are conducting awareness campaigns related to public health and raising interest in health education besides participating in some food safety conferences, preparing brochures and publications on food safety, educating people on the prevention of contamination and spoilage."

The central municipality laboratory regularly analyses samples of food which are withdrawn from the market.

For the imported food items which come through air, the health inspection officers at Muscat International Airport inspect the shipments and allow only after being assured that the food items are suitable for human consumption.

Tender Board awards projects worth over RO 15m

MUSCAT: The Tender Board on Wednesday awarded projects worth more than RO 15,229,976 during its meeting held under the chairmanship of Dr Said bin Mohammed al Saqri, Minister of Economy, Chairman of the Tender Board.

The tenders, which ranged from medical supplies and computer systems to development projects and services benefiting the public, were distributed as follows: 1. Procurement of medical supplies and blood transfusion apparatus (RO 6,248,219); 2. Supply of computer systems for school students from families benefiting from the Social Security Scheme (RO 3,499,925); 3. Supply of medicines to the Royal Hospital (RO 1,358,040); 4. Supply of surgical

equipment for dialysis units in health establishments under the Ministry of Health (RO 409,493); 5. Maintenance services and spare parts for medical equipment at the Royal Hospital (RO 895,796); 6. Renewal of tenancy contract for the Courts Complex in the Wilayat of Al Seeb (RO 226,800); 7. Additional works for the tender on designing consultancy services and supervision of Al Rustaq slope dual carriageway, the Governorate of South Al Batinah (RO 122,655); 8. Additional works for the tender on designing consultancy services and supervision of Al Saada Sports Complex's expansion project, Dhofar Governorate (RO 45,000); 9. Additional works for the tender the setting up of a fish market at the fishing port in Al Seeb (196,341);

10. Additional works for the tender on designing consultancy services and supervision of a project to set up a fishing port in the Wilayat of Qurayat (RO 8,954); 11. Additional works for the internal tender on consultancy services and training for projects department of the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation (RO 24,252); 12. Contract with Utelsat for renting space area for exchange and transmission of the Cultural Channel from Salalah to Muscat and the dissemination of the earth station television's digital transmission (DVBT2) programmes (RO 1,039,000); 13. Renewal of contract for radio and television transmission via NileSat (RO 1,155,000).

— ONA



Dr Said bin Mohammed al Saqri, Minister of Economy, Chairman of the Tender Board, presides over the meeting on Wednesday. — ONA

No coronavirus deaths in last two days

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Health (MoH) on Wednesday reported 171 new cases of Covid-19, bringing the total number of cases registered in the Sultanate to 134,856. Once again for the second straight day, the MoH reported zero Covid 19-related death, keeping the total death toll at 1,532.

The total recovery cases reached 127, 169, or 94.3 per cent of the total cases reported.

Seventeen patients were hospitalised during the past 24 hours, taking the total number of inpatients in hospitals to 95, including 25 in Intensive Care Units (ICUs).



Supreme Court decision to cost Galfar RO 21m

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 3

Galfar Engineering and Contracting said that the Supreme Court has issued a decision rejecting the petition filed by the company against the verdict of the Muscat Appeal Court, which nullified the arbitration award.

“We would like to inform our esteemed shareholders and Investors that in reference to our earlier disclosure dated February 19, 2018 on the arbitration award issued in favour of Galfar Engineering and Contracting (Claimant for the Seeb Sewer Network Project Contract, which was subsequently appealed by Oman

Wastewater Services Company (Haya Water). The Supreme Court has issued a decision rejecting the petition filed by Galfar against the verdict of the Muscat Appeal Court, which nullified the above-mentioned arbitration award,” the company said in its Muscat Securities Market (MSM) filing on Wednesday.

According to the initial assessment, this decision by the Supreme Court may have a potential financial impact on the books of accounts by approximately RO 21 million. Galfar will re-initiate the necessary legal proceedings to claim the amounts subject of the dispute in the arbitration award which has been nullified.

■ RAFO FLIES MEDICAL SUPPLIES



MUSCAT: One of the helicopters of Royal Air Force of Oman, in cooperation with the Ministry of Health, transported medical supplies to mountainous areas in the Wilayat of Qurayat in the Governorate of Muscat.

Oman Avenues Mall launches community outreach arm

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 3

Continuing its commitment towards community development and empowering individuals for a promising future, Oman Avenues Mall, the most prominent lifestyle & retail destination in the Sultanate, has launched its social responsibility wing, Tafa'ul – a beacon for community engagement. Aimed at positively touching the lives of the citizens and residents of Oman, Tafa'ul will collaborate with community development and societal wellbeing programmes to drive meaningful impact.

The mall operator seeks to provide a much-needed platform for showcasing and enhancing Omani citizens and residents in playing the role of an aggregator for standalone community enterprises.

“We are pleased and proud to launch our CSR programme Tafa'ul at Oman Avenues Mall, which strengthens our pioneering role in contributing to social causes, environmental sustainability, empowering Omani talent, promoting awareness about education, and participating in community-oriented initiatives. The community outreach arm will effectively utilise the mall's reach and position to support and contribute to the society, by consolidating efforts of various individuals and philanthropic entities,” Ananth A V, Director – Oman, India, Malaysia and Indonesia for Lulu Group International, said on the occasion of launching Tafa'ul.

Five key initiatives are planned to be implemented as part of Tafa'ul this year. This includes the on-going support programme for Oman Cancer Association executed through Art Beats, which has been undertaken as part of Tafa'ul's debut initiative. Hosted by renowned artist Ibrahim Gailani, Art Beats is dedicated to showcasing art

across various media, wherein, Gailani will talk about different forms of art including painting, sculpture, pottery, photography, installation, and more. The programme will also feature artists from Oman through interviews and their works. At the core of Art Beats is a social initiative - Studio.

It has collaborated with Oman Cancer Association for a noble cause. At the end of the first season of Art Beats, Studio, it will host a special art-themed event to support the Oman Cancer Association. As part of the initiative, Tafa'ul will acquire an artwork each from all artists featured on Art Beats. These artworks will be collated into a digital portfolio and shared with prospective buyers. All proceeds from the sale of the artworks will be donated to Oman Cancer Association to support the work done towards cancer awareness. To further promote the cause, the artworks of the artists will be up for sale at a special showcase at Oman Avenues Mall as a run up to the art event.

Additionally, under Tafa'ul, the 'Let's read' library programme is being upscaled to host the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs dedicated center for Islamic literature as part of the malls “lets read” library project which is scheduled to be launched during the holy month of Ramadhan. Along with these initiatives, there will be an environmental support programme which will be launched this year as part of Tafa'ul's support initiatives. Oman Avenues Mall's community outreach arm will also reach out to aspiring as well as established Omani Fashion designers to provide them an exhibit and showcase platform within the mall's premises. Furthermore, a robust Omani entrepreneur support programme is being planned under Tafa'ul and will be auctioned towards the end of 2021.



A resident leaves an envelope with a completed Covid-19 home test kit to be picked up by a volunteer during a door-to-door tests delivery in an effort to halt the new SARS-CoV-2 variant's spread, in Ealing, West London, on Wednesday. — Reuters

Oxford/AstraZeneca study backs UK jabs drive: Government

LONDON: Britain on Wednesday seized on a new study that said the Oxford/AstraZeneca Covid vaccine significantly reduces virus transmission and is highly protective after a single dose, after stinging criticism about its effectiveness from EU leaders.

Health Secretary Matt Hancock said the research, which has yet to be peer-reviewed, vindicated its massive vaccination drive, which has so far seen some 10 million people receive a jab.

"It does show the world that the Oxford jab works, it works well," he told BBC radio. "It slows transmission by around two-thirds, so it categorically supports the strategy that we're undertaking."

The European Medicines Agency has recommended the Oxford/AstraZeneca jab for adults of all ages last week — more than a month after independent regulators in the UK gave it the green light.

But several countries have advised against administering it to older people.

Germany said it will not advise over 65s to get it while Italy's medicines agency recommended alternatives for people aged over 55. President Emmanuel Macron claimed the vaccine was "quasi-ineffective" for the over-65s.

But the vaccine developers refuted his claim, saying the

uncertainty was driven by a lack of data in older age groups rather than any evidence that it did not work.

"From an immunological perspective, the older adults seem to respond in a very similar way to younger adults," Mene Pangalos, AstraZeneca's Executive Vice-President of biopharmaceuticals research and development, told a webinar on Wednesday.

More data on older people should be available within weeks with the completion of a US trial and early results from Britain's vaccination drive, added Andrew Pollard, Director of the Oxford Vaccine Group.

DOSING SCHEDULE

The study by Oxford University found that those who had been vaccinated with a single dose were 67 per cent less likely to test positive with a PCR test, "suggesting the potential for a substantial reduction in transmission".

It also provided backing for the UK's strategy of administering as many first doses of vaccine to high-risk groups as possible and allowing a 12-week interval before the second dose, which has been criticised by some experts.

The other vaccine already being rolled out in the UK, the Pfizer/BioNTech jab, was designed to be administered with a shorter interval. — AFP

Kremlin savours Sputnik vaccine win, plans production abroad

MOSCOW: Moscow savoured its scientific and political win on Wednesday after a top medical journal declared the Sputnik V Covid vaccine highly effective, and said it was working to increase production of the jab abroad.

Momentum was building towards a rollout in Europe as both Germany and Spain said they were open to taking deliveries of the vaccine.

The Lancet journal published results on Tuesday showing the homemade Russian vaccine — named after the Soviet-era satellite — to be safe and 91.6 per cent effective against symptomatic Covid-19 cases.

The shot faced Western criticism last year when it was approved in Russia before large-scale clinical trials.

The development represents a major scientific and political victory for President Vladimir Putin, who has called Sputnik V the world's best vaccine.

The latest results have also allayed some Western concerns over the transparency of the Russian jab and increased hopes for ending the pandemic, as many European nations struggle with rolling out their vaccines.

In a call with reporters on Wednesday, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said *The Lancet* article demonstrated the "reliability and effectiveness of the Russian vaccine".

"And besides that, (it) probably also confirmed the justification of the accelerated registration of this vaccine in the Russian Federation," he said, adding that the jab's safety was "proven".

On Wednesday, the banner headline of the pro-Kremlin *Izvestia* daily's front page celebrated the "successful launch" of the jab.

"Russian 'Sputnik V' has been recognised as the safest vaccine," the newspaper said.

Russia registered Sputnik V — a two-dose vaccine using adapted strains of the adenovirus, which causes the common cold — in August, months before Western competitors and even before

Russia's Sputnik V vaccine

DEVELOPMENT Gamaleya National Centre of Epidemiology and Microbiology

EFFECTIVENESS **91.6%** against symptomatic forms of Covid-19*

TYPE **Viral vector**
Uses two different human adenoviruses for each of two injections

EFFECTS Appears effective for over 60s
Partial data suggest very good protection against moderate to severe Covid-19 strains

NUMBER OF DOSES **2 doses**, the second injected after **21 days**

STORAGE TEMPERATURE **2-8°C** (refrigeration temperature)

PRICE PER DOSE **< 10 dollars** on international market

*Among the best-performing vaccines along with those of US-German Pfizer/BioNTech and US Moderna versions (rated around 95%)

Sources: The Lancet, Russian Direct Investment Fund



AFP

large-scale clinical trials.

Its developers later said the vaccine is over 90 per cent effective and Russia began inoculating citizens in December.

Sputnik V has been approved in more than 15 countries, including several ex-Soviet republics.

The Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF), which helped finance Sputnik V, has said that more than two million people have been inoculated with the jab around the world.

BOOSTING PRODUCTION

Peskov said Russia was working to further boost production of the vaccine in foreign nations.

"The number of countries that register this vaccine at home is increasing every day," he said.

"We are very active in responding to enquiries from various countries asking for the supply of this vaccine."

Rather than exporting Sputnik V in bulk, Moscow hopes to develop production partnerships

with local factories.

Brazil, India, Kazakhstan and South Korea are currently producing the jab, though not all of them have made it available to the public yet.

RDIF applied for registration of Sputnik V in the European Union last month and German Chancellor Angela Merkel has expressed willingness to its use once the jab receives the regulatory nod.

German biotechnology company IDT Biologika said it was in touch with RDIF over jointly producing the vaccine, while Spanish Health Minister Carolina Darias said Madrid would "wholeheartedly welcome" the jab so long as it was approved.

The EU is facing anger over a sluggish start to its mass vaccination campaign and member state Hungary has already registered the Sputnik jab on its own.

While Moscow has aspirations for Sputnik V to increase its

geopolitical clout, Peskov emphasised that "priority is given to Russia's domestic needs".

But beyond its capital and largest city Moscow, where Mayor Sergei Sobyenin estimated on Saturday that some 300,000 people had already been vaccinated, Russia has struggled with rolling out Sputnik V.

On Tuesday, the governor of the northwestern Leningrad region, surrounding the country's second-largest city Saint Petersburg, said it had used up its first 10,000 vaccine doses and was now waiting for additional supplies.

By Wednesday, Russia had reported 3.9 million coronavirus infections — the fourth-highest caseload in the world.

However, Russia faces a population sceptical of getting vaccinated, with recent surveys showing only 38 per cent of respondents were prepared to be inoculated against Covid.

— AFP

Covid responses chip away at democratic norms: Study

PARIS: Emergency measures to curtail the coronavirus pandemic took tolls on democratic freedoms around the world last year, with setbacks in the West even as some Asian countries made progress, a report said on Wednesday.

The annual "Democracy Index" published by the Economist Intelligence Unit found an erosion of personal rights in nearly 70 per cent of the 167 countries analysed.

