

In brief

MUSCAT



REGULAR SERVICE OF MUSCAT-SHANNAH FROM TODAY

Mwasalat said that Route 51 (Muscat-Shannah) will resume the regular schedules, starting from November 29. The company had earlier announced the timings for the same route between November 22 and 28, 2020. <https://mwasalat.om/en-us/Services/Intercity-Outside-Muscat>

RAFO CARRIES OUT MEDICAL EVACUATION



An aircraft belonging to the Royal Air Force of Oman (Rafo) carried out medical evacuation for a five-year-old girl suffering from a critical health condition from Masirah Hospital in South Al Sharqiyah Governorate to Khoula Hospital in Muscat Governorate to receive medical care. The operation comes within the context of humanitarian services provided by the Sultan's Armed Forces and the Ministry of Defence to citizens and residents across the Sultanate.

Sultanate participates in OIC foreign minister's council meet

NIAMEY: The Sultanate is taking part in the 47th session of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) held in the capital of the Republic of Niger, Niamey. The Sultanate's delegation is headed by Shaikh Ambassador Salim bin Suhail al Mashani, Head of International Organizations Department at the Foreign Ministry. President Mahamadou Issoufou of Niger received the heads of delegations participating in the session. The ambassador conveyed the greetings and wishes of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to the president and the friendly people of Niger. The president of Niger asked the ambassador to convey his greetings and best wishes to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik wishing the Omani people more progress and prosperity. Held under the theme "United



against Terrorism for Peace and Development", the session discusses several topics and issues of concern to the Muslim world including the Palestinian cause, the fight against violence, extremism and terrorism, defamation of religions and dialogue between civilisations, cultures and religions. During the session, the council of foreign ministers discussed a number of political, humanitarian, economic, cultural and social issues and other topics relating to science, technology and media. — ONA

MCIIP launches integrated digital marketing platform

MUSCAT: Asila bint Salim al Samsamiyah, Under-Secretary for Investment Promotion of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion recently launched the digital platform markeetex, in coincidence with the 50th National Day. Markeetex is the first integrated digital marketing platform specialising in the provision of electronic commerce and logistics. The platform displays a wide range of products as well as after-sale and delivery services inside and outside the Sultanate. Asila bint Salim al Samsamiyah, Under-Secretary for Investment Promotion of the Ministry

of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, said that the launch of the electronic platform markeetex comes as part of the 'Made in Oman' campaign and is aimed at promoting local products which contributes to supporting the national economy. She added that the ministry targets to place the Sultanate on the electronic platform map from local to global digital platforms. In this initiative markeetex has introduced a special section for the Omani products to help entrepreneurs to display their products and enable consumers to identify local products especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, she said. It is noteworthy that the 'Made in Oman' campaign is organised by the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion in collaboration with Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI), Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn), Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority, the Consumer Protection Authority. The campaign is aimed at promoting Omani products and encouraging local and international consumers to buy Oman products.



CAMPAIGN AT DEEP SEA CLEANING



A team comprising of 27 diving volunteers from the Wilayat of Qurayat have carried out a campaign aimed at cleaning the deep sea from marine pollutants such as plastic bags and fishing nets. The campaign began in April, 2019 and has so far managed to extract nearly four tonnes of marine pollutants from the deep sea.

New school opens in Musandam



TEXT AND PICTURE BY
AHMED BIN KHALIFA AL SHUHI

As part of the National Day celebrations, the directorate of education in Musandam Governorate celebrated the opening of a new school in Al Huwainiyah area. Constructed at a cost of RO 2.5 million, the new school will serve male and female students of grades 1 to 12 who reside in maritime areas and face difficulty commuting long

distances to access schools in Khasab. The new school boasts all the necessary facilities and equipment that meet the requirements of a modern integrated school. The Khour Sham School has 14 classrooms, an educational resources centre, an IT lab, a chemistry lab, a multi-purpose hall, a 20-room female teachers' accommodation among others. Many of the students access the new school on small boats.

Hotels report decent occupancy during holidays

VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

The long weekend due to National Day holidays gave a small boost to the hospitality sector in the country.

Despite the closure of beaches and public parks as part of COVID-19 restrictions, hotels in Oman reported decent occupancy that helped the sector to minimise the effects of lockdown that virtually crippled this crucial industry.

Omran Group, the national tourism development company, has been running a 'WithinOman' campaign offering massive discounts at some of its properties which helped the hotels to reclaim some of the lost ground.

Talking to the *Observer*, hotels managers said most of

Most of the guests were aware of the rules and willingly complied with instructions as per the MoH guidelines

the properties recorded decent occupancy as people were looking for breaks from home.

"As per the Ministry of Health (MoH) guidelines, there were some restrictions especially with the use of some facilities. Most of the guests were aware of the rules and willingly complied with instructions," said a supervisor at one of the hotels in Jabal Al Akhdhar.

Hotel rates were slightly more than the average during this summer due to occupancy and some properties were not fully



functional due to shortage of staff. "Keeping low level of occupancy most of our staff have been sent on

leave," said an official at one of the Crowne Plaza properties. Sur, Ras Al Jinz and Masirah

were among the favourites this time for visitors from Muscat. Masirah, Ras Al Jinz and Al

Ashkara had seen full occupancy for the weekend which was clubbed with the 2-day National Day holidays, said the cluster manager for these properties.

"With beach and most public places closed to avoid gathering, hotels with facilities such as swimming pools were the only available option," said Moshin Khamis who spent two days with his family in Masirah.

With visa rules for tourists expected to be eased by the new year, travel and tourism industry will hopefully get better.

The total revenue of Omani hotels in the three-to-five-star category fell by 42.2 per cent in the first four months of the year to RO 55.18 million, compared to the same period in 2019, as the impact of the coronavirus took hold.

NATIONAL DAY HORSE RACING HELD IN BARKA



BARKA: *Haboub Muscat*, a horse led by Ahmed bin Saeed al Saeedi and coach Saeed bin Khamis al Hinai and owner Hala al Turki, was crowned champion at the 50th National Day Cup of Endurance for a distance of 100 km organised by the Oman Equestrian Federation.

The race was held in Al Wahra region of Barka and saw participa-

tion of 64 horses. The competition included two qualifying races for a distance of 80 km and 40 km. The race was attended by Munther bin Saif al Busaidy, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Omani Equestrian Federation and members of the Board of Directors, where the new village was established with funding from Oman LNG. — ONA



India to issue emergency certificates for free

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, NOV 28

Keeping in mind the financial hardships faced by the Indian citizens in Oman who wish to avail expat exit scheme, the Government of India has approved issue of Emergency Certificates (EC) free of charge for those who do not possess a valid passport.

EC application fee, ICWF charges and BLS service fee will be waived off for those applicants who do not have means to pay these fees.

If any applicant so desire, they can avail of form filling, photograph preparation and SMS services from BLS (optional) at a total cost not exceeding RO 2.

Indian citizens who wish to avail this facility may please follow the guidelines given below:

Register in MoL portal as per the guidelines issued by MoL

and Embassy of India, after getting approval from MoL, the individual can approach BLS main office in Muscat or its collection centres (Global Money Exchange offices in Salalah, Nizwa, Duqm, Sur, Suhar, Ibri, Buraimi, Shinas and Khasab) during the normal working hours to apply for Emergency Certificate with an Undertaking (Annexure-A), Original expired/damaged/Lost passport/EC or its copy and two latest passport size photographs.

In order to avoid crowding at the collection centres in the nine locations mentioned above, the social workers are hereby authorised to submit the applications in bulk at the collection enter after getting the signatures of the individuals verified by honorary consular agents of that area.

Emergency Certificate will be issued in 3-4 working days depending on the number of applications.

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THE WILAYAT IS PUNCTUATED BY A STRING OF WADIS WITH LUSH DATE ORCHARDS GROWING ALONG THEIR BANKS OFFERING A RELAXED ATMOSPHERE

Dhank

Odd topography and tourist attractions

The Wilayat of Dhank is located in the centre of Al Dhahirah Governorate. The wilayat takes the name 'Dhank' from its odd topographic features with mountains surrounding all sides.

It borders the wilayats of Al Buraimi on the northwest, Ibri on the southwest and Yanqul on the east.

The wilayat consists of many villages such as Al Shukur, Al Azizi, Al Mathaa, Al Alayah, Al Khabib, Fida, Dout and Al Wahasha.

Dhank is blessed with many wadis, which are among the most important tourist destinations in the wilayat.

Wadi Al Fateh, notable among the wadis, is characterised by mountainous features like grottoes and rock formations, besides castles and forts built on the banks of the wadi.

Adding beauty to the spot, the wilayat is punctuated by a string of wadis with lush date orchards growing along their banks. In fact, these wadis offer a relaxed atmosphere to visitors, enabling them to break the monotony of routine and get away from the strenuous city life.

Wadi Qumeirah is another famous wadi in Dhank located 70 km away from the centre of the wilayat.

The area includes an ancient cemetery dating back to pre-Islamic era, in addition to an ancient copper mine, a pathway made by inhabitants between farms, and the Qumeirah village.

Dhank is known for its Bani Saedaa spring water, through which water supply is maintained for long periods, especially during the rainy season.

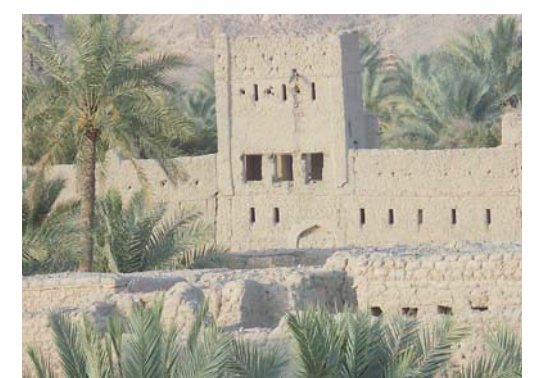
As regards the historical landmarks, Almunaikh castle is one of the many such heritage buildings located in Dhank.

It has been restored by the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism.

The wilayat is known for some traditional crafts such as tanning leather, extracting rose water and breeding honey bees.

The residents of Dhank also practise many traditional occupations and professions as part of their daily life, which include collecting woods, farming and livestock rearing.

Social customs and traditions are an integral part of the people's life in Dhank, especially those related to wedding.





UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi speaks during a press conference at Um Raquba camp for Ethiopian refugees in Sudan's eastern Gedaref province, on Saturday. — AFP

UN says Sudan needs \$150m to help Ethiopian refugees

UM RAQUBA: Sudan needs \$150 million in aid to cope with the flood of Ethiopian refugees crossing its border from conflict-stricken Tigray, the UN refugee agency chief said on Saturday during a visit to a camp.

The Tigray conflict broke out on November 4 between Ethiopia's federal forces and leaders of the region's ruling party.

Sudan has since hosted more than 43,000 Ethiopian refugees fleeing from the intense fighting into one of its most impoverished regions.

"Sudan needs \$150 million

for six months to provide these refugees water, shelter and health services", said UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Filippo Grandi at Um Raquba camp, some 80 kilometres from the border.

Grandi called on "donors to provide Sudan with these resources as soon as they can".

Between 500 and 600 refugees are still crossing the border each day. Sudan has sought to provide help to accommodate the mass refugee influx as it struggles with its own deep economic crisis.

— AFP

TEHRAN: Iran's President Hassan Rouhani on Saturday accused Israel of acting as a "mercenary" for the United States and seeking to create chaos, vowing Tehran would avenge the assassination of a top Iranian nuclear scientist.

Islamic Republic's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei called for the perpetrators to be punished for Friday's killing, while Rouhani stressed the country would seek its revenge in "due time" and not be rushed into a "trap".

Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, who was dubbed by Israel the "father of Iran's nuclear programme", died after being seriously wounded when assailants targeted his car and engaged in a gunfight with his bodyguards outside the capital Tehran on Friday, according to Iran's defence ministry.

The assassination comes less than two months before US President-elect Joe Biden is due to take office, after a tumultuous four years of hawkish US foreign policy in the Middle East under President Donald Trump.

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei called for the perpetrators to be punished for Friday's killing, while Rouhani stressed the country would seek its revenge in "due time" and not be rushed into a "trap"

"They are thinking of creating chaos, but they should know that we have read their hands and they will not succeed", Iran's president said in televised remarks.

He pinned the blame for the killing on "the wicked hands of the global arrogance, with the usurper Zionist regime as the mercenary".

Iran generally uses the term "global arrogance" to refer to the United States.

Trump unilaterally withdrew in 2018 from a multilateral nuclear deal with the Islamic republic,



Prominent scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh is seen in Iran, in this undated photo. — Reuters

which sought to contain its atomic ambitions, and has re-imposed crippling sanctions. But Biden has signalled his administration may be prepared to rejoin the accord.

"This barbaric assassination shows that our enemies are in stressful weeks, during which they feel... their pressure declining, the global situation changing", the Iranian president added.

"The nation of Iran is smarter than to fall in the trap of the conspiracy set by the Zionists", Rou-

hani said in televised remarks.

The United States slapped sanctions on Fakhrizadeh in 2008 for "activities and transactions that contributed to the development of Iran's nuclear programme", and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu once described him as the father of Iran's nuclear weapons programme.

Iran has repeatedly denied seeking to develop nuclear weapons.

The *New York Times* said an American official and two other intelligence officials confirmed Israel was behind the attack, without giving further details.

"Iran's enemies should know, that the people of Iran and officials are braver than to leave this criminal act unanswered", Rouhani added, talking at Iran's weekly COVID-19 task force meeting.

"In due time, they will answer for this crime."

Former CIA director John Brennan warned on Friday that the assassination risked sparking a wider conflagration in the Middle East. — AFP

In Syria, Yarmuk residents plan return to war-torn Palestinian camp

YARMUK, Syria: When Syrian authorities said they would allow returns to the war-ravaged Yarmuk camp for Palestinian refugees in southern Damascus, Issa al Loubani rushed to sign up and quickly started repairing his home.

Hundreds of former residents have already requested permission to go back to the settlement, home to 160,000 Palestinian refugees and some Syrian families before the conflict broke out in 2011.

