

Indian varsity to release book on late Sultan Qaboos

An Arabic anthology on late His Majesty Sultan Qaboos, features various facets of the legendary leader, will be launched in Indian state of Kerala on Friday. The collection, which comprises extracts from books, newspaper and magazine reports, are compiled by two Arabic linguists of Kerala's Calicut University and will be dedicated to the late Sultan legacy on his first death anniversary. SEE PAGE 3



P10

PETERHANSEL RETAINS OVERALL LEAD



P15

APPLE TIES EXECUTIVES BONUSES TO SOCIAL, ENVIRONMENTAL VALUES



P20

MAINTENANCE OF AL DHUWAIOA FALAJ COMPLETED



MUSCAT

VISION 2040 TO BOOST US-OMAN PARTNERSHIP

The US business community views positively and confidently the steps taken by the Government of Oman under the leadership of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik. These steps are aimed at boosting the economic climate, supporting the private sector and pulling more investments. This was stated by Kimberly A Reed, President and Chairman of Export-Import Bank of the United States (EXIM). Reed commended the promising sectors that were included in the Oman Vision 2040 affirming that EXIM can contribute to reinforcing economic and investment relations between the two countries. SEE P2

BEIJING

CHINA DENIES ENTRY TO WHO PROBE TEAM

An expert mission to China to probe the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic was in disarray on Wednesday after Beijing denied entry to the World Health Organization team at the last minute despite months of painstaking negotiations. Ten experts were due to arrive in China this week for the delicate, highly politicised task of establishing how and where the virus jumped from animals to humans. But with a number of the team already in transit, China denied them entry visas, prodding WHO Chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, to say he was "very disappointed". SEE P7

Now get news on the go



INSIDE



HONG KONG ARRESTS 53 FOR PLOT TO 'OVERTHROW' GOVT

P7



A NEW VOICE IN INDIAN FARM PROTESTS

P9



Royal Decree turns MSM into joint stock company

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik issued a Royal Decree No 5/2021 on Wednesday converting Muscat Securities Market (MSM) into a closed joint stock company under the name Muscat Bourse Company SAOG.

Article (1) states that, by virtue of provisions of this decree, an Omani closed joint stock company shall be founded under the name "Muscat Bourse Company SAOG" and that its ownership shall be transferred to Oman Investment Authority.

Article (2) states that all the allocations, origins, rights, obligations, assets and registers of Muscat Securities Market (MSM) shall be transferred to Muscat Bourse Company SAOG.

Article (3) transfers the employees of MSM to Muscat Bourse Company SAOG, in

Muscat Bourse Company SAOG shall practice all its activities within the framework of the Capital Market Law and thereby comes under the monitoring and supervision of the Capital Market Authority (CMA)

line with provisions of the Privatization Law promulgated under Royal Decree 51/2019.

Article (4) transfers all specializations of Muscat Securities Market stated in the Capital Market Law (promulgated under Royal Decree No 80/98) shall be transferred to Muscat Bourse Company SAOG, without

prejudice to this company's objectives stated in its Articles of Association.

Article (5) stipulates that Muscat Bourse Company SAOG shall practice all its activities within the framework of the Capital Market Law and thereby comes under the monitoring and supervision of the Capital Market Authority (CMA).

It also states that Muscat Bourse Company SAOG may issue all regulations and decisions necessary for practising its specializations, achieving its objectives and specifying fees against the services that it offers, after the approval of the CMA. Till such time, the regulations and laws in force shall continue to be implemented without prejudice to the provisions of this decree. TURN TO P3

Expats can change job status till January 21

SAMUEL KUTTY
@samkuttyvp

The Ministry of Labour has extended the grace period to companies in Oman to correct the status of their expatriate employees till January 21.

"Employers can make changes to the job titles of their expatriate workers who are working in professions that are Omanised", said a statement from the ministry on Wednesday.

According to the ministry, the decision to extend the grace period has been taken as part of the

government's efforts to re-organise and regulate the labour market. The ministry in a recent statement said that it was reviewing the legislation to regulate the labour market in its efforts to improve working conditions that will benefit the national workforce.

"The new regulations, to be rolled out in cooperation with other relevant authorities, will be in line with professional standards that can stimulate the work environment and contribute to the national economy", the statement said.

HM receives phone call from US Secretary of State

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on Wednesday received a phone call from Mike Pompeo, US Secretary of State. They discussed bilateral cooperation between the two friendly nations as well as the regional developments. — ONA

VAT FROM APRIL 16

THE TAX AUTHORITY announced the framework and related guidelines for registration of tax-eligible businesses and organisations in the Sultanate.

NO VALUE ADDED TAX FOR 94 ITEMS

These include meat, fish, poultry, dairy products, fresh eggs, vegetables, fruits, coffee, tea, cardamom, cereals and grains, olive oil, sugar, baby foods, bread, bottled water and table salt.

MANDATORY REGISTRATION

If the taxpayer's annual turnover is RO 38,500 or more

TAX

VOLUNTARY REGISTRATION

If the taxpayer's annual turnover is RO 19,500 or more

SAVE THE DATE

February 1 to March 15

April 1 to July 1

Taxpayers whose turnover is RO 1 million have to register from February 1 to March 15. VAT applicable from April 16

For taxpayers whose turnover is RO 500,000, registration begins from April 1 to July 1

SEE REPORT ON P13

ROP LAUNCHES DRIVING SIMULATOR



Royal Oman Police launched a driving simulator unit in Ibri on Wednesday. It is aimed at facilitating the application procedures through a technical system that allows the applicants to perform the preliminary test required for obtaining a driver's licence electronically. The e-system enables the applicant to book an appointment and do the theoretical tests electronically following which the applicant moves to simulation devices that utilises augmented reality technology. SEE P2

ROP launches new online traffic services

IBRI: The Royal Oman Police (ROP) on Wednesday opened a traffic safety institutes system in different governorates of the Sultanate, and launched three online traffic services. The new online traffic services include an electronic system for the testing of drivers, online issuance of driver's licence and online issuance of vehicle registration card.

This was announced at an event held at the Traffic Safety Institute in Ibri in Al Dhahirah Governorate as part of the Royal Oman Police (ROP) Annual Day celebrations held under the auspices of Lt Gen Hasan bin Mohsin al Shraiqi, Inspector-General of Police and Customs.