France and Portugal in particular were downgraded to the rank of "flawed democracies" — in France's case because of lockdowns and other restrictions on movement.

That pulled down its aggregate ranking on subjects including civil liberties, political participation and functioning of government.

Portugal's slide reflected in part fewer parliamentary debates during the health crisis to function as a check on the prime minister's powers. Overall, "the pandemic resulted in the withdrawal of civil liberties on a massive scale



A man speaks in a loud speaker as several thousand entrepreneurs, owners of cafes, pubs and restaurants and their staff gather to protest against the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions imposed by the government in Zagreb, Croatia, on Wednesday. — AFP

and fuelled an existing trend of intolerance and censorship of dissenting opinion," the report found.

Even though in many cases citizens approved or at least accepted drastic social distancing rules aimed at limiting Covid

deaths, incoherent policies and enforcement undermined trust in government and democratic norms for many.

"The withdrawal of civil liberties, attacks on freedom of expression and the failures of democratic accountability that occurred as a

result of the pandemic are grave matters," the report found.

In Asia, however, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan were promoted to "full democracies" from "flawed," as government's "reacted decisively" to the crisis and "retained the confidence of their populations."

Even though Asia still lags overall in terms of democratic freedoms, "the novel coronavirus pandemic has accelerated the shift in the global balance of power from the West to the East," the study said.

The United States also retained its "flawed democracy" status, with more active voter participation in government offset by deep mistrust of political parties and dysfunctional government institutions. "Social cohesion has collapsed, and consensus has evaporated on fundamental issues... Joe Biden, faces a huge challenge in bringing together a country that is deeply divided over core values," it said. — AFP



A satellite image shows the FSO Safer oil tanker off the Yemeni port of Ras Isa. – AFP

Yemen authorities ‘ready’ for UN mission to repair tanker

SANAA: Yemen’s Ansar Allah said on Wednesday they are “ready” to allow a UN mission to inspect a long-abandoned fuel tanker which threatens to cause a massive oil spill, denying UN allegations of new delaying tactics.

The 45-year-old fuel vessel, abandoned near the western port of Hodeida since 2015, has 1.1 million barrels of crude on board, and a rupture or explosion would have disastrous environmental and humanitarian consequences.

“There is nothing new, no problems and no delays,” Ahmed Dares, an official responsible for oil affairs, said.

He said they were “ready for maintenance operations” to commence in March, as previously announced by the United Nations.

UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric said on Tuesday that they had yet to receive documents needed for the mission to inspect and repair the FSO Safer, initially planned for early last year and

repeatedly delayed.

“To facilitate the leasing of technically equipped service vessels, which are required for the mission, we have requested the authorities to provide a letter with security assurances,” he said in a statement.

“We regret that, to date, we have not received a response to our multiple requests for this letter, the lack of which would increase the cost of the mission by hundreds of thousands of dollars.

“We are also very concerned by indications that the authorities are considering a ‘review’ of their formal approval of the mission to deploy.”

Dujarric said that Ansar Allah officials had told the UN to pause certain preparations for the mission, for which the world body had allocated \$3.35 million, while they consider a review.

“In light of these challenges, the timeline of deployment of the mission remains uncertain,” he said. — AFP

Iran rules out changes to nuclear accord

TEHRAN: Iran will not accept any changes to the nuclear accord signed in Vienna in 2015, President Hassan Rouhani said on Wednesday.

“Not a single paragraph in the nuclear deal will change, nor will there be any new negotiators... Remarks about this are irrelevant and useless,” he told state television. Rouhani’s comments came in response to calls from the US and European signatories for future talks to address issues including Iran’s Middle East policy and missile programme.

French President Emanuel Macron also called for Saudi Arabia to join negotiations.

Former US president Donald Trump pulled out of the nuclear agreement in 2018. Washington introduced a policy of “maximum pressure” to try and renegotiate the agreement and force Tehran to accept tougher conditions.



A view of the Natanz uranium enrichment facility 250 km south of Tehran. – Reuters

In response, as of 2019, Iran gradually stopped complying with its obligations under the deal, meant to curb Iran’s nuclear programme in exchange for lifting economic sanctions.

The IAEA informed member states this week that Iran has started enriching uranium with a second set of advanced centrifuges that are banned under the nuclear accord. In addition,

Iran has also started installing even more powerful centrifuges, according to the Vienna-based IAEA.

“There’s more to come soon,” Iran’s IAEA envoy Kazem Gharibabadi wrote on Twitter.

New US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has said he will work with international partners towards a stronger nuclear agreement with Iran. — dpa

■ SAUDI ENTRY BAN



People register to receive a dose of vaccine against the Covid-19 disease in Riyadh. Saudi Arabia has temporarily suspended entry from 20 countries from Wednesday in a bid to curb a jump in coronavirus infections. The ban applies to neighbouring Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, and in the wider region, to Lebanon and Turkey. – AFP

Covid denies Gaza cancer patients essential care

GAZA CITY: For Tahani al Rifi, a 34-year-old Palestinian thyroid cancer patient, her twice-monthly trips out of Gaza for iodine radiotherapy had offered hope that she could beat the illness.

But restrictions imposed during the pandemic have made travelling for treatment to a hospital in the West Bank impossible for her, leaving Rifi with few options as her health has worsened.

“My blood tests show that my condition has deteriorated,” she said, wearing a floral scarf while speaking through a pink protective mask.

“I’m living on sedatives, because of the pain in my feet and neck.”

Gaza had a weak healthcare system before the coronavirus pandemic, due partly to an Israeli-enforced blockade.

Israel tightly controls the flow of goods and people in and out of Gaza, measures it says are necessary to contain Hamas and other armed groups in the strip.

Because radiotherapy is unavailable in Gaza, Rifi had been travelling to Hebron in the occupied West Bank for treatment, a journey that requires transit through Israel.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic



Tahani al Rifi looks out of her house's gate in Gaza City, amid restrictions imposed during the pandemic which have made travelling for treatment to a hospital in the West Bank impossible for her. – AFP

was declared last year, crossings into Israel have been restricted further.

For Gaza cancer patients, the Jewish state has allowed gravely ill people to be transferred to the West Bank or east Jerusalem, the majority Palestinian part of the city it annexed following the 1967 Six-Day War.

Rifi said her case was not considered acute enough to qualify for an emergency transfer.

Her last radiotherapy session was in August, and she has felt too weak to exercise at the sports club near home in east of Gaza City, she added.

ACCESS TO CARE

Gaza, which has a population of roughly 2 million, has recorded more than 51,500 coronavirus cases, including more than 520 deaths, according to Hamas’s health ministry.

Poverty rates, which stood at nearly 50 per cent before the pandemic, have increased — in part due to economic hardships exacerbated by the lockdowns that Hamas has imposed to stem transmission. Imane Shanane, who runs a patient advocacy organisation in Gaza, said cancer sufferers had been left “more fragile” by the pandemic. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

TRIPOLI/BENGAZI

Liquidity crisis eases after exchange rate shift

Libya’s currency adjustment last month has helped ease a liquidity crisis across the country but the continued scarcity of cash dollars means the black market still thrives.

Libya has been split since 2014 between warring western and eastern administrations with rival factions seizing control of key economic institutions.

As the eastern banking system was cut off from the Central Bank of Libya (CBL) in



Tripoli, different black market exchange rates emerged across front lines, both very different to the official rate, and making dollars unaffordable to most Libyans. — Reuters

TEL AVIV

Govt offers to vaccinate all over 16s

Israel will expand Covid-19 vaccinations to include anyone over the age of 16, officials said on Wednesday, after turnout for shots ebbed. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who is seeking re-election on March 23, had hoped the vaccine drive and a third national lockdown now in its sixth week would allow the economy to reopen this month.

But serious cases of Covid-19 and deaths from the disease have risen, with the increase attributed mainly to highly communicable



virus variants. This has offset gains from the vaccines.

“The reduction in morbidity has rather halted,” Nachman Ash, national pandemic-response coordinator, told Kan radio. — Reuters

TUNIS

Four soldiers killed in landmine blast

An improvised explosive device killed four Tunisian soldiers patrolling in a mountain region near the Algerian border, Defence Ministry spokesman Mohammed Zekri said on Wednesday.

The mountainous Moghila area, near the impoverished city of Kasserine, is home to a militant group that the Tunisian army has been fighting for years.

Tunisia faces a small but persistent militant threat, foreign diplomats focused on security say. As well as militant cells holed



up in remote mountain regions, who have not made successful forays beyond their strongholds in recent years, there is also a threat from militants radicalised online. — Reuters

In brief

■ WUHAN



WHO EXPERTS VISIT LAB IN SEARCH OF VIRUS ORIGIN

World Health Organization experts on Wednesday inspected a Chinese laboratory in Wuhan that some US officials said could have been the source of the coronavirus, as countries around the world pin their hopes on vaccines as a way out the pandemic.

Russia is working to increase production of its Sputnik V jab in foreign countries after a report showed strong results for it.

And British pharmaceuticals giant GlaxoSmithKline and German biotech firm CureVac said they were teaming up to jointly develop a vaccine with the potential to counter multi-variants of Covid-19.

■ ISLAMABAD



HEALTH WORKERS RECEIVE CHINESE-MADE VACCINE

Pakistan launched its Covid-19 vaccine drive at a ceremony in the capital attended by Prime Minister Imran Khan in which a doctor was the first in the country to receive the shot.

Beijing has donated about 500,000 doses of the Sinopharm vaccine — which has yet to be fully approved by China's health authorities — with a further million expected by the end of the month. Lawmaker Nausheen Hamid, who leads parliament's health committee, said a first phase of vaccinations would prioritise health workers. "I can't say with certainty, but we would still need around two months to start a mass vaccination campaign", she added. — AFP

■ BANGKOK



PHUKET PLANS PRIVATE VACCINATION DRIVE

Thailand's resort island of Phuket is planning private coronavirus vaccinations for 250,000 residents in the hope the government will allow it to fully reopen to foreign tourists by October and save its battered economy, industry officials said.

"The people of Phuket are losing hope", Phuket Tourism Association President, Bhummikitti Ruktaengam said, adding that the island's economy was at its lowest point in recent history.

About 10.5 million of the nearly 40 million foreign visitors to Thailand in 2019 visited Phuket. — AFP

Suu Kyi charged with possessing illegal radios

NAYPYIDAW: Myanmar police have filed charges against ousted leader Aung San Suu Kyi for illegally importing communications equipment and she will be detained until February 15 for investigations, according to a police document.

The move followed a military coup on Monday and the detention of Nobel Peace laureate Suu Kyi and other civilian politicians. The takeover cut short Myanmar's long transition to democracy and drew condemnation from the United States and other Western countries.

A police request to a court detailing the accusations against Suu Kyi, 75, said six walkie-talkie radios had been found in a search of her home in the capital Naypyidaw. The radios were imported illegally and used without permission, it said.

The document reviewed on Wednesday requested Suu Kyi's detention "in order to question witnesses, request evidence and seek legal counsel after questioning the defendant".

A separate document showed police filed charges against ousted President Win Myint for violating protocols to stop the spread of coronavirus during campaigning for an election last November.

Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) won the election in a landslide but the military claimed it was marred by fraud and justified its seizure



Staff at scores of government hospitals across Myanmar stopped work on Wednesday or wore red ribbons in show of protest against the military coup. — Reuters

Days before coup, IMF sent Myanmar \$350m in cash

WASHINGTON: The International Monetary Fund last week sent \$350 million in cash to the Myanmar government, part of a no-strings-attached emergency aid package to help the country battle the coronavirus pandemic.

Days later, military leaders seized power and detained elected leader Aung San Suu Kyi and other elected officials, in what the US State Department said on Tuesday constituted a coup.

There appears to be little the

IMF can do to claw back the funds, part of rapid-disbursing Covid-19 financing programs with almost no conditions and approved by the IMF board on January 13, sources familiar with the payments and international finance experts said.

"We are following the unfolding developments closely. We are deeply concerned about the impact of events on the economy and on the people of Myanmar", an IMF spokesperson

said in a statement, confirming the payment was completed last week.

The United States is the dominant shareholder in the IMF, which has provided Myanmar with \$700 million in emergency coronavirus financing over the past seven months, including last week's payment, which included \$116.6 million through the IMF's Rapid Credit Facility and \$233.4 million through the Rapid Financing Instrument. — Reuters

Judge shot dead in Jalalabad ambush

JALALABAD: An Afghan judge was shot dead in an ambush in the eastern city of Jalalabad on Wednesday, police said, the third court official killed in less than a month.

Judge Hafizullah was attacked as he headed to work in a motor trishaw, said Farid Khan, spokesman for Nangarhar province's police.

Gulzada Sangar, a doctor at Jalalabad public hospital, said Hafizullah had multiple bullet wounds.

The murder of Hafizullah, who like many Afghans goes by just



A soldier takes position during a military operation in Arghandab. — AFP

one name, comes after militants shot dead two women judges working for the Supreme Court in Kabul on January 17.

Several prominent Afghans — including judges, clerics,

journalists, activists and doctors — have been assassinated in often brazen daytime attacks.

Targeted killings with remotely detonated bombs attached to vehicles, or drive-by shootings, have become favoured tactics of insurgents, especially during the morning commute in big cities.

Earlier on Wednesday a policeman was killed and three others wounded in Kabul by a bomb attached to their vehicle.