More than 400 families have returned in the last few months because they cannot afford to rent homes elsewhere after years of displacement, the United Nations said in early November.

Loubani, who first left in 2012, is determined to join their ranks even if the windows of his wrecked apartment are still covered with plastic sheeting.

"Our flat needs major work, but it's better than paying rent", said Loubani, who has been living in a Damascus apartment with his wife and daughter.



Issa al Loubani, a 48-year-old Palestinian refugee, walks with his wife and daughter in a street in the Palestinian Yarmuk camp, on the southern outskirts of Damascus. — AFP

"We still need electricity, running water, and to clear rubble from the streets" before moving back in, the 48-year-old Palestinian refugee said from Yarmuk.

Syrian government and allied

forces retook the camp in 2018 from the IS group.

But two years on, reconstruction has been slow and the scars of war remain visible.

The walls of Loubani's building are pockmarked with bullet holes.

Neighbouring blocks have had their facades blown off or seen their balconies cave.

Some structures have collapsed entirely following years of bombardment and heavy fighting. — AFP

UN: Hundreds of Syrians exit Lebanese town over tensions

TRIPOLI, Lebanon: At least 270 Syrian families have left a north Lebanon town, as hostility towards them mounted over a murder allegedly committed by a Syrian national, the UN refugee agency said on Friday.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees condemned "collective reprisals against Syrians in the town", of Bsharre, saying many of the families fled in fear without taking their belongings.

"Collective punishment... for a whole community for an incident involving one individual is unacceptable," a UNHCR spokesperson said in a statement.

Many of those who fled the town said they were chased out by Bsharre residents after a Syrian on Monday was accused of shooting dead a Lebanese resident, sparking widespread tension and hostility.

Lebanon's official National News Agency reported forced evictions of Syrians in the wake of the murder, but Bsharre's mayor denied that the Syrians had left out of fear.

A correspondent in Tripoli saw dozens of Syrian families



Syrian refugees, who have been forcibly evicted from the Lebanese northern town of Bsharre, find refuge in Tripoli on Saturday. — AFP

gathering outside a UNHCR building in the northern city.

A group of young men in Bsharre "assaulted us, threatened us and started a fire" in the house, Umm Khaled, a 31-year-old Syrian mother of five said.

"We picked up our children and ran away to Tripoli", located more than 40 kilometres east, she said.

Yassin Hassan, a 30-year-old Syrian who had lived in Bsharre for years, said he was beaten by a group of men.

"We ran away... without taking anything from our homes", he said. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

SANAA

13 dead in Yemen clashes: Military sources

Thirteen fighters were killed in an exchange of artillery fire between pro-government forces and separatists in the southern province of Abyan, military sources said on Saturday. The Southern Transitional Council lost eight men, including two officers and six others were wounded late on Friday in the latest outbreak of violence between the nominal allies in Yemen's civil war, an STC source said.

A military source on the Yemeni government side said that



five fighters from its ranks were among the dead.

The STC is a separatist organisation that wants the south to secede from the rest of the country. — AFP

TEHRAN

Iran ministry reports slowing of virus cases

Iran's Health Ministry on Saturday reported a slowdown in coronavirus infections, saying that 89 of 160 cities were out of the designated high risk category. "I thank our dear people for taking the appropriate precautions and tolerating the restrictions", Deputy Health Minister Alireza Raisi said on state TV, adding that public adherence was 90 per cent. Still, the government on Saturday announced the closure of most non-essential government offices in an effort



to stem the spread of the virus.

A health ministry spokeswoman reported 13,402 new coronavirus cases on Saturday, pushing the national tally to 935,799 in the Middle East's worst-hit country. — Reuters

NASIRIYAH

Toll rises in clashes among Iraq rival protesters

The toll from clashes among rival protesters in Iraq's southern hot spot of Nasiriyah rose to six dead, medics said on Saturday, as other cities imposed security measures.

Violence erupted on Friday between the dwindling members of the October 2019 anti-government protest movement and supporters of populist cleric Moqtada Sadr, who had called on his followers to hit the streets in a show of force.

In the southern city of Nasiriyah, anti-government activ-



ists accused Sadrists of shooting at them and torching their tents in their main gathering place of Habboubi Square. Clashes continued into the night, with medics reporting a total of six dead by Saturday. — AFP

In brief

■ JAKARTA

INDONESIA POLICE
HUNT MILITANTS
AFTER 4 KILLED

Indonesian police were searching on Saturday for suspected militants accused of killing four people of a minority community, beheading one and burning down their homes. Ten militants linked to a “terrorist” group beheaded one victim and slit the throats of the others on the island of Sulawesi on Friday, national police spokesman Awi Setiyono quoted a witness as saying.

Speaking to the news channel Metro TV, Awi did not explain the alleged attackers’ motivation. He did not respond to Reuters requests for comment. Indonesia has grappled with intermittent militant attacks recently. “This attack is another serious escalation against the minority in Indonesia,” Human Rights Watch researcher Andreas Harsono said. — **Reuters**

■ BANGKOK

THAI PROTESTERS MOVE
TO BANGKOK SUBURBS

Thai anti-government protesters demonstrated in Bangkok’s outskirts on Saturday with a duck parade and speeches demanding the removal of Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, a new constitution and reforms to the monarchy.

Protests have been stepped up this week despite threats by Prayuth, a former junta ruler, to use all available laws against protesters who break them and charges of insulting the monarchy against several protest leaders. Hundreds of people gathered in both Nonthaburi and Bang Na, to the northwest and southeast of Bangkok respectively. — **Reuters**

■ SHANGHAI

CHINA REPORTS SIX NEW
COVID-19 CASES

China on Saturday reported six new coronavirus cases in the mainland for November 27, compared with five cases a day earlier, the health authority said. All of the new infections were imported cases, the National Health Commission said in a statement. There were no new deaths.

China also reported four new asymptomatic patients, compared with eight a day earlier. As of November 27, mainland China had a total of 86,501 confirmed coronavirus cases, it said. China’s death toll from the coronavirus remained unchanged at 4,634. — **Reuters**

Australia says 13 soldiers face
dismissal after Afghan report

SYDNEY: Australia has told 13 special forces soldiers they face dismissal in relation to a report on alleged unlawful killings in Afghanistan, the head of the country’s army said on Friday. An independent report published last week in redacted form said there was evidence that 39 unarmed Afghan prisoners and civilians were killed by 19 Australian soldiers.

None of the 19 soldiers were identified in the report, which was written by a state judge appointed by the inspector-general of defence. The 19 current and former soldiers have been referred for possible prosecution.

Under mounting pressure, Lieutenant General Rick Burr, the head of the Australian army, said 13 current soldiers have been issued with notices that could eventually lead to their termination.

Burr did not identify any of the 13 soldiers, but said they were not part of the 19 current and former soldiers who face possible criminal charges. He said the 13 soldiers that face dismissal have two



Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan Local Police (ALP) forces patrol during a cleaning operation in Pashtun Zarghun district of Herat province on Saturday. — **AFP**

weeks to respond to the notice.

“At this time, 13 individuals have been issued administrative action notices in relation to the Afghanistan inquiry,” Burr told reporters in Canberra.

“We are all committed to learn-

ing from the inquiry and emerging from this a stronger, more capable and effective army.” Australia’s most senior military official apologised to Afghanistan last week after the release of the report. The report into the con-

duct of special forces personnel in Afghanistan between 2005 and 2016 said senior commandos may have forced junior soldiers to kill defenceless captives in order to “blood” them for combat.

— **Reuters**Malaysia will
hold poll after
pandemic is
over: PM

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia will hold a general election when the novel coronavirus pandemic is over, Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin said on Saturday, shortly after he averted a showdown by winning parliamentary support for his administration’s budget.

Parliament passed the largest-ever budget by a voice vote on Thursday despite weeks of threats by the opposition and some of Muhyiddin’s allies to derail the government’s 2021 spending plan, which could have triggered a crisis. “God willing, when COVID-19 is over, we will hold a general election,” Muhyiddin said in a speech at a annual general meeting of his Bersatu party.

“We will return the mandate to the people and leave it to them to choose which government they want.” Muhyiddin’s eight-month-old administration has clung on with a two-seat majority in parliament.

— **Reuters**

■ HOLY PROCESSION



Sikh devotees carry the Guru Granth Sahib (Sikh holy book) in a special golden palanquin during a ‘Nagar Kirtan’, holy procession ahead of the 551st birth anniversary of Sikhism founder Sri Guru Nanak Dev, at the Golden Temple in Amritsar, India, on Saturday. — **AFP**

Music icon Cher meets Pakistan
PM ahead of elephant’s move

ISLAMABAD: American pop icon Cher met Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan on Friday ahead of the relocation of an elephant from Islamabad’s dilapidated zoo to a Cambodian sanctuary.

The famed singer, who has for years campaigned for Kaavan the elephant and is helping pay for his move, arrived in the Pakistan capital this week to see the animal before the flight to Cambodia on Sunday.

“Appreciating her efforts in retiring Kaavan to an elephant sanctuary, the prime minister thanked Cher for her campaign and role in this regard,” a statement from Khan’s office read.

Cher tweeted that she thanked Khan “For Making It Possible For Me To Take Kaavan To Cambodia”.



A caretaker feeds Kaavan, an elephant waiting to be transported to a sanctuary in Cambodia, during a farewell ceremony at the Marghazar Zoo in Islamabad, on November 23. — **Reuters**

The plight of Kaavan — an overweight, 35-year-old bull elephant — has drawn international condemnation and highlighted the woeful state of Islamabad’s zoo, where conditions are so bad a judge in May ordered all the animals to be moved.

A team of vets and experts

from Four Paws, an Austria-based animal welfare group, has spent months working with Kaavan to get him ready for the journey to Cambodia.

Experts have trained Kaavan to enter a large metal crate that will be used to transport the animal to the airport. — **AFP**



A farmer shouts slogan during a protest against the newly passed farm bills at Singhu border near Delhi, on Saturday. — **Reuters**



Demonstrators attend a demonstration against measures to curb the spread of the Novel Coronavirus, in Frankfurt an der Oder, Germany on Saturday. — AFP

Europe virus toll crosses 400,000 as shops reopen in France

PARIS: Coronavirus deaths topped 400,000 on Saturday in Europe, the world's second worst-hit region, as parts of the continent began to reopen shops for the holiday season.

But across the Atlantic fearful US shoppers turned to online outlets for a massive Black Friday sale, while densely populated Los Angeles county announced a ban on gatherings of people from different households under a new "safer-at-home order" to battle the surging pandemic.

Persistent high case numbers in many western countries loom over governments' hopes to ease their virus rules for Christmas and New Year.

The holidays would be a

longed-for respite before bracing for what the world hopes is one last wave of restrictions until a clutch of promising new vaccines kick in. Europe on Saturday crossed a grim barrier, registering 400,649 deaths according to an AFP tally at 0800 GMT.

Britain accounted for almost two-thirds of the fatalities at 57,551 followed by Italy with 53,677 France at 51,914 and Spain with 44,668.

Stores began lifting their shutters in France on Saturday, while Poland's shopping centres will also reopen.

"I'd rather avoid the Internet, I'm going to buy things in the shops. They need it", said Anne Dubois, one of the first customers

applauded through the doors by staff at Paris' vast Galeries Lafayette department store as it opened at 10:00 am.

"Whether or not there's people here, at least we've got our daily life getting back to normal", said 36-year-old Aurelie, a manager in the L'Oreal section at Galeries Lafayette.

Belgium will allow shops to reopen from December 1, but keep the current semi-lockdown in place possibly until mid-January. The move mirrors similar easing in Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands.

Ireland has also announced a staggered easing of restrictions to allow some businesses to reopen and for families to gather ahead of Christmas.

Germany, once a beacon of hope in Europe's coronavirus nightmare, logged more than one million cases on Friday.

Although the virus spread is slowing thanks to weeks of tough restrictions, Europe remains at the heart of the pandemic, recording more cases than the United States in the past week.

Germany's Robert Koch Institute recorded more than 22,000 new daily cases on Friday, pushing the overall total in the country beyond the one-million mark.

More worryingly, the number of COVID-19 patients in intensive care has soared from around 360 in early October to more than 3,500 last week. — AFP

In fresh blow to Trump, US appeals court rejects Pennsylvania election case

WASHINGTON: A federal appeals court on Friday rejected an attempt by US President Donald Trump's campaign to block President-elect Joe Biden from being declared the winner of Pennsylvania, dealing another significant setback to Trump's bid to overturn the November 3 election.



"Free, fair elections are the lifeblood of our democracy. Charges of unfairness are serious. But calling an election unfair does not make it so", wrote Stephanos Bibas on behalf of a three-judge panel. "Charges require specific allegations and then proof. We have neither here", wrote Bibas, who was nominated by Trump.

The Trump campaign and its supporters have tried and failed to convince judges of election irregularities in Michigan, Georgia, Arizona and Nevada, all critical to Biden's victory. "Voters, not lawyers, choose the President. Ballots, not briefs, decide elections", said the appeals court opinion. "On to SCOTUS!" wrote Jenna Ellis, a Trump campaign attorney, on Twitter after the ruling, referring to a planned appeal to the US Supreme Court.

"The activist judicial machinery in Pennsylvania continues to cover up the allegations of massive fraud." Pennsylvania certified Biden, who won the state by 80,000 votes, as its winner this week. Under Pennsylvania law, the candidate who wins the popular vote in the state gets all of the state's 20 electoral votes.

Trump, a Republican, has refused to concede to his Democratic rival and continues to claim, without evidence, widespread voter fraud. But as

Free, fair elections are the lifeblood of our democracy. Charges of unfairness are serious. But calling an election unfair does not make it so

STEPHANOS BIBAS

On behalf of a three-judge panel

his legal challenges to the results fail, Trump said on Thursday he will leave the White House if the Electoral College votes for Biden when it meets on December 14, the closest he has come to conceding the election.

