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DUPLANTIS
DELIGHTS HOME
FANS WITH 6M



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OPEC+ RESUMES OIL
TALK, WILL TRY TO
REACH AGREEMENT



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CELEBRATING
THE SPIRIT OF
TOGETHERNESS



MUSCAT

HM GREETINGS TO
COMOROS, MALAWI

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Othman Ghazali of the Union of the Comoros on his country's National Day. In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his sincere sentiments and best wishes of good health and happiness to President Ghazali and the brotherly people of the Comoros further progress and prosperity. His Majesty has also sent a cable of greetings to President Dr Lazarus Chakwera of the Republic of Malawi on his country's Independence Anniversary. — ONA

DEAL TO PROVIDE
LOGISTIC SERVICES

Asyad Express, an arm of Asyad Group, signed an agreement with Vodafone Oman to provide Asyad with integrated logistics services through Vodafone's implementation and accomplishment centre. This cooperation is considered the latest in the list of Asyad partnerships aimed to bolster its status as a regional end-to-end centre in the electronic business sector.

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OPINION

Modern Omani poetry
tackles tensions and
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DR KHALID
AL BALUSHI

Peru's indigenous
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INSIDE



IRAN'S BUSHEHR NUCLEAR
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BRITISH QUEEN AWARDS
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PRIORITY TO EMPLOY JOB-SEEKERS

HM presides over Employment Supervisory Committee's meeting

MUSCAT: As part of the Royal attention that His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik accords to the issue of employment of job-seekers, considered among the top priorities of the government's action, His Majesty the Sultan presided over a meeting of the Supervisory Committee of the National Employment Programme (NEP) at

Al Barakah Palace on Monday. His Majesty the Sultan reviewed major challenges to the job-seekers' employment file. He studied analysis of the current labour market situation, related factors and indicators and the efforts exerted by the government in this respect. During the meeting, His Majesty the Sultan looked into the plans of

the NEP, its method of functioning and the objectives of the programme in the next stage. His Majesty the Sultan also reviewed the progress made in the employment programme through a set of initiatives made to provide employment for job-seekers in government sectors (civil as well as military sectors) and in the private sector.

TURN TO P2

- HM reviews challenges in employment file

■ HM reviews progress in employment programme

■ Analyses current labour market situation
- Pledges to accord his Royal attention to NEP

■ Gives directives to combine the efforts of all parties

Sultanate sees a slight
fall in new Covid cases

VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

The number of sick Covid-19 patients in the country saw a major decline on Monday. According to the latest estimates, the number of active cases dropped from 29,009 to 27,255 on Monday, which means only 6.33 per cent of the total infected patients are sick compared to 10.54 per cent on Sunday. The total recovery rate also improved to 88.5 from 88.3 per cent in the past 24 hours. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Health on Monday reported 1,570 new cases and 33 deaths over the past 24 hours.

The daily deaths also dropped to 33 from the mid-forties recorded most of the week. The total number of cases registered in the Sultanate has now reached 276,736, including 3,316 deaths. The inpatients in hospitals saw a marginal decline from 1,589 to 1,554, while the ICU patients also declined from 532 to 506. New patients also dropped from 171. The ministry has announced that the number of people vaccinated stood at 1,966,838, which is 30 per cent of the total target groups, of which 78 per cent received one dose and 22 per cent received two doses.

HM RECEIVES CREDENTIALS OF SAUDI AMBASSADOR



His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik received at Al Barakah Palace on Monday morning credentials of Abdullah Saud al Anzi, Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador of King Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud of Saudi Arabia, accredited to the Sultanate. During the side meeting with His Majesty, the ambassador conveyed greetings of Saudi King along with his best wishes of good health, happiness and long life to His Majesty the Sultan and the Omani people continuous progress and prosperity under the wise leadership of His Majesty. DETAILS ON P2

His Majesty presides over Employment Supervisory Committee meeting



FROM PAGE 1

His Majesty the Sultan gave directives to combine the efforts of all government and private parties in their endeavours to support the NEP and empower it. The aim is to accelerate full study of the challenges facing employment and draft more comprehensive plans and programmes for generating employment for job-seekers in a sustainable manner that fits with approaches of Oman Vision 2040.

His Majesty the Sultan

pledged to accord his Royal attention to the National Employment Programme. He affirmed that he will maintain close follow-up of the NEP to ensure it yields the desired outcome.

The meeting was attended by members of the Supervisory Committee of the National Employment Programme and the Head of the Private Office. May the Almighty Allah protect His Majesty the Sultan and guard him as a source of inspiration, progress and prosperity for Oman and its noble people! — ONA

Oman, Saudi Arabia to elevate relations in different spheres

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik received at Al Barakah Palace on Monday credentials of Abdullah Saud al Anzi, Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), accredited to the Sultanate.

During the side meeting with His Majesty, the Ambassador conveyed greetings of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques along with his best wishes of good health, happiness and a long life to His Majesty the Sultan and the Omani people continuous progress and prosperity under the wise leadership of His Majesty. He also expressed his great honour and utmost delight to present his credentials before His Majesty the Sultan.

He affirmed to exert all his efforts to elevate the relations between his country and the Sultanate in various spheres in a manner that serves the joint interest of the Omani and Saudi brotherly people.

His Majesty the Sultan welcomed the ambassador, expressing his thanks for the greetings and best wishes of King Salman. His Majesty affirmed to him that he would receive all support from His Majesty, the Government and the Omani people to facilitate carrying out his duties.

The credentials' presentation ceremony was attended by the Minister of the Diwan of Royal Court, the Foreign Minister, the Commander of the Royal Guard of Oman (RGO), the Head of the Royal Protocols and the Military Aides to His Majesty the Sultan. — ONA



INITIATIVES TO HELP SMES CONFRONT PANDEMIC

ZAINAB AL NASSRI
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The Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises Development (riyada) said that the pandemic has changed the map of sales and shopping for companies. It has accelerated the transformation processes towards online sales, and has highlighted virtual shopping tours, and provides wider options in electronic payment operations.

"The pandemic also highlighted pre-scheduling of customer appointments in the application of physical distancing and reducing waiting time in queues, as well as it has enhanced communication with customers via e-mail during closed hours to show support and sympathy during the pandemic," it said.

The authority has launched a special initiative to provide consultations targeting small and medium enterprises most affected by the pandemic, in order to support these institutions to overcome the challenges.

Through this initiative, the Authority provides legal consultations in commercial



and civil issues, administrative operations, review of contracts and agreements. It also provides financial consultations in financial management, tax returns and value-added tax in addition to administrative consultations in crisis management, marketing, work plans, human resources management, supply chain management and quality management.

Riyada conditioned for applicants for consultations that the project should be affected by the pandemic,

and should be updated in the Authority's database.

To confront the Pandemic economically, the government has put in place a set of monetary and financial measures to provide liquidity, reduce the cost of borrowing and ensure the continuity of credit provision to the affected sectors. The Central Bank urged commercial banks to postpone the repayment of private-sector loans for a period of six months to support their recovery. The government has also adopted

some measures to help SMEs, including manpower support, deferment of payments (such as taxes, rent, utility payments, etc.), and provision of interest-free loans from the Development Bank.

According to the National Center for Statistics and Information (NCSI), the total number of micro, small and medium enterprises registered with riyada at the end of May 2021 reached 53,166, an increase of 20.3 per cent compared to the same period in 2020.

Al Numani receives Swiss ambassador



MUSCAT: General Sultan bin Mohamed al Numani, Minister of the Royal Office, received in his office on Monday Balz Abplanalp, Ambassador of the Swiss Confederation to the Sultanate.

During the meeting, Al Numani welcomed the ambassador, who thanked the Sultanate for its efforts in the region. The meeting exchanged cor-

dial conversations on the march of the relations binding the Sultanate and the Swiss Confederation.

The meeting also reviewed a number of cooperation areas and means to promote them to achieve the joint interests of the two friendly countries.

The two sides also touched on several matters of common interest. — ONA

2,038 Omani employees retired till May-end

KHALID AL ADAWI
MUSCAT, JULY 5

A total of 2,038 employees have retired in the first 5 months of this year 63 per cent of whom are males and 37 per cent are females, according to the Civil Service Employees Pension Fund (CSEPF).

In its latest statistics published on Monday, the CSEPF indicated that the average age of the retirees was 49 years and the average length of service was 25 years while the average monthly pension was RO 955.

The CSEPF data showed that the total number of employees until the end of May this year stood at 70,396 of whom males account for 77 per cent and females 23 per cent. The total amount of monthly pensions stood at RO 40 million and the average age upon retirement was 50 years while the average length of service was 22

years and the average monthly pension was RO 575. The total number of beneficiaries from the retirement pension until the end of May this year reached 85,215 beneficiaries, including 48,730 living retirees, and 36,485 heirs eligible for the pension.

The total number of subscribers with the CSEPF until the end of last May reached 162,683 subscribers, 51 per cent of whom are males and 49 per cent are females. The average age of the subscribers is 39 years and the average length of service is.

The number of employees in the units of the state's administrative apparatus who are subject to the Civil Service Employees Pension Fund Law reached 158,249 employees. The recent statistics showed that Muscat Governorate has the highest number of beneficiaries of the monthly pension at 23 per cent or 19,999, including 13,532 living retirees, and 6,167 heirs.

WINNERS OF THE RAMADHAN RAFFLE DRAW



Samira al Khanbashi and Yousuf al Fouri were announced the winners of the Ramadhan Quiz conducted by the Observer and Oman Arabic during the holy month. These winners were selected from hundreds of entries for both print and social media sections respectively. They will be driving home brand new Toyota Yaris. The draw was held in the presence of a number of key officials from the Ministry of Information at the premises on Monday.

140 industrial units closed for flouting Covid norms

MUSCAT: The Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn), closed 140 industrial establishments and issued violations for 161 others.

Engineer Basem al Zedjali, Director of Inspection, Control and Occupational Safety at Madayn, said that Madayn carried out a set of preventive measures against Covid-19 between March 17, 2020 and end-June this year. These measures included inspections on 4,931 establishments. Of that total, 3,958 were found to be com-

mitted to the precautionary measures while 973 others received a notice to rectify their conditions. Besides, Madayn's emergency room handled 2,221 reports during the same period.

During this period Madayn carried out disinfection operations at 244 establishments. The disinfection operations included the administrative buildings at the industrial estates, the Knowledge Oasis Muscat and Al Mazunah Free Zone.



مدائن
madayn

Tender

The Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn) announces the following Tender:

Tender Number	Tender Name	Last date of Buying	Date of Submission	Type of Work	Register Degree	Fee (R.O)
6/2021/PEIE/HQ-6	The Security System Project At Suhar Industrial City (Fencing)	19-07-2021	15-08-2021	Construction	First & Second	600

Interested Companies registered with Tender Board may obtain the Tender documents from the E-Tendering website: <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om> against non-refundable payment as mentioned above for each set of document. Tenders should be submitted on line on given website. The Tenderer should enclose scan copy of Bank Guarantee issued by any bank in the Sultanate of Oman for the value of 1% of the Tender value validity for (90) days, and addressed to The Chairman of Tender Committee mentioned in above tenders.

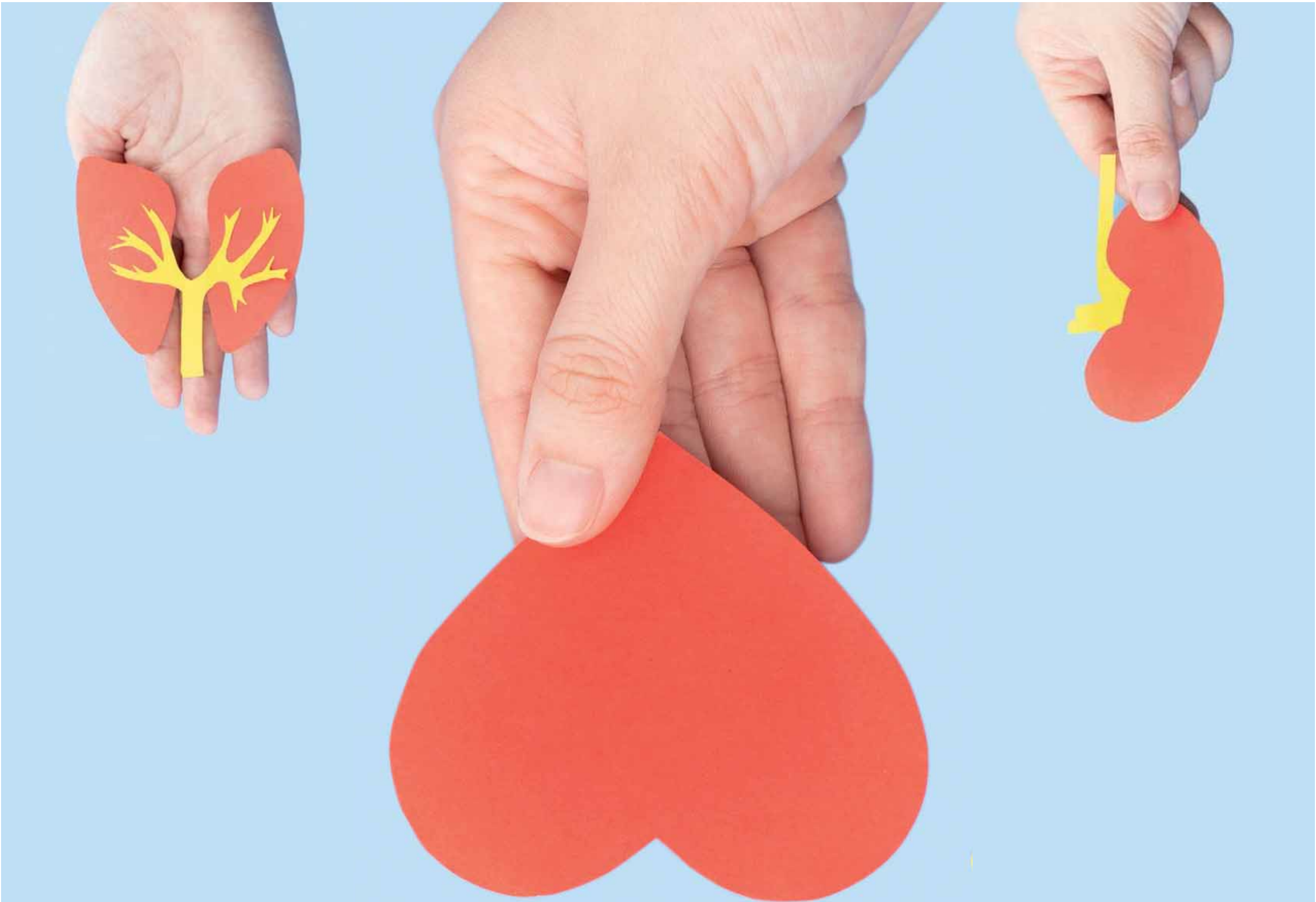
- Tender Inquiry:** All correspondence pertaining to the TENDER Inquiry must be online at eTendering System.
- E-Tendering System Inquiry:** All correspondence pertaining to the eTendering System technical support must be directed to the following helpdesk email address and phone number: etenderhd@ita.gov.om and +968 24166670, 24166409

Note: Bid Submission will be online only.

No Document can be accepted as Manual except Original Tender Bond. Scan Copy of Tender Bond needs to be attached in system and original needs to be deposited before Bid Opening. Madayn is not bound to accept the lowest or any other Offer and has the right to cancel these tenders and the tenderers have no right to claim for any compensations.