Four similar bomb blasts rocked the Afghan capital on Tuesday, including one that killed a prominent cleric. — AFP

■ AERO INDIA 2021



Indian Air Force (IAF) Sarang helicopter team performs during the 'Aero India 2021' air show at Yelahanka air base in Bengaluru on Wednesday. — Reuters

Intl celebrities weigh in on Indian farmers' protest

KANDELA: Indian farmers' leaders on Wednesday outlined plans to scale up months of protests against agricultural reforms, as their cause gained high-profile supporters in the West.

Demanding the repeal of three new farm laws that they say will hurt them to the benefit of large corporations, tens of thousands of farmers have been camped on the outskirts of Delhi since late 2020.

Their generally peaceful protest was marred by violence last week, when some demonstrators drove a procession of tractors into the heart of the capital and clashed with police.

Police have since erected barricades around three main protest sites and shut off the Internet in some areas.

Farmers' leaders, speaking hours after US pop superstar Rihanna weighed into the row in a posting to her 101 million Twitter followers, said they would not back down.



Demonstrators take part in a march organised in support of farmers protest in New Delhi on Wednesday. — AFP

"This gathering shows the anger against the government and we will continue our fight", union leader Rakesh Tikait

told a 50,000-strong rally of the politically influential Jat community in northern Haryana state.

He and other leaders said they would send more farmers to the Delhi protest sites and hold similar meetings across the

country to gather further support.

Rakesh Singh Vidhura, a farmer from the neighbouring state of Punjab, the epicentre of the protests, who attended Wednesday's meeting, said the movement was bringing together growers from across India's northern breadbasket region.

"The protests have spread because these laws will impact the livelihood of farmers and Indian agriculture overall", he said.

GLOBAL FOCUS

The farmers say the reforms, which will allow big retailers to buy directly from growers, will mean the end of long-standing guaranteed prices for their crops and leave them vulnerable to the whims of big business.

The government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, which has offered some concessions but ruled out abandoning them, says they will benefit farmers and draw investment to a sector that makes up nearly 15pc of India's \$2.9 trillion economy and employs about half its workforce. — Reuters

FRANCE-SLOVAKIA DIPLOMACY



French President Emmanuel Macron holds an umbrella to Slovakia's Prime Minister Igor Matovic as they give a statement on the sidelines of a working lunch at The Elysee Presidential Palace in Paris on Wednesday. — AFP

Ex-ECB chief Draghi tasked with forming Italian government

ROME: Italy's president tasked former European Central Bank (ECB) chief Mario Draghi with forming a technocratic government, after the previous coalition under prime minister Giuseppe Conte collapsed in mid-January.

"I thank the president for the trust," the 73-year-old economist said in Rome on Wednesday following the meeting with President Sergio Mattarella.

An internationally trained economist, Draghi was given the nickname "Super Mario" by the press — a moniker that stuck over the years. For weeks, Draghi had been talked about as a potential head of a technocratic government to guide the country through the twin health and economic crises



Former ECB head Mario Draghi called for unity on Wednesday after being charged by Italy's president to form a new government, saying the country faced a 'difficult moment'. — Reuters

spawned by the coronavirus pandemic.

After weeks of impasse, party negotiations mediated by the president of the Chamber of

Deputies, Roberto Fico, to resurrect Italy's centre-left governing coalition finally broke down late on Tuesday. Conte's resignation came in response to former prime minister Matteo Renzi's small-but-essential Italia Viva party leaving the centre-left coalition after a spat over how to use pandemic aid from the European Union.

In recent weeks, installing a government of technocrats had been discussed as a possible short-term option in the face of the fighting by political party leaders.

The president's plans for Draghi got a mixed reception, with the populist Five Star Movement, the strongest force in parliament, continuing to call for a political government, rather than a team of technocrats. — dpa

UK asks EU for Brexit grace period extension to 2023

DUBLIN/LONDON: The United Kingdom demanded a two-year extension to grace periods for checks on goods going between Britain and Northern Ireland on Wednesday as European Union and British officials met to discuss problems over border arrangements following Brexit.

EU member Ireland backed the call for more flexibility. As part of its Brexit agreement last year, Britain agreed to checks on some goods moving between British-ruled Northern Ireland and other parts of the United Kingdom.

That let the land border between Northern Ireland and the rest of Ireland remain open with no checks. But the authorities in Northern Ireland complain that it has led to difficulty bringing in goods from other parts of the United Kingdom — and supermarkets have complained of shortages of some items.

British Cabinet Office minister Michael Gove, in charge of negotiating the rules around Northern Ireland, asked in a letter to his EU counterpart Maros Sefcovic that the bloc agree to extend and expand waivers on the movement of certain goods from Britain into Northern Ireland.

"The arrangements that currently apply to supermarkets and their suppliers must be extended until at least 1 January



Britain wants the issues that have complicated some trade between Northern Ireland and the rest of Britain to be resolved with the European Union as quickly as possible, Prime Minister Boris Johnson's spokesman said on Wednesday. — Reuters

2023. The eligibility for these arrangements must also be adapted so that all relevant local businesses and services are able to be included as authorised traders," the letter said.

Gove and Sefcovic are due to hold talks on the issue later on Wednesday, along with Northern Ireland's first minister Arlene Foster of the Democratic Unionist Party and deputy first minister Michelle O'Neill of Sinn Fein.

Ireland, which the EU is keen to shield from the effects of Brexit and whose views on relations with Britain and Northern Ireland are closely followed, expressed support for flexibility from the

European Union on grace periods.

Irish Foreign Minister Simon Coveney also asked for issues around the transport of pets from Northern Ireland to be addressed.

"From an Irish perspective we want there to be some flexibility here if it's possible to do that," Coveney told national broadcaster RTE. Trade across the land border in Ireland was the most contentious issue of Britain's five-year Brexit negotiations. Ultimately, London agreed that Northern Ireland would remain in the EU single market and customs territory when the rest of the United Kingdom left on January 1 this year. — Reuters

Court scraps arguments in Trump-era immigration cases

WASHINGTON: The US Supreme Court on Wednesday cancelled upcoming scheduled arguments in appeals filed by Republican former president Donald Trump's administration defending his funding of the US-Mexico border wall and his so-called "remain in Mexico" asylum policy.

Democratic President Joe Biden's administration, which is in the process of changing course on both issues, on Monday had asked the justices to postpone further legal filings in the two cases and to remove them from their oral argument calendar. Biden's administration already has announced plans to discontinue

wall construction and suspend the asylum programme, potentially making the cases moot.

The court was scheduled to hear arguments in the wall case on February 22 and the asylum police case on March 1.

The cases involve two contentious issues left over from Trump's turbulent four years in office.

The border wall was one of Trump's central 2016 campaign promises, with his supporters chanting at rallies "build the wall." At issue was the legality of Trump's decision, after Congress refused to appropriate money he sought for the wall, to shift military funds already provided by lawmakers



A man walks past barbed wire and security fencing surrounding the US Supreme Court in Washington. — Reuters

for other purposes to pay for the project.

Trump called the wall necessary to curb illegal immigration and drug trafficking across the southern border. Democrats have called the wall immoral, ineffective and expensive. Trump promised during the 2016 presidential race that Mexico would pay for the wall. Mexico refused.

Trump in 2019 redirected \$2.5 billion from military counter-narcotics programmes for border wall construction in California, New Mexico and Arizona. Biden issued a proclamation on January 20, his first day in office, ordering a freeze on border wall projects and directing a review of the legality

of its funding and contracting methods.

The "remain in Mexico" policy, which took effect in 2019, has forced tens of thousands of migrants along the southern border to wait in Mexico, rather than entering the United States, while their asylum claims are processed.

Trump said the policy reduced the flow of migrants from Central America into the United States. Migrants in the programme, many of them children, faced violence and homelessness in Mexico while awaiting court dates. Human rights groups have documented cases of kidnappings, rapes and assaults. — Reuters

SHORT TAKES

PERTH

71 homes destroyed as bushfire rages

At least 71 homes have been destroyed in a bushfire raging out of control near Australia's fourth-biggest city Perth, authorities said on Wednesday, as they told residents to ignore a coronavirus lockdown and leave threatened areas.

The blaze has torn through swathes of land in the Perth Hills and was moving towards more densely populated areas.

Six firefighters received minor injuries — including one who officials said suffered burns and continued working to extinguish the blaze — but no deaths or serious



injuries have been reported so far.

"To the people who have lost their homes, it's just devastating for them. Our thoughts go out to them," Western Australian fire commissioner Darren Klemm said. — AFP

CONNECTICUT

Rescuers brave ice to pull 2 from sinking truck

US firefighters battled crumbling ice in Long Island Sound to rescue two people trapped after a truck broke through and sank in the frigid waters beneath, authorities said.

Social media images of the incident near the Connecticut city of Stamford showed rescuers extending an aerial ladder over the ice to reach the couple in the sinking vehicle.

"The extreme winds, snow and tide continued to move the vehicle and cause it to fill with water," Matt Palmer, deputy chief of the Stamford Fire Department, said on



its website, adding that the mishap came at the peak of a nor'easter storm.

Snow up to 2 feet (61 cm) deep was dumped across the US north-east on Monday and Tuesday, killing three people and shutting down transport. — Reuters

WIESBADEN

Website for vaccine appointments crashes

Elderly citizens were again left disappointed by an online process to get Covid-19 vaccination appointments in the German state of Hesse.

The website where people aged over 80 can sign up to get the jab was not accessible on Wednesday morning. Staff operating a telephone hotline spoke of technical problems and said appointments could not currently be allocated.

Hesse is a state of around 6.3 million people located in central Germany. It is home to the financial hub of Frankfurt.



The first round of registrations there was also beset with problems as the system was overwhelmed by demand. Only 60,000 vaccination appointments were handed out then and seniors and their relatives had to wait hours to register. — dpa

Creative industries — why?

Some people may not be aware of the meaning of the creative industries. Many still do not realise why the world is celebrating it. There are those who limit the ambit of these creative industries just to traditional arts and crafts. But it is a cultural heritage. It is an act of human productivity which has cultural significance. If it is presented in an elegant manner keeping in view the developments every where and the spirit of time is considered during the process, it can win the world.

Work is work. There is no work which is an embarrassment or a cause of isolation if it makes you sweat while doing it. All creative works, professions, vocations, arts, painting, sketching, illustration or photography etc are better than any public and private sector jobs particularly in view of the current exceptional circumstances.

We can ask ourselves that despite their supremacy in modern technology, did we forget the deep-rooted cultural heritage of China and Korea. The answer will certainly be ‘no’.

Sometimes we ask that what is the price of an Omani dagger or an Omani women’s dress, and a handmade local jewellery. These are awfully expensive because they are rooted in the ancient Omani civilisational heritage.

There is always disparity in capabilities even among the members



Ali Al Matani
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of one family. It is illogical that the entire nation will go for one profession. Not all of them can become judges, engineers and doctors. This disparity complements each other’s interests and requirements.

We should realise that all people in the country will not have interest in bitcoin, Internet, automotive vehicles, aircraft, financial markets, philosophy and economics. It does not mean that these areas of life and work are less important. Instead, this shows people’s tendencies, interests and aspirations.

Similarly, we know that craft industries are alternative to low-salary jobs, as is the case now. We also see that sometimes even expatriates are given preference over citizens in these industries even though this is purely Omani cultural heritage.

Therefore we feel that many do not understand the creative industries in all their details. This is how they do justice with the integrated economy which generates billions for the countries which have shown interest in it.

According to the Unesco and UNCTAD statistics, creative industries generate \$2.250 billion annually, and employ 30 million people around the world. We know that the motion picture industry is also part of the creative industries. This industry uses latest technologies. It is in a state of constant development and innovation and generates millions of dollars in many countries. Music is also part of

this creative industries. The theatre and museums can not be separated from it. These industries are particularly important and give huge returns and generate jobs. Despite all this there are many who underestimate them.

In Europe, you buy a high-quality hive made in India for more than \$100, and the traditional Omani women’s costumes now cost a thousand rials. Therefore, would you tell your daughter who wants to study fashion designing not to specialise in this area of work, and that it is better for her to study computer science and technology.

We must understand that sometime chefs are paid more than some senior government officials. The Turkish chefs are the best examples. Traditional cuisine and popular food are prepared and served by cooks who are paid fantastic wages compared to those who are in other traditional professions. We must realise that one should not work in a profession which he or she does not like. This is because if we opt for a profession without liking it, we will not be able to be creative in it.

There are many who plagiarise or steal others’ cultural traditions and heritage to sell it to tourists. Stealing someone’s history is not easy. It is simply not possible despite all the flow of information on social media. Even if they do it, it is a fact that these thieves cannot get the real price of such cultural heritage.

DIGITAL DIVIDE

US battle over broadband heats up

AVI ASHER-SCHAPIRO

In January Ellie Mitchell started getting a barrage of texts and emails from her Internet service provider, warning her she was running out of data.

“The messages kept coming: ‘You’ve used 75pc, 80pc, 90pc...’” Mitchell, Director of Youth Nonprofit Maryland Out of School Time Network, said in a phone interview.

“It felt like we were being held hostage”, said Mitchell, who was working from home in Baltimore, Maryland alongside her husband and their two children attending school online.

Comcast Corp, one of the largest Internet providers in the United States, announced in November it would be capping data usage for residential customers not on an unlimited plan in several cities in the northeast.

Customers who use more than 1.2 terabytes (TB) of data are charged \$10 for every additional 50 gigabytes, up to a maximum of \$100.

The move drew the ire of elected officials and digital rights activists in Baltimore, who have been calling on the company to make broadband accessible for all students during the pandemic.