On Monday, Trump's administration cleared the way Biden to transition to the White House, giving him access to briefings and funding even as Trump vowed to continue fighting the election results. Biden won the election 306-232 in electoral votes, including Pennsylvania's 20. Even if Trump overturned the outcome in Pennsylvania, he would still need to reverse the result in at least two other states to remain as president. — Reuters

Scotland leader 'never been more certain' of independence

GLASGOW: Scotland's First Minister Nicola Sturgeon on Saturday said she had "never been more certain" of achieving independence, with Britain's final departure from EU trading arrangements set to precede key Scottish elections in the months ahead.

The head of Scotland's devolved government and the leader of the pro-independence SNP told supporters at the party's virtual conference that the prospect of a break between Scotland and the rest of the

UK has never been closer.

"Independence is in clear sight - and with unity of purpose, humility and hard work I have never been so certain that we will deliver it", she said.

Sturgeon and the SNP have argued for a second referendum on Scottish independence since the party's overwhelming victory among Scottish seats in Britain's 2019 general election.

Now she hopes that a further resounding win in May elections to

the Edinburgh parliament will hand her party a mandate for a second bid to quit the UK.

Opinion polls in recent months have shown that a majority of public opinion in Scotland now supports independence.

The country chose to remain part of the four-nation United Kingdom in a 2014 referendum on the issue.

But Scots later voted by a thumping majority in 2016 to remain in the European Union, a referendum the Leave side won by a narrow



Scotland's First Minister Nicola Sturgeon. — AFP

margin when taking the rest of Britain into account.

Since then, "we have won a landslide victory in a UK general election and support for independence has risen, it has become the sustained and majority view in public opinion this year", said Sturgeon.

"Who should be taking the decisions that shape our futures? We know that it is the people who live here, wherever they come from, who can best harness Scotland's immense human and natu-

ral resources.

"Let us reach out to all Scotland like never before", she added.

Sturgeon urged her party to "demonstrate... that Scotland is ready to take our place in the global family of independent nations", saying it was "now a nation on the brink of making history."

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson has repeatedly rebuffed calls from for a another referendum, saying that the 2014 vote settled the question for a generation. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

ADDIS ABABA

Heavy shelling by Ethiopia rocks Tigray capital

Heavy shelling rocked the capital of Ethiopia's Tigray region on Saturday as the city of half a million braced for an all-out offensive by government forces against its dissident leaders. Ethiopia's military "has started hitting with heavy weaponry and artillery the centre of Mekele", the local government said. Two humanitarian officials with staff in the city confirmed the strikes.

"The Tigray regional state calls upon all who have a clear conscience, including



the international community, to condemn the artillery and warplane attacks and massacres being committed", the statement said. — AFP

HAVANA

Rare protest over freedom of expression

About 200 Cuban artists demonstrated outside the country's culture ministry on Friday in a rare protest over freedom of expression that received support from leading Cuban cinema figures. The demonstration followed the expulsion by authorities on Thursday night of protesting members of an artists' collective from their premises in the historic centre of Havana.

Authorities said the eviction of the 14 members of the San Isidro



Movement was necessary due to COVID-19 protocols since one had returned from Mexico via the United States and not properly quarantined. — AFP

PARIS

Protest as France reels from police violence

Thousands took to the streets across France on Saturday to demand the government abandon a contentious new security law, in a controversy intensified by the beating and racial abuse of a black man by police officers that shocked the country. The demonstrations against the security law — which would restrict the right of the press to broadcast images of police officers' faces — took place nationwide with the central Place de la Republique in Paris filled to



the seams despite the coronavirus pandemic. President Emmanuel Macron said late on Friday that the images of the beating of black music producer Michel Zecler in Paris last weekend "shame us". — AFP

Thank God the flowers grow, the birds sing and the sun shines!

I lay in bed last night, and from nowhere came the thought... “What if COVID-19 doesn’t end in the New Year?” I don’t know about you, but I have had this vision of COVID-19 becoming no more inconvenient than the flu in the New Year. But what if it doesn’t?

Here we are, getting towards a year of the restrictions, social and financial hardships brought on by the pandemic, and really, nobody has a roadmap for getting out of it. Globally, every nation is ‘doing its own thing,’ every time a scientist or an ‘expert’ makes a public statement, another disagrees creating a myriad of complications for those of us trying to put our own thoughts in order so that we are confident that our actions and processes are going to keep us safe. In terms of what we are being told, we can have less and less faith in what we read and hear through the global media.

I feel certain that this is why we have had so many impositions and restrictions placed on us by the authorities, the Supreme Committee, here in Oman, who have demonstrated a reasoned, yet I feel pragmatic approach to the pandemic, however I feel certain they have been undone by the uncertainty and variety of opinions expressed in the global reaction to the threat. Just look at the amazing diversity of national responses around the world, and how the various nationalities have responded.

The Institute of Labour Economics



Ray Petersen
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WE ARE GETTING TOWARDS A YEAR OF THE RESTRICTIONS, SOCIAL AND FINANCIAL HARDSHIPS

looked at a number of country’s responses and the United States was hit hard on the employment front through March and April higher unemployment and social benefits mitigated some of the adverse effects, employee retention and work-share incentives have been heavily subsidised, however with modest success. The great American ‘freedom’ debate, black lives matter, and policing issues have significantly impacted upon their society’s positive response to any COVID related measures, not helped by President Trump flouting expert advice and his dismissal of COVID-19 as barely relevant.

The United Kingdom has experienced its greatest economic reverse in more than 40 years, and both the institutional, self-employed, and particularly youth unemployment figures are abysmal. Worse, job retention and income support schemes, and novelty business support initiatives appear beset with integrity issues.

Their priority will be reversing a slide towards long-term unemployment. This has caused significant social instability, youth insecurity and behavioural revolt. It is clear too that the less affluent are suffering disproportionately.

Sweden, on the other hand took a ‘hands-off’ societal perspective, leaving it to the population to implement the measures they felt individually inclined towards. However, the global responses forced significant job losses

in the tourism and service sectors where currently sustainable financial assistance has mitigated much of the impact. Of course, this made for a happier society, however recent figures have shown an alarming increase in cases, and authorities must now be holding their breath.

New Zealand, as you know, went into an immediate lockdown and border closure, with astonishing results, and has been effectively COVID-Free within the community for almost 6 months, the only cases being those entering the country in forced isolation. There have been significant job losses in the tourist-reliant economy, however the population appear to be completely behind the governmental responses given their landslide victory in the recent elections.

And what do those four nation’s responses tell us, along with our own? Probably that societal acceptance of government policies, measures and restrictions is the only way forward, and that individual responses are selfish, and destructive to the national good. Maybe we should be looking at ourselves for longer in the mirror, asking if we are doing all we could and should to achieve society and community objectives, rather than, “I do what I think is best.”

Your willingness to ‘go to battle’ against COVID-19, and to be strong, admirable in less uncertain circumstances, is nothing less than foolhardy in these.

GO-IT-ALONE

Hungary looks east for coronavirus vaccines

PETER MURPHY

An Aeroflot delivery of Russia’s Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine to EU member Hungary last week has sparked new criticism at home and abroad of Prime Minister Viktor Orban’s go-it-alone policies.

“We are the first European country to receive such a sample”, said Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto in a video showing the plane touching down at Budapest airport.

An initial 10 doses were handed over for local testing, with large-scale deliveries and potentially mass production by a Hungarian firm possible next year if it proves safe and effective, according to Budapest.

Hungarian doctors and experts will soon study the production of Sputnik V in Russia, Szijjarto told a press conference with Russian Health Minister Mikhail Murashko in Budapest last Friday.

Their visit would allow a speedier decision on approval of the vaccine in Hungary, said Szijjarto.

While Hungary has reserved potential future

vaccines from both Europe and the United States, it is also in contact with Chinese and Israeli developers, according to Budapest. “No one can say for certain when we’ll get a vaccine or when it’ll be mass-produced, (hence) Hungary should

“No one can say for certain when we’ll get a vaccine or when it’ll be mass-produced”

TAMAS MENCZER
Foreign ministry

also look to the east and cooperate with Russia and China”, a foreign ministry official Tamas Menczer said last week.

Menczer accused critics of the procurement plans of representing the interests of pharmaceutical multinationals and “the Brussels lobby scene”.

The European Medicines Agency (EMA), charged with overseeing vaccine approval in the European Union, has yet to assess the Russian drug, which Moscow said last week showed 95 per cent effectiveness in latest trials.

Earlier this month, EU officials warned — without mentioning Hungary — that marketing vaccines unauthorised by Brussels would go against Europe’s vaccine strategy.

“If you were to market such a vaccine on European territory, then obviously, we would have to take action in order to ensure that these rules are respected”, said a European Commission spokesperson Vivian Loonela, without providing further detail.

Hungary and Poland are already at loggerheads with Brussels over the EU’s long-term budget. And Hungary’s maverick approach could spark a new rift.

But Orban’s domestic critics are also wary about the arrival of Sputnik V.

“Maybe it will be safe and effective, but this is less about the virus or the vaccine, and more about government propaganda telling us that, when in trouble, the Russians are friends who help us first”, said Gabriella Lantos, a health expert with the New World opposition party.

Meanwhile, Hungarian pro-government media are in favour of Sputnik V and criticise Brussels for being cautious.

While Orban insists that his foreign policy of opening up towards the east is pragmatic, it is a strategy that has seen him accused of being Russian President Vladimir Putin’s “Trojan horse” in the EU and Nato. — AFP

OLD STRAINS

No easy ride for EU-US even with Biden’s francophone team

FABIEN ZAMORA

US President-elect Joe Biden’s appointment of French speakers to top positions has cheered Paris but France knows it will take more than mother tongue chats to overcome transatlantic strains, even after the departure of Donald Trump.

As his future secretary of state, Biden has named former deputy national security adviser Anthony Blinken, who spent part of his childhood in France and is fluent in French.

The special envoy for climate, former secretary of state John Kerry, spends his holidays in Brittany, while Michele Flournoy, in the running for defense secretary, studied in Belgium where she learned French.

The atmosphere of exchanges with this team is likely to be markedly more cheerful than contacts with the Trump administration that culminated in a frosty closed door visit to Paris this month by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

But an extra dose of bonhomie will not make strategic disagreements — that range from the future of Nato to policy towards China — go away.

Indeed, with conspicuous timing days after Biden’s election victory was confirmed, a French journal published



US President-elect Biden delivers a Thanksgiving address at the Queen Theatre in Wilmington, Delaware, last Wednesday. — AFP

BIDEN HAS NAMED ANTHONY BLINKEN AS HIS FUTURE SECRETARY OF STATE, WHO IS FLUENT IN FRENCH

a mammoth interview with Macron where he outlined his vision for a Europe that acts independently of the United States. Europe should have “strategic autonomy”, he told Le Grand Continent, adding that it should “not become the vassal of this or that power and no longer have a say”.

French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves

Le Drian said he was “particularly happy” about Blinken’s appointment as he had worked with him while serving as French defence minister.

A French government source described Blinken as “francophone and francophile” and said he and Le Drian used the informal “tu” for “you” when speaking. — AFP

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Dhofar target 9th HM Cup

YOUTHFUL AL ORUBA LOOK TO SNATCH FIFTH TITLE IN FINAL TODAY

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, NOV 28

Eight-time champions Dhofar will lock horns with four-time winners Al Oruba in the final of the 2019-2020 His Majesty's Football Cup Championship on Sunday at Al Rustaq Sports Complex. The summit clash of the coveted cup will kick off at 6 pm under auspices of HH Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth, who will be the chief guest and award the trophy to the winners in presence of dignitaries and officials.

The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth and Oman Football Association (OFA), in coordination with the Supreme Committee and Ministry of Health, allowed an attendance of 100 fans from both teams' supporters with full implementation of the medical measures to avoid spreading of the COVID-19.

The Salalah giants are one win away to equalise Fanja's record of nine titles while the Al Sharqiyah-based team will try to recall the memories of the 2014-15 final as they had beaten neighbours Sur 2-1 and clinched the coveted title for fourth time. Both teams faced each other before 30 years and it was in the final of the HM Cup in 1989-90 as Dhofar won the match 1-0. Moreover, both teams met in the 2019-20 Omantel League and the matches ended in draws. However, today's game will have a different outcome as both teams are keen to add a new title in their treasure.

Al Oruba, coached by Haitham al Alawi, are fancied to lift the coveted title and to escape team's relegation to the first division league. Al Alawi's men, who will represent the team today, are basically new faces and playing in the final for first time except the experienced players including Ahmed Saleem, Khalid Saleh and Younis Mubarak.

On the other hand, experienced



national coach Rasheed Jaber will try to end the season for Salalah giant with another title after claiming the Super Cup against Sur in last September at the same venue which will host the final game of the showpiece tournament. Rasheed Jaber has many key players with full experience in the finals who can monitor the game well including Salim al Nahar, Fayez al Rushaidi, Qasim Said, Mohammed al Musalami, Harib al Saadi, Abdul Salam Amer, Lopez and Salah al Yahyai.

Dhofar and Al Oruba overcame tough matches in the knockout stages.

Dhofar entered the final after edging Al Nahda on away goal as the first leg of the semifinal ended 1-1 at Al Buraimi Sports Complex, while the second leg ended goalless at Al Sadaa Sports Complex.

In the quarterfinal round, the Salalah side picked up an

The last rounds of top-tier league and the semifinals of the coveted cup were good platforms to gear up for the final of the HM Cup. There is no major absence except Al Mundher al Alawi while other players are in good shape

RASHEED JABER
Dhofar head coach

of the coveted cup were good platforms to warm up for the final of the HM Cup. There is no major absence except Al Mundher al Alawi while all the other team players are in good shape," he told a press conference.

Fayez al Rushaidi, Oman and Dhofar goalkeeper, voiced confidence of winning the top domestic game. "We had good technical preparation and hope to lift the ninth title," he said.

Al Oruba head coach Haitham al Alawi expressed satisfaction on entering the final of the HM Cup.

"It is a great honour for any team to play in the final match of the HM Cup. Obviously, the opponents are tough and runners-up of the 2019-20 Omantel League with top and experienced players. However, we are depending on our youthful players to lift the title," he said.

Al Alawi preferred to forget their performance in the Omantel League and focus on the final game. "Our full concentration is on the summit clash of the HM Cup and there is no pressure on the team," he said.