@madaynoman

madayn.om



ORGAN TRANSPLANT

ACHIEVES MILESTONE

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

Marking a milestone in organ transplant in the country, the first Oman Transplantation Society under the Oman Medical Specialty Board came into force, setting humanitarian targets and helping those in need of organ transplants.

In the Sultanate, organ donation is legally regulated, and the Society will facilitate patients with organ failure to receive a replacement organ transplant from a legal donor as soon as possible.

“The very thought of Oman Transplant Society (OTS) was born out of the fact that a person who dies of brain damage can help eight others who are in need of organs live”, said a highly placed source at the OTS.

“Many a time, those who fly out in need of suitable organ are subjected to illegal practices including cheating and damage to health, and the like and being able to get the required organ from a legitimate donor at home would reduce such incidents.”

Accordingly, the Society will organise awareness and educational campaigns for various segments of society on the importance of organ donation besides organising meetings,

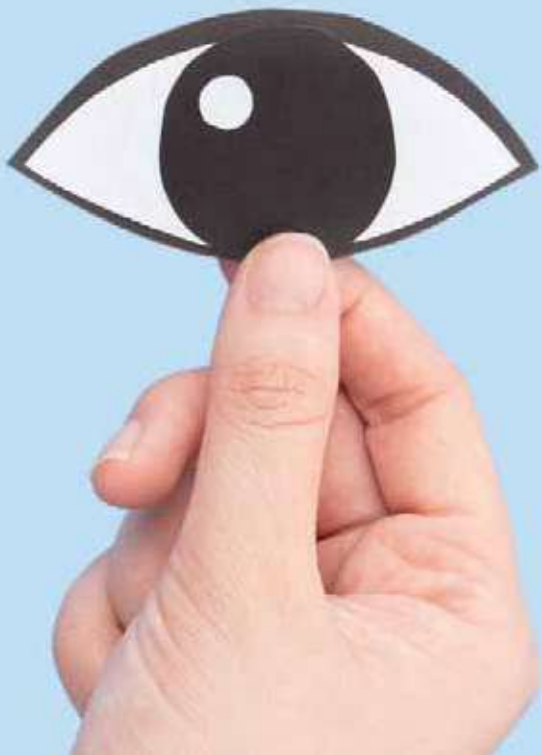
seminars and scientific conferences for medical and paramedical cadres to inform them of the latest developments in the field of organ transplantation, to begin with.

This shall be followed by the implementation of programmes, events and activities that support organ transplantation and issuing protocols and treatment guides for organ transplantation among the members of the society.

Dr Ahmed al Busaidy is the President of the Society, while Dr Maiseen al Kalbani is the Deputy head. Dr Warith al Hashami, Dr Huda al Khalili, Dr Said al Busafi, Dr Fathaya al Harthy, and Dr Khalid al Balushi are the other office-bearers of the Society.

His Eminence Shaikh Ahmed bin Hamed al Khalili, the Grand Mufti of Oman had earlier issued a fatwa (official, religious announcement) clarifying the Islamic stance that promote organ donation and reception which based on genuine grounds and not on commercial motive.

Accordingly, organ or human tissue transplantation should not be conducted unless it is the only available option. All other organ and human tissue transplantation are banned if it leads to race mixing and can attract fine of RO 10,000.



The Ministry of Health (MoH) has issued a decision (No 179/2018) that regulated the transfer and transplantation of human organs and tissues.

In light of the decision, no organ transplantation in return for compensation, both monetary and in kind, shall be conducted, nor shall a person's need or ignorance to get his approval to be taken advantage of.

Any advertisement promoting the sale and purchase of organs and human tissues is strictly banned, and violations will lead to a fine of RO 6,000.

Definiteness of both parties (donor and the recipient) should not be revealed to each other unless there is a mutual agreement. Otherwise, an administrative fine of RO 3,000 will be imposed.

The Oman Transplantation Society shall also form support groups for organ donors and patients who have had an organ transplant and their families.

Oman's national programme for organ transplantation will be made to reach potential donors and recipients in cooperation with the Ministry of Health (MoH) and various relevant authorities.



Oman, Saudi discuss ways to promote joint investments

MUSCAT: Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) and Saudi Chambers Federation on Sunday held a virtual meeting via videoconferencing during which the two sides discussed means of upgrading the rate of investment opportunities available in the two countries.

The Omani side was led by Ridha Juma al Saleh, Chairman of the OCCI, while Ajlan Abdulaziz al Ajlan, Head of Saudi Chambers, led his country's team.

Ridha underscored the significance of efforts being undertaken to foster economic and commercial cooperation between the private sectors in both countries.

His speech also dealt with ways of exchanging expertise and consolidating the efforts of business and economic firms specialised in the two countries' target sectors and visions, which are Oman Vision 2040 and the Saudi Vision 2030.

Ridha also spoke about statistics and indicators shared by the Sultanate and Saudi Arabia, notably data pertaining to commercial exchange, tourism, commerce and joint investment.

He pointed out that commercial exchange between the two countries comprises 7.32% of the volume of non-oil commercial exchange between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and GCC

states during 2020.

The value of Saudi investments registered in the Sultanate stands at RO 105 million.

Al Ajlan's speech focused on the depth of Omani-Saudi strategic economic relations, noting that the Kingdom, in its 2030 vision, seeks to enhance ties with other countries, including Oman and this, he said, affirms the Saudi parties support for the economic drive.

"In this meeting, we strive to expand aspects of cooperation in all economic spheres and study investment and business opportunities available in the two countries' private sectors," said Al Ajlan. This, he observed, involves a greater

sense of responsibility to be shouldered by both parties with a view to augmenting the volume of commercial exchange to the levels desired to be attained by the private sectors.

The meeting touched on a number of joint economic fields. To this effect, HH Sayyid Faisal Turki al Said, the Sultanate's Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, stressed the importance of stimulating economic action.

"In the near future, we may sign a number of commercial agreements between the two sides and many of these agreements will deal with the private sectors," said HH Sayyid Faisal.— ONA

SAI participates in ARABOSAI executive council meeting



DOHA: The Sultanate, represented by the State Audit Institution (SAI), on Monday participated in the 62nd meeting of the Executive Council of the Arab Organization for Supreme Audit Institutions (ARABOSAI) in Doha.

The Sultanate's delegation was headed by Ahmed bin Salim al Rujaibi, SAI Deputy Chairman of

Audit in the State Administrative Apparatus.

Najeeb al Qattari, Secretary General of ARABOSAI, assured in his opening speech that ARABOSAI continues its efforts which aim at promoting cooperation and exchanging expertise among SAIs, as well as being up to date on professional advance-

ments in audit fields.

Bandar Mohammed al Thani, Chairman of the ARABOSAI Executive Council, appreciated in his speech the efforts of SAIs, members of the council and their accomplishments, which have contributed in boosting the progress of audit work despite the current challenges. — ONA

Asyad Express, Vodafone Oman to provide logistic services

MUSCAT: Asyad Express, an arm of Asyad Group, on Monday signed an agreement with Vodafone Oman to provide Asyad with integrated logistics services through Vodafone's implementation and accomplishment centre.

This cooperation is considered the latest in the list of Asyad partnerships aimed to bolster its status as a regional end-to-end centre in the electronic business sector. Nassir Ahmed al Sharji, Acting CEO of Asyad Express, said, "Our integrated logistics services saw rapid development recently at local and regional fronts. The company seeks to capture new opportunities in order to advance our mission to spearhead the growth of the logistics sector in Oman." — ONA

749 freed from jail through Fak Kurbah programme

KABEER YOUSUF

@kabeeryousef

As many as 749 people who were held guilty for minor financial offences from 39 courts of the Sultanate were released through the 8th edition of Fak Kurbah, an annual charitable programme by the Oman Lawyers Association (OLA).

The release of these people comprising different nationalities who were found guilty for small financial offences were released through the concerted efforts of the OLA, supported by several good Samaritans who pooled in money for the release.

These numbers make the total number of people released from financial claims to 3,934 over the past eight years.

Muscat topped the number of complaints with 226 cases, while Musandam reported the lowest, 8 cases.

Al Batinah South (85), Al Batinah North (151), Al Sharqiyah South (56), Al Sharqiyah North (48), Al Dakhiliyah (39), Al Dhahirah (34), Al Buraimi (70), Al Wusta (9), Dhofar (23).

The major financial offence against them were majorly dishonour of cheques and were released as part of the 8th edition of the initiative which was launched on April 1, 2021 and ran until May 31, 2021 during the holy month of Ramadhan.

"Release of 749 inmates who were found guilty of minor financial offence was secured as part of our annual Fak Kurbah programme, and it is our endeavour to show solidarity

with the suffering and who are punished for unintentional mistakes," said Dr Mohammed bin Ibrahim al \Zadjali., Chairman of Oman Lawyers Association told the *Observer* in a virtual meeting.

He added that the maximum amount set as ceiling for the release of an individual was RO 2,000 and their offence included civil, commercial, legal or labour, financial claims, and the Association has coordinated with 39 courts in various governorates of the Sultanate.

"We have plans to run the programme through the year instead of just two months, and we are studying the pros and cons of the same," Khamis al Abri, Deputy Head of the OLA, said.

He remembered that since the establishment of the initiative, it had been generously supported by sincere and noble hearts of the country, and they have been there for the needy and spared no effort to provide whatever they could do to release those imprisoned for financial claims.

Over the past seven years, the initiative has succeeded in releasing more than 3,185 prisoners. Today, in its eighth edition, the initiative has released an additional 749 prisoners, bringing the total to 3934.

In 2012, 44 people were released against 749 inmates this year. In 2014 (304), 2015 (432), 2017 (425), 2018 (510), 2019 (673), and in 2020 (797), minor financial offenders were acquitted after the OLA paid their dues to the affected parties.



Sultanate of Oman Ministry of Defence ENGINEERING SERVICES

TENDER ANNOUNCEMENT

Ministry of Defence invites Contractors specialized in the under mentioned works and registered with the Govt. Tender Board and Ministry of Defence to participate in the following tender.

Tender No	Tender Name	Contractors Grade	Last Date to Obtain Tender	Tender Submission Date	Tender Price (RO)
06/2021	Construction Work - MAM	Excellent	15th July 2021	31th August 2021	275/-

*For more information about the above Tenders please visit gate number (14)

- Tender Documents (Electronic Tender Document) can be obtained from the Tender office, Gate No: 14, Muaskar Al Murtafa'a after payment of the tender fee indicated above.
- The Payment should be made electronically by using SMART CARD, VISA CARD and VISA ELECTRON. Sunday to Thursday (0900 - 1300 Hours).
- The Bid to be accompanied by Tender Bond in the value of (1%) of the bid value in the form of a Bank Guarantee or Certified Cheque issued by a local bank and addressed to HE the Chairman of the Tender Committee.
- Bids are to be submitted in sealed envelopes addressed to HE the Chairman of Tender Committee and marked with Tender Number and Name. Name of Bidder or any other marks should not be printed on the envelopes.
- Bids to be deposited in the Tender office at Gate No: 14 Muaskar Al Murtafa'a before 1300 hours on the assigned day for submission of the Tender.
- We would like to draw your attention to the importance of adherence to the submission date, request and any queries related should not be submitted to MODES fourteen days prior to submission of offer.

You are requested to submit the following items within your tender submission, failure to submit the required information may result a disqualification of your offer without any further notification.

1. Percentage of Omanisation within the company supported by an authenticated certificate from the Ministry of Manpower (Updated Copy).
2. Detailed priced breakdown to be specified as per scope and drawings.
3. Full set of stamped drawings and documents, Tender Form and Tender Bonds to be submitted as hard copy and others documentation shall be as soft copy (USB) in two separate files:
 - A. Financial (bill 1&2 separated from bill3).
 - B. Technical files.
4. Confirmation of site visit.
5. All addendums and circulars.
6. List of sub-contractors/suppliers and their acceptance letter to this project.
7. List of current and executed projects.
8. Valid Registration Certificates from Tender Board.
9. Financial Statement for the last Three years.



هيئة تنظيم الخدمات العامة Authority for Public Services Regulation

Notice

Based on Article (33) of the law promulgated by Royal Decree 78/2004, the Authority wishes to announce the issue of its annual report for the year 2020, and referring to Article (29) of the sector law, the annual report contains:

- 1- Detailed information relating to the Authority's activities and the developments that occurred in the electricity and Related Water sector, and the extent to which the electricity market is prepared for further Liberalisation;
- 2- The proposals of the Authority in relation to Permitted Tariff regulations and government financial subsidy;
- 3- A detailed statement of the achievements in the area of providing electricity to Rural Premises and the plan of the Authority in respect of RAEC Connection and Electrification Funding;
- 4- A statement of the audited financial accounts of the Authority for each financial year in accordance with the international accounting standards;
- 5- The method of calculating the value of financial subsidy in accordance with the provisions of Article (18) of the sector law;
- 6- Any other matters the Authority considers should be included in this report.

A copy of the annual report can be viewed on the Authority's website through the link:
apsr.om/en/annualreports

Authority for Public Services Regulation

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E-mail: enquiries@apsr.om

Sudan urges ceasefire in Ethiopia’s war-hit Tigray



A woman, who fled the violence in Ethiopia’s Tigray region, watches as others bake a bread at May Weyni secondary school, in Mekele, the capital of Tigray region, Ethiopia. – AFP

KHARTOUM: Sudan called on Saturday for a ceasefire and dialogue in neighbouring Ethiopia, warning of regional instability, as fighting intensified in war-hit Tigray region across the border.

“The Sudanese government is deeply concerned about the developments in Ethiopia, which may have a negative impact on regional stability,” it said in a statement.

It urged “all the parties in neighbouring Ethiopia to stop the fighting and come to the negotiating table”.

Ethiopia’s northern Tigray region has been rocked by fighting since last November 4, when the federal government unleashed a military operation against dissidents in the region.

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed announced his forces had seized control of Tigray’s capital Mekele weeks later.

But last week, rebel fighters announced retaking Mekele and dismissed a unilateral ceasefire declared by the government as a “joke”.

Sudan said it would “spare no effort” to work with all the Ethiopian factions to resolve the conflict.

The months-long fighting has left thousands dead and plunged the region into a humanitarian crisis.

It has also sent some 60,000 refugees fleeing into Sudan, a nation struggling with its own economic woes and a rocky transition since the April 2019 ouster of strongman Omar al Bashir.

The Tigray conflict comes at a time of souring Khartoum-Addis Ababa ties over use of the fertile Fashaga border region where Ethiopian farmers have long cultivated land claimed by Sudan.

Sudan, along with Egypt, has also been locked in a long-running dispute over Ethiopia’s construction of a massive hydro-electric dam on the Blue Nile.

Cairo sees the barrage as an existential threat to its water supply, while Khartoum fears its own dams would be harmed without a binding agreement with Addis Ababa. — AFP

Iran’s Bushehr nuclear plant back online after two weeks

TEHRAN: Iran’s only nuclear power plant has been brought back online, its manager said early on Monday, after two weeks off-grid amid a power shortage and rolling blackouts across the Islamic republic.

The Bushehr plant’s shutdown was initially blamed on a “technical fault” that required repairs followed by conflicting reports that it was a regular maintenance operation.

The plant going offline came as Tehran and world powers in Vienna talks attempt to revive a hobbled 2015 agreement on Iran’s nuclear programme that was torpedoed by the United States.

It returns to the grid as major cities across Iran including the capital Tehran are experiencing frequent blackouts blamed on high summertime demand exceeding production levels.

The “technical fault” that shut down the Bushehr plant “was fixed”, Mahmoud Jafari, who is also deputy head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI), told ISNA news agency around midnight.