The opening of the traffic

safety institutes system marks the beginning of an integrated electronic system that utilises modern technology and advanced devices for the training of vehicle drivers and increasing their traffic awareness in partnership with local and international entities.

The electronic driver's testing is aimed at facilitating the application procedures through a technical system that allows the applicants to perform the preliminary test required for obtaining a driver's licence electronically. The e-system enables the applicant to book an appointment and do the theoretical tests electronically following which the applicant moves to simulation devices



that utilises augmented reality technology.

The online issuance of driver's licence and vehicle registration

cards enables the user to get copies of the driver's licence and vehicle registration cards and save them on their smartphone.

The service also enables the user to follow up the status and validity of the driver's licence. The system can be accessed via the ROP smartphone application.

Brigadier Engineer Mohammed bin Awad al Rawas, Director-General of Traffic stated that the traffic safety institutes will contribute to raising traffic awareness in all governorates of the Sultanate and play a significant role in qualifying motorists and road-users. They will also provide qualification programmes for drivers involved in several road accidents or have a record of multiple traffic violations as well as the drivers of public transport vehicles such as school buses and trucks.

In brief

MUSCAT

114 NEW COVID-19 CASES, 2 DEATHS

The Ministry of Health registered 114 new coronavirus cases and 2 deaths in Oman on Wednesday. The total cases in the country have now touched 129,888 including 122,456 recoveries and 1,504 deaths, according to MoH. In the past 24 hours, 50 recoveries were reported.

MINISTRY, BE'AH SIGN PACT

The Ministry of Energy and Minerals signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Oman Environmental Services Holding Company (be'ah) which aims to promote safe disposal of waste. The MoU was signed by Dr Mohammed bin Hamed al Rumhi, Minister of Energy and Minerals, and Tariq bin Ali al Amri, CEO of be'ah.

COMPANY LOSES RO 4.5 MILLION

Sweets of Oman said it has taken legal action against employees who have misrepresented its financial statements for the second quarter of 2020 which caused the company a loss of over RO 4.5 million. In a statement issued to Muscat Securities Market (MSM), the company it appointed an independent auditor to review the statements.

Five-Year Plan eyes 3.5 per cent GDP growth rate

MUSCAT: Dr Nasser Rashid al Maawali, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Economy, said that the 10th Five-Year Plan will focus on achieving a real GDP growth rate of not less than 3.5 per cent on average and 5.5 per cent in nominal GDP growth rate, as well as increasing the investment rate to 27 per cent of GDP on average.

One of the main objectives of the plan is to attract more foreign direct investment in the oil and

non-oil sectors, to reach 10.9 percent of the GDP by the end of the plan. It also aims to increase the private sector's contribution to investment to reach 60 per cent on average, as well as achieving a real growth rate for non-oil activities estimated at about 3.2 per cent on average, and maintaining safe and stable inflation rates in the range of 2.8 per cent annually.

He said, "Oman Vision 2040 has been directly followed up and



supervised by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik. The 10th plan reflects the directions of His

Majesty that were included in his historic speech on February 23, 2020. The 10th plan is of great importance at this historical stage and is considered the first implementation plan for the vision. It is also the first tool by which the potentials of the future vision and the proposed initiatives and policies are implemented in order to achieve the goals of the vision during the next five years."

He concluded that there will be

a special pamphlet known as "The Citizen's Guide for the Tenth Five-Year Plan" in addition to a number of other documents within the plan's outputs, including a volume for "The 1st Year Projects in the 10th Five-Year Plan", "Monitoring and Evaluation Framework for the 10th Five-Year Plan" and a volume for "The 10th Five-Year Plan Programmes" which will be released in the first quarter of 2021. — ONA

Vision 2040 to boost US-Oman economic ties

MUSCAT: The US business community views positively and confidently the steps taken by the Government of Oman under the leadership of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik. These steps are aimed at boosting the economic climate, supporting the private sector and pulling more investments.

This was stated by Kimberly A Reed, President and Chairman of Export-Import Bank of the United States (EXIM). She noted that the US trade team in Muscat is making great efforts mainly aimed at acquainting the US business community with the investment opportunities available in the Sultanate.

Reed commended the promising sectors that were included in the Oman Vision 2040 affirming that EXIM can contribute to reinforcing economic and investment relations between the two countries.

The Oman Vision 2040 marks a renewed renaissance in the Sultanate and represents an opportune chance for starting a new phase of partnership relations between the Sultanate and the US particularly in the economic fields, the chairman of EXIM said underscoring the depth of the historic and strategic relationship binding the two nations in various economic, trade and investment fields.

The chairman of EXIM added that the future carries a multitude of promising opportunities for both sides that have the potentiality of boosting trade exchange and enhancing economic and investment cooperation. She called on



Export-Import Bank of the United States (EXIM) has some important sectors that can support the strategic relations between the Sultanate and the US and the value added fields

KIMBERLY A REED
President and Chairman, EXIM

businessmen in both countries to seize the opportunities and facilitations set forth in the free trade agreement signed between the friendly countries.

Despite the exceptional conditions the world currently

witness due to the coronavirus outbreak, EXIM was able to carry out a lot of initiatives and steps that contributed in one way or another to fostering the US relations with its strategic partners including the Sultanate. On this side, she said, we believe that Export-Import Bank of the United States (EXIM) has some important sectors that can support the strategic relations between the Sultanate and the US and the value added fields.

She added that these sectors are wireless communications, 5G technology, agriculture and aquaculture, biotechnology, wastewater treatment, manufacturing, medical sciences and mining all of which are promising sectors in the Sultanate. He explained that the US possesses advanced equipment that can be well utilized in many of these sectors. — ONA



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Indian varsity to release book on Sultan Qaboos

KABEER YOUSUF

@KABEERYOUSEF

An Arabic anthology on the late His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said, features various facets of the legendary leader, will be launched in the Indian state of Kerala on Friday.

The collection, which comprises extracts from books, newspaper and magazine reports, are compiled by two Arabic linguists of Kerala's Calicut University and will be dedicated to the late Sultan legacy on his first death anniversary.