Al Oruba captain Ahmed Saleem sounded confident that all Al Oruba players are in good form and said they are looking to end the match with the fifth title.

aggregate 3-0 win over Oman Club thanks to 3-0 win in the first leg, while second leg was a goalless draw. Dhofar began the HM Cup campaign with a comfortable 4-0 win over Al Musannah and followed with a crucial 1-0 victory over the Omantel League champions Seeb.

Al Oruba secured spot in the final with a comeback 1-0 win against Ibri in the second leg after losing the first leg 2-1. The Sur-based team commenced the campaign with a 3-0 victory over Majees. Then in round 16, Al Oruba edged Al Khabourah 1-0 and repeated the same margin against Al Nasr in the quarterfinal first leg and posted a 2-1 win in the second leg game.

COACHES CONFIDENT

Dhofar coach Rasheed Jaber said the team's preparation for the summit clash began since August. "The remaining rounds of top-tier league and the semifinals





Thunder clinch women's Big Bash League title

SYDNEY: Fine bowling helped propel Sydney Thunder to an upset seven wicket win over Meg Lanning's Melbourne Stars and claim the women's Big Bash League title on Saturday. Rachael Haynes' team restricted the Stars to just 86 for nine off their 20 overs after losing the bat flip at North Sydney Oval and chased down the total easily with more than six overs to spare. — AFP



Pliskova hires Osaka's ex-coach Bajin

PRAGUE: World number six Karolina Pliskova said on Friday she had hired Sascha Bajin as her new coach for the 2021 season. Pliskova published a photo on Facebook and Twitter featuring Bajin, fitness coach Azuz Simchich and a caption saying "Team Pliskova 2021". — AFP



An exterior view of a coronavirus disease managed isolation quarantine facility at the DoubleTree by Hilton, in Christchurch, New Zealand. — AFP

Seventh Pakistan cricketer positive for COVID-19

CHRISTCHURCH: A seventh Pakistan cricketer tested positive for COVID-19 as the team remained confined to their hotel in Christchurch on Saturday, unable to train and with a question mark over their New Zealand tour.

The Pakistanis, who only arrived four days ago, are already on a "final warning" for breaching New Zealand's tight quarantine restrictions, with the growing number of coronavirus cases adding pressure to preparations for their opening match on December 18.

Despite all members of the squad returning negative tests before flying to New Zealand, six came up positive after testing on day one in the country.

"One additional member of the Pakistan cricket squad has today tested positive," the Ministry of Health said in a statement on Saturday, confirming the seventh patient.

"The remainder of the results from the squad's day-three swab testing, apart from the six who have already returned a positive result, are negative."

All overseas arrivals to New Zealand must spend two weeks



New Zealand's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Sport and Recreation Grant Robertson. — AFP

in quarantine.

The 53-man squad will undergo further tests on Monday and in the meantime they remain confined to their rooms after permission to train while in isolation was revoked by New Zealand authorities.

The ministry said exemptions allowing teams to train while in managed isolation "are very difficult to obtain" and Pakistan's exemption was put on hold after several players were caught flouting social distancing protocols inside the quarantine hotel. New Zealand's Director-General of Health, Ashley Bloomfield, said that breaches of the rules were taken very seriously and the Pakistan team "as a whole has been issued with a final warning". — AFP

CAPE TOWN: Jonny Bairstow powered England to a five-wicket win over South Africa in the first Twenty20 international at Newlands in Cape Town on Friday.

Bairstow thrashed 86 not out off 48 balls as England chased down a victory target of 180 with four balls to spare.

England were struggling at 34 for three before Bairstow and Ben Stokes (37) changed the momentum of the match with a fourth wicket stand of 85.

Even so, South Africa still had a realistic chance of winning as England went into the last four overs needing 51 runs.

But left-arm fast bowler Beuran Hendricks conceded 28 runs in the 17th over, including three wides which cost eight runs, as Bairstow and England captain Eoin Morgan went on the attack.

Morgan said the win was "extremely pleasing, given that we were pretty average apart from two or three players."

Morgan said England's bowlers "missed areas", although left-arm Sam Curran claimed a career-best three for 28 in South Africa's innings of 179 for six.

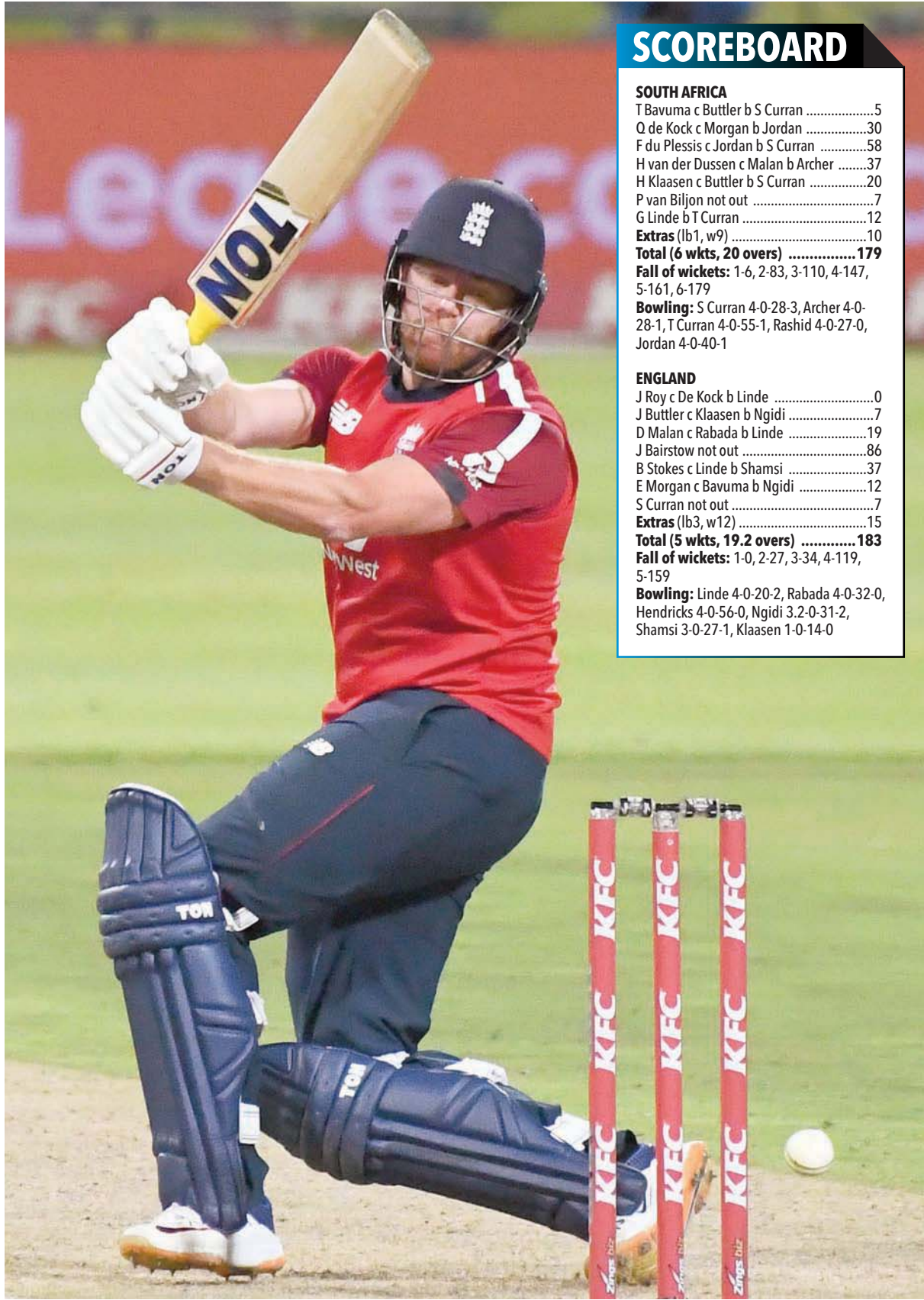
And he was disappointed with the batting start, although he praised Bairstow and Stokes.

"Jonny and Ben rebuilding the way they did set up the win nicely," he told SuperSport television.

Bairstow batted at number four instead of opening as he often does in white-ball cricket.

"It's something you've got to enjoy," he said. "You learn to craft your innings in different ways."

Bairstow hit nine fours and four sixes, finishing the match in style with his fourth six which sailed into a building sight on the northern end of the ground. — AFP



England's Jonny Bairstow misses a shot during the first T20 international against South Africa at Newlands stadium in Cape Town, South Africa. — AFP

SCOREBOARD

SOUTH AFRICA	
T Bavuma c Buttler b S Curran	5
O de Kock c Morgan b Jordan	30
F du Plessis c Jordan b S Curran	58
H van der Dussen c Malan b Archer	37
H Klaasen c Buttler b S Curran	20
P van Biljon not out	7
G Linde b T Curran	12
Extras (lb1, w9)	10
Total (6 wks, 20 overs)	179
Fall of wickets: 1-6, 2-83, 3-110, 4-147, 5-161, 6-179	
Bowling: S Curran 4-0-28-3, Archer 4-0-28-1, T Curran 4-0-55-1, Rashid 4-0-27-0, Jordan 4-0-40-1	
ENGLAND	
J Roy c De Kock b Linde	0
J Buttler c Klaasen b Ngidi	7
D Malan c Rabada b Linde	19
J Bairstow not out	86
B Stokes c Linde b Shamsi	37
E Morgan c Bavuma b Ngidi	12
S Curran not out	7
Extras (lb3, w12)	15
Total (5 wks, 19.2 overs)	183
Fall of wickets: 1-0, 2-27, 3-34, 4-119, 5-159	
Bowling: Linde 4-0-20-2, Rabada 4-0-32-0, Hendricks 4-0-56-0, Ngidi 3.2-0-31-2, Shamsi 3-0-27-1, Klaasen 1-0-14-0	

All-round Maqsood, Nadeem power IT Works to victory

MUSCAT: IT Works rode on the class of Oman's premier all-rounders Zeeshan Maqsood and Muhammed Nadeem to defeat Arm Alpha by 4 wickets in a keenly-contested Premier Division 50-over League opener at Oman Cricket's Turf 1 in Al Amerat on Friday.

Alpha failed to post a big total on the board, scoring a modest 166 all out in 45.1 overs as Maqsood and Nadeem ran through the side, taking three wickets each.

Left-arm spinner Shakeel Ahmed bowled a miserly spell too, taking two wickets for only 17 runs. Parth Trivedi top-scored for Alpha with a solid 64.

IT Works were in deep trouble at 28 for 4 in 11 overs before Maqsood joined Hammad Mirza, adding 54 runs for the fifth wicket to put the chase back on track. He was then involved in a match-winning 54-run partnership with Nadeem before being bowled by young Ubaid Ullah for a vital 50 off 73.

Nadeem (30 not out) and Khuram Khan (23 not out off 8) then saw IT Works home for an exciting 4-wicket win with a good 65 balls to spare.

Brief scores (Premier Division 50-over League): Arm Alpha 166 all out in 45.1 overs (Parth Trivedi 64 - 2x4, 2x6, Ubaid Ullah 30 - 3x4, Zeeshan Maqsood 3-21, Muhammed Nadeem 3-41, Shakeel Ahmad 2-17) lost to IT Works 167 for 6 in 39.1 overs (Zeeshan Maqsood 50 - 5x4, Hammad Mirza 34 - 6x4, Muhammed Nadeem 30 - 3x4, Kaleemullah 4-38) by 4 wickets.

AQIL, AMIR POWER ARTT TO ANOTHER HUGE WIN

Unbeaten Arabian Region Travel and Tourism (ARTT) continued to collect massive victories in A Division 50-over League, thrashing a hapless Basta CT by 218 runs thanks to wonderful performances by Aqil Khan and Ayed Amir Ali at OC Turf 2 on Saturday.

Amir Ali top-scored with a run-a-ball 90 while Khan contributed a



ARTT's star performers Amir Ali (left) and Aqil Khan.

solid 70 to set up another big total by ARTT that also saw valuable contributions from young Adeel Abbas (48), Ahmed Murtaz (42) and Mohsin Qureshi (30).

Basta could not stand up to ARTT's bowling might too, folding up for a feeble 104 in the 31st over. Khan was brilliant with the ball too, taking 5 for 11 in 8 overs, three of which were maiden.

Qureshi bowled well too, taking 3 for 29.

Brief scores (A Division 50 overs League): ARTT 322 for 8 in 50 overs (Syed Amir Ali 90 - 9x4, Aqil Khan 70 - 7x4, Adeel Abbas 48 - 6x4, Ahmed Murtaz 42 - 7x4, 1x6, Mohsin Qureshi 30 - 1x4, 3x6, Javed Abrar 22 - 1x4, 3x6, Shahid Mehmood 2-46, Peter 2-57) smashed Basta CT 104 all out in 30.2 overs (Chirag 44 - 3x4, Aqil Khan 5-11, Mohsin Qureshi 3-29) by 218 runs.

ZAWAWI POWERTECH GO TOP WITH WIN

Zawawi Powertech rose to the top of A Division League with an im-

pressive 113 -run win over OCT Muscat in a one-sided game at OC Turf 2 on Friday.

OCT Muscat did well to dismiss Zawawi for 214 in 35.4 overs but failed to show the same zeal with the bat, folding up for a disappointing 101 in 38 overs against brilliant bowling by Kannan Prabhakaran (4 for 23) and Natarajan Kalairasan (3 for 15).

Earlier, Nalaka Pathum's 40-ball 64 was the highlight of Zawawi's innings which could not last longer due to brilliant bowling by Mohammed Rashad and Khalid al Balushi who claimed four and three wickets respectively.

Brief scores (A Division): Zawawi Powertech 214 all out in 35.4 overs (Nalaka Pathum 64 - 8x4, 3x6, Natarajan Kalairasan 26 - 3x4, Mohammed Rashad 4-27, Khalid al Balushi 3-36) bt OCT Muscat 101 all out in 38 overs (Majid Hussein 33 - 2x4, Kannan Prabhakaran 4-23, Natarajan Kalairasan 3-15) by 113 runs.