That allowed the plant to be reconnected to the national power grid and resume production.

Jafari said power generation had resumed on Sunday, and urged Iranians to “help” the overburdened grid by minimising power consumption as high temperatures are forecast in the coming days.

The plant on Iran’s southern coast and its 1,000-megawatt reactor were built by Russia and officially handed over in September 2013 after years of delay.



A view of the reactor building at the Bushehr nuclear power plant in southern Iran, 1,200 Km south of Tehran. – AFP File Photo

Russian and Iranian firms started work on two additional 1,000-megawatt reactors in 2016, with construction expected to take 10 years.

On June 20, the AEOI had blamed “a technical fault” for the shutdown and said it had given the energy ministry one day’s notice before going offline.

It said two days later that the issue was with the plant’s “power generator”, without explaining further.

But Iran’s foreign ministry at the time described the shutdown as “routine”, saying it was carried out “once or twice each year”.

Bushehr plant chief Jafari said in late March that Iran was having a difficult time obtaining supplies to run Bushehr because of US sanctions, and warned of an imminent shutdown “if no

Iranians have been urged to ‘help’ the overburdened grid by minimising power consumption as high temperatures are forecast in the coming days

solution is found”.

Tehran is engaged in talks with world powers in Vienna to revive the 2015 nuclear deal that gave Iran international sanctions relief in exchange for limiting its nuclear programme.

But hopes for rising prosperity were dashed in 2018 when former US president Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew from the accord and reimposed punishing

sanctions on Tehran.

Trump’s successor Joe Biden favours rejoining the accord and his administration is indirectly involved in the Vienna talks to salvage the deal.

Bushehr going off-grid had raised concerns of worse blackouts after a string of power cuts in Iran blamed on heat, drought impacting hydro-electrical facilities, and surging electricity demand.

Iran introduced planned, rolling blackouts in May after Tehran and several other cities were hit by unannounced power cuts, sparking complaints from consumers and an apology from the energy minister.

A spokesman for Iran’s electricity company on Monday apologised for unplanned cuts the night before. — AFP

Tunisia hopes Libya stability could bring economic relief

BEN GUERDANE, Tunisia: After years of war in Libya, Tunisian traders celebrated the reopening of the border with their oil-rich North African neighbour as a positive sign they hoped would stimulate economic growth.

In the hardscrabble Tunisian coastal town of Ben Guerdane, some 30 kilometres from Libya’s frontier, merchant Jaafar Ben Ali said it was a big relief. “Now that the war (in Libya) is over, and that the borders are open, it is much easier,” said Ben Ali, who crosses to Libya to buy Turkish-made blankets. “I do a round-trip in a day.”

A United Nations study estimated the Libyan crisis was ‘responsible for 24 per cent of the deceleration of economic growth’ in Tunisia from 2011-2015

Tunisia’s economy has lurched from crisis to crisis since the country’s 2011 revolution, most recently due to the coronavirus pandemic and lockdown measures.

But it was also hit by the impact of war next door in Libya, where a decade of conflict raged ever



A merchant stands next to displayed carpets in a shop at the Maghreb souq of Tunisia’s southern town of Ben Guerdane. – AFP

since the 2011 uprising that killed Muammar Gaddafi. One United Nations study estimated the Libyan crisis was “responsible for 24 per cent of the deceleration of economic growth” in Tunisia from 2011-2015.

That was equivalent to a loss of \$880 million per year, or two per cent of Tunisia’s GDP, the UN said.

The town of Ben Guerdane, in Tunisia’s under-developed and impoverished southeastern region, felt the impact harder than most.

For years, Tunisian authorities had turned a blind eye to smuggling, partly because of the dire economic situation in the

border region.

But in 2016, after an attack claimed by a Libyan branch of the IS group, Tunisia imposed stricter controls, sparking protests.

In 2018, Libyan authorities closed the border for more than six weeks to rein in the smuggling of fuel and other items, again triggering demonstrations in Ben Guerdane.

In 2019, trade took another blow, when fighting in Libya raged close to the border.

Then, just as violence in Libya subsided last year, the border was shut for eight months to stem the spread of Covid-19.— AFP

ROME

Migrants rescued in Mediterranean operation

The private sea rescuers of the ship *Ocean Viking* have rescued several hundred boat migrants in the central Mediterranean Sea in a major operation. The crew took a total of almost 370 people on board from a wooden boat in Libyan waters on Monday night, operators SOS Mediterranean announced. Their boat was in danger of capsizing during the five-hour operation.

The *Ocean Viking* is currently the only ship of a private sea rescue organisation operating in



the central Mediterranean. Those brought aboard in the latest rescue operation join several hundred boat migrants brought to safety in recent days.

— dpa

BEIRUT

Beirut blast victims mark 11 months since disaster

Dozens of relatives of those killed in Lebanon’s port blast gathered on Sunday to mark 11 months since the catastrophe and urge answers from a sluggish probe towards prosecuting those responsible.

Hundreds of tonnes of ammonium nitrate fertiliser exploded on the dockside on August 4 last year, killing more than 200 people, injuring thousands, and ravaging swathes of the capital.

It emerged afterwards that top



political and security officials, including then prime minister Hassan Diab, had known about the explosives being stored unsafely at the port for years.

— AFP

CAIRO/TOKYO

Dispute over blockade of Suez Canal settled

An agreement has been reached in the dispute over the blockade for days of the Suez Canal by the freighter *Ever Given*. The container ship is to be released this Wednesday, a spokesman for the Japanese ship owner Shoen Kisen Kaisha said. He did not give details of the agreement with the Egyptian canal authority.

After weeks of extensive negotiations, an ‘agreement in principle’ had been reached, the British law firm Stann Marine recently announced. It represents



the owners and insurers of the *Ever Given*. Osama Rabea, the head of the Suez Canal Authority, also refused to announce any details of the settlement due to a confidentiality agreement. — dpa

In brief

■ JAKARTA



INDONESIA OFFERS FREE TELEMEDICINE SERVICES

Indonesia will provide telemedicine services as hospitals across the main Java island struggle to cope with a surge in coronavirus cases, the country's health minister said. The government is working with 11 telemedicine sites to provide medical consultation and prescriptions for people who self-isolate at home with Covid-19, Budi Sadikin said. "Those infected with Covid-19 but have blood saturation that is above 95 per cent, have no difficulty breathing and have no comorbidities, they can stay at home with ease and get good medical attention," Budi said. The government on Saturday imposed a partial lockdown across the islands of Java and Bali, effective until July 20, as the country battles an unprecedented wave of cases. — dpa

■ BANGKOK



1 KILLED, 27 HURT FROM BANGKOK FACTORY EXPLOSION

An explosion near Thai capital Bangkok's international airport left a plastic's factory in flames, killing at least one firefighter and wounding 27 people, officials said. Heavy plumes of black smoke could be seen rising up to the sky from the city's downtown 35 kilometres away, as rescuers continued to evacuate residents near the site. The blast occurred around 3 am at Taiwan-based Ming Dih Chemical Co, located on the outskirts of Bangkok near Suvarnabhumi airport. "We have 27 injured, mostly from cuts, and one dead who was a firefighter," said Somsak Kaewsena, the chief of Bang Pli district where the factory is located. — AFP

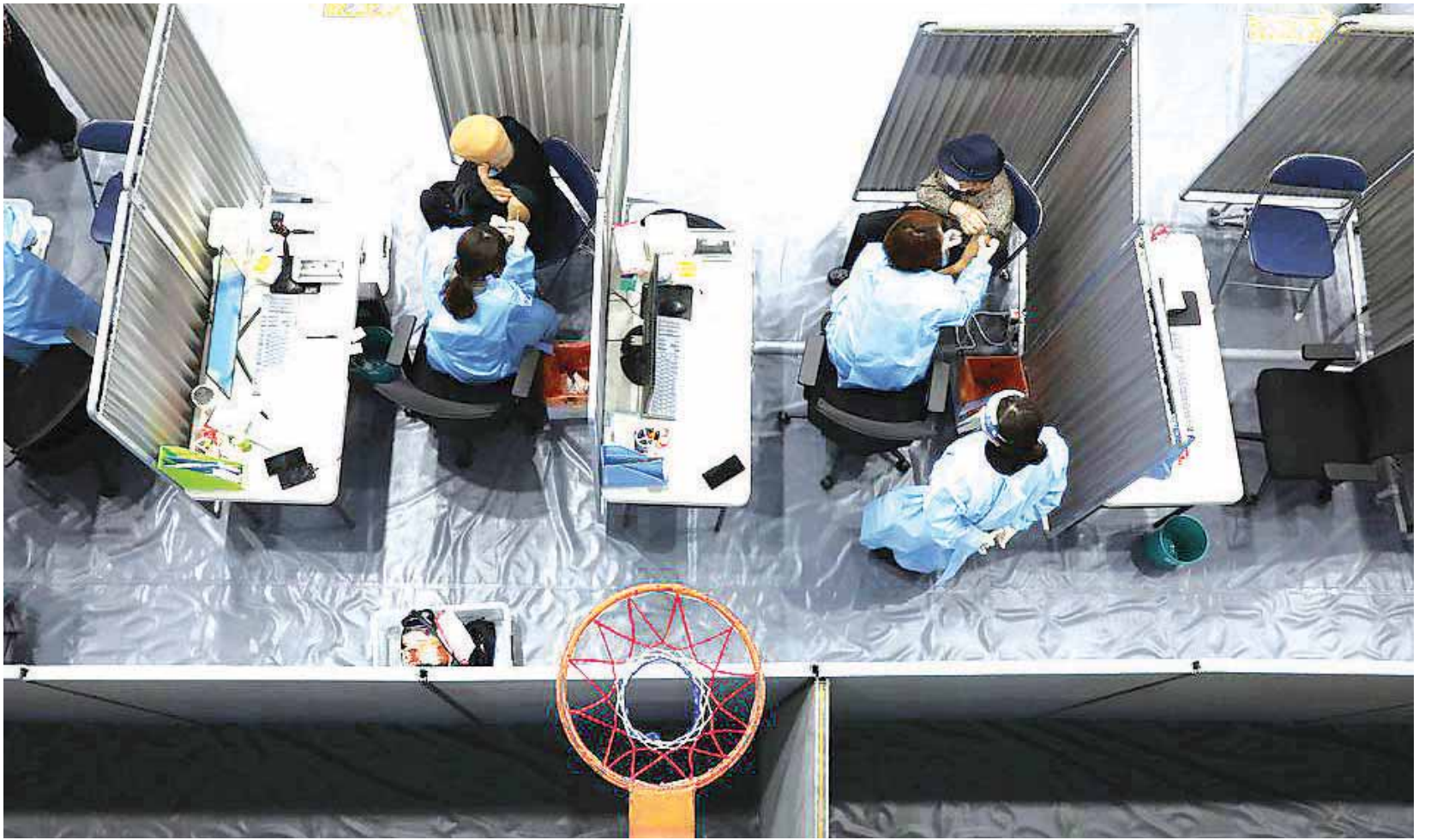
■ CANBERRA



COVID CASES SURGE IN FIJI AS MORTUARY FULL

The mortuary at Fiji's largest hospital is now full, the country's health ministry said as the Pacific island nation logs record daily coronavirus cases. There were no immediate details on the capacity of the morgue. Twenty-eight people have died from Covid-19 in a second wave of infections starting in April, the ministry said. The Colonial War Memorial Hospital in the sole public hospital in the capital of Suva and its facilities are now devoted to caring for Covid patients. — Reuters

S Korea in talks to make up to 1 bn doses



South Korean senior citizens receive their first dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech coronavirus disease vaccine at a vaccination centre in Seoul. — Reuters File Photo

include Hanmi Pharmaceuticals Co Ltd and Quratis Co Ltd. Hanmi confirmed that it has a big capacity reserved for Sanofi's diabetes drug and it can be used for Covid-19 vaccine production as the Sanofi project has stalled.

"We happen to have this facility available right now because our clinical trial (with Sanofi) was discontinued in the middle of last year," Kim Soo-jin, senior vice president of Hanmi, said.

"It's very timely that we have a fully ready, GMP, state-of-the-art facility available," she said, referring to good manufacturing practice.

Quratis, which makes a tuberculosis vaccine, said its new factory built last year can now be used for mRNA vaccine production.

Shares in Hanmi erased early losses and rose nearly 7 per cent on Monday after the Reuters report,

There are only a few mRNA vaccine developers and there's a limit to how much they can produce to meet global demand. South Korea is keen to help by offering its facilities and skilled human resources

LEE KANG-HO

Director-General South Korea's health ministry

and its top shareholder Hanmi Science jumped 10.3 per cent.

South Korea has stepped up its effort to produce more vaccines since US President Joe Biden in May agreed with South Korean

President Moon Jae-in on a comprehensive partnership on Covid-19 vaccines.

Lee said his team is having frequent video conference calls with the vaccine makers and the World Health Organization (WHO).

WHO spokesman Tarik Jasarevic said the organisation is "talking with South Korea and other countries," but did not elaborate.

The WHO said last month it will set up a hub in South Africa to manufacture mRNA vaccines within 9-12 months that will give companies from poor and middle-income countries the know-how and licenses to produce Covid-19 vaccines.

Lee said mRNA vaccine makers may be reluctant to share their technology, but they can take advantage of South Korea's raw material suppliers to address a

global shortage of such ingredients as lipids, nucleotides and capping reagents.

"They're capable of manufacturing and developing such raw materials to help vaccine makers... and the South Korean government is committed to provide all necessary support including financial and administrative aid."

Lee said the country also has a capacity for at least another 500 million doses of fill-and-finish vaccines apart from the deal Moderna announced with Samsung BioLogics in May.

South Korea has deals to buy 106 million doses of mRNA vaccines from Pfizer and Moderna to cover full vaccination of its population of 52 million this year. The government said last week it would purchase more mRNA shots to use them as a booster shot next year. — Reuters

■ PROTEST AGAINST FARM REFORMS



Farmers shout slogans as they make their way along the road to Delhi to join farmers who are continuing their protest against the central government's agricultural reforms, in Beas of India's Punjab state. — AFP

Philippines orders probe after military plane crash kills 50

MANILA: Philippine authorities ordered on Monday an investigation into the crash of an Air Force plane that overshot a runway killing 47 soldiers on board, three civilians on the ground and injuring dozens.

Some passengers on the Lockheed C-130 jumped free seconds before the plane crashed and burst into flames on the weekend, officials cited witnesses as saying. The aircraft, carrying recently graduated troops bound for counter-insurgency operations, had been trying to land at Jolo airport in southern Sulu province.

All 96 passengers on board had been accounted for, with 49 military personnel injured as well as four civilians on the ground, military spokesman Major General Edgard Arevalo said.

In a news conference, Arevalo said the plane was in "very good condition" and had 11,000 flying hours remaining before its next maintenance was due.

"We are determined to find out what really transpired in this very tragic incident, because according to available information the



View of the site after a Philippines Air Force Lockheed C-130 plane carrying troops crashed on landing in Patikul, Sulu province, Philippines. — Reuters

The plane was in 'very good condition' and had 11,000 flying hours remaining before its next maintenance was due

aircraft followed the specified protocols," he said.

Defence Secretary Delfin Lorenzana ordered an investigation into the country's worst military air disaster in nearly 30 years.

The military command said the soldiers were flying to the

provincial airport of Jolo from Laguindingan, about 460 km to the northeast, to be deployed to their battalions. The army in the sprawling Philippine archipelago has been fighting a long war in the area against militants from Abu Sayyaf and other factions.