With millions forced to work and learn from home, Covid-19 has laid bare the digital divide across the country, with technological inequality disproportionately affecting poor and minority communities.

Some 16 million children, or 30pc of all US public school students, lack either an Internet connection or a device at home adequate for distance learning, according to the Boston Consulting Group.

“We see (the Comcast cap) as preying on people’s vulnerability”, Baltimore city councilman Zeke Cohen said in a phone interview.

“This decision to add a data cap is particularly harmful to Black and brown people, and poor people, who are already living paycheque to paycheque and can’t afford additional fees.”

A Comcast company spokesman said that only about 5pc of its customers would regularly go over the 1.2 TB limit, adding that it had a policy of working with customers on payment plans if they could not afford their bills.

On January 26, Cohen, two other council members and the Baltimore Digital Equity Coalition (BDEC), sent a letter to Maryland’s Attorney General, requesting he investigate Comcast for price gouging.

When Baltimore’s public schools first went remote in March 2020, Aliyah Abid was a high-school senior and a member of the group Students Organizing a Multicultural and Open Society (SOMOS), which pushed Comcast to make broadband quicker and cheaper.

“These days, the internet is how you access your education — so, with Comcast we are being asked to pay for a public education that’s supposed to be free”, she said.

“And not everyone is privileged enough to just not think about that.”

In July, SOMOS launched a petition asking Comcast to ensure students in the city could get online for free during the Covid-19 crisis.

Chief among their demands was improving the speed and lowering the cost of the “Internet Essentials” program, a discounted plan for low-income customers that costs \$9.95 per month.

That service caps download speeds at 25 megabytes per second (MB) and uploads at 3 MB, speeds that meet the basic federal definition of “broadband”. — Thomson Reuters Foundation

ON THE BRINK

Canada care workers struggle to make ends meet in pandemic

JULIE GORDON AND ANNA MEHLER PAPERNY

For 15 years, Halima has supported herself and her three children by working long hours taking care of elderly clients in retirement homes or in their personal residences in Toronto.

But as Covid-19 infections surged last year, Halima’s hours were slashed because care workers in Ontario were restricted to working in only one facility, and suddenly she could not afford the C\$1,800 (\$1,407) monthly rent on her apartment.

Halima, who asked to be identified by her first name only, has managed to keep a roof over her head by cutting back on groceries. As a part-time worker, she has no benefits and no paid sick days.

“Food and rent, everything is very expensive. It’s hard to live now”, Halima said in an interview.

Canada is struggling to tame a second wave of Covid-19 and stop the spread of new variants. Seniors have borne the brunt of the pandemic: 70 per cent of Canada’s more than 20,000 Covid-19 deaths have been in long-term care homes.

Personal support workers (PSWs) have long wrestled with housing insecurity in expensive Canadian cities, but the pandemic has worsened the situation for many, pushing some into homelessness and leaving others teetering on the brink, according to workers, shelter administrators, union



Kingsley Inyang is tested as passengers arrive at Toronto’s Pearson airport after mandatory coronavirus testing took effect for international arrivals in Mississauga, Ontario, Canada. — Reuters

THE PANDEMIC HAS
WORSENERD THE
SITUATION FOR
MANY, PUSHING
SOME INTO
HOMELESSNESS

officials and health advocates.

At the heart of their struggle are low wages and fewer hours amid pandemic restrictions that do not allow them to work at multiple care homes. The problem is most acute among part-time workers at for-profit care homes.

In populous Ontario, most PSWs are women and about 60 per cent work in for-profit care homes, many in part-time, high-turnover jobs, according to a recent Canadian Women’s Foundation report.

Some are paid close to minimum wage, meaning they earn barely enough

even with full-time hours to skirt the poverty level for a single person with no dependents. A recent survey found 67 per cent of PSWs reported earning less take-home pay now than before the pandemic. Even full-time care workers making the average wage in Ontario would fall short of the poverty level for a family of four in Toronto.

“I suspect that people who were one to two paycheques away from experiencing homelessness... now don’t have that insulation”, said Naheed Dosani, a doctor and health justice activist in Toronto. — Reuters

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BAUSHER
THUMP
QURAYAT 6 - 0 IN HM CUP

ANUROOP
ATHIPARAMBATH
MUSCAT, FEB 3

Bausher thumped Qurayat 6-0 in the first round match of His Majesty's Cup hockey championship at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex late on Tuesday.

The Group 4 match saw the complete domination of the host team as Qurayat could not find their name on the scoresheet.

Home boys Bausher started their HM Cup campaign in brilliant fashion as Ali al Owaisi netted in the second minute itself from a penalty corner.

The early goal shook the visitors' confidence as Bausher continued the onslaught.

Muhanna al Hassani found the target in the 15th minute with a good field goal.

Bausher led the first quarter 2-0.

In the second quarter, Anas al Wahaibi struck through a field goal in the 28th minute as Bausher led 3-0 at the half-time break.

The hosts came back in



the second half with the same temperament as Qurayat looked completely off-colour.

Bausher earned several penalty corners during the period.

Two of the opportunities were well converted by Khalid al Battashi to give Bausher an unassailable 5-0 cushion.

Al Battashi slotted home in 43rd and 57th minutes past a hapless Qurayat goalkeeper.

To pile more misery on Qurayat they conceded a penalty stroke towards the end of the match and Adnan al Hassani made no mistake in the 58th minute to complete the scoreline as 6-0.

SECOND DEFEAT

This was the second defeat for Qurayat, who suffered a 4-0 drubbing at the hands of Seeb in their opening match.

Bausher are topping the group table with three points and a better goal average than Seeb with same points. Qurayat are yet to open their account.

On Thursday, Salalah will take on Dhofar in a crunch clash in Group 2 at Al Saada Stadium (4 pm), while Muscat will play Nizwa in Group 3 at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex (7 pm).

Top two teams from four groups will qualify to the final round which will commence on February 22.

In brief

COLOMBO



SRI LANKA'S TOUR OF WEST INDIES IN DOUBT

Sri Lanka are looking to reschedule their tour of West Indies after head coach Mickey Arthur and opening batsman Lahiru Thirimanne tested positive for Covid-19, the country's cricket board (SLC) said on Wednesday.

Tests were carried out on the provisional 36-man squad on Tuesday ahead of the series in the Caribbean that was scheduled to start on February 20.

"Immediately upon identification, both Mickey Arthur and Lahiru Thirimanne have been directed to follow the government's health protocol laid out on COVID-19," the SLC said.

MELBOURNE



PLAYERS, OFFICIALS ISOLATE AFTER AUSTRALIA COVID CASE

The Australian Open was again thrown into chaos on Wednesday when up to 600 players and officials were told to isolate and get tested after a worker at a hotel they are staying in became infected with Covid-19. Victorian state Premier Daniel Andrews said the man last worked at the Grand Hyatt Hotel in Melbourne on January 29 and anyone there was considered a casual contact. "There is a number of about 500, 600 people who are players and officials and others who are casual contacts," Andrews said. The precautionary move may not impact the Australian Open, which will start on Monday.

JOHANNESBURG



AHLY SEEK CLUB WORLD CUP REDEMPTION IN QATAR

A 25 per cent win rate in a tournament is not normally associated with Al Ahly of Egypt, the most successful club on the continent with 20 Confederation of African football (CAF) titles.

But that is the disappointing Fifa Club World Cup record the Cairo Red Devils take into a quarterfinal on Thursday against Al Duhail from host nation Qatar. It will be the sixth appearance by Ahly in the annual competition and they desperately want to improve on having won just three matches of 12, losing the rest. The low point came at the 2013 Club World Cup in Morocco as they were humiliated 5-1 by Monterrey of Mexico in the fifth-place play-off.



India face England with Lord's Test final at stake

CHENNAI: New dad Virat Kohli returns to captain a buoyant India against England as they aim to build on their crushing win over Australia by sealing a place in the World Test Championship final.

Kohli, who welcomed a baby daughter last month, missed most of the Australia series on paternity leave as Ajinkya Rahane led an injury-ravaged side from 0-1 down to a sensational 2-1 away win.

Next up is the much-anticipated four-game series against Joe Root's England, who are also on a winning streak after beating Sri Lanka 2-0 on their first Test tour since the pandemic.

However, India start as strong favourites on their spin-friendly home pitches, where England haven't won a Test since 2012.

The hosts will also expect to clinch their place in the inaugural World Test Championship final in June at Lord's, where New Zealand await.

India top the table followed by New Zealand, Australia and England. The Black Caps reached the final when Australia called off their tour of South Africa over coronavirus concerns.

Fast bowler Mohammed Siraj and wicketkeeper-batsman Rishabh Pant were among the new stars unearthed by India as they clinched the series by handing Australia their first defeat at Brisbane's Gabba ground since 1988.

Paceman Mohammed Shami and left-arm spinner Ravindra Jadeja will miss the first two Tests due to injuries, but England are

keenly aware of the strength and variety of India's attack.

"The one thing about the Indian bowling attack is that it's not just about spin," England's assistant coach Graham Thorpe said. "Their seam attack is also strong. We can't be sidetracked completely and focus just on the spin side of things."

Jasprit Bumrah will lead the pace attack that also includes Siraj, Ishant Sharma and Shardul Thakur.

Spinners Ravichandran Ashwin, Kuldeep Yadav, Washington Sundar and Axar Patel will also be key on the Indian pitches.

England have come equipped with their spin options in Jack Leach, Dom Bess and Moeen Ali.

— AFP

Bangladesh, Windies share opening day honours

CHITTAGONG, Bangladesh: Opener Shadman Islam struck a patient half-century and left-arm spinner Jomel Warrican claimed three wickets for 48 as Bangladesh and the West Indies shared the honours on the opening day of the first Test in Chittagong on Wednesday.

The hosts ended the day on 242-5, with Shadman leading the way with 59 off 154 balls — and several others chipping in with useful knocks.

Mushfiquur Rahim (38), Mominul Haque (26) and Najmul Hossain (25) all got modest starts after Bangladesh opted to bat first, but they could not march on.

Shakib Al Hasan and Liton Das were unbeaten on 39 and 34 respectively at the close.

The visiting bowlers managed to strike whenever a partnership started to flourish, keeping Bangladesh in check.

Kemar Roach made the first breakthrough when he bowled opener Tamim Iqbal with an inswinger that hit the top of the left-hander's middle stump.

Although Tamim fell for just nine runs, his tally in Test cricket went to 4,414 runs, giving him the record of Bangladesh's leading run-scorer — for while at least.

Shadman and Najmul then steadied the innings with a 43-run stand before the latter was run out.

Warrican claimed the first of his three wickets beautifully, setting a trap for Bangladesh skipper Mominul Haque, who obliged by lofting a catch to John Campbell at midwicket.

It ended Mominul's promising 53-run third-wicket stand with Shadman, who followed his captain off the field shortly after, having been trapped leg before



Bangladesh's Shadman Islam plays a shot on Day 1 of the first Test against West Indies in Chittagong. — AFP

SCOREBOARD

BANGLADESH FIRST INNINGS	
Shadman Islam lbw Warrican	59
Tamim Iqbal b Roach	9
Najmul Hossain run out	25
Mominul Haque c Campbell b	26
Mushfiquur Rahim c Cornwall b Warrican	38
Shakib Al Hasan not out	39
Liton Das not out	34
EXTRAS (b2, lb2, w5, nb3)	12
TOTAL (five wickets; 90 overs)	242
FALL OF WICKETS: 1-23, 2-66, 3-119, 4-134, 5-193	
BOWLING: Roach 16-5-44-1, Gabriel 17-3-51-0, Cornwall 22-1-56-0, Mayers 7-2-16-0, Warrican 24-5-58-3, Brathwaite 4-0-13-0	

by Warrican.

Shadman — who hit six fours — could have survived if he had reviewed the decision of the on-field umpire, as a replay showed the ball was going down leg.

Mushfiquur then reclaimed his record as the country's leading run-getter and rebuilt Bangladesh's innings with a 59-run stand with Shakib.

Their partnership came to an end when Mushfiquur poked a delivery from Warrican to Rahkeem Cornwall at slip.

The West Indies handed Test debuts to Nkrumah Bonner, Kyle Mayers and Shayne Moseley.

— AFP

BSC, ISM score contrasting victories in U-16 league

MUSCAT: Lakshmi Narayana and Luis Kerrigan's terrific all-round performances powered Boshers Sports Centre (BSC) to a nail-biting 6-run victory against Indian School Wadi Kabir (ISWK) in a 30-over Junior League Under-16 clash at Muscat Municipality ground 2 in Amerat on Saturday.

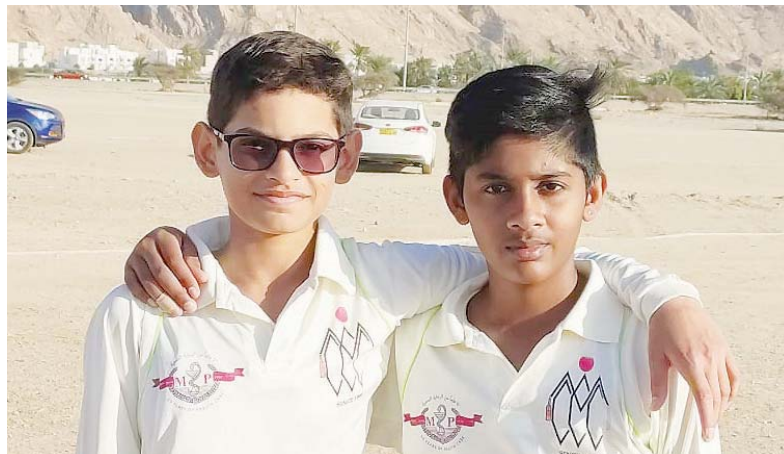
Lakshmi top-scored with 59 while Luis contributed 49 as BSC posted 219 for 9 on the board. Siddh Mehta was the pick of ISWK bowlers, taking 4 for 35.