MOHAMMED STORMS TO TOP SPOT

WILLCOX TAKES OVERALL LEAD IN OPEN AND 40 PLUS CATEGORIES

ANUROOP ATHIPARAMBATH
MUSCAT, NOV 28

Local cyclist Mohammed al Wahaibi stormed to the top position in the third round open category of the Oman Cycling Association (OCA) Championship with a timing of 2 hours 29 minutes and 37.87 seconds at Halban on Friday.

Mundher al Hasani missed the first spot by a whisker as the Omani finished with a timing of 2:29:37.89 in the 90 km road race with 15 laps.

Paul Willcox from United Kingdom (2:29:37.96) continued his impressive form with a third-place finish. The North Road Oman team rider is leading the race for Omantel jersey in the open category with 220 points after the third round. Willcox also leads the 40 plus category for the Sohar International Jersey with 140 points.

Mundher al Hasani of Ahli Sidab A is leading the under-23 section for Bank Nizwa jersey with 120 points.

YOUNGSTERS IMPRESS

Local rider Amjad al Shuraiqi won the top honours in the youth section (48 km) with a timing of 1:40:22.21 while Ayad was consistent (1:40:22.28) on second spot. Abdulaziz al Mandhari finished third (1:40:22.28).

In under-23 section, Mohammed al Wahaibi cinched top position with Mundher al Hasani second



From left: Mundher al Hasani, Mohammed al Wahaibi and Paul Willcox celebrate on the podium of open category.

and Said al Rahbi finishing third (2:29:38.23) thanks to their brilliant performance for the round.

In 40 plus, Willcox asserted his supremacy, while Szczepan Pietruska of Poland (2:29:38.78) took second and Oman's Ayman al Wahaibi finished third (2:29:40.11).

After third round, Ahli Sidab A (Mohammed al Wahaibi, Mundher al Hasani and Saud al Mandhari)

are leading with 285 points. Royal Army consisting of Said al Rahbi, Mashari al Khalili and Hatim al Booshri are second with 240 points and North Road Oman (Paul Willcox, Szczepan Pietruska and Yuri Lipkov) are third with 197 points.

Ishaq al Balushi, OCA General Secretary, was the chief guest for the concluding ceremony as

he honoured the top three place winners in open, under-23, youth, and 40 plus categories.

The fourth round will be a 98 km road race with 10 laps from The Wave to Airport on December 18.

In the third round, Willcox had won the open section, while Omani rider Abdullah al Ghilani claimed the top spot in the under-23 category and a second-place finish

2 HRS
29 MINS
37.87 SECS

MOHAMMED AL WAHAIBI
AHLI SIDAB A CYCLIST

in the open category.

The championship, which runs for a total of 641 km, consists eight races — six road races, one individual time trial and one team time trial.

All the races are one-day events with separate prizes on each day.

This year's event is competed by Ahli Sidab A and B teams, Al Rustaq, Al Shabab, Sur, Izki, North Road Oman, Gulf Cycles, Arsen Endurance/Diver Store, Nizwa Club, Brothers Team, Capital Team, Ibri Club and Royal Army of Oman along with the cyclists from two youth centres in Muscat and Nizwa.





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Oman Food Investment eyes global presence by 2040

STRONG GROWTH: Part of Oman Investment Authority, OFIC currently boasts a portfolio of 23 companies and food-related assets with investments totalling around \$1.5 billion

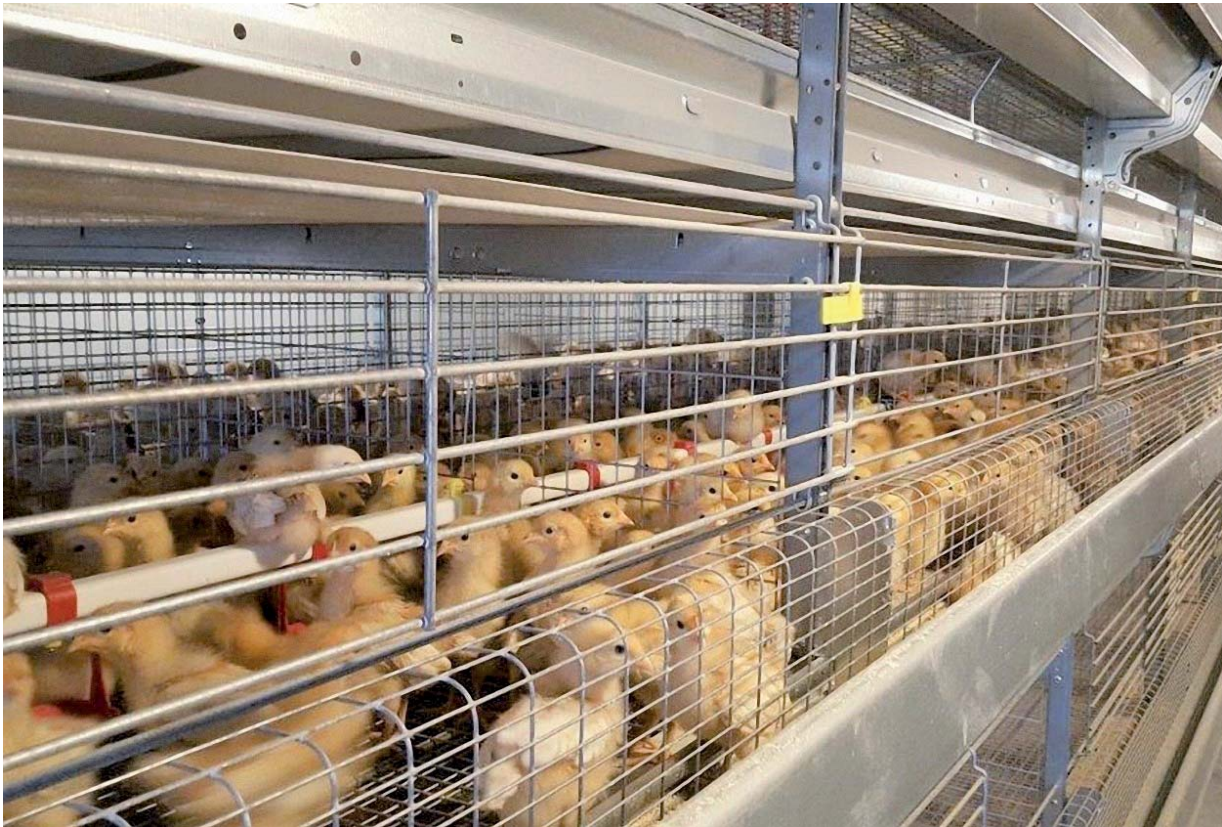
CONRAD PRABHU
@conradprabhu

Oman Food Investment Holding Company (OFIC), the government's food sector development arm, has ambitions to evolve into a prominent player in the global food industry with investments spanning the entire food value chain.

The state-owned enterprise, which was recently absorbed into Oman Investment Authority (OIA), the Sultanate's integrated sovereign wealth fund, already boasts a portfolio of 23 companies and food related-assets with investments totalling around \$1.5 billion, according to a top executive of OFIC.

Eng Saleh bin Mohammed al Shanfari, CEO, outlined a 20-year strategy that positions OFIC for robust growth over the 2020-2040 timeframe.

Taking part in an online forum organised recently by the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, he said the strategy



envisioned OFIC growing into a "significant player" in the region by 2027. By 2031, the group is projected to burgeon into a "leading player" in the Middle East with a portfolio of assets across the world serving Oman and the GCC markets. 2040 will see OFIC becoming a "prominent player" globally, he noted.

OFIC has come a long way since

it was established barely seven years ago, evolving into a well-diversified group with investments in, among other areas, dairy processing, poultry farming, meat production, oil seeds crushing, dates processing and packaging, veterinary medicine production and fish processing.

Over the 2020-2021 timeframe, the group has plans to add food logistics,

fruits and vegetable marketing, food-related R&D, commercial trading and coconut processing to its expanding portfolio, he said.

"Our objective is to invest across the food value chain and to participate in commercially viable projects here and outside the Sultanate," said Eng Al Shanfari.

"We are looking to develop



We are looking to develop partnerships with private and public stakeholders, promote the adoption of responsible agricultural practices, focus on agri-food projects that cover cities, urban and rural areas, and contribute to food quality standards that make Omani standards highly competitive internationally

ENG SALEH AL SHANFARI
CEO, OFIC

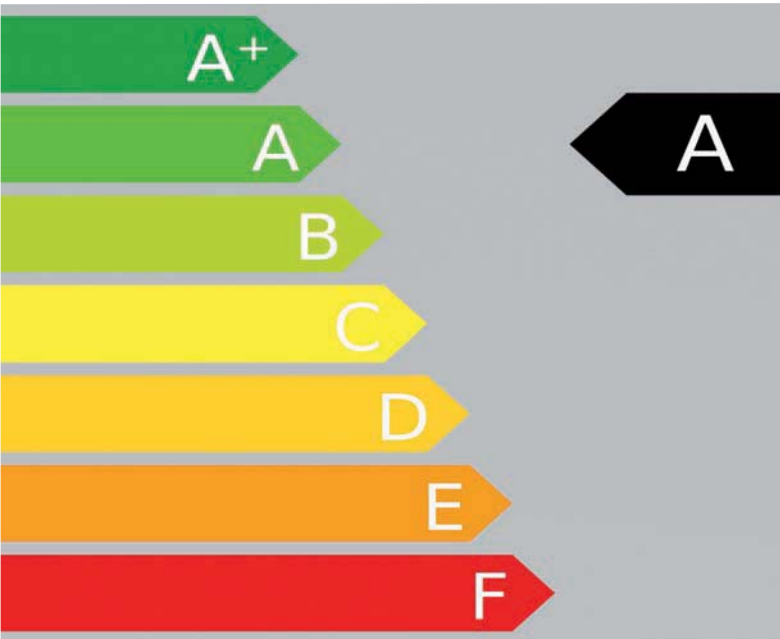
partnerships with private and public stakeholders, promote the adoption of responsible agricultural practices, focus on agri-food projects that cover cities, urban and rural areas, and contribute to food quality standards that make Omani standards highly competitive internationally. We are also looking to leverage Oman's competitive geographical location to develop food products for export to rest of the world."

Notable investments by OFIC include the \$250 million integrated dairy processing project of Mazoon Dairy, the \$250 million A'Namaa poultry project in Ibri, the \$120 million Al Bashayer meat processing project, \$58 million Murooj Dairy plant, Oman Oil Seeds Crushing, Oman Dates Production and Marketing, International Sea Foods, and National Veterinary Vaccines Company. The government's stakes in a number of food-related companies have also been transferred to OFIC.

"We also want to become the halal hub for the region," said the CEO. In this regard, he invited international stakeholders to join hands with OFIC in securing and strengthening their supplies of halal foods.

"We are open to partnerships and would like to pursue opportunities in R&D and smart agriculture systems that will allow both countries to reap the possibilities," he added.

Omani specs for energy efficient appliances under evaluation



BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, NOV 28

As a part of the national plan for rationalising electrical energy consumption, the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion has implemented energy efficiency specs for home appliances, in cooperation with the Authority for Regulation of Public Services (APSR) with support from the Implementation Unit of Oman Vision 2040.

Ministerial Decree 107/2018 mandates the affixing of energy efficiency labels for air conditioners in accordance with energy efficiency standards for air-conditioners. Following the issuance of the decree, the Ministry has embarked on the process of formulating corresponding standards for four key categories of household electrical appliances and fixtures, which includes refrigerators,

freezers, water heaters, washing machines and LED lights.

According to the Directorate-General of Specifications and Metrology at the Ministry, these four sets of standards are currently being evaluated by various stakeholders. The feedback of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) has also been solicited.

The Ministry hopes to implement these standards of specifications within one year from the date of the approval of the ministerial decision binding the implementation of these specifications. The Omani standard specifications for electric energy efficiency labels for household electrical appliances obligate manufacturers and the suppliers of these devices to provide more energy efficient appliances in the local market. Energy consumption levels will be specified on each appliance.

Oman to push ahead with manufacturing sector growth

GLOBAL STRATEGY: Sultanate reaffirms commitment to sustainable industrial development at UNIDO forum

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, NOV 28

The Sultanate, represented by the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, participated in the 48th meeting of the Industrial Development Board (IDB) of UNIDO, along with representatives from 168 countries from around the world.

The three-day meeting, which opened virtually last week, focused on a number of themes, including the future of industrialisation, ways to promote comprehensive and sustainable industrial development, and UNIDO's achievements during the past period.

Speaking during the opening session, Eng Sami bin Salem al Saheb, Director-General of Industry, said, "The economic and social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are strongly felt in developed and developing countries alike and that the comprehensive and sustainable industrial development plays a crucial role in immediate response and long-term recovery."

He added, "The pandemic-



In order to address these challenges facing international communities, stakeholders must be involved at all levels to develop a global strategy and a roadmap for economic recovery after the pandemic.

preventive measures, adopted by most countries around the world, have led to the closure of the borders and to the suspension

of global economic activity. The manufacturing and trade activities have suffered the same consequences."

Eng Al Saheb stressed the need for global cooperation not only in the field of health, but also in trade, finance and macroeconomic policies, noting that UNIDO is making efforts by stimulating and coordinating global efforts and providing technical support to countries that deal with the health and economic consequences of the pandemic.

He added that in order to address

these challenges facing international communities, stakeholders must be involved at all levels to develop a global strategy and a roadmap for economic recovery after the pandemic.

Eng Al Saheb affirmed that the Sultanate is committed to comprehensive and sustainable industrial development and the 17th UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG). He added that the Sultanate continues to push the manufacturing sector to more advanced stages in line with Oman Vision 2040.



‘Zombie’ companies on the rise

Ever since the ‘80s, a small number (4 per cent) of publicly listed companies began being classified as ‘zombies’. The core criteria are that (1) such companies are unable to pay the interest expenses with their operating income. Additional criteria are the following:

- (2) The gap between their return on equity and their cost of equity, is lower than 4 per cent,
- (3) Their yearly sales growth is below 3 per cent,
- (4) Their three-year average sales growth is below 3 per cent, and
- (5) Their ‘Altman Z-Score’ — that measures liquidity, solvency as well as profitability and is also used to predict bankruptcy filings — is below 1.8.