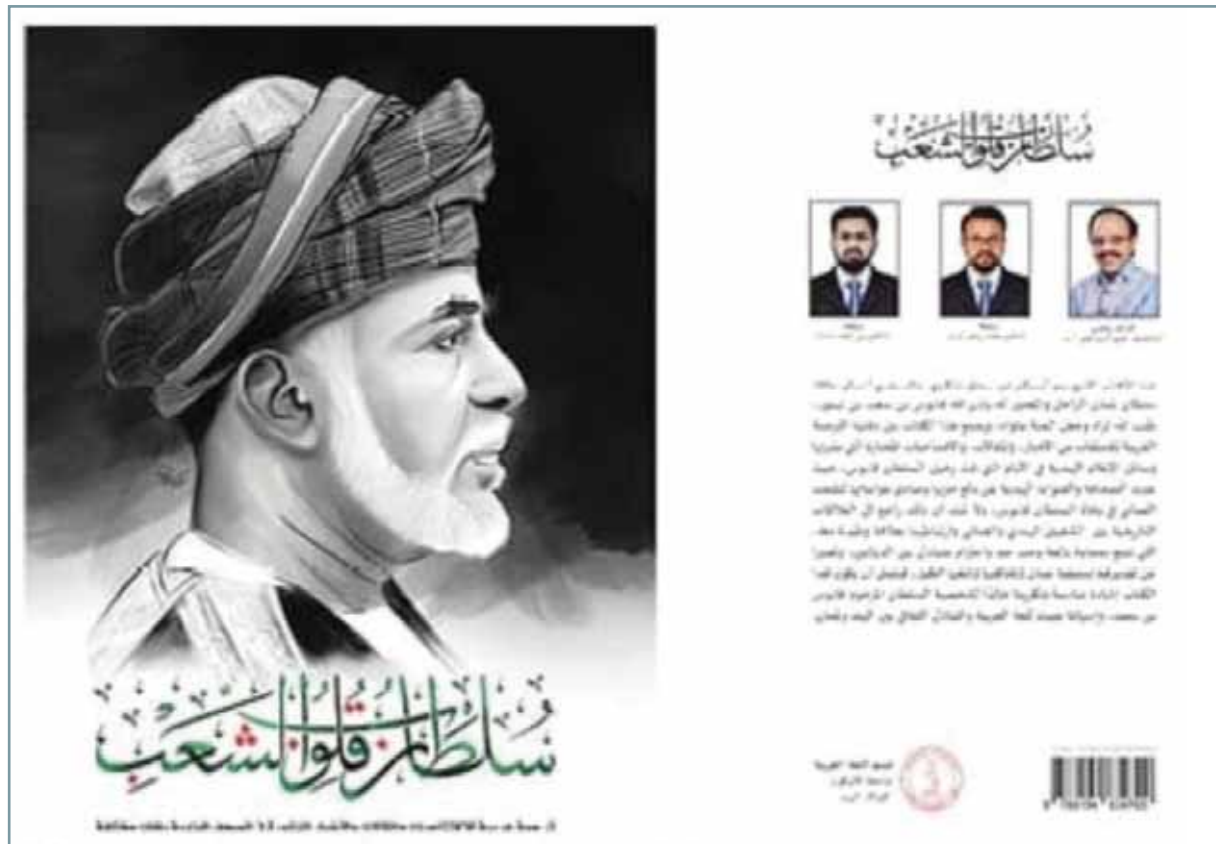
Over the past year, the Department of Arabic Language at the University has been collecting data pertaining to the HM after he left for heavenly abode on January 10, 2020. They translated the various articles appeared on Indian and other foreign media

into Arabic and compiled them into a book.

"This book is a befitting tribute to a personality that lived for the nation and loved his people and set an example with his life how a leader should be," said KV Mohammed Riyas, Arabic teacher at Calicut University who, along with KK Zainul Abid, Arabic lecturer at the Meenchanda Government Arts College prepared the book.

KT Jaleel, Minister for Higher Education, Welfare of Minorities, Waqf and Hajj of Kerala, has written the preface to the book while Professor AB Moideen Kutty, Chairman, Minority Welfare Department has edited the book.

Dr P Mohammed Ali will receive the first copy of the book from Dr KT Jaleel amid a gathering of intellectuals, politicians



and diplomats at the Le Meriden Hotel Kochi. "It gives me immense pleasure to be a part of such a distinguished initiative of an Arabic book on the late His Majesty Sultan Qaboos," said Dr P Mohammed Ali.

The first Indian book on His Majesty in Malayalam was launched in 2010 with Dr Ali's efforts and was launched by Abdullah bin Naser al Rahbi, who is now Oman's ambassador to Egypt. "Letting various generations know about the life and mission of the late His Majesty, on the first anniversary of mourning, would be a great, fulfilling deed," said Dr P Mohammed Ali.

A seminar on Oman-India relations will be held as part of the book launch where experts will brainstorm various ways on catapulting the bilateral relations that are more than 5,000 years old.

RO 6.5m agreement to set up smart agriculture project

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MoAFWR) signed on Wednesday an agreement to lease 100 acres to Agricultural and Fisheries Development Company (AFDC) to invest and implement the smart agriculture project in the Wilayat of Al Kamil W'al Wafi.

The RO 6.5 million project aims to increase the productivity of various vegetables, extend their production seasons, and raise the quality and safety of local production. This agreement comes within the framework of joint cooperation between the public and private sectors and approaches of Oman Vision 2040 to encourage investment, especially in the agricultural and animal fields, in order to achieve local food security and create job opportunities for citizens.

Smart agriculture is defined as a system that relies on advanced technology in cultivating agricultural crops in sustainable and clean ways, and rationalising



the use of natural resources. The project focuses on introducing advanced technologies in the agricultural sector and raising the efficiency of using agricultural resources and inputs to produce vegetables. The project will also serve young Omani investors in the Integrated Agriculture Project in the Wilayat of Al Kamil W'al Wafi.

The project consists of greenhouses, shade houses, soilless farming techniques, open field cultivation techniques, mechanization, modern irrigation

networks, a wireless agricultural meteorological station, warehouses, production sorting and processing facilities, and other facilities. The project seeks to cultivate varieties of vegetables. 150,000 square metres will be allocated for winter cultivation of various crops, which will focus on new varieties. The agreement was signed by Dr Saud bin Hamoud al Habsi, Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, and Abdullah bin Mohammed al Siyabi, Director-General of AFDC.