ISWK's response was led by Siddh Mehta's superb 73 off 58 but BSC bowlers did a nice job, bowling them out for 210 in 30 overs. Lakshmi, Ashish Valappil and Luis all claimed two wickets each.

SAMPATH, KUTTIRAJA SHINE IN ISM WIN

In another Under-16 league game, Divyansh Sampath brilliant 3 for 11 and Shanmugarajan Kuttiraja's magnificent 57 not out off only 29 balls were the highlights of Indian School Muscat's (ISM) thumping 9-wicket win over Sri Lankan School Muscat (SLSM) at Muscat Municipality ground 1.

SLSM failed to put a big total on the board, folding up for 104 in 27.5 overs due largely to



Harshil Dinesh Shetty and Gaurav Dinesh of MCCC U-13.

brilliant bowling by Divyansh and Glenalexie Menezes who bagged 2 for 19.

ISM raced to the target in only 9 overs, scoring 105 for 1 thanks to Kuttiraja's top knock.

BRIEF SCORES

JUNIOR LEAGUE U16
Boshers Sports Centre 216 for 9 in 30 overs (Lakshmi Narayana 59 - 7x4, Luis Kerrigan 49 - 4x4, Siddh Mehta 4-35, Abhas Ajay 2-31) **beat ISWK 210 all out in 30 overs** (Siddh Mehta 73 - 10x4, Chaitra Jitesh 39 - 3x4, Lakshmi Narayana 2-32, Ashish Valappil 2-38, Luis Kerrigan 2-48) by 6 runs.
Sri Lankan School Muscat 104 all out in 27.5 overs (Devin Wijayananda 37 - 5x4, Divyansh Sampath 3-11, Glenalexie Menezes 2-19) **lost to Indian School Muscat 105 for 1 in 9 overs** (Shanmugarajan Kuttiraja 57 - 8x4) by 9 wickets.

JUNIOR LEAGUE U13
MCCC Red 139 for 2 in 20 overs (Shravan Sharat 56 - 2x4, Theertha So 35 - 1x4) **lost to ISWK-B 140 for 2 in 17.4 overs** (Vasudev Ram 41 - 2x4, Gautham Midhun 41 - 4x4) by 8 wickets.
MCCC Yellow 206 for 3 in 20 overs (Harshil Dinesh 64 - 6x4, Kriv Rajesh 49 - 8x4, Aneek Chakrovarty 42 - 6x4) **beat PSM 108 for 8 in 20 overs** (Asad Kashif 35 - 3x4, Gaurav Dinesh 3-7, Ayush Karthyic 2-10, Husain Maden 2-11) by 98 runs.
Boshers Sports Centre A 148 for 4 in 20 overs (Jeyapranesh Ayyappan 40 - 4x4, Nimish Sandesh 37 - 4x4, Kuttiraja K Giriharan 2-27) **lost to Indian school Muscat 149 for 1 in 11.3 overs** (Pachisia Ojius 80 - 11x4, Shah Jeet 37 - 4x4) by 9 wickets.
Boshers Sports Centre B 37 all out in 17.5 overs (Adarsh Kumar 13 - 1x4, Kavish Rajeshkumar 3-7, Saumya Bhavin 3-10, Ayush Shetty 2-5, Edwin Robins 2-11) **lost to ISWK-A 38 for 1 in 2.4 overs** (Nilaksh Vats 27 - 4x4) by 9 wickets.

Indian Republic Day hockey festival marked



MUSCAT: PK Prakash, Councillor at Indian Embassy, visited the sports museum of SAS Naqvi to mark the Republic Day of India hockey function in a symbolic manner as the annual hockey festival was suspended due to the pandemic situation.

Prakash was accompanied by his wife and daughter and Osama Rawat received the guests.

Earlier, Indian Ambassador Munu Mahawar had visited the museum on October 20.

Dr Shaikh Hammad bin

Hamed al Ghafri, Member of State Council, had felicitated Mahawar on the occasion.

For the past 15 years, the Friends of Naqvi Group and Team Coorg Muscat annually hold hockey tournaments marking the Republic Day of India, Indian Independence Day and Dyan Chand Day (National Sports Day of India). The events are held under the patronage of Indian Embassy and in coordination with the Oman Hockey Association.



SEEB, SALALAH, AHLI SIDAB AND SOHAR IN LAST 8

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, FEB 3

Seeb, defending champions of 2019-20 season of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth Shield for Volleyball Championship, secured a spot in the quarterfinals as they blanked Oman club 3-0 in the round 16 matches on Tuesday at indoor hall of the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex.

The title holders commenced the first set with winning target and managed to end it at 25-19. Seeb spikers, under directions of their experienced coach Jamal al Mamari, continued strong show in the second set to claim it 25-11.

Coach Hamood al Harthi, head coach of Oman club, employed a better approach in the third set but Seeb's players experience finished the set with nine points gap by 25-16.

Seeb will meet Salalah on February 9 at Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in the last-8 stage.

Salalah club booked their slot in the quarterfinals after thrashing neighbours Al Ittihad 3-0 on Monday. The initial set was very tight between both teams as each team was looking to take the first

Seeb spikers, under directions of their experienced coach Jamal al Mamari, continued strong show in the second set to claim it 25-11

set for advantage in the match.

The opening set ended in favour of Salalah at 28-26. Salalah's spikers took the advantage and managed to end the second set on winning note as well as they claimed it 25-12. In the third set, Al Ittihad's spikers tried to make a comeback to the match but Salalah's players ended it at 25-23.

SOHAR OUST MAJEES

Sohar, winners of the Ministry's Shield in 2015, sealed a slot in the quarterfinals after their triumph

against Majees 3-1 at Sohar Sports Complex.

Sohar team's players began the match strongly as they ended the first set with 25-12 and Majees registered a prompt come back in the following set as they equalised by taking it 25-23.

Sohar's men were the best team in the third set to claim it 25-13 and they went on to claim the match by winning the fourth set by 25-19.

Muscat-based team, Ahli Sidab, earned their direct ticket to the next round after their crucial win over Ibri by straight sets 25-16, 25-14 and 25-15.

The other fixtures of the round 16 will be completed late on Wednesday while the quarterfinal matches will be held from February 9.

The first edition of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth Shield for Volleyball Championship had commenced in 2012 and Saham won the first three editions consecutively.

Sohar won the 2015 edition, while Al Salam claimed the titles of 2016, 2017 and 2018. Muscat-based team, Seeb, were the champions for 2019 and 2020.

ITALY, RUSSIA BECOME FIRST TEAMS INTO SEMIFINALS

Zverev, Tsitsipas open season with fighting victories in ATP Cup

MELBOURNE: Alexander Zverev and Stefanos Tsitsipas opened their seasons with fighting wins in the ATP Cup Wednesday as they warm up for the Australian Open, while Italy and Russia became the first teams into the semifinals.

Seventh-ranked Zverev had to dig deep to overcome Canadian dangerman Denis Shapovalov 6-7 (5/7), 6-3, 7-6 (7/4) and seal the tie for Germany.

But he gained valuable court time ahead of another crack at a first Grand Slam trophy at the Australian Open starting next week.

Zverev, who fell agonisingly short in the US Open final last year to Dominic Thiem, said having his brother Mischa as team captain had helped him.

"All the players enjoy having him as captain, he's been fantastic in training as well. It's just great to have him here," he said.

Germany's Jan-Lennard Struff upset Milos Raonic 7-6 (7/4), 7-6 (7/2) in the opening match and Canada are now out after a second narrow loss for Shapovalov, who pushed Novak Djokovic hard in their Group A clash on Tuesday.

Djokovic's defending champions Serbia beat Canada 2-1 in their opener on Tuesday and will play Germany on Thursday for a place in the semis.

Greece's world number six Tsitsipas was also forced to work hard by Australian Alex de Minaur, who won the season-opening Antalya Open last month, eventually triumphing 6-3, 7-5.

Tsitsipas, a semifinalist at the Australian Open in 2019, said he gave it his all.

"It was a thrilling match, both of us gave everything we had," he said.

"I managed to stay calm and resilient. I just tried to take my opportunities and press as much as I could."

Australia's John Millman had won the opening singles match against Michail Pervolarakis, with the Group B tie sent into a deciding doubles.

BERRETTINI DELIVERS

Italy became the first nation into the last four by beating France to follow their opening win against Austria in Group C.

Fabio Fognini won just five games in his ATP Cup opener on



Greece's Stefanos Tsitsipas in action during his match against Australia's Alex de Minaur at the ATP Cup in Melbourne Park. — Reuters



Germany's Alexander Zverev in action during his group stage match against Canada's Denis Shapovalov in the ATP Cup at Melbourne Park. — Reuters

I was ready for any score. I kept going. I thought about my weapons and that's how I won the match
MATTEO BERRETTINI
Italian player

Tuesday against Dennis Novak, but bounced back to battle past Benoit Paire 6-1, 7-6 (7/2) and give Italy a 1-0 lead.

Matteo Berrettini, tipped by Djokovic as among the new generation capable of winning a Grand Slam, clinched the tie with a comfortable 6-4, 6-2 victory over Gael Monfils, ranked a place below him at 11.

"I was ready for any score. I kept going," said Berrettini, who

recovered from going down an early break in the first set. "I thought about my weapons and that's how I won the match."

"It's a great team, great guys. We are enjoying on court, but off court as well," he added. "I think when you're playing for your country, for your team, it's something special."

Russia, the only team to feature two top-10 players, also made the semis, proving too strong for Japan.

World number eight Andrey Rublev crushed Yoshihito Nishioka in just 64 minutes, losing just seven games across his two singles encounters at this year's event, before fourth-ranked Daniil Medvedev cruised past Kei Nishikori 6-2, 6-4.

"Really happy for the team," said Medvedev. "Semifinals is a big step... really happy that we made it in both singles."

Serbia overcame Spain in the final of the inaugural and hugely popular tournament last year in Sydney — launched as a rival to the Davis Cup. — AFP

Serena sizzles as Osaka, Barty struggle

MELBOURNE: Serena Williams continued her impressive Australian Open preparations with a straight-sets thrashing of Tsvetana Pironkova on Wednesday, as world number three Naomi Osaka and top-ranked Ashleigh Barty struggled.

Williams, 39, has been on belligerent form at the Yarra Valley Classic and overpowered the Bulgarian with a 6-1, 6-4 victory in 74 minutes. "So far, so good. It's special to play here with what's going on in the world," said Williams, who only lost four games against Daria Gavrilova in her opener on Monday.

Williams, aiming for a record-equalling 24th Grand Slam title at the Australian Open, broke Pironkova

first up and kept her foot on the gas with 25 winners and six aces.

The American will face compatriot Danielle Collins, who knocked out world number six Karolina Pliskova in straight sets, in the quarterfinals on Thursday.

Osaka and Barty, however, were pushed to the brink, but both avoided early exits at Melbourne Park.

Japan's Osaka was made to work hard against in-form Katie Boulter, but fought back for a 3-6, 6-3, 6-1 victory to reach the quarterfinals in the Gipsland Trophy.

She next meets Irina-Camelia Begu from Romania.

"Today was really tough for me. It just felt like a new experience playing

here again after such a long while," Osaka said. "For me, I thought she played really well. I sort of had to raise my level, kind of go within myself."

British world number 371 Boulter, who knocked out teenage sensation Coco Gauff on Tuesday, ran her error-strewn opponent ragged to claim the first set in 39 minutes.

A refocused Osaka lifted her intensity to run away with the contest in a one-sided third set.

'I FOUND MY GROOVE'

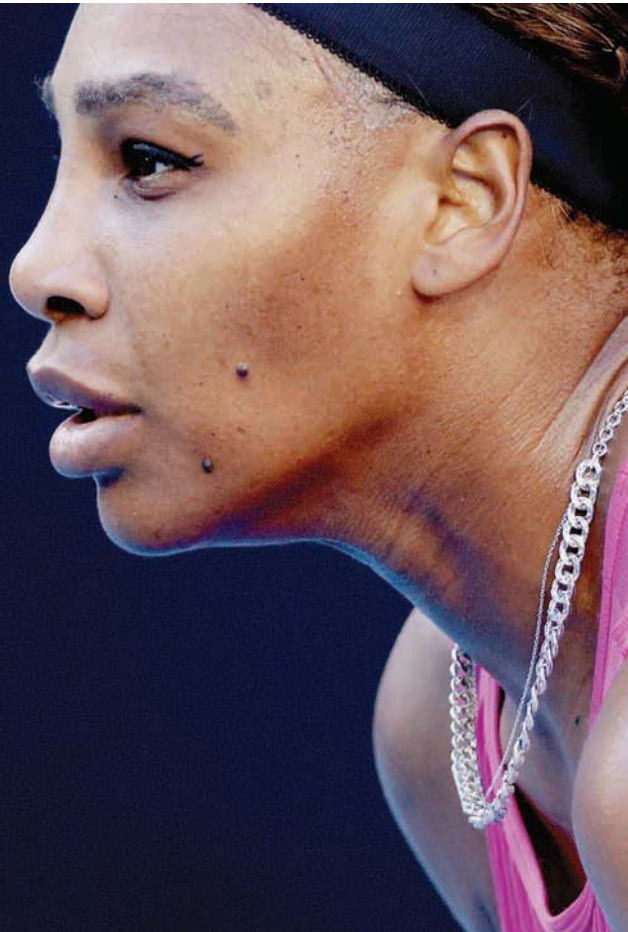
World number one Barty also had a fright in her match against Marie Bouzkova of the Czech Republic, but recovered from a second-set stutter to win 6-0, 4-6, 6-3. "Mid-match I

lacked execution... but happy to get it on my terms in the end," Barty said after a quick turnaround, having beaten Ana Bogdan in straight sets on Tuesday night.