The ‘90s ‘resuscitated’ the definition of zombie companies with the Japanese crisis, and such a word started being associated more broadly with the idea of bail-out by government or financial institutions for companies that had slim chances of survival. COVID-19 has brought once again the horror movie definition to the highlights of the media worldwide. Just before the pandemic it was estimated that 400 out of the top 3,000 large companies listed in the US stock market were



STEFANO VIRGILLI
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THE ZOMBIES IN THE US STOCK EXCHANGE HAVE NOW ACCUMULATED A TOTAL OF \$1.36 TRILLION IN DEBT: AN INCREMENT OF ALMOST 280 PER CENT SINCE BEFORE THE PANDEMIC.

zombies. As of now, according to Bloomberg, the number grew by 50 per cent, bringing the total to 600 companies that are unable to pay the interest expenses with their operating income. The zombies in the US stock exchange have now accumulated a total of \$1.36 trillion in debt: an increment of almost 280 per cent since before the pandemic.

Groups linked to travel and tourism are some of the most recent additions to the group of zombies. Some of the most recognisable names are established vast companies such as Marriott International (hotels) and Carnival (cruises).

But only focusing on criteria number 1 does not provide a full projection of the situation. For instance, Amazon and Salesforce fall under such a category, despite the fact that they both generate significant revenues and they habitually reinvest in future growth.

Streaming service Roku and online furniture retailer Wayfair ended up in the infamous list, but probably due to their increased amount of investment. Both of them are in fact generating larger revenue during the pandemic, given that more people stay at home, therefore more susceptible to engage with entertainment services and home improvement products.

A different story applies to

cinema theatre operators such as AMC Entertainment Holdings, with revenues significantly reduced.

Car maker Tesla is also considered a zombie company given the gigantic amount of funding received. Similarly ride hailing service Uber, which has been exposed to debt ever since its inception.

An interesting example is biotech Moderna, which has been attracting more and more investments with a potential growth and generous revenues ahead.

In the toys and games industry, Mattel and Hasbro, both zombies of category 1, have engaged in a price war to the lowest point, with the goal of “snatching” clients from the competitor.

Such a “zombie” exit strategy however, is not readily available for highly regulated industry, the medical sector for instance.

Hospital operator Community Health System, which barely failed to satisfy criteria number 3, by growing revenues by 2.9 per cent (where the criteria impose 3 per cent minimum growth) has opted for a divestment strategy instead.

So zombie companies might be the new buzz definition, but not necessarily spells calamity, provided that not all definition criteria are satisfied. [The writer is a member of the International Press Association]

Oman’s first energy sector magazine set for launch

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, NOV 28



Energy Oman, the first magazine dedicated to Oman’s evolving energy sector, is set to be formally launched against the backdrop of Oman’s 50th National Day celebrations.

Produced and distributed in print and digital formats, the bi-monthly magazine, along with the new portal, will serve as a single news and information resource encompassing all facets of Oman’s diversifying energy landscape — from oil and gas to power and water to renewable energy, and related segments across the entire energy value chain.

Energy Oman is the brainchild of some of the highly respected Omani oil and gas industry veterans, conceived out of the need to create a key strategic platform that will stimulate, advance and empower the sector.

The platform will also allow for discussion and debate on issues of critical importance to the industry while presenting insights, trends and analyses from top-level industry experts, policy and decision makers and thought leaders.

Providing editorial direction is a five-member Advisory Board comprising recognised energy professionals such as Eng Saif al Salmani (Technical

Director, CCED), Dr Omar al Jaaidi (General Manager, Ara Petroleum), Dr Anwar al Kharusi (Vice-President — Upstream Business Unit, OQ), Eng Fahmi al Musharafi (Petroleum Engineering professional), and Eng Abdullah al Harthy (Chairman, Energy Oman).

The editorial focus of the publication is broadly aligned with the expanded mandate of the Ministry of Energy and Minerals.

Energy Oman’s commitment to put a spotlight on themes of strategic national significance, notably human capital development, localisation, R&D and In-Country Value, has earned it more leverage.

Energy Oman will pave the way for the establishment of a platform that will host a range of business activities that include roundtable meetings, industry events, seminars and networking forums, all aimed at fuelling the growth of the energy sector. For more information, visit www.energyoman.net.



MSM WEEKLY REVIEW

Financial sector pulls down MSM Index

Oman Nominal GDP			
(OMR mn)	1H19	1H20	Change
Petroleum Activities	5,104	4,085	-20.0%
Total Non Petroleum Activities	9,661	8,702	-9.9%
Financial Intermediation Services	(424)	(384)	-9.6%
Taxes less Subsidies	(197)	(149)	-24.3%
Nominal GDP	14,143	12,254	-13.4%
Source: NCSI			

The MSM30 ended the week marginally lower by 0.11 per cent. The Services and Industrial indices ended higher by 0.38 per cent and 0.01 per cent respectively, while the Financial Index was down 0.76 per cent. The MSM Shariah Index was higher 0.13 per cent.

NBO which earlier announced about not exercising its option to call its \$300 million Perpetual Tier 1 Capital which were issued in November 2015 with a coupon rate of 7.875 per cent and first call date on November 18, 2020.

The bank last week announced that the coupon for the five year reset period starting November 18, 2020 is the aggregate of the initial margin of 6.193 per cent per annum and relevant 5 year reset rate, which has been determined as 0.460 per cent per annum.

The aggregate coupon for this five year reset period is therefore 6.653 per cent per annum. (Interest of \$33.265 per \$1,000).

Oman nominal GDP declines by 13.4 per cent YoY in 1H20 to RO 12.25 billion compared to RO 14.14 billion at the end of 1H19. Drop in nominal GDP was contributed by all the sectors except Agriculture/Fishing and Base Chemicals whose GDP went up 13.2 per cent and 5.5 per cent, respectively. Petroleum activities declined by 20 per cent during the period.

Within petroleum, crude and natural gas activities were down by 21.9 per cent and 9.6 per cent, respectively. Within Non-Petroleum activities, industrial and services sector GDP declined by 11.3 per cent and 10.6 per cent, respectively during 1H20.

Hotels and restaurants GDP declined the most amongst all by 34.3 per cent YoY during 1H20.

As per CBO latest monthly bulletin, Oman reported deficit of RO 1.95 billion for 8M-2020 compared to RO 1.37 billion deficit in similar period last year. Revenue during the period declined by 22.2 per cent to RO 5.55 billion compared to RO 7.13 billion in same period last year. Expenditure on the other hand also aided in controlling the deficit.

Expenditure declined by 11.8 per cent to RO 7.51 billion in 8M-2020 compared to RO 8.51 billion in 8M-2019. In the month of August alone, Oman revenue stood at RO 365.6 million with oil and gas revenue at RO 175.4 million and RO 94.3 million, respectively.

On the expenditure side, total expenditure dropped to RO 772.7 million in August 2020 compared to RO 1,082.1 million in July 2020. Deficit stood at RO 407 million in August compared to RO 724 million in July 2020.

[Courtesy: U-Capital]

Diwan of Royal Court, Bank Muscat enhance partnership

MUSCAT: The Diwan of Royal Court and Bank Muscat, the leading financial services provider in the Sultanate, have further enhanced their strong partnership. The Diwan of Royal Court was the first government entity to be on-boarded to the Bank’s Business-to-Business (B2B) solution.

Since the beginning of the year, it has greatly proven its effectiveness and utility. This comes as part of the Bank’s initiative to onboard ministries and government entities as well as corporates to various digital solutions for a secure and convenient digital banking experience.

The electronic services and solutions provided by the Bank to its customers have especially proven its efficiency during these times which require both physical distancing and the convenience of electronic platforms and services.

The Bank’s B2B Connect solution seamlessly and securely integrates with the Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) software used by the Diwan of Royal Court and provides an automated, two-way data transfer service for high volume online payments. A major advantage is that B2B Connect minimises human errors, allows for faster turnaround and reconciliation, thereby enabling operational efficiencies.

The solution was customised for the Diwan of



Abdullah Shaban al Farsi



Shaikh Waleed K al Hashar

Royal Court enabling it to go paperless and easily continue operations during the current phase brought about by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Abdullah Shaban Mohammed al Farsi, Head of Administrative and Financial Affairs at the Diwan of Royal Court, said: “We are happy to strengthen our partnership with Bank Muscat, the leading financial services provider in the Sultanate, and take advantage of its cutting-edge corporate digital banking solutions. The Diwan of Royal Court has been keen to lead the way in implementing the Government’s digital initiatives and is the first government entity to implement this solution.

We are always keen to cooperate and strengthen our partnership with different institutions so as to enhance the level of services and facilities provided to individuals, corporates and institutions. We hope that both institutions will greatly

benefit from this partnership and help bring about a qualitative transformation in banking services.

Since the beginning of this year, it has proven its effectiveness and ensured the continuity of payment of tender funds to beneficiaries on time during the pandemic. This step comes as a translation of the Oman 2040 vision.”

Shaikh Waleed K al Hashar, Chief Executive Officer, Bank Muscat, said: “We are privileged to onboard the operations of the Diwan of Royal Court to the Bank’s cutting edge B2B Connect solution.

Digital solutions are playing a major role in powering economic growth today and the Bank is helping both government institutions and corporates keep pace with these rapid developments. With its innovative banking solutions, Bank Muscat can address the complete payment requirements of the government and private sector organisations of all sizes.”

Brexit talks resume in London as clock ticks down

LONDON: European Union chief negotiator Michel Barnier resumed make-or-break Brexit talks with British counterpart David Frost in London on Saturday with the clock ticking for a deal on future trading arrangements.

It is the first time they have met face-to-face since Barnier went into self-isolation after a member of his team caught coronavirus.

A failure to reach an agreement would see Britain and the EU trading on World Trade Organization terms, with tariffs immediately imposed on goods travelling to and from the continent.

Britain has been largely trading on the same terms with the EU since it officially left the bloc in January as part of a transition agreement that expires at the end of the year.

As it stands, it will leave Europe's trade and customs area in five weeks with talks on a follow-on agreement stalled over fishing rights and fair trade rules.

Both parties warned on Friday that success was not guaranteed, with Barnier tweeting that the

"same significant divergences persist".

"We are not far from the take it or leave it moment", he later told ambassadors from member states, according to a European source familiar with the closed-door meeting.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson's lead negotiator Frost said that people were "asking me why we are still talking", he tweeted.

"My answer is that it's my job to do my utmost to see if the conditions for a deal exist. It is late but a deal is still possible, and I will continue to talk until it's clear that it isn't." A no-deal scenario is widely expected to cause economic chaos, with customs checks required at borders.

Concern is particularly acute on the border between EU member Ireland and the British province of Northern Ireland, where the sudden imposition of a hard border threatens the delicate peace secured by 1999's Good Friday Agreement.

Johnson spoke with Irish Prime Minister Micheal Martin late on Friday and "underlined his



EU Chief Brexit Negotiator Michel Barnier and the British PM's Europe Adviser David Frost pose for a photograph at start of the first round of post-Brexit trade deal talks between the EU and the UK, in Brussels, in this file photo. — AFP

commitment to reaching a deal that respects the sovereignty of the UK".

But he also "reaffirmed the need to prioritise the Good Friday

Agreement and avoid a hard border on the island of Ireland", according to a summary of the call released by London.

Johnson earlier told reporters

the "likelihood of a deal is very much determined by our friends and partners in the EU", adding there were "substantial and important differences to be

bridged."

A key sticking point is the EU's demand for a post-Brexit "level playing field", with punishing trade penalties if either side diverges from agreed standards or state aid regulations, but Britain does not want to be bound by rules made in Brussels.

Britain's fishing waters are also a hot topic, with sources on Friday saying that Barnier told envoys that London was asking that European access to them be cut by 80 per cent, while the EU was willing to accept 15 to 18 per cent.

The talks have already pushed on much longer than expected and time is running out for ratification of any deal by the European Parliament by the end of the year.

Members of the European Parliament have expressed frustration with the delays and may have to ratify a deal between Christmas and the New Year.

In Brussels, one source close to the talks said she would "eat my hat" if there was a deal by Monday, echoing a chorus of complaints that Johnson was playing the clock. — AFP

ECB sees lower inflation but growth outlook brighter

FRANKFURT: The European Central Bank expects prices in the euro zone to keep falling this year and rebound more slowly in 2021 than it previously thought even as the prospect of a coronavirus vaccine boosts the growth outlook, ECB Vice-President Luis de Guindos said in an interview.

The ECB is due to unveil its new projections on December 10, along with a new stimulus package. De Guindos' comments suggest a cut to the inflation forecast for this year, next year and possibly even 2022 is on the cards.

"Inflation will be negative until the end of the year and we expect that it will turn positive next year", de Guindos said. "All in all, we expect inflation to be close to 1 per cent in 2021 and to see it moving up towards 1.2 per cent or 1.3 per cent in 2022."

De Guindos also confirmed consensus expectations for a contraction in the euro zone economy but said the prospect of a vaccine against the novel coronavirus meant the outlook further out appeared brighter.

— Reuters

US finalises new rules sought by airlines on consumer protections

WASHINGTON: The US Transportation Department said it would add new procedural hurdles before the government could bar most additional unfair or deceptive practices by airlines, in a move sought by the carriers.

The department is codifying a definition of what constitutes unfair or deceptive practices. It will require a three-pronged analysis before adopting new rules deeming airline practices unfair or deceptive and require evidentiary hearings before most new rules are adopted.