There was no sign the plane was brought down by insurgent fire, officials said. "We assure our people that we are transparent and the results of the investigation (will be made) available when completed," added Arevalo, saying that authorities were still searching for the flight recorders. — AFP

Florida condo demolished ahead of tropical storm, search to resume

SURFSIDE: The partially collapsed Miami-area condo where 24 people are confirmed dead was demolished on Sunday night, ahead of the possible arrival of Tropical Storm Elsa.

Search-and-rescue efforts for 121 people missing have been suspended. Miami-Dade County Mayor Daniella Levine Cava told reporters earlier on Sunday that rescue efforts would resume after the demolition, noting it was 11 days since the collapse.

Video footage showed the 12-story building collapsing downward and throwing up plumes of smoke.

As of Sunday afternoon, Tropical Storm Elsa was off the coast of Cuba with winds of 60 miles per hour (95 kph). After moving across Cuba later on Sunday and Monday, the storm was forecast to approach western Florida on Tuesday or Wednesday.

In the wreckage of the Champlain Towers South complex in Surfside, workers drilled into columns where small explosive charges were placed to bring the remains of the building down in a small area, officials said.

Residents in nearby buildings did not need to evacuate but were instructed to stay indoors and turn off air conditioning due to dust.

Instead of the usual fireworks and flag-waving parties, beachside communities in the area planned more subdued events for the Fourth of July. Miami Beach



The rest of the Champlain South tower is demolished with a controlled explosion in Surfside. – AFP

cancelled its Independence Day celebrations.

Investigators have not determined what caused the 40-year-old complex to collapse on June 24. A 2018 engineering report found structural deficiencies that are now the focus of inquiries that include a grand jury examination. All residents of another

building, Crestview Towers in North Miami Beach, were told on Friday to leave immediately after engineers found serious concrete and electrical problems, officials said.

The move was considered urgent because of the approach of Elsa, North Miami Beach City Manager Arthur Sorey said,

adding that the building's owners had not yet begun a mandatory safety recertification process required 40 years after it was built.

"It's definitely not an easy decision," Sorey said. "It's just the right thing to do during these times. It's uncertain what's going to happen with the storm."

— Reuters

Avignon masks up for theatre festival

AVIGNON: One of the world's biggest theatre festivals gets underway Monday in the southern French city of Avignon after a year-long hiatus caused by Covid-19, with masks compulsory for audiences but organisers relishing a return to relative normality.

Theatregoers and troupes have expressed excitement at being reunited for the 75th edition of the Avignon theatre festival, which rivals Edinburgh for the title of the world's biggest showcase of performing arts.

"I feel euphoric, as if this is my first festival," said festival director Olivier Py, who has run the event since 2013.

Being deprived of last year's edition had shown both the public and performers alike "how precious it is", he said.

The festival opens later Monday with a hugely-anticipated production by Portuguese director Tiago Rodrigues of Anton Chekhov's "The Cherry Orchard", starring French screen legend Isabelle Huppert and staged at the Papal Palace main festival venue.

Rodrigues, 44, whose work at Lisbon's Dona Maria II national theatre has made him one of the most sought after directors in Europe, will take over the running of the festival from its 2023 edition, French Culture Minister Roselyne Bachelot announced. The pandemic still looms large over the three-week-long theatre extravaganza.



People stand in the "Cour d'honneur" of the Popes' Palace (Palais des papes) stage on the first day of this year edition of the Avignon theatre festival in Avignon on Monday. – AFP

A South African dance performance by celebrated choreographer Dada Masilo was pulled from the programme on the eve of the opening night after members of the troupe tested positive for the virus or were contact cases.

Avignon, a picturesque walled city which was the seat of Catholic popes in the 14th century, has put in place several measures to try prevent the festival becoming a giant cluster.

Mask-wearing will be obligatory outdoors as well as in for the duration of the festival.

And venues will be ventilated for 40 minutes between each performance.

Audience members will not need to show proof of vaccination or clean Covid tests to be able to take their seats — except for shows at the Papal Palace. — AFP

France warns virus fourth wave could hit by end-July

PARIS: France could see a new spike in Covid cases by the end of July due to the spread of the more contagious Delta variant of the virus, the government spokesman said on Monday.

"Over the past week the epidemic is again gaining ground," Gabriel Attal told France Inter radio, with the Delta variant now accounting for 30 per cent of new infections in the country.

A fourth wave of infections is "a possibility" by the end of this month, he said, echoing a warning issued by Health Minister Olivier Veran late on Sunday.

Several countries, including Britain and Russia, have already seen alarming jumps in new cases because of the variant, which was first identified in India.

French officials acknowledge

that not enough people are getting vaccinated despite ample supplies, which could lead to a rise in cases. "We've seen in the United Kingdom an explosion (of cases) that occurred very rapidly after the first red flags, and we're seeing these signs in our country," Attal said.

Overall, the French infection incidence rate stood at 21 per 100,000 people as of last Thursday, the most recent data available, still below the alert level of 50 but an increase of 10 per cent on the previous week.

"The English example shows that a wave is possible from the end of July," Veran had warned on Twitter, saying that a combination of vaccines, testing and social distancing can limit its impact.

— AFP

Queen awards bravery medal to National Health Service

LONDON: Britain's Queen Elizabeth II has awarded the George Cross to the National Health Services of the UK, recognising all NHS staff in all four nations.

In a personal, handwritten message, the queen said NHS staff have carried out their work "with courage, compassion and dedication" for more than 70 years.

The award comes on the 73rd anniversary of the NHS's foundation.

The George Cross was instituted by King George VI on September 24 1940 during the height of the Blitz, and is granted in recognition of "acts of the greatest heroism or of the most courage in circumstances



of extreme danger."

The award of the George Cross by the queen is made on the advice of the George Cross Committee

and the Prime Minister.

In her message, on Windsor Castle-headed paper, the queen wrote: "It is with great pleasure,

on behalf of a grateful nation, that I award the George Cross to the National Health Services of the United Kingdom.

"This award recognises all NHS staff, past and present, across all disciplines and all four nations.

"Collectively, over more than seven decades, they have supported the people of our country with courage, compassion and dedication, demonstrating the highest standards of public service.

"You have the enduring thanks and heartfelt appreciation of us all."

Details of the presentation of the award will be confirmed at a later date. — dpa

ROME

Pope in 'good' condition after surgery

Pope Francis was doing well on Monday after surgery for an inflamed large colon, but the 84-year-old was expected to spend around seven days recovering in hospital, the Vatican said.

The pontiff was admitted to Rome's Gemelli hospital on Sunday for a scheduled operation under general anaesthetic for symptomatic diverticular stenosis of the colon. Francis "is in good general condition, alert and breathing spontaneously",



spokesman Matteo Bruni said in a statement, adding that the surgery "lasted about three hours".

LONDON

Kate self-isolating after Covid contact

The Duchess of Cambridge is self-isolating for 10 days after coming into contact with someone who later tested positive for Covid-19, Kensington Palace said on Monday.

The wife of Prince William was "not experiencing any symptoms but is following all relevant government guidelines and is self-isolating at home," a royal statement said.

Kate, as the duchess is popularly known, had been due to attend a thanksgiving service



on Monday to mark 73 years since the founding of Britain's National Health Service.

She was also scheduled to

OSLO

Norway delays reopening due to Delta variant

Norway is delaying the next major step in unwinding restrictions related to the Covid-19 pandemic to the end of the month at the earliest, Prime Minister Erna Solberg said on Monday.

"There is a risk that the Delta variant will cause a fourth wave of infection in the unvaccinated part of the population, among those who have only received one dose or are in vulnerable groups," Solberg said.

The World Health Organization has said Delta is



becoming the globally dominant variant of Covid-19, raising concerns over whether existing vaccines will work against it.

A weak link in vaccination campaign

CATHERINE TRIOMPHE

With a sizable Black minority traditionally mistrustful of vaccines and with many conservative rural whites convinced that the vaccine is more dangerous than Covid-19 itself, Southern US states like Alabama have some of the country’s lowest vaccination rates, leaving the disadvantaged region vulnerable to dangerous new virus variants. But some people are trying their best to change that.

With a small team and an energy level that belies the crushing Southern heat, County Commissioner Sheila Tyson knocks on the doors of modest homes in Memorial Park, a mainly Black neighbourhood of Birmingham, Alabama’s largest city.

“This Sunday, I want you all out there (in the park)”, Tyson, a leader of the Alabama Black Women’s Roundtable, tells anyone who opens their door.

“We will have free food as long as it lasts, when it’s gone it’s gone, and we are going to have vaccine shots — have you had your vaccines?”

Despite an injured foot, Tyson is one of the few local officials to actively campaign for vaccine acceptance, tirelessly visiting parks, schools, day-care centres and stadiums in some of the area’s poorest neighbourhoods.

When Covid cases spiked in Alabama in December and January, people were “dropping like flies”, she says.

And as the Delta variant of coronavirus spreads across the United States, she says, “We are very concerned, not only about the Black and brown people but about all people.”

Tyson has heard the conspiracy theories that keep some people from getting the vaccine, including the notion that “the vaccine would sterilise African American men.”

Such baseless ideas stem from a grim history of discriminatory healthcare practices — not least the infamous syphilis experiments carried out by the US government from 1932 to 1972 on hundreds of unwitting Black men in Tuskegee, 200 km from Birmingham.

— AFP

“This Sunday, I want you all out there (in the park). We will have free food as long as it lasts, when it’s gone it’s gone, and we are going to have vaccine shots — have you had your vaccines?”

SHEILA TYSON

County Commissioner



COOLING OFF

Children cool off with a swim at Sangam, the confluence of rivers Ganges, Yamuna and the mythical Saraswati on a hot summer afternoon in Allahabad, India, on Monday. — AFP

Modern Omani poetry tackles tensions and contradictions



Dr Khalid Mohammed al Balushi

khalidalbalushi@hotmail.com

LITTLE WONDER THAT IT AT TIMES REBELS AGAINST CLASSIFICATION AND DOMESTICATION. AT OTHER TIMES IT SWINGS BETWEEN REBELLION AND CONFORMITY

The dominant cultural discourse in Oman has always been, by and large, male dominated and collectivist. However, modernisation in the 1970s began to challenge that discourse. Poetry began to break away from traditional Arabic style both in formal and thematic terms.

Formally, it experimented with rhyme-free and prose poetry. Thematically, it was bold enough to take topics hitherto taboo. Championing the individual in the face of the multiple discourses, Omani poetry attempted to portray human experience with its manifold tensions and contradictions. Little wonder that it at times rebels against classification and domestication. At other times it swings between rebellion and conformity and yearns for a kind of certainty that the collectivist discourse promises.

The politics of individualism comes out in two distinct voices. On the one hand, there is a voice that elevates the personal, the everyday and the mundane. For example, in Hilal al Hajri’s *Night is Mine* (2006), we see a persona who, on looking at himself in a mirror, finds that even mirrors are hypocritical, sees children who take him out of the rancor of ‘orientalists’ and clash of cultures, reads

the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam in a café, and on looking up, finds a woman staring at him, or remembers a friend who dreams of a woman’s or a chicken’s thigh.

A similar voice is manifest in *A House on the World Roof* (2012) by Ahmad al Hashmi. The persona cherishes his “small house that looks like a sweetheart/This is my water, my food on the table/This is my warbling music/This is my kindly wine/It looks at me with fondness/I’ve no problem in arranging my everyday cares”.

In *My Private Festivals* (2014) by Fathiyya al Saqri, we see the details of a woman: Her eyes and body, her pain, solitude and deprivation, her stand towards her father and grandfather and her home imprisonment. We see her attempt to create alternative imaginary worlds and her oscillation between a world of obedience and a world of rebellion.

On the other hand, there is still a voice that avoids everyday details, and, in their stead, situates itself in something of a celestial setting. In *Clouds* (2006) by Sama Esa, we see the persona leave society, go to a high hill from where he watches the earth collapse and people drown.

Similarly, in *Tears’ Path* (2007) by Abdulla al Balushi, we see the persona

move in a celestial universe; he sees himself taken by a bird to places where “prophets prostrated”. An air of sacredness surrounds the characters of the collection. We see a woman who “collects her child” from the “top of the celestial ladder”, a man who looks at “the heart-like spot” and sees nothing but “flower, our way to eternity”.

The dead lamented in the collection are saints in the sky where “the soul sings”. The persona likens himself to an angel and resorts to “a sleeping child/That spends the night in prayer in the sun’s threads”. Indeed, such a childhood is an eighth sky for him: “As if childhood were a place that cuddled me/or a flash that carried roses/over an eighth sky.

These two voices converge, as said at the onset, with each other to champion the individual and elevate the ordinary. Actually, we see instances of this in contemporary poetry as well as in fiction. In a series of articles, I shall substantiate my claim by presenting both translations and analyses of some representative works.

(The writer is with College of Arts and Social Sciences, Sultan Qaboos University)

Peru’s indigenous hope for a voice under new president

STEFANIE ESCHENBACHER AND ANGELA PONCE

Maxima Ccalla, 60, an indigenous Quechua woman, has spent her life tilling the harsh soil in Peru’s Andean highlands, resigned to a fate far removed from the vast riches buried deep beneath her feet in seams of copper, zinc and gold. The Andean communities in Ccalla’s home region of Puno and beyond have long clashed with the mining companies that dig mineral wealth out from the ground.

In recent interviews, many said they felt discriminated against and marginalised, and accused mining companies of polluting their water and soil.

But in a country still under the shadow of a colonial past, the rise of an outsider politician, the son of peasant farmers, is sparking hopes of change. It has

also thrown a spotlight on stark divides between the rural Andean highlands and remote Amazon settlements, and the wealthier — and whiter — coastal cities.

Pedro Castillo, who wears a straw farmers hat and plays up his humble village roots, has pledged to give a voice to Peru’s “forgotten” rural groups and redistribute mineral wealth in the world’s second largest producer of copper.

“The looting is over, the theft is over, the assault is over, the discrimination against the Peruvian people is over”, he said at a speech in Cuzco.

The socially conservative leftist is on the cusp of being confirmed president after firing up the rural and indigenous vote, including in mineral-rich regions like Puno.

“So long, governments have promised to solve our problems

but nothing has changed”, Ccalla said in Quechua through a translator while working in the fields surrounding her home in the community of Carata.

“Now, hopefully, he will fulfil his promises.”

Ccalla is one of millions of mostly poor, rural Peruvians who voted for Castillo in the June 6 run-off election.

Wearing a colorful, traditional Monterra hat against the sun, Ccalla’s demands are simple: She wants safe drinking water.

Castillo holds a slim lead, which is being scrutinised after legal pressure from his right-wing rival Keiko Fujimori who has alleged fraud and wants to disqualify some votes from rural areas. Election observers said the vote was carried out cleanly. The tension over the count has exposed a racial and socio-

economic divide in the country.

More than a dozen leaders and activists from Quechua and Aymara communities, scattered across the Andes, and others deep in the Amazon rainforest hundreds of miles north, spoke to Reuters candidly about the discrimination they face.

In Puno, the region where Carata is located, Castillo scored some 90 per cent of the total vote count. His party logo, a yellow pencil on red background, had been painted on walls of lone houses — the only splashes of bright colour for miles around.

Though Castillo does not identify as a member of an indigenous community, those who spoke overwhelmingly said they could relate to him “as one of us” because of his humble upbringing and his background as a farmer.

As with Bolivia’s Evo Morales a decade ago, they hoped he would give greater representation to marginalised groups, and a more state-led approach to mining to drive higher social spending.

“Now we see a lot of possibilities for the future — he’ll be a good president,” said Rene Belizario, 34, a Quechua. But, he added, “this is our opportunity and if he doesn’t deliver, the people will rise. There’ll be protests”.