Barty will face Shelby Rogers of the United States next.

Reigning Australian Open champion Sofia Kenin was also pushed hard by American Jessica Pegula, dropping the first set and finding herself 4-1 down in the second before prevailing 5-7, 7-5, 6-2.

"I was happy the way I was able to change things in the second set... I found my groove," said Kenin, who will play Garbine Muguruza next in a rematch of last year's Australian Open final. — AFP



business

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70 economic activities reserved for Omani investors

Ministerial Decision 209/2020 came into force on December 14, 2020 cataloguing a broad array of predominately small and medium-size businesses that can be set up only by Omani investors

CONRAD PRABHU
@conradprabhu

As many as 70 different economic activities are now covered in the so-called 'negative list' that are effectively off-limits to foreign investors under the Foreign Capital Investment Law (FCIL) enacted by the Omani government in 2019.

A summarised list of these activities, which are restricted to local investors (among others who fall outside the remit of the FCIL statute), was made public by the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) last December.

Ministerial Decision 209/2020, issued by Minister Qais bin Mohammed al Yousuf, came into force on December 14, 2020 cataloguing a broad array of predominately small and medium-size businesses that can be set up only by Omani investors (as well as GCC nationals and those covered by the Oman-US FTA).



But legal consultants providing advisory services to their local and international clientele have since obtained a detailed breakdown of the activities that are prohibited for foreign investment.

The activities, distributed across a broad category of sectors, are as follows:

(i) Retail sale of following goods and services in dedicated stores: Gift items and Silverware; Traditional weapons; Pottery and Craft items; Handicrafts;

Beekeeping merchandise; Plant nurseries; Flowers; Art, Paintings and Souvenirs; Phone Cards of local service providers; Cooking Gas; Animal Feed; and Suitcases and Bags.

(ii) Tailoring, embroidery and production of: Women's abaya, Omani kumma (cap), Arab male outfits, Non-Arab male outfits, Dresses and outfits of Arab and non-Arab women, Sports attire, and Military uniforms;

(iii) Automotive parts, repairs

and services: Servicing of motor vehicles; Oil change and lubrication services; Auto electrical services and Battery recharge; Radiator repair and services; Tyre and tyre hub repairs; Wheel balancing; Auto air-conditioning repairs; Car cleaning and polishing, and Exhaust System cleaning.

(iv) Cooking gas: LPG filling stations; Wholesale supply of cooking gas; and Transport of gas cylinders.

(v) Fuel Marketing Stations:

A summarised list of these activities, which are restricted to local investors (among others who fall outside the remit of the FCIL statute), was made public by the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) last December

Filling stations; Diesel filling stations; and Operation and Management of filling stations.

(vi) Foodstuff & Confectionery: Manufacture of Omani halwa.

(vii) Traditional crafts: Manufacture of Omani khanjar.

(viii) Laundry: Laundry services (outside of hotels and resorts); Clothes ironing services (outside of hotels and resorts); and Laundry and Dry Cleaning (outside of hotels and resorts).

(ix) Mobile phone sales and services: Retail sales of telecom goods and accessories in specialised stores; and Retail sales of mobile phones and accessories in specialised stores.

(x) Offices: Photocopying and typing services; Documentation services; Customs clearance services, and Real estate brokerage.

(xi) Insurance and loss adjustment: Assessment of cancelled vehicles; and Insurance commission agencies.

(xii) Recruitment services: Manpower offices and

Recruitment offices.

(xiii) Hair-cutting and salon services: Haircutting and facial services for men (other than those in hotels and resorts); Hairdressing and salon services for women (other than those in hotels and resorts); and Barber services for children (outside of tourism establishments).

(xiv) Orphanage and elderly care: Specialised care homes; Homes for the aged, Orphanages and Rehabilitation centres.

(xv) Food and agro-produce: Fruits and vegetable wholesale outlets; Retail sales of fresh fruit, vegetables and dates in specialised stores, and Retail sale of traditional honey in specialised stores.

(xvi) Others: Potable water tanker operations; Pilgrimage transportation services; Loading and unloading of goods; General cleaning of buildings; Design and installation of neon signboards; Operation of driving schools; Libraries and Archival services.

The new Foreign Capital Investment Law, promulgated by Royal Decree 50/2019, came into force on January 1, 2020, effectively doing away with the need for a local partner when investing in the Sultanate. The new statute provides an array of incentives, tax benefits and other inducements to encourage international investors to weigh opportunities for business and investment in Oman.

CMA to launch new transparency enhancing portal for market players

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 3

The Capital Market Authority (CMA) is preparing to launch its XBRL disclosure portal by organising a series of introductory workshops for regulated entities about the significance of the XBRL portal to enhance transparency through better disclosure methodologies by issuers of securities, insurance companies and brokers.

The initiative in line with the Oman Vision 2040 to provide quality services through digital transformation.

XBRL is globally recognised system for disclosure of financial and non-financial statements of the listed companies and funds to enhance transparency and efficiency in stock markets which reflects positively on the confidence of market participants.

The portal provide fast and safe disclosure technology as it provide



unified concepts for financial information and disclosure elements allowing fast, accurate, timely and effective exchange of information in comparable manner and provide the ability to conduct the required comparison, studies and analysis in an efficient electronic way and reduce audit period.

XBRL transfers financial statements and data using IFRS Taxonomies and coding readable by both reader and computers for easy access to the information therein and to compare the contents.

CMA, in collaboration with IRIS Business Services Limited, will organise nine introductory workshops from February 8 - 14, 2021 for capital market institutions, public joint stock companies, insurance companies and brokers, investment funds and the companies operating in the field of securities in addition to accredited audit firms. The Authority signed an agreement to roll out the XBRL portal last year.

Asyad Group signs up to Neptune Declaration on seafarer safety

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 3

Asyad Group, the holding company of government-owned port, transport, shipping, maritime and logistics assets, has signed the Neptune Declaration to prevent exposing seafarers to extended periods at sea.

The latest commitment comes in keeping with Asyad's continuous efforts to ensure the highest health and safety standards and practices for its staff and in response to international calls for crew change to minimise the impact of Covid-19 on maritime trade and logistics.

Since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the shipping arm of Asyad has set out to implement consistent crew change protocols on all its vessels in the USA, Singapore, Brazil, India, Sri Lanka and Japan to help seafarers enjoy a healthier social life and manage the stress of their time at sea.

The Neptune Declaration, signed by more than 300 global players and businesses operating



in the maritime sector, urges the implementation of four main actions to facilitate crew change and safeguard the global supply chain.

These actions include recognising seafarers as key workers, providing them priority access to Covid-19 vaccine and ensuring air connectivity between key maritime hubs for seafarers.

Dr Ibrahim al Nadhairi, CEO Maritime- Asyad, commented that joining this Declaration rings true to Asyad's HSSE culture and pledge to provide a safe workplace for all its

employees.

It also marks a milestone towards reinforcing Asyad's position as a leading global logistics group committed to supporting and caring for seafarers spending extended periods at sea that may impact their physical, mental and social wellbeing.

Al Nadhairi added that Asyad has taken concrete measures to improve the level of care extended to its seamen, whether by providing personal protection equipment, scaling up regular on-board healthcare campaigns and supporting

The shipping arm of Asyad has set out to implement consistent crew change protocols on all its vessels in the USA, Singapore, Brazil, India, Sri Lanka and Japan to help seafarers enjoy a healthier social life and manage the stress of their time at sea

seafarer families, if need be. Asyad strongly believes that the human capital is the invaluable essence of the Group and the driving force behind our progress," said Khalil al Balushi, Marine Director.

He added that the Neptune Declaration, to which Asyad is now an active member, formalises a global initiative to improve the wellbeing and welfare of seafarers as the lifeblood of the global supply chain.

Today, Asyad Group has grown into an established player in the global maritime market, owning and operating around 60 carriers and vessels.

New variants imperil revival of global tourism

Despite the current conditions that the countries of the world are going through to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, air traffic has picked up partly to cater to the desire of some people for leisure travel and also to support the global flow of goods and merchandise. According to a recent poll conducted by YouGov in this regard, 46 per cent of the respondents in the Middle East said they were planning to spend their vacation overseas during 2021 notwithstanding the pandemic, while 52 per cent intend to spend their vacation in their home countries to encourage domestic tourism. In addition, 25 per cent of those surveyed said they plan to undertake local or international business trips to conclude deals

and procure materials, products and commodities necessary for local economies despite the restrictions imposed by countries and airports in the wake of the latest surge. The survey also indicates that some of these travellers intend to travel First Class and Business Class because of the relatively better distancing between seats and other precautions. Others said they plan to stay in 5-Star international hotels and resorts for the same considerations. Those who would opt for Tourist Class travel are primarily holidaymakers travelling in a group or are members of the same family. The Covid-19 pandemic has led to the postponement of many tourism activities and events around the world, including international tourism



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IT IS NOT UNLIKELY THAT THIS SITUATION WILL CONTINUE DURING THE CURRENT YEAR, AT A TIME WHEN NEW VARIANTS AND STRAINS HAVE PROMPTED MORE AGGRESSIVE SHUTDOWNS.

conferences and exhibitions such as the International Tourism Bureau of Berlin, the London Tourism Fair, the Arab Travel Market in Dubai and others. This has reduced the opportunities for tourism promotion and marketing in the world, and has cost many jobs in tourism establishments, airlines, and hotel and resort companies. It is not unlikely that this situation will continue during the current year, at a time when new variants and strains have prompted more aggressive shutdowns. Undoubtedly, governments have been keen to adopt new measures to limit the spread of the epidemic while also rolling out vaccines and supporting mass vaccination campaigns. While expressing a desire to travel despite the

pandemic, many travellers have nevertheless voiced their fears about exposure to the virus. Among the respondents, 43 per cent of luxury travellers said they fretted about the pandemic risks, while 35 per cent voiced concerns about safety and security of travel amid the pandemic. Such surveys by travel experts provide the opportunity for everyone, ranging from owners of institutions operating in the field of aviation, hotel, accommodation, nutrition and other institutions specialising in global tourism, to develop their marketing strategies and put in alternatives to sustain their operations. After all, there are great numbers of people employed in these sectors eager for the return of normality once the pandemic subsides.

ICAI Muscat Chapter launches VAT Knowledge Series

MUSCAT: The Muscat Chapter of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of India (ICAI) launched its VAT Knowledge Series for its members in Oman as part of its continuing education programme series. The event was held under the auspices of Dr Khalfan al Barwani, Chairman of the College of Banking and Financial Studies (CBFS). N Ramananda Prabhu, Chairperson, welcomed the members and stated the plan to further enhance the standing of the Muscat Chapter of the ICAI and to conduct knowledge series, seminars, events on variety of topics that would help all accounting professionals become great business leaders. Dr Khalfan al Barwani, the chief guest, commended the initiative of the Muscat Chapter towards capacity building of all finance professionals in Oman. “Starting early is instrumental in ensuring that VAT implementation runs smoothly for any business,” he said. “Being properly trained is critical to ensure programme success, so businesses need to provide the best possible training for all employees who will be handling the transition to VAT,” he stated, adding that VAT will also improve the economy of Oman.

PRESS RELEASE

BANK MUSCAT SIGNS PACTS WITH HEIS TO PROVIDE DIGITAL BANKING SERVICES



Bank Muscat has signed agreements with a number of higher educational institutions in the Sultanate. The agreements with the Sultan Qaboos University, the University of Technology and Applied Sciences, College of Sharia Sciences and the College of Banking and Financial Studies will provide them access to the bank's digital banking services. This will allow these institutions to easily make and approve online transactions, thereby saving the time and effort of their employees and increasing operational efficiencies. This move to digitalisation is in line with the goals of Oman Vision 2040 including the building of a diversified, dynamic, globally interactive and competitive economy that meets the present and future needs of the locals, in which the private sector has a prominent role. Tariq Atiq (pictured), Deputy General Manager, Transaction and Public Sector Banking, Bank Muscat, said: “We are pleased to strengthen our partnership with leading educational institutions across the Sultanate and link them to the state-of-the-art digital banking system offered by the bank. “We hope that this partnership will raise streamline business transactions and raise the operational efficiencies of these institutions. We thank all our partners for their confidence in the bank's services and facilities and recommend that they start using secure methods like the Corporate Internet Banking platform for transferring salaries and making all recurring payments ahead of the extended February 28, 2020 deadline for banks to stop accepting insecure payment methods.”

Oman, Indonesia seek to enhance commercial ties

KABEER YOUSUF
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Oman and Indonesia are exploring opportunities to support the digital transformation under way in the two countries. This was emphasised during a virtual press conference held earlier this week. It follows the recent partnership agreement between Omani tech company ETCO with Indonesian Awadah Group, which promotes a cultural-linguistic exchange between the two nations using technology.