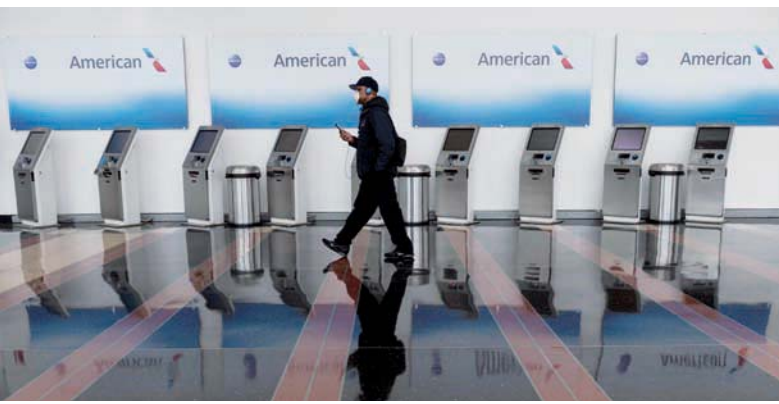
Many Democrats in Congress urged the department to abandon the effort.

Representative Katie Porter said in July that the rule would "weaken enforcement of airline passenger protections." Four senators including Maria Cantwell, the top Democrat on the Commerce Committee, said "industry groups could exploit these new procedural hoops — which the airlines themselves appear to be driving — to delay any DOT action to protect consumers."

The Transportation Department said on Friday the

new rules that apply to airlines and ticket agents provide "greater transparency and predictability on how the department conducts its aviation consumer protection rulemaking and enforcement activities."

The International Air Transport Association and Airlines for America, a trade group that had sought the rules representing major airlines including American Airlines, Delta Air Lines and United Airlines, said earlier the proposed rules would "benefit the public by further enhancing the transparency, predictability, and consistency of DOT's rulemaking and enforcement procedures."



A passenger walks past empty American Airlines check-in terminals at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport in Arlington, Virginia. — Reuters

Southwest Airlines said DOT previously had "not adopted clearly articulated standards or policy statements for determining what constitutes unfairness or deception... Too often this has resulted in overbroad interpretations of DOT's authority."

The definitions are modelled on the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) standards on unfair or deceptive practices. FTC Commissioner Rebecca Slaughter had urged the department not to finalize the rule "because it will seriously hamper the department's ability to fulfil its statutory mission of protecting aviation consumers." — Reuters

Online deals thin US Black Friday crowds



Shoppers wear protective face masks as they look for Black Friday deals at the Ellenton Premium Outlet stores in Ellenton, Florida. — AFP

NEW YORK: Masked shoppers turned up in smaller numbers at major US retailers including Macy's Inc, Walmart Inc and Best Buy Co Inc on Black Friday as early online deals and worry about the spike in COVID-19 cases dulled enthusiasm for trips to the mall.

Retailers overhauled the traditionally busy shopping day that comes the day after Thanksgiving. Walmart opened stores at 5 am on Friday, directing shoppers to turn right upon entering and proceed along main aisles to shop deals before paying at registers surrounded by plastic barriers.

Best Buy opened at 5 am, employing workers in can't miss orange vests to serve as traffic cops. Others offered temperature checks and "grab-and-go" merchandise, including toys, bikes and kitchen appliances to discourage lingering in store aisles.

Bill Park, a partner at Deloitte & Touche LP, estimated traffic at the King of Prussia mall outside of Philadelphia was down about 20-30 per cent compared to last year. "I'm surprised at the traffic. It's down a little bit but heavier than I thought", he said but noted shoppers were not loaded down with packages. — Reuters

SHORT TAKES

WASHINGTON

HSBC considers exit from US retail banking

HSBC Holdings Plc is considering a complete exit from retail banking in the United States after narrowing the options for how to improve performance at its struggling North America business, the *Financial Times* reported on Saturday.

The bank's senior management aim to present the plan to the board in the coming weeks, the *FT* reported, citing people familiar with the situation.

HSBC Holdings Plc said last month it planned to reduce



annual costs to below \$31 billion by 2022, a more ambitious target than it set out in February and well below the operating expenses of \$42.3 billion it reported in 2019.

— Reuters

BRUSSELS

EU delays rules on free carbon permits

The European Commission will confirm in February rules to calculate industries' free carbon permits over the next five years, pushing back a plan to finish the regulations this year.

The EU's carbon market forces polluters to buy permits to cover their emissions, but gives some free permits to industry to deter companies from relocating to outside of Europe to avoid carbon costs.

Draft versions of the rules suggest most industries would

see free credits cut by the highest possible rate over the next five years, as the EU seeks to curb pollution and meet climate goals.

The Commission said it would finalise in February the "benchmarks" to determine industries' free permits over the 2021-2025 period.

The Commission said it was still verifying data from the 11,000 factories and power plants covered by the carbon market, which will help determine the rules. — Reuters

PARIS

Airbus re-sells six unwanted jets built for AirAsia

Airbus has found buyers for six aircraft from the A320neo family rejected by one of its main customers, Malaysia's AirAsia, as it works off a surplus left by the coronavirus crisis, industry sources said.

Unwanted jets have become an emblem of pandemic-induced problems in the aerospace industry that have come on top of a chill in ties between two of its major players.

Tensions became unusually public when Airbus in April



invited tenders for six jets that AirAsia had failed to take delivery of.

It has now found homes for all six, the last of which is being delivered this month, a European industry source said. — Reuters

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Top Story

BREAKING NEWS

86 new Covid-19 cases in Oman, Muscat crosses 1,000-mark

▲ Oman Observer 19/04/2020
Muscat: The Ministry of Health (MOH) in Oman announced 86 new cases of Covid 19 on Saturday, bringing the total ...

Main Stories

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19/04/2020

Turkey's coronavirus cases overtake Iran, highest in Middle East
19/04/2020

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Dubai extends 24-hour coronavirus curfew, Gulf countries implement more drastic measures
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Oman

WE ARE MAKING A SWITCH.

features



Did you know that Oman's dunes can sing?

35 known sand dunes emit a loud rumble that sounds like the low moan of a cello. But how these dunes produce this “music” remains a much-debated mystery. Oman's very own dunes also sing its own songs. Here's a little bit of insight as to why this phenomenon happens... **P18**

INSIDE STORIES

HEALTH & WELLNESS



THE ART AND SCIENCE OF LYING

The tale of Pinocchio is a popular story originally written by Italian writer Collodi in 1881. An old, poor puppeteer carved a marionette out of a piece of enchanted wood and named it Pinocchio. This toy came alive, started abusing the old man and ran away... **Story on Page P20**

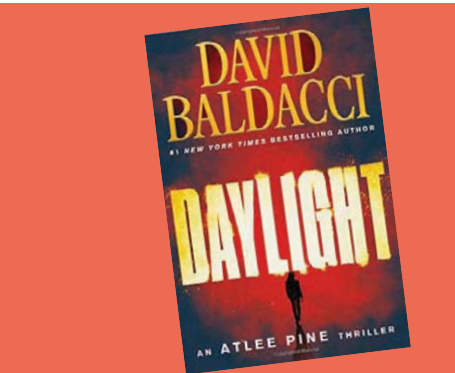
COOK LIKE A CHEF



TUNA TATAKI SALAD

In today's recipe, Chef Rajesh showcases the best way to prepare tuna. Tuna is very high in source of calories and protein. There are many types of tuna but basically the four types are as follow: Yellow fin, blue fin, big eye, skipjack... **Story on Page 19**

READ



DAYLIGHT BY DAVID BALDACC

The FBI agent Atlee Pine's search for her twin sister overlaps with a military investigator's hunt for someone involved in a global conspiracy.

LOCAL TRENDS



TILAL AL IRFAN'S FIRST NATIONAL ART COMPETITION WINNER ANNOUNCED

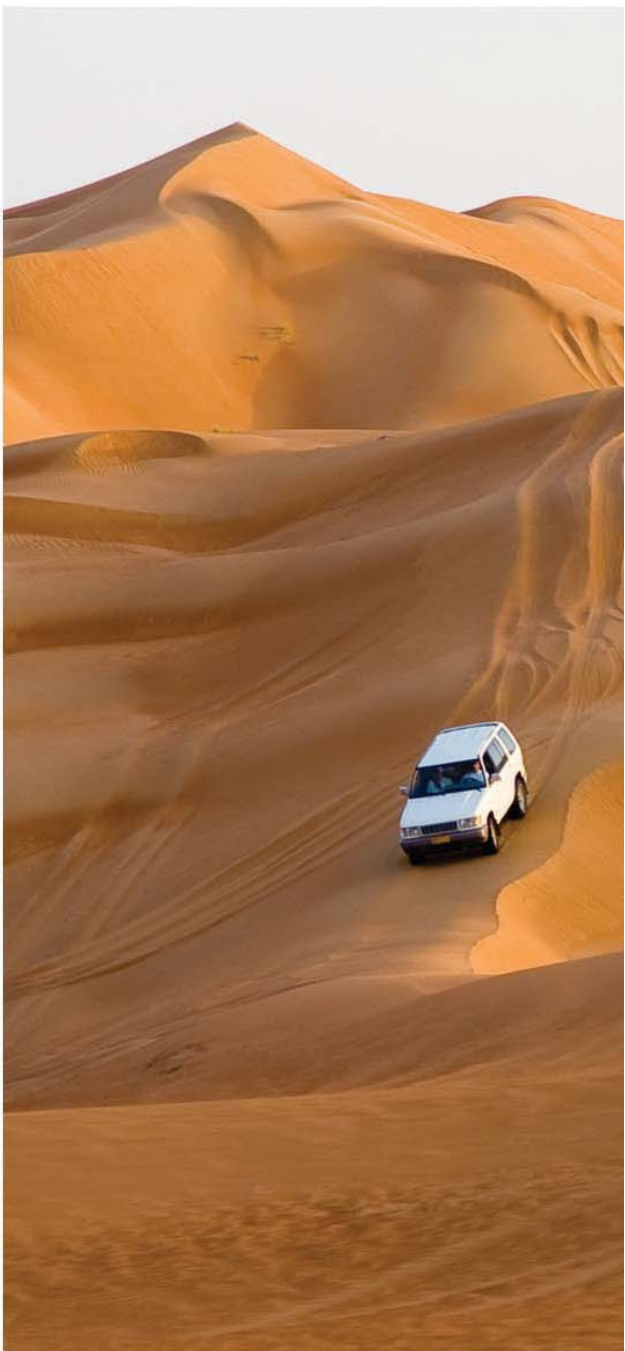
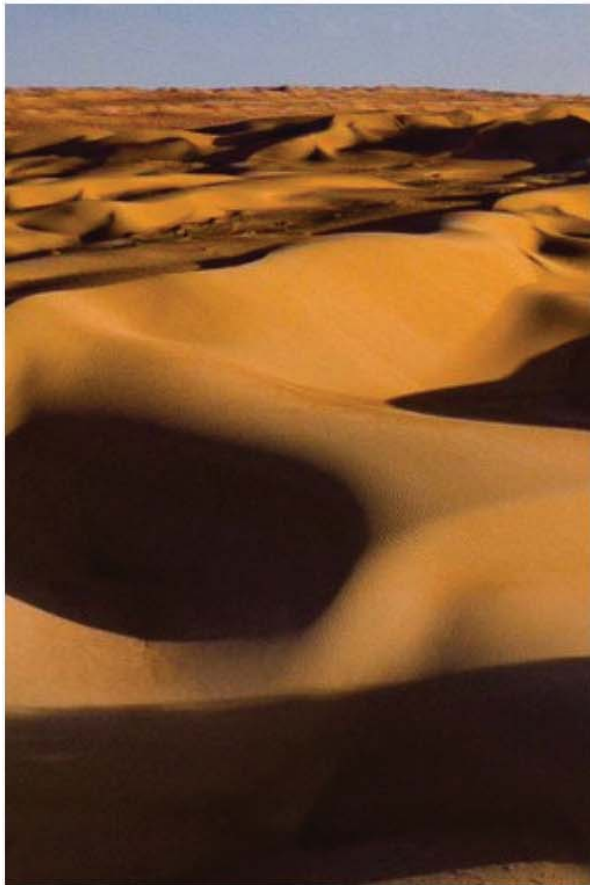
Under the auspices of Sayyid Said bin Sultan al Busaidi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, local artist Muhammad Al Timami has been crowned as the winner of... **Story on Page 19**

CELEBRATE



ELECTRONIC GREETINGS DAY

There was a time when electronic greeting cards were very popular – a means of showing your friends and loved ones' affection. While they've become outdated, they remain to be a great way of communicating how you feel. Electronic Greetings Day marks the perfect occasion to go ahead and bring back one of the treasured practices of the past.



Did you know that Oman's dunes can sing?

BY TITASH CHAKRABORTY

When plagued by whipping desert winds, dunes signal their displeasure with haunting moans that reverberate across the arid landscape. Some emit single-note songs while others mimic a jumbled chorus — but no one knew why they sang these different songs.

In 2012, National Geographic news released an article about this ethereal phenomenon, it read, "When Marco Polo heard it in China, he suspected evil spirits. When residents of Copiapo, Chile, heard it emanating from a sandy hill, they dubbed the peak El Bramador, for its roars and bellows. Scientists today call it "singing sand", but they're all referring to the same thing: As sand grains shuffle down the slopes of certain sand dunes, they produce a deep, groaning hum that reverberates for miles."

Read: <https://www.national-geographic.com/news/2012/10/121031-singing-sand-dunes-physics-science-whistling/>

35 known sand dunes emit a loud rumble that sounds like the low moan of a cello. But how these dunes produce this "music" remains a much-debated mystery. Another vexing question is why different dunes sing different tunes — and how can some even sing more than one note at a time?

This is a natural sound phenomenon of up to 105 decibels, lasting as long as several minutes, that occurs in about 35 desert locations around the world.

For this, they studied sand from two dunes — one in southwestern Morocco and the other in southeastern Oman.

The Omani grains ranged from 150 to 310 microns in size (0.006–0.012 in), which accounted for their broader range of nine notes from 90 to 150 Hz.

When scientists isolated some of the Omani grains by size, their narrower range vibrated at one frequency to produce the same note.

The speed of the moving sand was also a factor. When the grains were all close in size, they moved at similar speeds and consistently produced the same pitch. When the grains varied in size, they moved at different speeds, causing a greater range of notes.

Scientists thought the tones came from vibrations in the dunes' subsurface layers. But researchers found that they could recreate the sound in a lab by letting sand slide down an incline. That proved that the sand, not the dune, was singing. The sound came from the vibrations of the grains themselves as they cascaded down the dune or an inclined lab structure.