Belizario, a father of three young boys, said he hoped Castillo would “recover” mines in the area operated by private companies to redistribute profits and generate jobs.

Mining is a key driver of Peru’s economy. Metals are the country’s largest export and Castillo, even with his plans to shake things up, will need to negotiate his way forward. — Reuters

THE SOCIALLY CONSERVATIVE LEFTIST IS ON THE CUSP OF BEING CONFIRMED PRESIDENT AFTER FIRING UP THE RURAL AND INDIGENOUS VOTE

sport



Spain plot reconquest against unified Italy

LONDON: Spain's cycle of dominance of European football began and ended with Italy so it is fitting their hopes of a reconquest will see them face Roberto Mancini's side, who are on their own path towards redemption, in Tuesday's Euro 2020 semifinal.

This is a fixture laced with history, not least for coach Luis Enrique, who was left with a broken nose by opponent Mauro Tassotti which went unpunished in a 1994 World Cup quarterfinal defeat and to this day sparks feelings of injustice in Spain.

Spaniards have happier memories of their Euro 2008 quarterfinal, when they prevailed on penalties after a goalless draw in their toughest game on their path to their first international trophy in 44 years.

They met again in the Euro 2012 final in arguably Spain's best display in that glorious four-year cycle, winning 4-0 in a performance so dominant captain Iker Casillas pleaded with the referee to blow his whistle and put Italy out of

their misery.

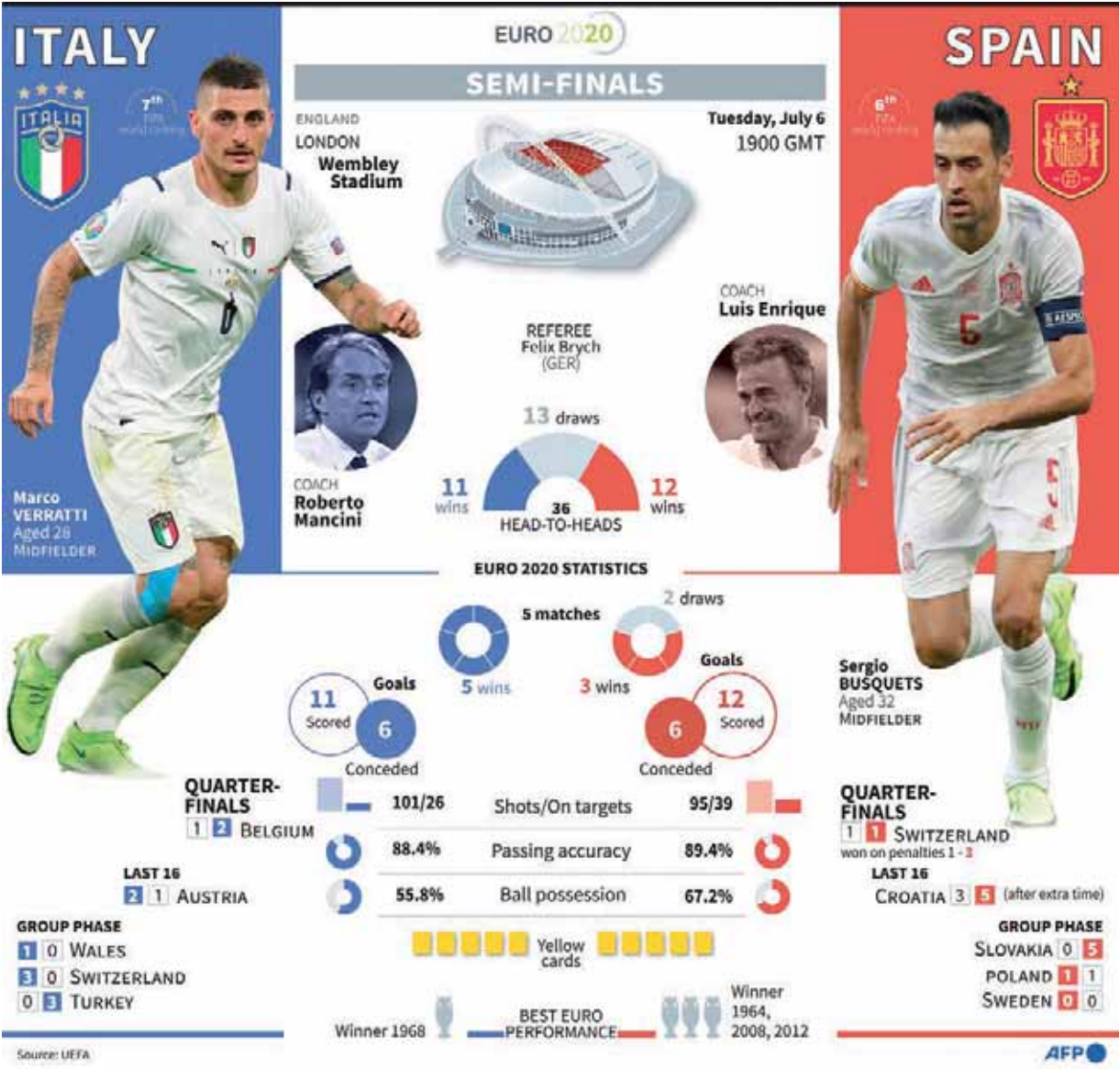
But the Italians would have their revenge four years later in the last 16 when a team fired up by Antonio Conte deservedly won 2-0 at the Stade de France to end Spain's long period of continental hegemony.

But that win did not spark the revival Italy hoped and a 3-0 defeat to Spain in qualifying for the 2018 World Cup led to them missing out on international football's biggest event for the first time since 1958.

It also provoked a deep identity crisis which led them to appoint Roberto Mancini.

Mancini has got the country falling back in love with the national team by overseeing some sparkling football and creating a real sense of unity demonstrated in the way they have celebrated every victory as if they had won a trophy.

That sense of togetherness could be seen on the pitch as they defended like gladiators in their 2-1 win over Belgium in the quarterfinals and in their raucous tribute on the flight



home to defender Leonardo Spinazzola, who tore his Achilles tendon and is out of the tournament.

Spain's path to the semifinals has been less smooth, getting off to a croaky start with dull draws against Sweden and Poland before coming to life with a 5-0 win over Slovakia and a 5-3 win against Croatia after extra time.

Their quarterfinal success over Switzerland on penalties was far less exciting but had the hallmarks of the shootout win over Italy 13 years ago and showcased the team spirit players and Luis Enrique have talked up throughout the tournament.

"From day one we were confident we were a solid and united group and that we were good enough and we've proved that," said forward Mikel Oyarzabal ahead of the Wembley semifinal.

"Italy are a top level team with players who keep performing at the highest level with their clubs but we're not any less than them."

In brief

■ LONDON



TOTTENHAM CHIEF PARATICI WANTS TO KEEP KANE AT CLUB

Tottenham's new managing director of football Fabio Paratici said on Monday keeping Harry Kane is "our goal as a club" even though the England captain has stated his desire to leave.

Kane, 27, has told Spurs he wants a move after growing frustrated at the their 13-year trophy drought and a clutch of top sides have been linked with the forward, including Manchester City, Manchester United and Chelsea. Reports last month said Premier League champions City had made a bid of £100 million (\$138 million) for the player, who won the Golden Boot as the top-scorer in the EPL last season.

■ PRAGUE



CZECH CAPTAIN DARIDA ENDS INTERNATIONAL CAREER

Czech skipper Vladimir Darida has ended his international career after the Czech Republic bowed out of Euro 2020 at the hands of Denmark, the national team said on Sunday.

The 30-year-old Hertha Berlin midfielder, who has scored eight goals in 76 international games, led the Czechs in all three group stage games at the Euro.

He missed the last-16 game against the Netherlands with an injury and came on as a late substitute in Saturday's 2-1 quarterfinal loss to Denmark.

"The national team bid farewell to the Euro. I then bid farewell to my team-mates," Darida said.

■ PARIS



MBAPPE MUST LEAVE PSG TO MAKE GLOBAL IMPACT: ANELKA

Kylian Mbappe needs to leave Paris St Germain if he is to make an impact on the global stage like Ballon d'Or winners Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi, former France player Nicolas Anelka said.

Mbappe, who scored 42 goals in all competitions for PSG last season, has a contract at the French club until June 2022 but has been linked with a move to La Liga's Real Madrid.

"If you want the biggest accolades, you will have to move from PSG at some point," Anelka wrote in his column for The Athletic. "You can't say you compete with the best all the time when you are at PSG."

Anelka said Ligue 1 is not easy but England's Premier League is the "toughest league".

BOL, DOS SANTOS SHINE IN STOCKHOLM DIAMOND LEAGUE

DUPLANTIS

delights home fans with 6m



I feel good about today, being here with my family and friends, and everybody watching

ARMAND DUPLANTIS
Swedish pole vaulter



Netherlands' Femke Bol celebrates winning the 400 metre hurdles competition and sets a new stadium record during the Diamond League meet in Stockholm. — AFP

Sweden's Armand Duplantis competes in the men's final pole vault event during the Diamond League Track and Field meeting in Stockholm, Sweden. — AFP

STOCKHOLM: Armand Duplantis failed in his bid to improve his own world record, but the Swedish pole vaulter still delighted home fans with yet another 6m-plus victory at the Diamond League meet in Stockholm on Sunday.

Duplantis cleared 6.02 metres before having three efforts at 6.19m, failing all three times in his bid to better the 6.18m mark he made last year.

Two-time world champion Sam Kendricks of the United States took second with 5.92m on countback from 2012 Olympic gold medallist Renaud Lavillenie of France.

"I feel good about today, being here with my family and friends, and everybody watching," said Duplantis, known by his nickname 'Mondo'. "It was really important for me to just kind of go out here and try to get over six metres, and then maybe take a few better shots at the world record, but overall 6.02 was a nice jump so I can't complain so much."

Just 24 other vaulters in history have managed to clear six metres, and Duplantis' unerring consistency over that height marks him as a clear favourite for gold come the July 23-August 8 Tokyo Olympics.

DUTCH PRODIGY

The meet was well set up by Dutch athletics prodigy Femke Bol, who ran the fourth fastest women's 400m hurdles of all time as she won in 52.37 seconds.

Bol, 21, was pushed all the way by American Shamier Little, who finished second in 52.39sec, the fifth best of all time.

The Dutch runner beat the personal best of 53.33sec she set at Thursday's Diamond League meet in Oslo by almost a second.

"I'm amazed, I'm so happy!" said Bol. "I think running personal bests is going to stop for now, but I hope to keep on getting close to this time. I can't believe it!"

PERSONAL BEST

Alison dos Santos, like Bol also 21, finished second to Warholm on Thursday, but the Brazilian took advantage of the Norwegian's absence to claim an impressive victory in the Swedish capital.

Dos Santos clocked a personal best and South American record of 47.34sec, going 14th in the all-time list, while Cuban-born Turk Yasmani Copello took second in 48.19. "I feel so happy about my running, I trained hard for this, I trained hard for the Olympic Games," said Dos Santos. — AFP

Curran shines before washout seals series for England

BRISTOL, England: Tom Curran picked up four middle-order wickets as England bowled Sri Lanka out for 166 in the third one-day international before the game was abandoned due to rain in Bristol on Sunday.

The washout meant the hosts, who enjoyed a 3-0 series sweep in the Twenty20s, won the 50-over series 2-0.

"We're delighted with the series win, and more so today with the way we started," England captain Eoin Morgan said. "We looked to be aggressive, create pressure and create opportunities. We're delighted that we continued to be ruthless and disciplined in the nature that we showed."

Sam Curran captured five wickets to inspire England's victory at The Oval three days ago and it was his older brother Tom who finished with 4-35 as the



England's Tom Curran celebrates after taking the wicket of Sri Lanka's Binura Fernando. — Reuters

tourists were bundled out in the 42nd over.

Sri Lanka again failed to make a solid start with the bat as captain Kusal Perera and fellow opener Avishka Fernando were removed by the new-ball attack of Chris

Woakes and David Willey in the opening six overs.

Pathum Nissanka's stint at the crease was also short-lived as he was caught behind off Willey, while Dhananjaya de Silva clipped a Woakes bouncer straight to

deep fine-leg. The touring side were tottering at 50-4 when Tom Curran was brought into the attack and he soon removed Oshada Fernando for his first ODI wicket since March.

Wanindu Hasaranga was next

to play a rash shot, holing out to a short ball for the third time in the series to give Curran his second wicket.

All-rounder Dasun Shanaka and Chamika Karunaratne adopted a cautious approach to add 29 runs for the seventh wicket, before Curran returned in overcast conditions.

The Surrey bowler used a scrambled seam to force an edge from Karunaratne's bat, which was brilliantly caught by wicketkeeper Jonny Bairstow diving to his right.

"It is disappointing. We sort of knew there was a bit of rain, but I didn't quite think it was going to come down that hard, that quickly, but it was nice to contribute with a few wickets," Tom Curran said.

England face Pakistan on Thursday in the first of three ODIs. A three-match T20 series follows. — Reuters

BARTY INTO QUARTERS FOR FIRST TIME

DJOKOVIC,
SHAPOVALOV
IN LAST EIGHT;
JABEUR BEATS
SWIATEK,
PLISKOVA
THROUGH

LONDON: World number one Ashleigh Barty reached the Wimbledon quarterfinals for the first time on Monday beating French Open champion Barbora Krejcikova of the Czech Republic 7-5, 6-3.

The 25-year-old Australian will play the winner of the match between unseeded compatriot Ajla Tomljanovic and British teenager Emma Raducanu on Tuesday for a place in the semifinals.

Defeat brought an end to Krejcikova's 15-match winning streak and she will have to wait another year to see if she can emulate her late coach and mentor Jana Novotna in winning the title.

Barty may have won in straight sets but that did not really tell the full tale of a hard fought 95-minute encounter against an opponent who had yet to win a main draw singles grass match prior to Wimbledon.

Barty's serve was once again her Achilles heel being broken early in the first set and then again in the second when she served for the match.

"It was an incredibly tough match," said Barty.

"Barbora has had an unbelievable year and am happy to come through in the end. I found some good stuff when it was important.

"This is a bit down to the work myself and my team do in practice but this is the fun part to come out and enjoy myself.

"It can be frustrating at times but it tastes sweeter when you win."

Former world number one Karolina Pliskova reached her first Wimbledon quarterfinal with a 6-2, 6-3 win over Russian wildcard Liudmila Samsonova.

Czech eighth-seed Pliskova,



Australia's Ashleigh Barty celebrates at the All England Club in Wimbledon. — Reuters

who has yet to drop a set at the tournament, will face either Madison Keys of the United States or Switzerland's Viktorija Golubic for a place in the semifinals.

DJOKOVIC POWERS ON

Novak Djokovic reached his 50th Grand Slam quarterfinal with a straight-set victory over Chile's Cristian Garin.

World number one Djokovic

eased into the last-eight at the All England Club with a 6-2, 6-4, 6-2 win and will face either Hungary's Marton Fucsovics or Russian fifth seed Andrey Rublev for a place in the semifinals.

"Confidence levels are very high after winning the French Open," said Djokovic.

"It was one of my biggest wins in the circumstances -- two five-setters, two four-setters in the

second week.

"They took a lot out of me but they also gave me wings. "The further I go in the tournament, the more comfortable I feel and I look forward to the next challenge."

Djokovic, the six-time Wimbledon champion and chasing a record-equalling 20th major title, is halfway to a calendar Grand Slam.