This partnership also involves Indonesia's WIR Group as the technology enabler and developer in the digital reality aspect of it. Ambassador Mohamad Irzan Djohan hopes that more Omani companies, especially from the private sector, will establish such partnerships with Indonesian companies. Omani companies and investors will be connected with their Indonesian companies in the digital services sector by the Indonesian Embassy in Muscat. “We are optimistic that Omani companies and investors

are interested in strategic partnerships with Indonesian companies because both nations and their peoples share similar values. Aside from the economic benefits of having a strategic partnership, we believe that our two peoples could work together well, which is important in having a partnership,” Mohamad Irzan Djohan, Indonesian Ambassador to the Sultanate of Oman, said. The digital transformation that the country has undergone in the recent past has supported the economy and other spheres of life.

This expertise can be shared with the Omani counterparts benefiting both sides in various ways. “Indonesia has undergone more than a decade of digital transformation which has improved human interactions, learnings and transactions. This also has created many Indonesian companies specialising in future technology, such as WIR Group which specialises in augmented reality, virtual reality and artificial intelligence,” Ahmad Ma'rufi, First Secretary at the economic section, said.

White paper outlines cyber security challenges associated with 5G rollout in the Middle East

NEW STUDY: Increasing number of mission critical Internet-of-Things (IoT) devices connected to 5G networks presents network operators an expanded set of threats and vulnerabilities

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 3

The development and rollout of 5G coverage across Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries will empower new services and use cases for consumers, enterprises and broader society. However, 5G infrastructure and the network ecosystem also creates opportunities for malicious threat actors seeking the potential to disrupt the economy, public health and safety. Against this backdrop, a new white paper from Booz Allen Hamilton outlines 5G's most significant technical changes, its diverse operational value, and associated risks and opportunities. 5G's widespread rollout will spur economic activity broadly through the sale, installation and operation of new networks. Increasing adoption will facilitate productivity gains, novel services and innovations only made possible by 5G's



technological advances including speed and network flexibility, among others. An IHS Markit study estimates that \$13.2 trillion in global economic value will be possible by 2035, generating 22.3 million jobs in the 5G global value chain alone. Meanwhile, the global 5G IoT market — already worth an estimated \$305 million annually — is projected to expand by 54 percent annually in the coming years, driving further gains. GCC countries' 5G plans are already well underway. In September 2020 for instance, in alignment with the UAE strategy for 5G and beyond (2020-2025) to boost 5G services rollout, the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA) announced allocation of a new frequency band that allows UAE telecoms operators to expand the application of 5G more broadly. Separately, while comparing

5G users' overall experiences across 12 of the world's leading developing 5G markets, an Opensignal report found that 5G users in Saudi Arabia have the fastest overall average download speed of 144.5 Mbps. Souheil Moukaddem, Executive Vice-President and Managing Director at Booz Allen Hamilton MENA, stated: “As 5G networks come online in the UAE and other GCC countries, facilitating the creation of secure and resilient 5G ecosystems is an urgent priority. “5G will forge connections between devices and the digital world. However, this connectivity also translates to new vulnerabilities. The government and private sector must recognise and address these risks early in the network development process.” Booz Allen assembled experts in cyber security research, engineering and threat

However, 5G infrastructure and the network ecosystem also creates opportunities for malicious threat actors seeking the potential to disrupt the economy, public health, and safety.

intelligence to identify 5G's key interworking technologies. Examining these core 5G technologies, Booz Allen's experts identified opportunities adversaries could exploit, what they might hope to gain from targeting these technologies, how these threats could impact organisations and users, and how operators could mitigate identified risks. 5G will have far-reaching impact across industries, empowering sectors such as healthcare and logistics to adopt new operating models, gain novel insights and drive efficiencies. However, the increased number of mission critical IoT devices will present threat actors with a wide array of new opportunities to inflict damage. 5G IoT devices will generate massive volumes of data that can be stolen, destroyed, or manipulated. Virtual networks customised for specific sectors and organisations will encourage

new targeted threats against them. New software and hardware supply chains will most likely lead to the introduction of untrustworthy components in the 5G ecosystem. While organisations plan to take advantage of the global 5G rollout, it is imperative to proactively prepare for these — and other — identified threats to 5G's core technologies. Booz Allen's white paper outlines specific threat scenarios, aligned to core identified elements of the 5G ecosystem and associated threat mitigations. The scenarios capture a wide spectrum of possibilities from attacks that damage industrial process devices and disrupt critical processes enabled by 5G networks to the theft of sensitive data, the risk of IoT-enabled devices being compromised, and disinformation campaigns. Ziad Nasrallah, Principal at Booz Allen Hamilton MENA, concluded: “Organisations on the path to 5G adoption should take a forward-looking view of this emergent technology. It offers both immense opportunities, while portending a continually evolving threat landscape. 5G deployment is already underway; now is the time for leaders across government and industry to ensure security, trust and resilience are the foundational principles of the next generation digital backbone.”

**German car sales drop 30 per cent**

New passenger car registrations in Germany fell more than 30 per cent in January to around 170,000 vehicles. Car dealerships have been hit by a second lockdown in Germany. — **Reuters**

**Toyota to build 9.2 million vehicles**

Toyota Motor plans record high global production of 9.2 million vehicles this year, up about 2 per cent from 2019's pre-coronavirus output, the *Nikkei* newspaper reported. — **Reuters**

**Euro in 2-month low against dollar**

The euro traded near a 2-month low against the dollar on Wednesday. The single currency was little changed at \$1.2036 against the dollar, in early London deals. — **Reuters**

Indian services industry improved; job cuts continued

A man is seen working inside a restaurant in New Delhi. — **Reuters**

BENGALURU: Growth in India's dominant services sector picked up in January as demand improved and consumer optimism was buoyed by the start of a huge Covid-19 vaccination drive, although firms continued to shed jobs, a private survey showed on Wednesday.

That improved sentiment was in line with findings of a Reuters poll last month that predicted Asia's third-largest economy would recover from the coronavirus crisis more strongly than previously thought, lifted by the government's "wealth and wellness" budget announced on February 1.

The Nikkei/IHS Markit Services Purchasing Managers' Index rose to 52.8 in January from 52.3 in December, staying above the 50-level mark separating growth from contraction for the fourth straight month.

"The Indian service sector enjoyed good levels of activity in January, with new business volumes rising for the fourth successive month and growth rates for both measures picking up from December", noted Pollyanna De Lima, economics associate director at IHS Markit.

A sub-index tracking new business rose last month primarily due to a continued recovery in domestic demand as export orders contracted for the eleventh straight month, hurt by strict restrictions to curb a resurgence in coronavirus cases in major economies.

Firms continued to shed jobs, as they have in most months since the pandemic began.

Despite facing a continued rise in cost pressures, albeit at a slower pace, firms reduced prices charged for the second consecutive month in an effort to boost sales.

"The main area of concern is the extent to which costs are rising across the services economy, with the rate of inflation remaining above trend despite easing from December", added De Lima. — **Reuters**

Reddit trading frenzy fades as Yellen summons agencies

WASHINGTON: A social media-driven trading cooled on Wednesday as US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen called a meeting of top officials that could result in tougher markets regulation for hedge funds, small investors and stockbrokers.

Mass buying by amateur traders over the past two weeks has driven wild price gyrations in companies that big US fund managers had bet against, including videogame retailer GameStop and cinema operator AMC Entertainment.

GameStop's US-listed shares, which scaled as high as \$483 last week, fuelled by posts on the popular Reddit forum WallStreetBets, deflated this week to \$90 as fee-free broker apps including Robinhood imposed buying curbs.

They erased early declines to rise 11 per cent in pre-market trading on Wednesday, while shares of AMC gained 7.8 per cent. GameStop's Frankfurt-listed shares continued their pace of declines, falling 24 per cent by 1030 GMT.

Silver, which briefly surged on Monday as small traders bought up the metal, steadied about 10 per cent below its recent peak.

"The unwind is obvious", said Oriano Lizza, premium sales trader at brokerage CMC Markets in Singapore. But he added that it would be easy for nimble small investors to regroup and target fresh companies. "I think from a regulatory standpoint, the concern is that they could continue to do this", he said.

The head of the US Securities and Exchange Commission, which regulates markets, will



A person walks past a GameStop store in the Manhattan borough of New York City, New York. — **Reuters**

meet with Yellen and the heads of the Federal Reserve and the Commodity Futures Trading Commission, possibly as soon as Thursday, a Treasury official said.

Yellen has asked to discuss recent volatility and whether trade has been consistent with fair and efficient markets.

It was not clear if a meeting could result in action, but experts expect focus to also fall on the ever-larger role played by non-bank firms such as hedge funds in financial markets, while small traders are bracing for a showdown.

"Final boss fight. It's happening tomorrow with Yellen, SEC and Federal Reserve", read one Wednesday post on Reddit.

"They are either going to try and stop the party or they are

looking for money to pay us and not crash everything at the same time."

Small investors' participation in stock markets has exploded over the past year as pandemic lockdowns, volatility and stimulus payments have driven a worldwide day-trading craze.

The phenomenon has pushed equity indexes from New York to Seoul to record highs and boosted the price of assets from cryptocurrencies to new stock market listings.

The assault on GameStop short-sellers took it to a new level as small traders appeared to act in concert as they organised buying over Reddit.

Posts encouraging silver buying also boosted prices on Monday, although that proved

short lived.

"The power of the retail investor exists", said Chris Brankin, CEO at TD Ameritrade in Singapore. "We could see other similar events more regularly, but be sure the regulators will look to curb any market (volatility) or manipulation", he said.

In the washup, Melvin Capital, one of the biggest funds betting on a drop in GameStop's share price, lost 53 per cent in January.

Others, such as billionaire investor Steven Cohen's Point72 Asset Management lost nearly 9 per cent, investors said.

Online broker Robinhood has also come under pressure and has scrambled to raise more than \$3 billion in a week as it races to meet funding needs stemming from the trading boom. — **Reuters**

Oil prices rise on falling crude stocks

MELBOURNE: Oil rose in early trade on Wednesday on expectations global oil stocks will fall back to more normal levels this year and as US lawmakers moved closer to approving President Joe Biden's \$1.9 trillion Covid-19 aid bill without Republican support.

Brent crude futures rose 16 cents, or 0.3 per cent, to \$57.62 a barrel, in a fourth straight day of gains after hitting \$58.05 on Tuesday, its highest in more than 11 months.

Analysts said the market was buoyed by the latest assessment by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries and allies, together known as Opec+, that oil stockpiles will decline to below a five-year average by June.

That showed the producers' output cuts were succeeding in bringing the market back into balance. — **Reuters**



A woman fills a car with fuel at a gas station in Quito, Ecuador. — **Reuters**

China's new coal power plant capacity in 2020 more than three times rest of world's

SHANGHAI: China put 38.4 gigawatts (GW) of new coal-fired power capacity into operation in 2020, according to new international research, more than three times the amount built elsewhere around the world and potentially undermining its short-term climate goals.

The country won praise last year after President Xi Jinping pledged to make the country "carbon neutral" by 2060. But regulators have since come under fire for failing to properly control the coal power sector, a major source of climate-warming greenhouse gas.

Including decommissions, China's coal-fired fleet capacity rose by a net 29.8 GW in 2020, even as the rest of the world made cuts of 17.2 GW, according to research released on Wednesday by Global Energy Monitor (GEM), a US think-tank, and

The runaway expansion of coal-fired power is driven by electricity companies' and local governments' interest in maximising investment spending, more than a real need for new capacity

LAURI MYLLYVIRTA
CREA lead analyst

the Helsinki-based Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air (CREA).

"The runaway expansion of coal-fired power is driven by electricity companies' and local governments' interest in



A woman cycles past coal-powered plants in Beijing, in this file photo. — **Reuters**

maximising investment spending, more than a real need for new capacity", said Lauri Myllyvirta, CREA lead analyst.

China approved the construction of a further 36.9 GW of coal-fired capacity last year, three times more than a year earlier, bringing the total under construction to 88.1 GW.

It now has 247 GW of coal power under development, enough to supply the whole of Germany.

A team of central government environmental inspectors delivered a scathing assessment of China's energy regulator last Friday, accusing officials of planning failures and focusing

too much on guaranteeing energy supply.

The NEA had allowed plants to be built in already polluted regions, while projects in less sensitive "coal-power bases" had not gone ahead, they said.

China has been criticised for pursuing an energy-intensive post-Covid recovery based on heavy industry and construction, and experts say new coal plants could end up becoming heavily-indebted "stranded assets".

Christine Shearer, GEM's Coal Programme director, said China needs to ensure its short-term development plans align with long-term climate goals.

"Hopefully as the Chinese government determines its coal power capacity targets for the next five-year plan (for 2021-2025), it will severely restrict if not end new coal plant builds and accelerate retirements", she said. — **Reuters**

features

OMAN OBSERVER       www.omanobserver.om editor@omanobserver.om

Oman's first female PADI champions underwater conservation

The beach trips she used to go to every Fridays for what is so-called “family get-togethers” and their abode being near to sea inspired Ehdaa al Barwani to fall in love with the sea. The first Omani female PADI, her passion also includes underwater conservation... **P18**



INSIDE STORIES

HUMAN INTEREST



A FAREWELL TO BULLS?

Spain's San Fermin festival, which attracts tourists from all over the world for the running of the bulls through the streets of Pamplona, will be cancelled for the second year in a row because of Covid-19, the regional head said on Tuesday... **Story on Page 20**

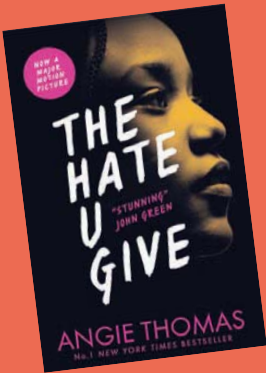
WILD LIFE



ROADSIDES TOO NOISY FOR BIRDS TO THINK, CRICKETS TO MATE

Crickets and the birds that snack on them are not natural allies, but they do have a common enemy, according to a pair of studies published on Wednesday: roadside noise pollution... **Story on Page 19**

READ



THE HATE U GIVE

BY ANGIE THOMAS

The book is a 2017 young adult novel by Angie Thomas. It is Thomas's debut novel, expanded from a short story she wrote in college in reaction to the police shooting of Oscar Grant.