Royal Decree converts MSM into joint stock company

FROM PAGE 1

— Article (6) states that the Capital Market Authority shall determine the general policy governing Muscat Bourse Company SAOG and shall issue regulations and laws regulating licences necessary to be granted to the company so that it could practice its activities, as well as fees that it needs to pay to the CMA. — Article (7) states that the Board of Directors of Muscat Bourse Company SAOG shall be formed in accordance with the company's Articles of Association

and that the CMA may object to the decision of appointing a Board of Directors within a period of 15 days from the date the CMA is notified of such a decision. — Article (8) states that Muscat Bourse Company SAOG must obtain the approval of the CMA prior to appointing a Chief Executive Officer for the company and employees for the top management of the company. — Article (9) instructs Oman Investment Authority to draft a contract of the foundation of Muscat Bourse Company SAOG

and its Articles of Association and to finalise its registration procedures in accordance with provisions of the Commercial Companies Law (promulgated under Royal Decree No 18/2019) before the date of enforcement of this law. — Article (10) cancels Muscat Securities Market (MSM), as well as all that contradicts this decree or contravenes its provisions. — Article (11) says that this decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced after 90 days from its date of publication. — ONA



Sultanate of Oman Government Development Bonds

The Central Bank of Oman announces an issue of Sultanate of Oman Government Development Bonds to be sold by auction. The 66th Issue of Government Development Bonds will be issued on Wednesday, 20/01/2021, carrying a coupon rate of 4.75% per annum for a maturity period of 3 years (maturing on Saturday, 20/01/2024). These Bonds will be auctioned on Monday, 18/01/2021. Investors may apply for these Bonds through competitive bidding only.

Security of Capital

Total security is offered as the Bonds are registered and transferable only by means of a document evidencing the transaction between a buyer and a seller through Muscat Securities Market. The Bonds are direct and unconditional obligations of the Government of the Sultanate of Oman.

Steady and Attractive Returns

Interest of 4.75% per annum is payable half-yearly during the life of the Bond, commencing from the date of issue (i.e. Wednesday, 20/01/2021). The interest will be paid semi-annually on 20th July and 20th January, every year till maturity of the Bond on Saturday, 20/01/2024. The first interest payment will be on 20/07/2021.

Liquidity

The Bonds can be liquidated before maturity by trading in Muscat Securities Market at the prevailing market price.

Collateral Advantage

The Bonds can be used as a collateral security to obtain loans from any commercial licensed bank.

Who Can Invest?

Resident and Non-resident Investors, such as Banks, Financial Institutions, Companies, Individuals and any other entity of any nationality.

How to Apply?

Prospectus and Application Forms can be obtained from any commercial licensed bank operating in the Sultanate of Oman. Completed applications can be submitted through any commercial licensed bank.

MSM Investor Code

The investor must provide the MSM Investor Code in his/her application.

Anyone who does not have MSM Investor Code, can obtain it from Muscat Clearing and Depository Co. (MCD) through their website at least one day prior to submitting the application to the commercial bank (www.mcd.gov.om) or can contact the following numbers:

Tel: +968 24822222 / 24822280 / 24822281 / 24822260
Fax: +968 24810555
E-mail: mcd.support@mcd.gov.om

Bank Account Details

An investor must provide the same Bank Account details registered with MCD.

THE MINIMUM SUBSCRIPTION AMOUNT IS R.O. 500 AND IN MULTIPLES OF R.O. 100 THEREOF



Central Bank of Oman

P.O. Box 1161, Postal Code 112, Sultanate of Oman
Tel: 24777635 / 24777837 / 24777145, Fax: +968 24777772, E-mail: mod@cbo.gov.om

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KAUSHALENDRA SINGH
@patkaushal

Ban on single-use plastic bags may turn into boon for some real entrepreneurs who have will to grab the opportunity out of the possible shortage of shopping bags in the market.

At least one such woman entrepreneur is excited to grab the opportunity, as she has been facing the problem with the customers at her coffee shop enterprise. She is also a skilled handicraft trainer.

Umm Majin admitted it to be very normal for the customers to come empty handed even though they wanted to take things home or to a meeting point as a matter of pastime with family and friends.

“It is due to several years of habit that make them come out for shopping without any personal bags. It will take time for them to accustom to the situation and come with their own bags,” she said, and added that here was the opportunity for the entrepreneurs to contact the supermarkets and supply bags.

“Markets are driven by demand and supply. In the event of ban on single-use plastic bags the demand for cotton or jute bags is going to be very high. Without waiting for support, the real entrepreneurs should jump and grab the opportunity,” she said.

A qualified handicraft trainer, Umm Majin said the handicraft centres spread all over the Sultanate can do the mass production of daily shopping bags made of clothes or other bio degradable fabrics and hit the market as soon as possible.

PLASTIC
BAN
A
BOON
FOR
ENTREPRENEURS

“It is like first come first served, because unlike the plastic bags, these personal bags would be washable and reusable. So the demand for them would stabilise after sometime,” she said.

Umm Majin is already facing the problem of not having non-plastic delivery bags at her coffee shop for the customers who prefer take-away rather than sitting and eating.

And the demand is there from across the sectors, mostly those who are into retail businesses.

“I went to a local hypermarket to buy things for my coffee shop, but the sales team did not provide me any bag. I keep all of them into the shopping trolley and put them in my car. The real problem is how to take those stuff from parking lot to the house.”

The situation has put many customers off guard, as they did not have any idea about the ban.

When asked Hythem, a shopper at one of the hypermarkets, said the hypermarkets should have run some drive one month before to create awareness among the people. There are people who do not have any clue about the ban and there are people who are going out of the shopping outlets without any shopping.

“The smart move should have been organising some awareness campaign inside the respective shopping malls. People would have purchased those bags in advance,” he said.

He, however, welcomed the move to ban single-use plastic bags and said it was just matter of time. People would get tuned to it and come with their own bags for shopping.





Mazoon Dairy inks pact to recycle plastic waste

STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT, JAN 6

Mazoon Dairy Company signed an agreement on Wednesday to recycle plastic and solid waste with the Recycling Services Company. With this Mazoon Dairy seeks to recycle 90 per cent of its waste.