Later, Denis Shapovalov's impressive run at Wimbledon saw him reach the quarterfinals after he dismissed Spain's 2019 semifinalist and eighth seed Roberto Bautista Agut 6-1, 6-3, 7-5.

The 22-year-old Canadian 10th seed — who beat Britain's two-time champion Andy Murray in the previous round — will next face 25th seeded Karen



Tunisia's Ons Jabeur celebrates after the win at Wimbledon. — Reuters

Khachanov of Russia for a place in the last four.

Khachanov triumphed over American Sebastian Korda 3-6, 6-4, 6-3, 5-7, 10-8 and will face Canadian 10th seed Denis Shapovalov for a place in the last four.

JABEUR MAKES HISTORY

Ons Jabeur's historic Wimbledon campaign saw her reach the women's quarterfinals, beating Poland's 2020 French Open champion Iga Swiatek 5-7, 6-1, 6-1 in their fourth round match.

The 26-year-old is the first Tunisian woman to reach the last eight at Wimbledon and will face Belarus second seed Aryna Sabalenka who defeated Elena Rybakina 6-3, 4-6, 6-3.

Sabalenka will be playing in her first Grand Slam quarterfinal.

Jabeur showed great poise to stay in the match after she let slip a 5-4 lead and serving for the first set only for the Pole to reel off three games on the bounce.

"It was a great match and I had to stay calm rather than get angry when I failed to close out the first set as getting angry would not have helped my cause," said Jabeur.

"Today I decided to change my game a bit as everyone knows I am doing drop shots and being aggressive was key today."

— AFP

WIMBLEDON RESULTS

Men (fourth round)
Matteo Berrettini (ITA x7) bt Ilya Ivashka (BLR) 6-4, 6-3, 6-1

Women (fourth round)
Ashleigh Barty (AUS x1) bt Barbora Krejcikova (CZE x14) 7-5, 6-3; Karolina Pliskova (CZE x8) bt Liudmila Samsonova (RUS) 6-2, 6-3; Ons Jabeur (TUN x21) bt Iga Swiatek (POL x7) 5-7, 6-1, 6-1; Aryna Sabalenka (BLR x2) bt Elena Rybakina (KAZ x18) 6-3, 4-6, 6-3

Osaka says preparing for Olympics, will do news conferences



TOKYO: Tennis star Naomi Osaka said on Monday she wants to be on top form at the Olympics and will take part in press conferences, after pulling out of several tournaments citing her struggles with depression and anxiety.

The world number two told Japan's national broadcaster NHK she was getting ready to play on home turf at the pandemic-postponed Tokyo Games, after having withdrawn from Wimbledon and the French Open.

"I am preparing myself little

by little so I can be at the top of my game for the Olympics," the 23-year-old wrote in a message published by the broadcaster.

"Since getting the attention of the world, I've always had bouts of anxiety. This is especially the case in the lead up to big competitions."

Osaka set off a debate about mental health in June after abandoning her French Open campaign just one match in over a dispute on media duties.

The Japanese player had said post-match news conferences were detrimental to her mental

health and likened them to "kicking people when they're down".

She later revealed her battle with depression and anxiety in a post on social media, saying she wanted to take time away from the game to get better.

In the message published by NHK, Osaka said she was "proud" to play for her country at the Games, adding that she would take part in news conferences while giving consideration to her mental health.

She was fined \$15,000 and

threatened with disqualification from Roland Garros after refusing to honour mandatory media commitments.

French Open organisers protested that they had treated her with "care and respect" after they were accused of being heavy-handed.

Osaka's agent said last month that she had withdrawn from Wimbledon to spend time with friends and family.

But he added that she was "excited to play in front of her home fans" at Tokyo 2020, which begins on July 23. — AFP



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Khazaen signs new investment pact with Omani logistics SME



BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JULY 5

Khazaen Economic City has recently announced the signing of a new investment agreement with Al Safwa SPC, a 100 per cent Omani-owned SME company. Under the agreement, Al Safwa will lease an area of 10,000 sqm aim to move its logistics and facility management services operations to Oman's most integrated economic city. EngSalim bin Sulaiman al Thuhli, CEO, Khazaen said, "It's a great move by an SME company and an inspiration for others as well. It reflects the trust that Khazaen is gaining from various business communities. Khazaen is determined to support SMEs by providing access to various logistics and business gateways to enable them to succeed in their business. Indeed,

today's signing reflects Khazaen's anticipated role in supporting the economic diversification plans of the Sultanate." Warith al Kharousi, CEO, Al Safwa SPC, said: "It is a great pleasure to be associated with Khazaen Economic City. It caters to our needs of today and also provides a competitive edge for the future that will enable us to compete locally and globally. We have shifted our business and would like to encourage other Omani companies to explore Khazaen for their future growth plans. Our decision to invest in Khazaen was linked to our business and operational growth while pursuing sustainable business across all industrial sectors, which we hope will meet with our ambitions of diversification and growth plans."

Oman LNG posts revenue of \$2.5 bn in pandemic-hit 2020

STRONG PERFORMANCE:
Despite challenging global economic conditions and lower demand, Oman LNG successfully delivered a total of 155 cargoes last year, compared with 166 cargoes in 2019

CONRAD PRABHU
[@conradprabhu](#)

Amid a year hit hard by low international oil prices and weakened global LNG demand, Oman LNG saw revenue decline to \$2.503 billion in 2020, down from \$3.845 billion a year earlier. Net Income After Tax (NIAT) slumped to \$663 million last year, down from \$1.112 billion in 2019. However, despite the formidable challenges posed by the pandemic-impacted global economy, Oman LNG delivered a "remarkable" performance overall, notably in terms of its production, reliability, and delivery of its strategic debottlenecking and power projects, top officials said. "In its 20 years of operation, and despite the many challenges encountered over the years, our company has continued to contribute to Oman's growth on an ever-expanding scale. By all measures of success, Oman LNG has sailed past all benchmarks to become the profitable and sustainable industry model that it is today", Talal bin Hamid al Awfi, Chairman of the Board of Directors, stated in the company's newly published 2020 Annual Report. Majority-state-owned Oman



LNG, said the Chairman, took early steps to mitigate the effects of collapsing oil prices and other adverse impacts on its production and financial obligations during the year. "To offset shortfalls, we proactively launched substantial cost saving initiatives, optimised shipping routes and revisited our market positioning. These initiatives successfully helped close the gaps and enabled us to remain agile and profitable." These efforts were reflected in Oman LNG's success in delivering a total of 155 LNG cargoes (equivalent to 10.2 million tonnes of LNG) last year, versus 166 cargoes (10.6 million tonnes) in 2019. While the two trains belonging to

Oman LNG contributed 114 of these cargoes, the remaining 41 came from the third train owned by Qalhat LNG. A further 32 cargoes of natural-gas liquids (NGLs) were also generated and shipped during the year. Harib bin Abdullah al Kitani, who retired as CEO of Oman LNG at the end of 2020, noted that the revenue and NIAT for the year were lower only by 17 per cent from estimates set out in the Business Year for 2020. He added: "Few companies would highlight their finances as a positive feature of 2020 business. There are times when protection of assets is sufficient success to celebrate, and although revenue and NIAT were down by 17 per cent for the year, much of this can be attributed to the

collapse in oil prices, subsequently compounded by the economic effects of the pandemic. Seen in this light, we need not be dispirited. What is more, our OPEX cost-savings for 2020 were worth an impressive \$45 million — no mean feat — all the more so given that our business operations suffered no hiccups." Among the highlights of the past year was the successful completion of the shutdown/turnaround of Train 1. Furthermore, the ongoing debottlenecking and power upgrade projects enabled the production of four additional LNG cargoes during the year as a result of the capacity increase and enhanced efficiency contributed by these initiatives.

Pandemic impacts continue to challenge Oman's real estate market

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JULY 5

The Sultanate is in a significantly improved position in comparison to this time last year, but headwinds remain for the real estate sector, leading real estate advisors Savills said in its latest report on Oman's real estate industry. According to Ihsan Kharouf, Head of Savills Oman, landlords will need to be flexible, pro-active and move quickly to changing market conditions in order to attract and retain tenants. Opportunities for development will need to be well considered and clearly focused on evident market gaps, opportunities and needs, he said. "Twelve months after the pandemic, the Sultanate has significantly accelerated its Covid-19 vaccination programme in June with the intention of over 70 per cent of the population being vaccinated by the end of the year. This is likely to be of significant benefit in re-opening the travel and tourism sector while allowing current restrictions on the retail sector to be significantly eased", Savills stated in its report.



(Picture for illustration only)

During 2020, an increasing focus on providing jobs for nationals and the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic saw a significant acceleration of the decline in the expatriate population that started in 2017. There are now around 320,000 (approximately 15 per cent) fewer expatriates in the Sultanate in comparison to 2016 although the expatriate population has started to stabilise over recent months. According to Savills, the pandemic

and subsequent lockdown measures have negatively impacted the office market in Muscat. Office leasing activity was limited before the pandemic and the onset of travel restrictions and lockdown measures led to muted demand levels. "Almost all new office leases were observed from companies with an existing presence in Oman. Demand remains primarily focused on smaller, fully finished spaces. In contrast to the demand dynamics, recent years have

seen the introduction of a significant supply of new office space which has exceeded the limited demand for office space in the city. There is currently circa 100,000 sqm of office space under construction, while requirements in excess of 2,000 sqm are extremely rare", it said. The report also highlights the potential for co-working space in the Sultanate. With the recent rapid evolution of the workplace and the way that Savills works allied to the

KEY TRENDS: Citing the Oman Census 2020, Savills notes that there are currently circa 80,000 vacant residential units (around 20 per cent of the total residential supply) in Muscat

global success of co-working spaces, the real estate advisors consider that this type of facility would be well suited to the requirements of start-ups and smaller companies in Muscat while offering a different development approach to more traditional office spaces. The report noted that expatriates constitute 40 per cent of Oman's population and play a significant role in the demand for residential units across the country. While the Omani population has continued to grow steadily, expatriate numbers started to drop gradually in 2018 and 2019 before seeing a drop from 880,000 to 760,000 (almost 15 per cent) over the course of 2020. "The expatriate population has

started to stabilise over recent months but there is the potential for further reductions in numbers due to the long-term economic impacts of the pandemic and a growing focus on Omanisation of the workforce, particularly for white collar positions", said Savills. Citing the Oman Census 2020, the report noted that there are currently circa 80,000 vacant residential units (around 20 per cent of the total residential supply) in Muscat. With the vast majority of Omanis being owner-occupiers, it is estimated that a significant proportion of the vacant units are likely to be investment properties for the rental market. "As a result of the notable drop in the number of expatriates in Muscat over 2020 allied to the difficulty for new employees to enter Oman due to travel restrictions, demand has seen a notable reduction over the last 15 months. It has been focused to a notable degree on more affordable apartments and villas/townhouses in the more exclusive localities of Al Mouj, Muscat Hills and Shatti Al Qurum", the report added.

Corporate finance needs to review culture to attract best talent post-Covid

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JULY 5

While Covid-19 has accelerated the pace of digital transformation in corporate finance, it has also highlighted the need for a more people-centric approach to organisational culture. To attract and retain the next generation of corporate finance talent, firms and business leaders must review their operational models to incorporate a healthier workplace culture.

This was the consensus of expert panellists during an ICAEW webinar on the attractiveness of corporate finance advisory as an early career opportunity, held recently. The panel of young professionals and experienced practitioners debated the future of deal-making in the Middle East.

The webinar provided insight on what skill gaps have been created by the move to remote working in corporate finance advisory, such as limited face-to-face colleague interaction and client engagement.

Panellists included: Mike Littlewood, Sector Head, Professional Services Commercial Banking MENAT, HSBC; Fatma Ghobash, Senior Consultant, Deals Transaction Services, PwC; Deepak Mirchandani, Senior



Consultant, Transactions, Grant Thornton UAE; Andrew Tarbuck, Partner, Head of Capital Markets, Al Tamimi & Company; Haya al Barqawi, Trainee Solicitor, Al Tamimi & Company and Zubin Chiba, Partner, Deals, Corporate Finance, PwC (moderator).

The speakers agreed the pandemic has brought to light the importance of having positive workplace cultures and that senior managers need to think more critically about employees' needs.

The pandemic has brought to light the importance of having positive workplace cultures and that senior managers need to think more critically about employees' needs.

This could be achieved by reviewing their workplace culture to ensure that it is more flexible and provides a community, and learning environment where junior employees are exposed to senior partners within the firm. The panellists highlighted the

importance of flexible work arrangements in corporate finance.

Speakers advised business leaders to consider the personal needs of their employees to allow better synching of working hours with their personal responsibilities.

According to the panellists, a firm's ability to find a balance delivering on all fronts – from client servicing to employee engagement and satisfaction is linked to how it stands out in the recruitment market.

Michael Armstrong, FCA and ICAEW Regional Director for the Middle East, Africa and South Asia (MEASA), said: "Company culture has become an increasingly important part of the working world, and now is the time to build a strong one for the post-Covid-19 era. Businesses should consider changing cultural norms and behaviours to make the profession more attractive.

This would be beneficial to both employees, who will gain more control over their personal lives, and employers, who will be able to attract and retain the next generation of talented finance professionals.

"Employers should also ensure that employees have variety in their work to keep them engaged and motivated. This could be done by giving employees experience in different areas of the business, such as venture funding, private placements, initial public offerings (IPO) or perhaps mergers and acquisitions (M&A) to ensure that they aren't performing the same tasks daily."

Bank Nizwa introduces treasury weekly newsletter



MUSCAT: Oman's most trusted Islamic bank, Bank Nizwa has launched its Treasury Weekly Newsletter series for its valued corporate customers. The weekly newsletter, an initiative by the Wholesale Banking Group's Global Markets Department (Treasury), is to showcase the multitude of Shari'a compliant products and services that the bank offers to private and public entities in the Sultanate and provide a condensed informative summary of markets and treasury related updates during the week in a reader-friendly design and fashion.

The newsletter will be sent out every Sunday to a wide range of the Bank's Wholesale Banking Group clients. Distribution of the newsletter has been adopted via an electronic platform to ensure physical distancing protocols are adhered to in compliance with the health and medical advisories to contain the Covid-19 pandemic. Designed to be compact, the one pager document will also be easily accessible regardless of location or time zones.

The highlight feature of the newsletter is that it is a one snapshot capturing the most relevant market moving headlines in the global, regional (GCC) and domestic (Oman) markets. Clients will have ready essential information on hand with the newsletter without having to go through the hassle of collating through the myriad of news and data from multiple channels.

Speaking on the introduction of the newsletter, R Narasimhan, General Manager of the Wholesale Banking Group said: "We received encouraging feedback from clients which lauded the Bank's initiative. With the fast changing global scenario, such concise and quality newsletter are most welcoming. We appreciate the effort put in by the Bank Nizwa's Treasury team in bringing value addition with the periodical to the entire Wholesale Banking Group's clientele segments."

Alizz Islamic Bank launches 'You Choose' campaign

MUSCAT: As part of its ongoing commitment to its customers in providing offers, benefits and attractive banking services, Alizz Islamic Bank has come up with bouquet of offers for customers who would like to transfer their salary or finance to Alizz Islamic Bank.

The 'You Choose' campaign gives the customers the flexibility to choose from a range of specially designed offers if they transfer their current finances or avail new financing from Alizz Islamic Bank or transfer their salaries to the bank.

The #YouChoose campaign gives the customers the freedom of picking one of the many benefits that fits that customers specific requirements and needs, such as a combo offer for customer



to enjoy a new credit card free for the life time of the financing tenors if a customer avails new financing from the bank or enjoy special rates on new financing at a rate of 4.75 per cent for home finance and 4.99 per cent for auto & personal finance or they can avail a 3 months moratorium period for their new finance.