Why exactly this happens, and how the sound itself is created, is still uncertain. However, the Parisian scientist's suspects that, during an avalanche, grains of sand move together down the dune — each grain colliding with and rolling around its neighbours, creating a constant stream of collisions. Larger grains of sand move around each other at slower rates and vice versa for smaller grains.

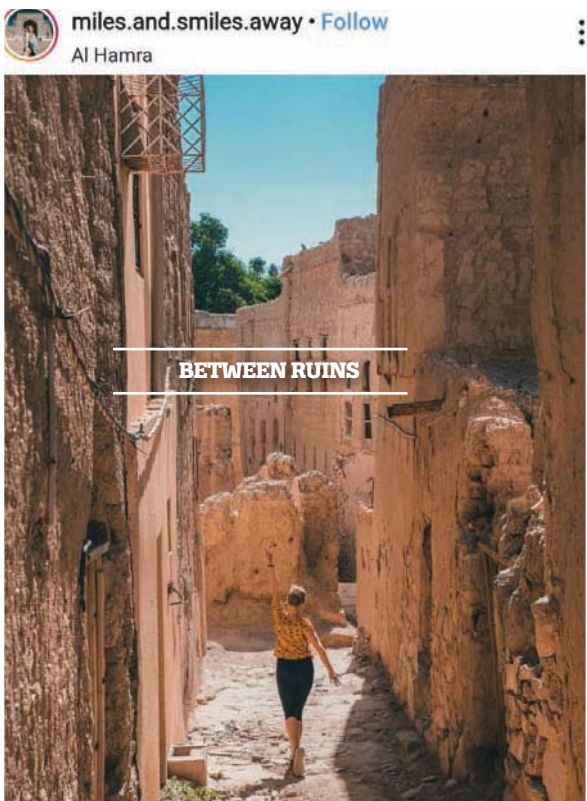
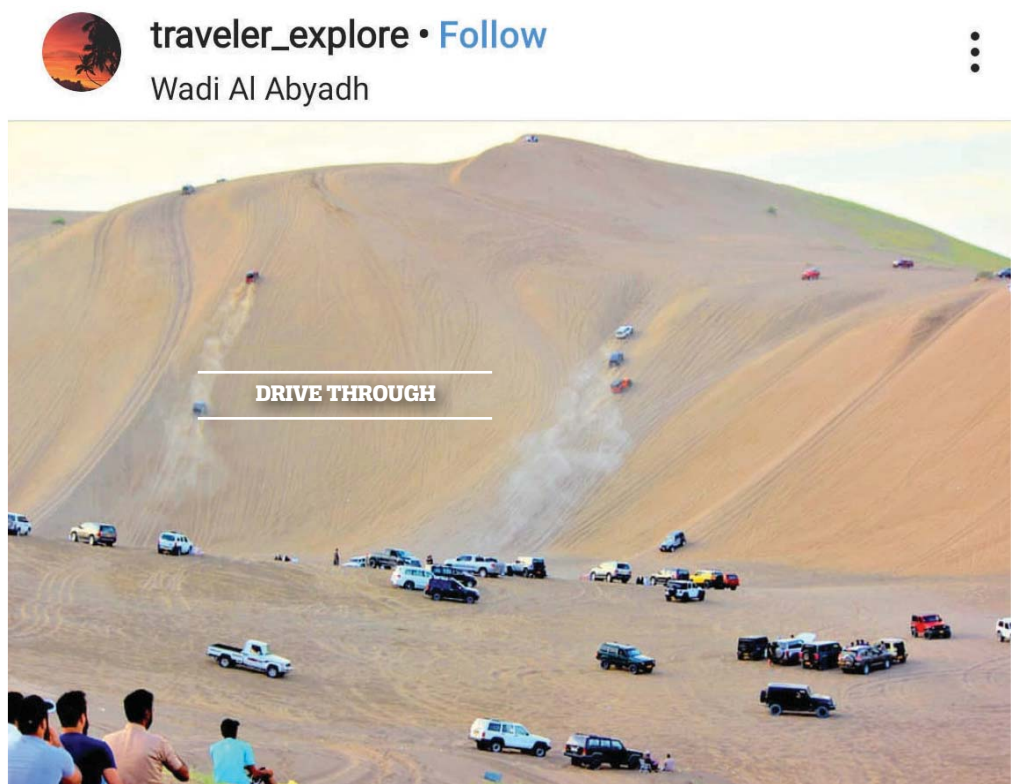
Oman's name is closely associated with the desert. The desert in Oman is an extension of the Bedouin lifestyle with its ancient associations of traditional culture and authentic original customs.

Scientists thought the tones came from vibrations in the dunes' subsurface layers. But researchers found that they could recreate the sound in a lab by letting sand slide down an incline



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COOK LIKE A CHEF

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TUNA TATAKI SALAD (Seared Tuna Salad)



BEST JAPANESE FLAVOURS

Takara is located inside the Intercontinental Hotel Muscat and is one of the country's best Japanese restaurants offering some of the most delicious and authentic Japanese flavours to the Sultanate. The restaurant currently has different promotions from Hana Nights that allows ladies to spoil their appetite every Tuesdays to Unlimited Ala Carte Weekend Lunch.

In today's recipe, Chef Rajesh showcases the best way to prepare tuna. Tuna is very high in source of Calories and protein. There are many types of tuna but basically the four types are as follow: yellow fin, blue fin, big eye, Skipjack.

PREPARATION METHOD

APPLE GINGER

In a clean blender put Kikkoman, rice vinegar, corn oil, ginger, onion, apple and white sugar. Blend well. When the dressing is ready, keep in a food-grade container and store in a freeze. Can be used up to 10 days. Stir well before use and mix ingredients well.

TUNA LOIN PREPARATION

Take a plate and marinate tuna with Kikkoman soy sauce and black pepper. Keep in refrigerator for 15 minutes. Heat the nonstick pan in high flame and add olive oil. Pan must be very hot to sear tuna. Once the pan is very hot, place the marinated tuna on pan and sear all side 10 seconds. (Tuna should not get cooked inside. Tuna must be cooked only from outside so that it will be juicy and soft) Take out from the pan and cut into 1cm thick slice. It will come 15 slices.

SALAD PREPARATION

Take 3 plates and arrange sliced tuna and cherry tomato in all three plates equally. Take a salad mixing bowl. Put mixed salad leaves and cucumber. Add apple, ginger, dressing 60ml (add more or less dressing depending upon your taste) and toss well to mix all dressing properly. Arrange salad on the plate together with sliced tuna. On top of the salad garnish with onions and beetroot.



APPLE GINGER DRESSING
[Yield: 700ml]
225ml Kikkoman soy sauce
225ml Japanese rice vinegar
200ml Corn oil
8gm Ginger peeled
125gm White onion roughly
diced
40gm Apple peeled and roughly
diced
135gm White sugar

200gm Tuna loin (4cm x3cm
x15cm)
20ml Olive
2gm Black pepper

250gm Any kind of mixed salad
leaves (eg: lettuce lollo rosso,
lettuce oak leaves, lettuce frisee
green, baby rocket leaves)
60gm Cucumber (cut into half
slice)
30gm Onion (julienne cut)
8pcs Cherry tomato - cut 1x4pcs
each
50gm Beetroot (Fine julienne
cut)



ABOUT THE CHEF CHEF RAJESH THAPA

Executive Chef

Head Chef
TAKARA Japanese Restaurant

Born in Nepal, Chef Rajesh Thapa, at a very young age has been inspired by the local chefs of Kathmandu. It is from these chefs that he first learned his culinary experience. After years of mastering many of the Nepalese styles of cooking, he moved to Dubai in 2008 and begin venturing into multi-cuisine speciality and working with some of the best 5-star hotels in the country. Working in different restaurants, he eventually gravitated towards Japanese culinary. He would spend the next 10 years working with Jumeirah Group where he pre-opened several of their world-renowned restaurants. As the head chef of Takara, he has dedicated his time into making sure that he prepares not only the freshest ingredients but the best that Japanese dishes have to offer. One of his missions is to train other chefs to become better especially at the Japanese style and art of cooking and inspiring the next generations of Head Chefs.

LOCAL TREND

Tilal Al Irfan's first National Art Competition winner announced



UNDER THE auspices of Sayyid Said bin Sultan al Busaidi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, local artist Muhammad Al Timami has been crowned as the winner of Tilal Al Irfan's first National Art Competition followed by Reem al Hashmi in second place and Mohammed Qamar in third place.

Muhammad Al Timami was one of over a hundred Oman-based artists who submitted designs for a sculpture that would be built within the development's landscape. Tilal Al Irfan is already a destination where the philosophy of place-making is inspiring authentic connections.

The competition ran for two months from September to October, and was open to nationals and residents, who could enter either as an individual or as a team of up to five members. As well as the accolade of winning and the opportunity to have their work seen by thousands of people, there were financial awards too, for both the winner and two runners up.

Al Timami's winning entry was chosen by an esteemed panel of judges made up of Hawazen Esber, CEO of Majid Al Futtaim - Communities, Peter Walichnowski, CEO of OMRAN, Hassan Meer, Arts and Culture Manager at OMRAN and Owner of Stal Gallery, Dr Bader al Maamari, Head of the Art Faculty at Sultan Qaboos University, and Sarah al Ulaqi, Artist and Founder of Cure8art Gallery.

Commenting on the selection, Hawazen Esber, CEO of Majid Al Futtaim - Communities, said: "We were overwhelmed with the positive response to this competition where both the originality and the variety of

the entries, clearly reflected the incredible talent, passion and enthusiasm of artists living and working in Oman."

"Art is a key pillar within Majid Al Futtaim's place-making philosophy and this initiative is one of many that will bring this philosophy alive at Tilal Al Irfan. The designs were all impressive and it was a difficult process narrowing them down to decide on a winner. But Muhammad Al Timami's concept stood out as exceptional and we know that once the sculpture has been created and is standing pride of place outside of the completed Sales and Experience Centre, it will enhance what is set to be an architecturally-striking space that offers something to every resident and visitor."

The winning sculpture will be the first of many prime examples showcasing the design talent in the Sultanate of Oman and a testimony of Tilal Al Irfan's cultural and artistic pillars.

Tilal Al Irfan will continue to build on this initiative and work with local artists to provide them with a platform to challenge their creativity.

Working to an ambitious, contemporary design which features a floating roof, once complete in early 2021, the Sales and Experience Centre will take centre stage opposite the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre.

As well as functioning as the development's HQ, the flagship building will be a creative and engaging focal point for visitors, with features, exhibits and design elements illustrative of how innovative, sustainable and connected life at Tilal Al Irfan is going to be.



The Art and Science of Lying

BY DR SIVA KUMAR
doctsh@gmail.com

The tale of Pinocchio is a popular story originally written by Italian writer Collodi in 1881. An old, poor puppeteer carved a marionette out of a piece of enchanted wood and named it Pinocchio. This toy came alive, started abusing the old man and ran away. To face the world, Pinocchio started lying, but every time he lied, his nose grew longer and gave him much trouble.

It's always fun to listen to someone lying when we already know the truth. The researchers at the University of Granada took this one step further and, apart from enjoying the situation, also took a thermal photograph of the lying person. They found that the temperature around the nose and eyes of the liar increased and swiftly named this the Pinocchio effect.

Psychologists have observed another severe condition resulting from lying, where an individual starts convulsing while they are telling lies. This has become known as the Pinocchio syndrome. This syndrome made doctors very busy when a high-ranking politician suffered from this rare form of epilepsy, which not only affected his health but also his career.

Lying is one of the forms of communication that involves at least two people — the deceiver and the deceived. For a successful transfer of information, both should participate in the process. The deceiver uses various tools such as apathy, ignorance or overconfidence in an effort to convince those being deceived. However, only when those being deceived are gullible enough to believe almost anything does the job become easy. Psychologists consider that lying successfully is one of the most sophisticated and difficult accomplishments of the human brain.

It has been observed that some people

with injuries in the frontal lobe region of the brain are not able to lie. (I'm not sure that hitting our forehead when we do something we regret qualifies as an injury of this kind.) However, scientists are sure that when the prefrontal cortex region of the brain of normal people is electrically stimulated, they become

Lying is one of the forms of communication that involves at least two people — the deceiver and the deceived. For a successful transfer of information, both should participate in the process.

skilled liars.

Psychologists admit that lying is natural and has some evolutionary roots. Many birds seem to be naturally gifted liars. For example, blue jays imitate the sound of hawks to scatter other birds and then take their food, and cowbirds sneak their eggs into other birds' nests without making their own.

Furthermore, eastern grey squirrels

bury nuts safely in one location after pretending to bury them in several other places to mislead nut thieves, and weak, male cuttlefish change their mottled colouration to look like females to avoid being attacked by the larger, more dominant male cuttlefish.

It, therefore, seems that virus-tricking our immune system, chameleons camouflaging themselves to fool predators and humans lying in the workplace could all be evolutionary. After all, many recruitment officers acknowledge that nearly all job applicants exaggerate their qualifications.

There are 24,200,000 Google search results that offer information on the best ways to lie. Some of the sites even provide short courses on do's and don'ts, and train users to learn appropriate gestures and body language. They also promise to prepare their trainees to lie like a pro without being caught. Apparently, one portal even showcases stories of its trainees who have succeeded brilliantly in some professions — but who knows if these are also lies?

It's very true that if lying were a job, some people would quickly become millionaires. Unfortunately for the liars, though, the real millionaires are those in the booming polygraph (lie-detector) manufacturing industry. During polygraph tests, the subject's blood pressure, heart rate, breathing and perspiration levels are measured to assess whether the subject is feeling stress. These parameters are then used to decide if the subject has been lying.

However, as the professional liars have slowly started learning how to be calm and control their breathing and sweating when they lie, the polygraph manufacturers have started to panic. First introduced as early as 1910, the designers of these devices have needed to work constantly to improve and refine them. Recently, a new manufacturer has claimed that their machine uses technology based on magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) and has started marketing them not only for offices but also for homes.