The agreement was signed by Ahmed bin Muhammad al Ghafri, Chief Support Officer, on behalf of Mazoon Dairy, while Mahmoud bin Abdullah al Ameri, CEO, signed on behalf of Recycling Services Company.

The agreement signing coincided with the Sultanate's celebration of Omani Environment Day, which falls on January 8 every year. It is an expression of participation in the global and the national efforts to preserve and conserve the environmental resources with an emphasis on Omani rooted culture to cope up with the environmental issues.

"The agreement is the first of its kind in the Sultanate, as the company has spaces dedicated to sorting all kinds of waste and recycling within its facilities," said the Chief Support Officer at Mazoon Dairy.

"This agreement will expand the company's waste recycling scope to include more types and quantities of waste that go to other activities that include more types and quantities of plastic and solid waste. It is part of our social responsibility and our commitment towards efficient waste management resulting from our operations," he said.

Mazen bin Hilal al Saadi, Director of Occupational Health,



The amount of recycled and reused materials are estimated at 5 to 10 tonnes per day, as the organic waste is transferred to the biogas plant, and the solid waste will be recycled

MAZEN AL SAADI

Director

Safety and Environment of the company, said, "The amount of recycled and reused materials are estimated at 5 to 10 tonnes per day, as the organic waste is transferred to the biogas plant, and the solid waste will be recycled. The amount of plastic that will be recycled is estimated at 250 tonnes and will increase with the expansion of operations."

The initiative, according to him, will achieve a quantum leap in terms of sustainability and preservation of the environment and within the environmental solutions that Mazoon Dairy has

drawn up."

Earlier also Mazoon Dairy Company worked on afforestation of its site in Al Sinaina in As'sallahiyah with 7,000 different types of trees, where the step of afforestation came after the completion of all construction work on the site, ensuring the operation of the sewage plant, and equipping modern irrigation systems. It has a variety of cultivated trees, including windbreaks, ornamental, and some fruit trees that are suitable for the desert environment. These programmes include sustainability plans, reducing emissions, and environmentally friendly solutions.

The company has also banned the use of plastic on its site through the distribution of environment-friendly bags from July last year. Under the initiative, environment-friendly bags were distributed among the people of Al Sinaina which became the first wilayat to ban the use of plastic bags.

Mazoon Dairy Company is the largest integrated dairy project in the Sultanate, with an estimated capital of RO 100 million. It is located in Al Sinaina in Al Buraimi Governorate and was built on an area estimated at 15 square kilometres.

Study looks at students' English competence online

STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT, JAN 6

Due to the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education institutions in Oman are moving from face-to-face instruction to emergency remote teaching and, then, to blended learning which is a combination of face-to-face learning and online learning. Dr Said al Amrani, an Assistant Professor at Sohar University, in collaboration with Dr Michael Harrington, an Associate Professor at The University of Queensland in Australia, published a research paper in an international Scopus-indexed journal titled 'the impact of online social presence on Omani female students' willingness to communicate in English.' "Social presence" is a concept that describes a set of influences on online interaction and online L2 learning. It is defined as an individual's degree of awareness of another person during an interaction online, and the consequent sense of an interpersonal relationship.

The study reports the findings of one of the first research projects to examine the impact of student online social presence, an emerging concept in computer-mediated communication (CMC), on learners' willingness to communicate (WTC) in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Oman. It also examines how learners' WTC is affected by CMC-based activities that were specifically designed to address WTC for Omani EFL students. The study took place



Dr Said al Amrani, Assistant Professor, Sohar University

at Sohar University, the first private university in Oman, where English is the medium of instruction. The explanatory study used a mixed-method research design. The participants first answered questionnaires before and after completing online communication tasks. Volunteer students were then invited to follow-up interviews in order to expand and elaborate on their questionnaire responses.

The findings of the study support the positive influence of text-based CMC activities on students' self-perceived communication competence in English, which in turn boosted their WTC. Levels of significance between students' WTC varied considerably according to communication contexts (small groups, large groups) and interlocutor types (friends, acquaintances and strangers). Interestingly, most respondents reported that they were more

willing to communicate in online environments than in face-to-face environments, but the low social presence of the text-based CMC environment used in this study (discussion boards, chat rooms, e-mails) seems to have affected the participants' WTC negatively. Students indicated that some aspects of online social contexts, including limited keyboard skills, lack of immediacy, inadequately structured discussion, and limited interactivity had negative effects on their online WTC in English.

The study has a number of pedagogical implications, which can help EFL instructors to better understand their students' communicative behaviours and enhance their digital fluency, with an aim to increase learning engagement levels, improve overall foreign language proficiency and increase WTC in EFL settings.

Qatar Airways resumes daily Muscat flights



STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT, JAN 6

Qatar Airways announced the resumption of daily flights to Muscat starting from January 7, as well as weekly flights to Salalah, with the first service having touched down at Salalah Airport on January 1.

The newly resumed flights to Salalah will leave Doha each Friday at 08:25 (05:25 UTC) am and arrive to Salalah at 12:00 local time. Flights from Salalah are scheduled on Fridays at 16:00 local time to arrive to Doha at 17:50. The flights to Muscat will fly daily from Doha at 00:45, arriving to Oman capital at 03:25, and leave Muscat at 04:40, landing in Doha at 05:30. This schedule will be valid from January to March 26, 2021.

Qatar Airways and Oman Air recently signed a code-share

expansion that will significantly increase the number of destinations available to Oman Air passengers from three to 65* on the Qatar Airways' network across Africa, the Americas, Asia Pacific, Europe, India and the Middle East. Qatar Airways passengers will also benefit from additional connectivity, with the ability to book travel on an additional six destinations across Africa and Asia in Oman Air's network. Both airlines will also explore a number of joint commercial and operational initiatives to further optimise their partnership.

Bennet Stephens, Qatar Airways' Vice-President Sales for Gulf, Middle East, Levant and Caucasus region, said: "We are pleased to continue rebuilding our network and offering our passengers the opportunity to travel safely from Muscat and Salalah. We are delighted with

the response from the students' community of Oman to our student club programme, where they can enjoy great savings and bespoke benefits such as extra baggage allowances, the flexibility to change the dates of their flight, complimentary Super Wi-Fi onboard."