Customer can also transfer their salaries to the bank and enjoy 10 per cent cash back on the first salary credited during the campaign period.

TSC launches Covid-19 vaccination campaign for staff and families

MUSCAT: As part of its commitment to taking measures to prevent the spread of the virus, The Sultan Centre (TSC) launched a Covid-19 vaccination campaign for all staff members and their families in the various branches around Muscat.

The initiative comes as part of TSC's extensive preventative measures to maintain the public safety and reduce the spread of the virus. Mahmoud al Shaikh, Marketing Manager at TSC, said, "Everyone at TSC are all aware of the importance of getting vaccinated against Covid-19 and support measures in the Sultanate to protect the community during this difficult time. Vaccinating our employees is the latest initiative to maintain public safety."

He added, "We have managed to provide Covid-19 vaccination for over 300 employees and their families, we will continue our



campaign until we get all our staff members and their families vaccinated, while maintaining the necessary preventive measures as advised by the official authorities

in the Sultanate."

TSC has been a leader in the fight against Covid-19 by implementing a series of strict safety protocols at each centre.

Khedmah signs pact for access and recharge services

MUSCAT: Oman Investment & Finance Co (Khedmah), one of the leading investments and services company in Oman, has signed an agreement with Direct Software to provide one-touch access to many top-up and recharge services associated with world's top retailers, especially in the entertainment space.

The agreement was signed by Saud bin Ahmed al Siyabi, Chief Operating Officer of OIFC and Dr Ibrahim bin Abdullah al Rahbi, Chief Operating Officer of Direct Software.



Under the agreement, Khedmah will have the rights to

sell and recharge game, gift cards and digital subscriptions for many

retailers such as Netflix, Amazon, Microsoft Office, iTunes, Google Play, PlayStation, Xbox and many more services offered as part of the platform. These features can be availed through Khedmah smart phone application and the website.

Saud al Siyabi said: "We are delighted to have collaborated with Direct Software to enhance our popular digital payments platform - Khedmah. These efforts come as part of OIFC's constant strive to cement its leadership in the market through the Khedmah

app, which has become a household name in a short period of time. The company seeks to keep abreast with technological advancements and new trends by offering new innovative products and unparalleled services, to meet clients' evolving requirements and fulfil their aspirations, ultimately achieving our desired objectives."

"Over the previous period, the number of Khedmah app downloads surpassed half a million. This benchmark encourages us to further innovate and improve our digital

transformation methodology, which comes in line with the Sultanate's efforts towards instilling a digital-first culture with the community," he added. Commenting on this partnership,

Dr Ibrahim al Rahbi said: "We are proud of this partnership with OIFC and we aspire to increase the synergies between us. Through our services in the field of top-up and recharge, we aim to create a secure and an efficient platform that allows the consumers to benefit from all of our offerings at the push of a button."



Opec+ resumes oil talk, will try to reach agreement

LONDON: After failing last week, the 23 members of the Opec+ group of oil producers will try again to reach agreement on how much crude to put on the market.

Since May, the group has raised oil output little by little, after slashing it more than a year ago when the coronavirus pandemic crushed demand. The current proposal is to increase output each month from August to December by 400,000 barrels per day, providing oil markets with an additional two million bpd by the end of the year.

But it is the suggestion of extending the agreement on incremental increases until the end of 2022 that has caused a hitch. The hold-out is the United Arab Emirates, which on Sunday criticised that extension as unjust.

A video conference between Opec members and their 10 allies has been scheduled for 1300 GMT to try and resolve the impasse.

In April 2020, as the coronavirus pandemic took hold, Opec+ decided to withdraw 9.7 million bpd from the market and to gradually re-introduce it by the end of April 2022.

The strategy has worked fairly well, and the two leading oil contracts, for North Sea Brent and for West Texas Intermediate (WTI) have been bobbing at around \$75 a barrel, an increase of 50 per cent since the beginning of the year.

The last time oil prices were that high was in October 2018. But reintroduction has stalled several times because of



A 3D printed oil pump jack is seen in front of displayed stock graph and Opec logo in this illustration picture. — Reuters

In April 2020, as the coronavirus pandemic took hold, Opec+ decided to withdraw 9.7 million bpd from the market and to gradually re-introduce it by the end of April 2022.

developments in the Covid-19 crisis, and at present, the alliance is still not pumping 5.8 million bpd of the initial figure.

Consequently the April 2022 deadline now seems too close, and some members want to extend the reintroduction period until December 2022 — which is what Abu Dhabi objects to.

The United Arab Emirates is prepared to extend the agreement if necessary, its Energy Minister

Suhail Mohamed al Mazrouei told the WAM news agency. But it wants the reference output levels raised to ensure they are fair.

The UAE's level, established in October 2018, is 3.17 million bpd, well below its effective potential output level of 3.8 million in April 2020, just before the sharp output cuts took effect. It was this question that caused last week's Opec talks to break down.

The meetings, more used to big hitters Russia and Saudi Arabia setting the agenda, were confronted with the UAE's refusal to toe the line.

"What was expected to be a relatively peaceful Opec+ meeting has become a very lengthy and uncertain one," said commodity analysts Kpler. Analyst Helima Croft, of RBC Capital Markets, went further.

"The prospect of a no-deal outcome — as well as a UAE Opec exit — has risen materially, even if it has not yet fully entered into firm base-case territory," she wrote.

"The White House may need to

Oil edges up as investors, traders await Opec+ talks

TOKYO: Oil prices were slightly up on Monday with investors and traders awaiting crucial talks by Opec+ following disagreement over output within the group that could lead to major producers pumping up volumes to grab market share.

Brent crude was up 15 cents, or 0.2 per cent, at \$76.32 a barrel by 0558 GMT, after slipping 1 cent last week, the first weekly decline in six. US oil gained 12 cents, or 0.5 per cent, to \$75.28 a barrel, having risen 1.5 per cent last week, the sixth consecutive week of gains for the contract.

The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (Opec) and its allies, known as Opec+, voted on Friday to increase production by about 2 million barrels a day from August to December 2021 and to extend the remaining output cuts to the end of 2022, but objections from the United Arab Emirates (UAE)



A petrol attendant prepares to refuel a car in Rome. — Reuters

prevented an agreement.

It was a rare public disagreement between members of the group, with national interests increasingly diverging, which is impacting Opec+ policy as oil users want more crude as their economies recover from the Covid-19 pandemic.

"Failing to come to a deal may provide some brief upside to the market," ING Economics said in a note. "However, realistically it could also signal the beginning of the end for the broader deal, and so the risk that members start to increase output," ING said.

— Reuters

work the phones over the weekend to help bridge the gap and prevent a breakdown scenario on Monday that could send prices spiralling higher."

But the Opec alliance is used

to disputes between its members. At the beginning of the year it managed to negotiate its way through a brief, but intense spat between Russia and Saudi Arabia over oil prices. — AFP

China extends probe into US-listed tech firms

BEIJING: Beijing on Monday widened its crackdown on its embattled technology sector on Monday by announcing probes into two more US-listed Chinese companies, a day after banning ride-hailing giant Didi Chuxing from app stores in the wake of its huge New York initial public offering.

The country's major Internet firms wield massive influence among its army of consumers, but have in recent months had their wings clipped in a regulatory crackdown that has scuppered listings and hit business as the government seeks to rein in their influence.

The latest targets are newly listed companies Full Truck Alliance — a merger between truck-hailing platforms Yunmanman and Huochebang — and Kanzhun, which owns online recruitment



A trader works during the IPO for Didi Global Inc on the New York Stock Exchange floor in New York City. — Reuters

platform Boss Zhipin.

"The overarching message here from regulators is, you need to have your house in order domestically before listing abroad," said Kendra Schaefer, at Trivium China.

The platforms have been told

to stop new user registrations during the investigation "to prevent security risks to national data, safeguard national security and protect public interest", the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) said.

Hours earlier, the watchdog

The platforms have been told to stop new user registrations during the investigation "to prevent security risks to national data, safeguard national security and protect public interest"

ordered the removal of Didi from app stores following a similar probe, which it said found the firm's user data collection and use in "serious violation" of regulations.

It also cited national security for the probe, in an unusual move against a domestic tech firm. However, there were no details on what the probe was about, nor when or where the claimed violations took place.

While it does not prevent

people from using Didi as existing users can still order rides for now, it throws a wrench in its growth plans after a bumper New York IPO last week raised \$4.4 billion, one of the biggest in the US over the past decade.

The ruling also comes at a time of heightened tensions between Beijing and Washington with the tech sector a key issue of disagreement.

Dubbed China's Uber, Didi was founded just nine years ago by former Alibaba executive Cheng Wei, and has gone on to dominate the country's ride-hailing market since it won a costly turf war against the US titan in 2016 and took over its local unit.

It now claims to have more than 15 million drivers and nearly 500 million users, while its services are available in 16 countries, including Russia and Australia. — AFP

Hackers demand \$70m to restore data in global cyberattack

WASHINGTON: Hackers suspected to be behind a mass extortion attack that affected hundreds of companies worldwide late on Sunday demanded \$70 million to restore the data they are holding ransom, according to a posting on a dark website.

The demand was posted on a blog typically used by the REvil cybercrime gang, a Russia-linked group that is counted among the cybercriminal world's most prolific extortionists.

The gang has an affiliate structure, but Allan Liska of cybersecurity firm Recorded Future said the message "almost certainly" came from REvil's core leadership.

— Reuters

SHORT TAKES

PARIS

Chip shortage driving French industry lower

The global shortage of semiconductors that has been plaguing the automobile industry is helping drive industrial production lower in France, data showed.

Manufacturing of motor vehicles fell by 7.9 per cent in May from the previous month "due to shortages of raw materials in the automotive industry", the national statistics agency INSEE said. That helped drag down overall industrial production by 0.3 per



cent during the month.

Coronavirus pandemic lockdowns caused a shift in consumer spending towards electronics and a spike in demand for the semiconductor chips that run them. — AFP

TOKYO

Japan's service sector activity contracts

Japan's services sector activity shrank for the 17th straight month in June as the coronavirus dampened demand at home and abroad, underscoring sluggish momentum for the world's third-largest economy.

The decline in the public and private services industry kept overall private-sector activity in contraction for a second month, in a sign the country's economic recovery struggles to pick up despite making progress with a coronavirus



vaccine rollout.

The final au Jibun Bank Japan Services Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) was at a seasonally adjusted 48.0, up from the prior month's final level of 46.5 and a 47.2 flash reading. — Reuters

SINGAPORE

Singapore economic revival stutters

Retail sales in Singapore fell sharply in May before the wider private sector stagnated in June, according to estimates released on Monday.

Official retail data showed a 6.8 per cent fall in May compared to April, while IHS Markit's latest Purchasing Managers' Index, which is based on a survey of around 400 Singapore-based companies, said there were "visible slowdowns of business activity" last month.

Driven by exports, the wealthy



city-state's gross domestic product expanded during the first quarter after a record annual contraction of 5.4 per cent last year, with the central bank last week saying 2021 growth could top 6 per cent. — dpa

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features



The spirit of togetherness

THE sixth virtual art exhibition 'Rangrez,' the artist group of Indian Social Club, saw four reputed Omani international artists participating alongside five Indian artists. About 45 paintings on display celebrated the spirit of togetherness. The artworks of each of the Omani artists were a rare visual treat with sensitive artist Soubam Priyananda leading its theme and curation.... **P20**

READ



ONE LAST STOP

BY CASEY MCQUISTON

It is a delightful speculative tale that follows August Landry, a somewhat cynical mystery lover who finds the ultimate puzzle in Jane, a punk-rock lesbian she keeps encountering on the subway. August was raised by her single mom, who was obsessed with the disappearance of her brother, August's uncle.

During moonlit nights, enjoy the Nana Folklore Art

WHAT IS THE purpose of songs in general? Why do people have to sing their emotions? Is it weird that the folklore songs in a community transfer the emotions of the people when the main purpose is to celebrate!! Well, this depends on the traditions and customs of the community. For example, In Dhofar, the folklore arts win a

special position in the country due to the mixture of languages in one song. The Dhofari people speak Arabic and some speak Shihri language. One of the rare folklore arts that are preserved till now is the Nana art. "Nana" has rules and principles. There are many poets who write this type and many composers who are inspired by the nature to cre-

ate its distinctive melodies. Nana expresses the various aspects of life. Said al Hakmani, a poet and singer of the Nana art says, "The art of nana is a melodious art, performed without any musical instruments. It can be performed individually or collectively. It is dazzling with its melodies that carry a deep meaning, although that the phrases are relatively short. The rural evening gatherings played an important role in preserving, developing and transmitting the art of "nana" to generations. These evenings have produced, throughout their history, a huge number of immortal poetic texts in the field of "nana" in addition to their active role in nourishing this art by increasing the number of poets and refining their talents.



The rural evenings in the old days are usually held after the rainy seasons when the land sprouts and nature blossoms, as well as in the moonlit nights and in weddings; specifically, on the night preceding the day of the wedding

feast, as well as on various public social occasions. At the present time, rural evenings had been given enough space in the festivals in the Sultanate, and they are held regularly as formal as any cultural evening.

HERITAGE



Around the world in seven months

OMANIS, SINCE ANCIENT times, are considered masters of the sea and in seafaring. Ancient civilisation “Majan” had connections and relations with other civilisations around the world and they used to travel for trading with other countries. This has built their strong sea navigation skills.

Today, seafaring has become one of the professions that many of Oman's youth had been considering. There are many marine companies that trust the skills of the Omani youth at sea, especially that some youth have learned from their ancestors all the requirements.

Naval engineer Majid Al Siyabi is one of the Omani youth who made his career path among the seas and oceans by joining the work as an officer in marine engineering onboard one of the giant oil tankers of the Oman Shipping Company. He made a number of cruises around the world for nearly seven months from the far west to the far east.

“In June 2018, my first trip in my career started when I joined the giant oil tanker “Saifah” from the port of “Long Beach” in California, USA, after I was accepted into the scholarship programme organised by the Oman Shipping Company and was able to pass exams and interviews in 2014”, al Siyabi said.

Al Siyabi went through a focused programme that included a university study in marine sciences, and practical training onboard one of the company's ships for approximately eight months each year for a period of three years. He also indicated that the training had a significant impact in refining technical skills and familiarising the one with the systems, engines, machines and howShipOperationandMaintenance System work. “I have obtained the requirements for the Marine Proficiency Certificate in Engineering from the British Maritime and Coast Guard Agency (MCA) in Newcastle, England”, he said.

The logistical field in the Sultanate is witnessing great development in all fields, including maritime transport. I am proud to join this field and my ambition is to be one of the pio-

neers in the field and its industry by working onboard the giant ships for the company”, he shared. he also stressed the importance of developing maritime transport, as it is one of the pillars of the movement of exports and imports for the commercial sector among the countries of the world.

Regarding the procedures for moving between the ports of the countries of the world, he explained: “It requires obtaining a maritime passport issued by the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology in the Sultanate after fulfilling the conditions for obtaining it. it is an important document that allows its holder to enter many countries and ports around the world without the need of the ordinary visas according to the agreements concluded in this field, in which the data of the ships and the duration of stay therein are recorded for the holder of this passport”.

“The longest cruise I've ever taken is a seven-month voyage that crossed a number of oceans. It was like a voyage around the world, from the far west to the far east. We crossed the Pacific, Atlantic and Indian Oceans. we started from the US state of California, then through the Pacific Ocean and then the



Atlantic to South America at the port of La Paloma in Uruguay, to far east Asia, passing through the Cape of Good Hope and the Indian Ocean to Singapore and China, then back to Africa in Angola and finally again in Singapore”.