ENTERTAINMENT



DEAF DRAMA 'CODA' AND QUESTLOVE DOCUMENTARY WIN AT SUNDANCE

“CODA,” the heartwarming indie drama about a teenage girl struggling to support her deaf family, scooped the Sundance film festival's top prize Tuesday, while musician Questlove won documentary honours with his debut. **Story on Page 19**

CELEBRATE



GOLDEN GLOBES AWARD CEREMONY TO BE BICOASTAL EVENT

The Golden Globes ceremony at the end of February will take place from both Los Angeles and New York, organisers said on Tuesday, and those nominated for their work in film and television will take part from locations around the world.



Oman's first female PADI champions underwater conservation

BY AL ANOOD AL WAHAIBI

Ehdaa al Barwani, 33 years old, also known as Dive with Dee across social media, is known to be the first Omani female PADI (Professional Association of Diving Instructors). Her love for diving was instilled within her since she was young. Growing up close to the sea and being a “water baby” is one of the reasons that inspired her to become a professional diving instructor. Al Barwani’s journey to becoming a professional diver was an easy and natural transition for her. Her first open water dive was in 2011, she then stopped for a couple of years before getting back to diving and becoming a PADI in 2018. The beach trips she used to go to every Fridays for what is so-called “family get-togethers”, allowed her to spend the day in the water, and are some of the



other inspirations in becoming a diver. “I didn’t expect to be the first female Omani diver though, it just happened to be that way,” Al Barwani adds. Al Barwani also aims to spread awareness for underwater conservation. “During my dive, I encourage my

divers and students to pick up any plastic wastes during their dives and to put it in their pockets until the end of the dive. This encourages good habits and instils a sense of responsibility in the divers,” she explains. Becoming a diving instructor to Al Barwani was not dif-

ficult, instead, she was able to do it even during her travels and meeting many inspirational people who encouraged her during her journey. Ehdaa is hoping to have a full team of Omani women dive professionals, and also an Omani dive team aimed at spreading awareness about underwater conservation. During the 50th National Day of Oman, Al Barwani was diving in with the traditional Omani outfit to spread awareness for underwater conservation. “The desperate need for us as Omani nationals to make sure our seas remain clean. It provides us with many resources; Oxygen, climate regulation, food and medicine sources,” she adds. Finally, Al Barwani aims to encourage more Omanis to take up diving as a sport to learn about the underwater and what coral reefs mean for the environment. It is a sport with no age requirement and can be enjoyable by all. For a diving experience with Ehdaa al Barwani, visit www.auradivers.com

TECHNOLOGY

Lobster shell patterns make concrete stronger: Australian researcher



SYDNEY: Inspired by the natural, twisting patterns of a lobster shell, Australian researchers say they have found a way, using 3D printing technology, to improve the strength of concrete for use in complex architecture. Reinforced with steel fibres, the concrete becomes more durable when set in a pattern that copies a lobster shell, according to a new study from Melbourne’s RMIT University. Rather than use a mould, the process involves depositing layers of concrete one on top of the other, directed from a computer programme using 3D printing technology. “The lobster shell is always something that still amazes me by its very interesting shapes and architectures, and especially (as) the lobster shell is really amazingly very stiff,” lead researcher Jonathan Tran said. Tran said the design would help when building challenging arch or twisted structures with complex geometries. — **Reuters**

GASTRONOMY

Missing customers, Belgian restaurateur serves mannequins



RIXENSART, Belgium: A Belgian restaurant owner near Brussels says she misses her customers so much since her restaurant was forced to close last October under coronavirus laws, she has replaced them with mannequins. Therese Mahieu began serving glasses of red wine to dummies with wigs, hats and scarves sitting at the bar this week in protest against Belgium’s Covid-19 measures. The dummies, made of balloons, give her a sense of community that has been lost at restaurant Chez Therese in the town of Rixensart, in Brussels’ commuter belt, since clientele were barred from entering to prevent Covid-19 infections. While Belgium has yet to see a surging third wave of coronavirus cases, the home of the European Union and Nato has one of the world’s highest per capita Covid-19 death tolls. — **Reuters**



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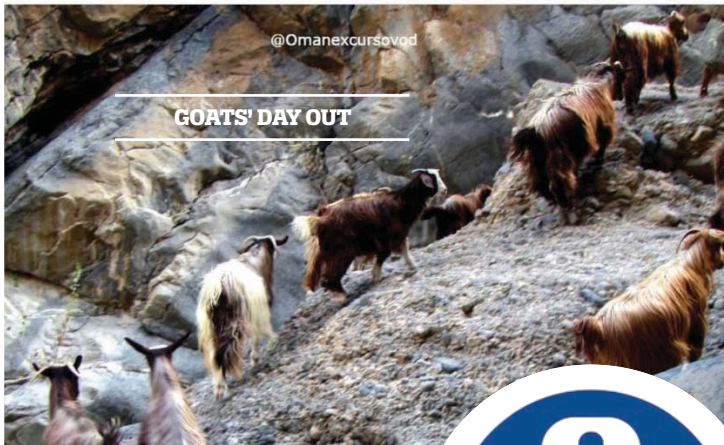
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WILD LIFE

Roadsides too noisy for birds to think, crickets to mate

CRICKETS AND the birds that snack on them are not natural allies, but they do have a common enemy, according to a pair of studies published on Wednesday: roadside noise pollution.

Vehicle traffic makes it much harder for at least one species of bird to solve problems, and sharply compromises the ability of some crickets to mate, lab experiments showed.

"Hearing the noises of cars driving by is enough to inhibit cognitive performance in song-birds," Christopher Templeton, a biologist at Pacific University in Oregon and senior author of a study in the scientific journal *Proceedings of the Royal Society B*, said.

"This has significant implications for how well they can get along in life."

There is mounting evidence that traffic noise — on the rise in most parts of the world — can have serious negative effects on animals, disrupting their ability to communicate, avoid predators, and attract mates.

The new research is the first, according to the authors, to detail how noise pollution impairs cognitive ability.

In experiments, Templeton and his colleagues challenged zebra finches with a range of tasks in the absence of artificial noise, as well as with the hummer of road traffic in the background, simulating conditions in semi-rural areas with a significant human presence.

Being exposed to traffic noise, for example, more than doubled the time it took for these intelligent birds to remember the location of hidden food, or to remove paper lids over tasty morsels.

"The impact of hearing traffic noise was enough to significantly reduce performance on tasks," Templeton said.

Experiments testing the effect of noise on cognition in young children, he noted, had yielded similar results.

In a second study, published in the journal *Behavioural Ecology*, a trio of scientists showed that — for a common species of cricket — traffic noise interferes with

their mating ritual, and thus with sexual selection and the process of evolution itself.

OFFSPRING SURVIVAL

The mating protocol for the two-spotted cricket (aka *Gryllus bimaculatus*) begins with the male rubbing its wings — one sporting a file, the other a scrapper — together to produce its signature chirping song.

Discriminating females can judge the fitness of a potential mate by the quality of their song — nature's way of ensuring that only the best genes get passed on.

In contrast to most mammals, it is the female that mounts the male she has judged most deserving of her favours.

In the experiments, the researchers surgically disabled the music-making ability of the males so as to be able to substitute recorded songs of either "low" or "high" quality.

"These crickets have hard chitinous outer wings that have no pain receptors, so cutting their wings did not cause them any undue harm or suffering," lead author Adam Bent, a researcher in zoology at the University of Cambridge, said.

In the presence of the silenced males, females heard both low- and high-quality mating calls under three conditions: against a backdrop of white noise, road traffic, and no added noise whatsoever.

Females took more than twice as long to mount the males when there was either white or traffic noise, and had a lower success rate — about 70 rather than 90 per cent — in consummating the act. "Mate choice decisions can have strong implications on the success and viability of offspring," Bent said. "This could disrupt the evolution of this species."

Previous research has demonstrated that human noise pollution can adversely affect reproduction and offspring survival in many different vertebrates, which includes mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles and fish.

"But insects have been vastly underrepresented in this field," Bent said.—**AFP**

ENTERTAINMENT



Deaf drama 'CODA' and Questlove documentary win at Sundance

"CODA," THE HEART-WARMING indie drama about a teenage girl struggling to support her deaf family, scooped the Sundance film festival's top prize on Tuesday, while musician Questlove won documentary honours with his debut.

Taking its title from an acronym for child of deaf adult, "CODA" follows a high-school student (Emilia Jones) who is torn between pursuing her passion for music, and staying home to help her deaf parents and brother.

Apple purchased the film early in the US festival after a rapturous online response and an intense bidding war between distributors — reportedly shelling out a Sundance record of \$25 million.

"I'm so excited, I'm so moved — I want to try to sign and talk at the same time but it's hard," said director Sian Heder, accepting the award remotely.

"CODA" is based on French 2014 comedy "La Famille Belier," transplanted to the US fishing town of Gloucester by Massachusetts native Heder ("Orange is the New

Black.")

Both Heder and Jones learned to use sign language for the film, which features several prominent deaf actors in lead roles including Oscar-winner Marlee Matlin ("Children of a Lesser God.")

The film also won the top Sundance audience award, and prizes for directing and ensemble cast.

Musician Questlove's first movie "Summer of Soul (...Or, When The Revolution Could Not Be Televised)," about the huge "Black Woodstock" festival that took place in 1969 Harlem, won jury and audience prizes for best documentary.

The film uses never-before-seen footage of the star-studded concert which was attended by 300,000 people and featured Stevie Wonder, Nina Simone and Mahalia Jackson, but has largely been lost to history until now.

"Hive," about a woman fending for herself in patriarchal war-torn Kosovo, took world cinema drama prizes, while foreign documentary went to "Flee" — an animation about a child refugee from Afghanistan, bought mid-festival by

"Parasite" distributor NEON.

Top indie film festival Sundance was co-founded by Robert Redford and is typically held at Park City in the mountains of western state Utah.

But it took place largely online this year due to the Covid-19 pandemic, with all 72 feature films making their premieres via online streaming.

One of the final movies to feature on Tuesday was "Amy Tan: Unintended Memoir," a documentary about the author of best-selling Chinese-American immigrant novel "The Joy Luck Club."

It was directed by Redford's son James, a filmmaker and activist who died in October aged 58 from bile-duct cancer with the movie largely completed.

"He was somebody I trusted so much... I felt he was never going to judge me, he was never going to pity me. He was just going to listen," said Tan.

Producer Karen Pritzker added: "I am only sorry we're not in-person, and that Jamie isn't with us to celebrate."—**AFP**



A FAREWELL TO BULLS?

Regional, local leaders disagree on Spain's Pamplona festival

Spain's San Fermin festival, which attracts tourists from all over the world for the running of the bulls through the streets of Pamplona, will be cancelled for the second year in a row because of Covid-19, the regional head said on Tuesday.

But amid much disagreement and handwringing across Spain over how strict pandemic restrictions should be, Pamplona's mayor was quick to say no decision had yet been made.

"An international festival like San Fermin, in which millions of people come to Navarra, won't be possible", Maria Chivite, President of Navarra's regional administration, said.

The local *Diario de Navarra* newspaper quoted Pamplona Mayor Enrique Maya as saying: "All citizens are aware that, with the available data, it will obviously be difficult to talk about (the festival) as we have known it until now, but on February 2... there's no decision made."

In a country where Covid

restrictions vary from region to region, and sometimes city to city, such disagreement over restrictions are rife.

Madrid region's conservative leader, Isabel Diaz Ayuso, defended on Tuesday her decision to relax some

From Friday, groups of up to six will be allowed to gather in outdoor restaurant terraces in the Madrid region, up from four now. A 10 pm curfew might be pushed to midnight in Madrid, where people are still allowed to eat and drink inside bars and restaurants, while theatres and museums remain open

restrictions in the capital, saying she had not seen any scientific evidence that meals in restaurants were more contagious than gatherings at home.

"Health is many things, not just avoiding infection", she said.

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from four now. A 10 pm curfew might be pushed to midnight in Madrid, where people are still allowed to eat and drink inside bars and restaurants, while theatres and museums remain open.

Ayuso has often clashed

with the left-wing central government on how to tackle the Covid-19 crisis.

"In the fight against the pandemic there are no shortcuts... It's not advisable or reasonable to start hurrying to wind down (the restrictions)", government spokeswoman Maria Jesus Montero told a news conference.

The Spanish government

decided on Tuesday to restrict air travel with Brazil and South Africa, where new highly contagious variants of the coronavirus have been detected.

Inbound flights will only be able to carry Spanish nationals and residents returning to Spain or transit passengers travelling to countries outside of the Schengen Area with stopovers shorter than 24 hours, it said.

The health ministry will decide this week whether or not to give AstraZeneca's recently approved Covid-19 vaccine to elderly people.

Several European countries including Germany, Poland and Austria have restricted the shot to younger people amid a lack of clinical data on its use in people over 65.

On Monday, Spain reported 79,686 new cases since Friday, slowing from the previous weekend's tally of 93,822 and pushing the cumulative total above 2.8 million. The death toll rose by 762 to 59,081. — **Reuters**