Qatar Airways is currently flying to over 110 destinations worldwide with more than 800 weekly flights, providing more global connectivity than any other airline and connecting to US, GCC, Europe and Levant regions. Starting from January 29, Qatar Airways will restart flights to Seattle, almost two months ahead of the initial schedule. Passengers travelling to and from US will have an opportunity to enjoy the QSuite, the World's Best Business Class Seat, offered by Qatar Airways on all its US flights.

SULTANATE OF OMAN MINISTRY OF HEALTH

ANNOUNCEMENT

The Ministry of Health invites specialized companies to participate in the following Tenders: -

Tender Ref.	Description	Last date for Collection of tender Document	Closing Time/ Day/ Date	Eligibility	Tender Fee (Non-Refundable)
MOH/HQ-94/2020 Recall - 1	Supply & Installation of Additional Medical Gases Terminal Outlets at Al Nahdha Hospital	14/January/2021	Before 08 am on Wednesday 10/February/2021	Specialized Companies registered with Tender Board	R.O 25,000 Per set
MOH/HQ-130/2020 Recall - 1	Replacement of RDU Water Treatment Plant at Al-Buraimi Hospital in Al-Buraimi Governorate	14/January/2021	Before 08 am on Wednesday 10/February/2021	Specialized Companies registered with Tender Board	R.O 25,000 Per set
MOH/HQ-1/2021	Supply of Pharmaceuticals for the Royal Hospital	14/January/2021	Before 08 am on Wednesday 10/February/2021	Specialized Companies registered with Tender Board	R.O 32,500 Per set
MOH/HQ-2/2021	Supply and Installation of IP PABX system for Barbazoom Heath Center in Dhofar Governorate	14/January/2021	Before 08 am on Wednesday 10/February/2021	Specialized Companies registered with Tender Board	R.O 25,000 Per set
MOH/HQ-3/2021	Implementation of Enterprise wise Business Intelligence solution at Various Health Establishments	14/January/2021	Before 08 am on Wednesday 10/February/2021	Specialized Companies registered with Tender Board	R.O 25,000 Per set
MOH/HQ-4/2021	Supply and Installation of Reverse Osmosis Plant at Al-Nahdha Hospital	14/January/2021	Before 08 am on Wednesday 10/February/2021	Specialized Companies registered with Tender Board	R.O 25,000 Per set
MOH/HQ-5/2021	Supply of Educational Books for Foundation Program at Oman College of Health Science	14/January/2021	Before 08 am on Wednesday 10/February/2021	Specialized Companies registered with Tender Board	R.O 25,000 Per set

- All Specialized and interested Companies registered with Tender Board on the above mentioned Grade may obtain Tender documents from the E. Tendering website: <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om> against non-refundable payment as mentioned above for each set of document.
- Tenders should be submitted on line on the given website signed and sealed. The Tenderer should enclose scan copy of Bank Guarantee or a certified Cheque issued by a Local bank for not less than One percent (1%) for the Tender value validity for (90) days from the Tender Submission date, addressed to The Chairman of the Tender Committee before one day of date submission.
- The Original Bank Guarantee should be submitted to the office of Director of Purchase and Tenders one day before the submission date for all Tenders.
- Ministry is not bound to accept the lowest tender and reserves the right to accepts or reject any tender.

(<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>)

Any Clarification, you may contact via
Telephone: 24166670
Email id etenderhd@ita.gov.om

US, Sudan ink deals on normalising Israel ties

KHARTOUM: US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, on an unprecedented visit to Khartoum, signed an initial agreement on Wednesday giving Sudan access to \$1 billion in financing from the World Bank, the government said.

Sudan's acting finance minister Hiba Ahmed and Mnuchin "signed a memorandum of understanding in Khartoum to provide a same-day bridge financing facility to clear Sudan's arrears to the World Bank," her office said.

"This move will enable Sudan to regain access to over \$1 billion in annual financing from the World Bank for the first time in 27 years," it said in a statement.

The signing came after the United States on December 14 formally removed Sudan from its crippling blacklist.

It opens the way for debt relief and investment in a country going through a tough political transition and struggling under a severe economic crisis exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.



The signing of the accords came after the United States on December 14 formally removed Sudan from its crippling blacklist.

Sudan's delisting was part of an agreement for the mainly Arab country's normalisation of its relations with Israel.

The northeast African country agreed to the normalisation deal with Israel in October but said it would only come into force after its approval by a yet-to-be-formed parliament.

Mnuchin, on "the first such visit to Sudan," according to Khartoum, was scheduled to meet both head of state General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok.

Their talks would focus on Sudan's deteriorating "economic situation, US aid to Sudan and debt relief," the government said.

Sudan is struggling with a chronic hard currency shortage and galloping inflation that have hit the purchasing power of all

social classes.

Its external debt is estimated at around \$60 billion.

Sudan has been undergoing a rocky transition since the army toppled veteran president Omar al-Bashir in April 2019 following months of mass protests against

his rule.

The joint military-civilian administration charged with overseeing the transition has sought to end the country's international pariah status by forging closer ties with the US.

On Wednesday, the US treasury chief also met with Sudan's water minister to discuss the long-running dispute with Egypt and Ethiopia over Addis Ababa's gigantic Nile dam.

The US and Sudan on Wednesday signed the "Abraham Accords", the US embassy in Khartoum said.

"We congratulate the civilian-led transitional government on its signature today of the Abraham Accords Declaration, which will help further Sudan on its transformative path to stability, security, and economic opportunity," the embassy said on Twitter.

"The agreement allows Sudan, Israel and other signers of the Abraham Accords to build mutual trust and increase cooperation in the region." — AFP

PALESTINIAN FARMERS STAGE PROTEST



Palestinian farmers protest after Israeli security forces uprooted olive trees reportedly located within the area C (where Israel retains control, including over planning and construction) in the West Bank village of Deir Ballut on Wednesday. — AFP

Israel leads world in vaccination drive

TEL AVIV: Order early, pay a lot, digitise distribution and stretch the supply.

That is how Israel came to be a leader of the world's COVID-19 vaccination drive, reaching nearly 15% of the country's 9.3 million population in about two weeks.