“The sea waves are known for their intensity and harshness, whether in terms of the weather fluctuations or the duration of the sea voyage. You have also to get acquainted with the crew of the ship to provide a safe and productive work environment even if the nationalities and cultures differ”.

FOOD GUIDE

He Said, She Said

WITH BOSKY DUTIA AND SAMI AL SALMI

Boasting nearly 30,000 following across their social media accounts, the duo behind Oman Restaurant Review is sharing some of their feedbacks about the food scene in Oman.

Follow them on Instagram: @oman_restaurant_review

OMAN RESTAURANT REVIEW 1st AUGUST 2014

A journey to the motherland



African cuisine is as diverse as the many cultures that exist on the continent, and the cuisine reflects this opulent multiplicity with a full-bodied flavour like no other. Known for its delectable Moorish taste, rich textures and surprisingly healthy fruit and vegetable bases, African food is a never-ending wonder: Our hunt for a variety of these essences led us to Savanna BBQ, a restaurant tucked away in a line of others at the Waterfront in Shatti Al Qurum. This place serves up a choice of African fusion food, grills, and delectable salads. Between us, we ordered 2 appetisers, 2 mains and a dessert to finish a wonderful night.

HE SAID: Mix Samboosa (Shuwa & veggie) served with green coconut chutney, a very well-prepared starter, don't miss the chutney as it takes those Samboosas to another level of awesomeness.

SHE SAID: While the Samboosa was as perfect as it gets, we needed something light to balance the heaviness of it. The steak salad - a light, refreshing, and tangy salad that contains perfectly grilled succulent pieces of meat with sun-dried tomatoes, feta cheese on a bed of crisp, sprightly veggies. The dressing rounded this salad perfectly making it a treat for all senses.



HE SAID: The Peri-Peri prawns - The creamy coconut rice served with the prawns was the star of the dish as it was cooked to perfection while the peri-peri shrimp lacked flavour. I think there is room for the prawns to be better. The BBQ chicken was soft and juicy though it was burnt from the outside, the Mahrage and Chappati were delightful.

SHE SAID: While the coconut rice was to die for, I picked the Mahrage with 1/2 BBQ chicken and Chappati and while my choice was wonderful, my chicken was burnt - when I asked them to replace it, they scraped the burnt bits off. The flavours however were on point. A summary marinade of lemon and herbs, the chicken was soft and appetising. The Mahrage (kidney beans) were cooked in a tomato-onion base that was extraordinary. All this served with soft Chappattis.

HE SAID: The hot date pudding was a balanced dessert, neither too sweet nor too dense.

SHE SAID: The hot date pudding was an excellent choice. This warm, buttery, and soft pudding were everything it should be. It certainly felt like a hot date! Kudos to the team for creating perfection - at least for me.

WE SAID: Service was standard, staff was friendly. We were rather disappointed with the chicken scraping stunt but overall, we had a nice experience. There is an abundance of places that do great African food at a fraction of the cost. Would we go back? Maybe for the samboosa and the coconut rice!



OVERALL RATING:
Ambience: 4/5
Taste of food: 3.5/5
Presentation: 4/5
Service: 4/5
Value for money: 3/5

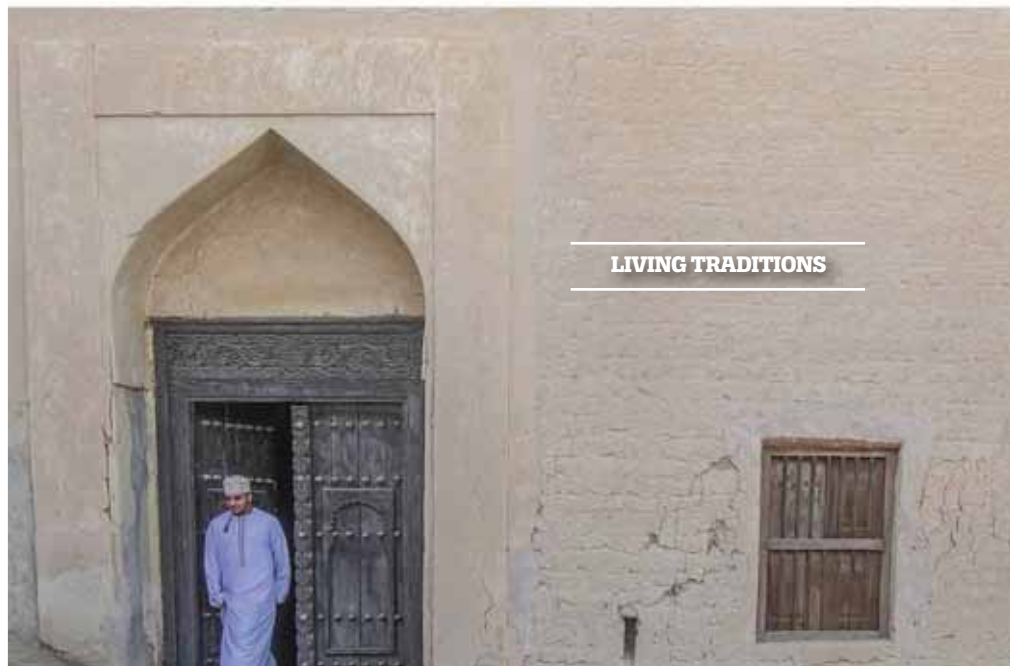


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CULTURE



From kite-running to breakdancing, Afghan pastimes again under threat

THE TALIBAN OUTLAWED dozens of seemingly innocuous activities and pastimes in Afghanistan during their 1996-2001 rule — including kite flying, TV soap operas, pigeon racing, fancy haircuts and even playing music.

These have made a comeback in the years since, but fears are growing they will be banned again if the hardline Taliban return to power.

The insurgents have made enormous military and territorial gains since US troops began their final withdrawal in May, and their leaders say they want Afghanistan to return to being an Islamic emirate ruled by religious elders.

AFP looks at some of the activities the Taliban banned, and the fears of those now taking part in them.

The musician

Sayed Mohammad makes a living as a professional musician playing the jupani, a traditional Central Asian stringed instrument he first picked up as a boy.

He still remembers the evening two decades ago when the Taliban broke into a house where he and his friends were playing music and singing songs.

According to the Taliban's strict interpretation of Islam, only the human voice should produce music

— and only in praise of God.

"I was young, so I was beaten less than my friends", said Mohammad, now 40 and a resident of the former insurgent bastion of Kandahar.

"I was still unable to stand for three days", he added.

He was lucky, he said, describing how on another occasion the Taliban cut off the fingers of one of his friends for playing the jupani.

When the insurgents were ousted, Mohammad celebrated by attending a concert.

"When the music played, I felt a tremor passing through my body out of sheer joy", he said.

"Joy that our country was free and that people were now free to start a new life."

Since then, many Afghans like Mohammad have become professional musicians and singers.

"There is no pleasure in life if we live in fear", the father of eight told AFP. He is determined to pursue his passion — even if the Taliban return to power.

"It's like an addiction. Even if they cut our fingers we will still play music."

THE MAKEUP ARTIST

In a small shop in the Afghan capital Kabul, beautician Farida transforms a shy young Afghan

woman into a radiant bride-to-be.

Oversized false eyelashes are delicately glued on, followed by the application of a rich carmine-red lipstick. Next comes eyeshadow, before beige and ochre blush is delicately brushed on.

Despite its bustling popularity, Farida's beauty parlour is one of hundreds across the country that face an uncertain future.

The Taliban severely restricted the movement and activities of women and girls during their rule, and banned beauty parlours from operating in public.

"If they come back, we'll never have the freedom we have now", said 27-year-old Farida, who asked not to be further identified.

"They don't want women working."

Farida's shop is busiest on Thursday and Friday — the weekend in Afghanistan, when hundreds gather for huge wedding ceremonies.

Out of the sight of men, the women come to be pampered for a few hours.

Beauty comes at a price, however. At Farida's salon, one of Kabul's most popular, a full treatment package can cost up to \$300.

"I think the Taliban will force us to leave when they come", Farida

said, adding she would love to move to Canada given a chance.

THE KITE-MAKER

In a bustling Kabul market shop, surrounded by hundreds of colourful kites of all sizes, Zelgai says he is determined not to give up the business his family has run for generations — and he has flown close to the wind before.

The Taliban outlawed kite flying on the grounds it distracted young men from praying and other religious activities, but Zelgai and his family kept operating.

"Of course, we did it in secret", the 59-year-old told AFP at his shop in the capital's Shor bazaar.

His colourful store has hundreds of fragile ready-made kites for sale, and he also takes orders for elaborate custom designs.

And business has soared in the years since the Taliban were ousted.

"This is freedom... we are able to showcase and sell our kites openly without any fear", Zelgai said.

The much-loved national pastime earned a reputation abroad after Afghan author Khaled Hosseini's 2003 bestselling novel "The Kite Runner" was turned into a film.

Today, when the wind is right, thousands of kites can be seen fluttering in Afghanistan's clear blue skies.

Some are engaged in fights, with the pilots trying to outwit each other with their flying skills and some using glass-encrusted twine to cut the strings of their opponents.

"People would suffer if it is banned. Thousands of families survive on this", Zelgai said.

THE BREAKDANCER

The day Manizha Talash took up breakdancing she knew she would become a target for the Taliban.

Talash is the only female member of a group of mostly Hazara boys who practice breakdancing in Kabul — usually in secret.

The 18-year-old has the support of her mother, who has several jobs to support the family after her husband went missing a few years ago.

But for Talash, who dreams of representing Afghanistan at the Olympics, the risks of continuing are multiple.

Not only is she a girl taking part in a forbidden activity, she is also a member of the Hazara community, considered heretical by some Muslim radicals.

"If the Taliban have not changed and they lock women at homes and trample their rights, then life would be meaningless for me and for millions of other women of Afghanistan", said Talash.

Despite the risks — the troupe was forced to switch practice venues after receiving death threats — she is determined to pursue her passion.

There have been women pioneers in many fields in Afghanistan, and Talash now sees herself as one of them.

"We had no women police officers before; now you see them everywhere", she said, dressed in a t-shirt, cap and black leggings — an outfit that would be anathema to the Taliban.

"I took the risk of becoming a target. I have fear in my heart but I won't give up." — **AFP**

HUMAN INTEREST

Sylvia Plath's love letters to Ted Hughes up for sale



A TROVE OF love letters that explore American poet Sylvia Plath's passion for her British husband, fellow poet Ted Hughes, are up for auction at Sotheby's, along with their wedding rings, family recipes and photo albums.

Plath, whose haunting poems turned the demons of her trauma into some of the most unsettling verses of modern English, killed herself in 1963 aged 30 by putting her head in a gas oven. Her young children were asleep in the flat but she had sealed their room against the gas. They were unharmed.

Plath and Hughes married in 1956 and their relationship was as tumultuous as it was passionate. Her letters to Hughes explore her agony of separation from him while she was studying at Cambridge.

"My flesh is colder than wet sod", Plath wrote. "Do you know that you have the most delicious quirked lovely mouth and your eyes crink up and you are all warm and smooth and elegantly muscled and long-striding and my god I go mad when I let myself think of you."

"Darling, you're the wildest loveliest piece of flesh walking. If little girls scream, it is only in a king of Bacchic ecstasy; the police are just jealous and want to convict such exceptional Samsonian excellence. I love you so."

The letters will be sold at Sotheby's on July 9-21. The sale comprises 55 lots and comes directly from the collection of Sylvia's daughter, Frieda Hughes.

The sale also includes a deck of Tarot cards given to Plath by Hughes for her birthday and a striking ink portrait drawn by Plath during the couple's honeymoon in Benidorm.

Hughes died in 1998. — **Reuters**



The spirit of togetherness

By Liju Cherian
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Four reputed Omani international artists along with five Indian artists participated in the sixth virtual art exhibition 'Rangrez', the artist group of Indian Social Club (ISC) in the Sultanate. The exhibition celebrated the spirit of togetherness which saw 45 paintings on display. The art works of each of the Omani artists were a rare visual treat.

Soubam Priyananda did the theme and the curation while his eponymous art work called 'Hues of Harmony' went on display. He is a very sensitive artist who creates very serene paintings of nature.

Says Soubam, "My sincere thanks to 'Rangrez' for giving me an opportunity to curate the show. As it is evident, my source of inspiration come from natural world and my love for the art is biased towards the works of Van Gogh, John Constable, Thomas Cole, David Hockney, Senaka Senanayake, Jaganath Panda, Oinam Dilip, Sandeep Jigdung and others. Encountering the works of these artists always gives me a sense of direction in life. Being said, the works of Mark Rothko, F N Souza, S H Raza, Jackson Pollock, Hassan Meer, Alia al Farsi also increase my serotonin levels."

The profile and works of the Omani and Indian artists are:

Abdullah al Hunaini: I work predominantly in acrylics, although I also use oil, water colours, and more recently, mixed media. My realistic and abstract compositions are in a detailed classical style. Most of my work features the country's natural beauty, traditions, culture and life of its people.

Saleem Sakhi: The coexistence between myself and the environment has become a source of creativity and inspiration in an abstractive style. I was deeply influenced by the resettlement project of the Arabian Oryx in the Sultanate to safeguard and protect them from extinction. That project has become, for me personally, an obsessive issue prompting and inspiring me to create forms of Arabian Oryx paintings and sculptures as an attempt to remove them from their barren environment to a world full of life and vitality.

Saud al Hunaini: My art reflects the philosophy of my life. My focus is mainly on themes related to humanity, freedom and peace. The still life and landscape paintings reflect my love for Oman's heritage and culture. I always try to bring out compositional depth and layers of mood revealing hidden meanings.

Anwar Sonya: I am inspired by my homeland and the charming Dhofar Governorate, where the Bedouin women project an exceptional meaning of real beauty. Most of my works have the main theme of Omani heritage, culture which reflects authenticity and is expressed through a contemporary artistic vision.

Sheffy Tattarath: Lost in the hues of

harmony like historian Thomas Carlyle's quote, "To us also, through every star, through every blade of grass, is not God made visible if we will open our minds and our eyes." I wish I were a child so that I can see, love nature without ego and can be lost in those hues of the harmony of nature.

Rashmi Dauria: My painting, 'Arabian Oryx', is a creature of rare, majestic beauty, native to the Great Arabian Desert. The oryx is capable of living in hot and arid conditions and survives for weeks without water. They are able to detect rainfall from a distance and follow the direction of fresh plant growth. Hence my work is titled 'Born Free 2.'

Shalini Varma: It is enjoyable to experiment with random colour palettes, harmonic colour combinations that are both soothing and appealing to the eye in my work titled 'Chasing the Sun.' Nature is amazing, especially at dawn and dusk, when light and colour saturate and mix in complete harmony. The sunset hues are beautiful, unique, and calming as the sun winds down. Mesmerised by the hues of the harmony and the calming effect of this hour, I used a triad colour combination to convey the synchronisation of nature and life for the viewer to absorb the beauty of the moment.

Kumud: My painting titled 'Yellow Field' portrays a beautiful yellow mustard field. Animals are in their element, coexisting in harmony with nature.

Shalini Kartik: I wanted to depict the vibrant colours of spring and nature along with the unique Batik fabric in my mixed media work titled 'A Walk in Bloom.' The inspiration for my work came from my trip to Bali which was filled with beautiful memories of nature and simplicity of the Balinese lifestyle. I have tried to portray these aspects in my painting.