The first big decision was paying a premium to get early vaccines. Israeli authorities have not said publicly what they paid for the vaccine developed by US company Pfizer and German partner BioNTech.

But one official said on condition of anonymity that



Israelis arrive to receive a COVID-19 vaccine at Clalit Health Services in Jerusalem, on Wednesday. — AFP

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government was "paying around \$30 per vaccine dose, or around twice the price

abroad."

Pfizer said in a statement that it uses "a tiered pricing formula based on volume and delivery dates" but declined to disclose further details.

Israel also offered the pharmaceutical companies the promise of a quick rollout that could serve as a template for other places: swift results from a small country with a universal healthcare system, patient data stored centrally and the technological savvy to ensure a digitised distribution network.

— Reuters

Syria's government auctions off land of the displaced

BEIRUT: Many Syrians forced from their homes by their country's brutal, a-decade-old war are now shocked to discover that their family farms have been taken over by government loyalists and cronies.

Rights groups and legal experts say local authorities in parts of northwest Syria recaptured by government forces have staged auctions to effectively "confiscate" fertile land and punish opponents.

One refugee, 30-year-old Salman, said he always knew it would be difficult to return to the family plot in Idlib province he abandoned during an offensive

a year ago by President Bashar al Assad's forces.

But whatever hopes he still had to return one day were all but crushed when he learnt the rights to cultivate the land had been sold off to a complete stranger.

"What right does someone have to come and take it?" the refugee, who asked to use a pseudonym, said by phone from Greece where he illegally moved a few months ago.

Salman said he used to plant lentils, barley and black cumin on the 37 acres of land he owns with his brothers, earning up to \$12,000 each harvest.

He discovered through a post



Rights groups and legal experts say local authorities in parts of northwest Syria recaptured by government forces have staged auctions to effectively "confiscate" fertile land and punish opponents.

on social media that the rights to the land were being auctioned off.

"We were shocked," he said. "This land was left to us by our ancestors and we want to pass it down to our children."

Several other Syrians displaced from southern Idlib and adjacent Hama and Aleppo provinces said that they too have had their plots expropriated.

Some learnt about it through social media advertisements run by the regime-affiliated Farmers' Union in Idlib or through acquaintances still living nearby.

In October, the Farmers' Union said that it was auctioning off the

right to use and cultivate plots owned by Syrians "who don't reside in government-controlled areas".

Victims found they were being blamed for their misfortune.

The union said the original deed-holders were "indebted" to Syria's Agricultural Cooperative Bank (ACB), which offers loans to farmers — including those who are now finding it impossible to settle dues from the outside government-controlled territory.

The landowners who spoke to this agency all denied having outstanding payments.

"It's just an excuse," Salman said. — AFP

SEOUL

South Korea delegation heads to Iran

A South Korean delegation is heading to Iran on Wednesday to seek the release of a chemicals tanker and its 20-member crew seized in Gulf waters by Iranian forces, Yonhap news agency reported. Iran denied on Tuesday it was using the ship and its crew as hostages, a day after it seized the tanker near the Strait of Hormuz while pressing a demand for Seoul to release \$7 billion in funds frozen under US sanctions.

The seizure of the MT Hankuk



Chemi has been seen as an attempt by Tehran to assert its demands, just two weeks before President-elect Joe Biden takes office in the United States. Iran wants Biden to lift sanctions that were imposed by outgoing President Donald Trump. — Reuters

TEL AVIV

Amnesty call to give Palestinians virus vaccine

Amnesty International on Wednesday called on Israel to provide coronavirus vaccine doses to Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and Gaza, saying the Jewish state was obligated to do so under international law. The Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank, which is home to some 2.8 million Palestinians, has not publicly asked for Israeli assistance in vaccine procurement.

Hamas, who control the Gaza strip, where about two million



Palestinians live, are highly unlikely to publicly coordinate with Israel in any vaccination effort. — AFP

BERLIN

Europeans 'deeply concerned' about Iran move

Germany, France and Britain on Wednesday said they were "deeply concerned" about Iran's move to step up its uranium enrichment, warning of "very significant" risks. Tehran on Tuesday said it was now refining uranium to 20 per cent purity, the biggest break yet from its commitments under the 2015 nuclear deal struck with world powers.

"This action, which has no credible civil justification and carries very significant



proliferation-related risks, is in clear violation of Iran's commitments" under the pact, the European trio said in a statement. "We strongly urge Iran to stop enriching uranium to up to 20 per cent without delay," they added. — AFP

In brief

■ PESHAWAR



THREE CHILDREN KILLED PLAYING WITH GRENADE

Three children were killed and two others injured on Wednesday when a grenade they found in a field exploded in northwest Pakistan, officials said. The four brothers and a neighbour were playing when they found the rusty grenade near a village on the outskirts of the northwestern city of Peshawar. "The children first played with it and later hit it with a stone causing it to explode", Mansoor Aman, a local senior police official, said. Local police official Aziz ur Rehman confirmed the casualties. Accidents involving discarded ordinance are not uncommon in Pakistan's northwest. — AFP

■ SEOUL



N KOREA'S KIM ADMITS MISTAKES AS PARTY MEET OPENS

North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un admitted that "almost all sectors" had fallen short of their economic targets as he opened a rare congress of the ruling Workers' Party, state media reported on Wednesday. The gathering is the first of its kind in five years, only the eighth in the nuclear-armed country's history, and comes weeks before US President-elect Joe Biden takes office. Relations with Washington have been deadlocked since talks between Kim and President Donald Trump stalled over sanctions relief and what Pyongyang would be willing to give up in return. — AFP

■ MANILA



PHILIPPINES ADDS 6 MORE COUNTRIES TO ENTRY BAN LIST

The Philippines on Wednesday added six more countries to a list of nations subject to entry restrictions in a bid to prevent a new strain of the coronavirus first discovered in Britain from entering the country. The new countries on the list are Portugal, India, Finland, Norway, Jordan and Brazil, Roque said. The Philippines earlier banned the entry of foreign visitors from the United States, Britain, South Africa, Switzerland, Italy, Denmark, Israel, Hong Kong, Spain, Ireland, Netherlands, Singapore, Lebanon, Japan, Canada, Germany, Sweden, Australia, France, Iceland and South Korea. — dpa

Criticism mounts over India's 'abrupt' nod for local vaccine

BENGALURU: Criticism of India's approval of a local COVID-19 vaccine without proof of its efficacy grew on Wednesday after news that a regulatory panel approved the shot just one day after asking the vaccine maker for more evidence it would work.

The recommendations of the Indian drugs regulator's subject expert committee (SEC) released on Tuesday show that the panel asked Bharat Biotech International Ltd to present more efficacy data for its COVID-19 shot before it could consider approving the treatment.

"After detailed deliberation, the committee recommended that the firm... may perform interim efficacy analysis for further consideration of restricted emergency use approval", the SEC's recommendations in a January 1 meeting show.

The very next day, the committee recommended approving Bharat Biotech's vaccine for "restricted use in emergency situation in public interest as an



A health worker checks the body temperature of an arriving passenger as they are mandated to undergo COVID-19 screening at a railway terminus in Mumbai on Wednesday. — AFP

abundant precaution." The SEC also separately recommended emergency use authorisation for the Oxford University/AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine, being produced by India's Serum Institute.

The greenlighting of Bharat Biotech's COVAXIN had already faced criticism from opposition lawmakers and health experts

for lack of efficacy data, typically obtained from a large, Phase III human trial — which the manufacturer is still conducting.

News of the SEC's recommendations spurred further criticism.

"Was the Subject Expert Committee (SEC) approval a command performance? This is as serious as it can get", Manish

Tewari, an opposition lawmaker, said on Twitter. Health experts questioned why the SEC abruptly recommended approval one day after asking Bharat Biotech for more analysis. "The SEC... appears to have been pressured overnight into reconsidering its decision and giving approval the next day, albeit hedged in by many conditions", the All India People's Science Network, a network of science advocacy groups, said in a statement.

"We are perplexed at the abrupt change in thinking of the SEC from the first two meetings to the third day on which the approval was recommended while apparently discounting the need for efficacy data as the condition of the approval", the All India Drug Action Network, a nonprofit health watchdog, said.

Both Bharat Biotech and government officials have pointed to regulatory provisions that allow for quick drug approval for serious diseases even without Phase III trial data. — Reuters

National 'cow science' exam on Feb 25

NEW DELHI: India will hold a mass nationwide online "cow science" exam next month, in the latest push by the central government to promote and protect the sacred animal, officials said on Wednesday.

The hour-long test on February 25, open to children and adults as well as foreigners, comprises 100 multiple-choice questions in Hindi, English and 12 regional languages.

The aim is to assess the public's knowledge and "sensitise and educate" them, according to the RKA cow protection agency created by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's administration.

"Certificates will be given to all. Successful meritorious candidates will be given prizes and certificates", the Ministry of Fisheries, Animal Husbandry and Dairying said.

"The cow is full of science and economics. People are not aware of the true economic and scientific value of the animal", RKA Chief Vallabhbhai Kathiria said. — AFP

WHO virus mission blunted as China refuses team entry

BEIJING: An expert mission to China to probe the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic was in disarray on Wednesday after Beijing denied entry to the World Health Organization team at the last minute despite months of painstaking negotiations.

Ten experts were due to arrive in China this week for the delicate, highly politicised task of establishing how and where the virus jumped from animals to humans.

But with a number of the team already in transit, China denied them entry visas, prodding WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, to say he was "very disappointed".

The first cases of the coronavirus were recorded in the central Chinese city

of Wuhan in late 2019, prompting accusations of chaotic, secretive handling by Chinese authorities which led to its spread beyond China. Beijing Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Hua Chunying confirmed the WHO team had not been admitted as planned, and admitted it was "not just a visa issue".

"The issue of origin-tracing is incredibly complicated", she told reporters at a regular news briefing. "To ensure the work of the international expert team in China goes smoothly, we have to carry out necessary procedures and make relevant arrangements."

Talks were continuing over "the specific date and specific arrangement of the expert group's visit", Hua added. — AFP

Japan's daily virus cases hit record



Pedestrians wearing protective masks, following COVID-19 outbreak, walk underneath Japanese national flags at a shopping district in Tokyo, on Wednesday. — Reuters

TOKYO: Japan's COVID-19 cases reached a new daily record on Wednesday, as the government faced mounting pressure from health experts to impose a strict state of emergency for the Tokyo greater metropolitan area.

Rising infections have driven Tokyo and surrounding areas to the highest level of a four-stage alert, prompting regional

governors to call for a declaration of emergency that Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga is expected to announce on Thursday.

The health ministry held a meeting of infectious disease experts on Wednesday, the second in as many days. They have called for stricter and longer countermeasures, while Suga has sought a more limited response to

avoid damaging the economy.

"Even if we take strong measures immediately, it will be difficult to bring the Tokyo metropolitan area down to stage 3 by the end of January", Takaji Wakita, Chief of the National Institute of Infectious Diseases, told reporters. New infections nationwide reached at least 6,001, a new daily record. — Reuters

Hong Kong arrests 53 for plot to 'overthrow' govt

HONG KONG: Hong Kong police arrested 53 people in dawn raids on democracy activists on Wednesday in the biggest crackdown since China last year imposed a new security law.

Hong Kong's most prominent pro-democracy advocates were arrested in raids on 72 premises as the authorities said last year's unofficial vote to choose opposition candidates in city elections was part of a plan to "overthrow" the government.

About 1,000 police took part in the raids, which included searches of the offices of a pollster and a law firm.

Hong Kong Secretary for



Ben Chung (front C) of a pro-democracy political group is arrested by police in the Central district after as many as 50 Hong Kong opposition figures were taken into custody in Hong Kong on Wednesday, under a new national security law. — AFP

Security John Lee said those arrested had planned to cause "serious damage" to society and that authorities would not tolerate subversive acts.

"The operation today targets the active elements who are suspected to be involved in the crime of overthrowing or interfering seriously to destroy the Hong Kong government's legal execution of duties", Lee told reporters.

Beijing's top representative office in Hong Kong said in a statement it firmly supported the arrests. Members of the democratic camp held a news conference to call for the release of "political prisoners".

Police did not name those

arrested, but their identities were revealed by their social media accounts and their organisations. They included former lawmakers, activists and people involved in organising the 2020 primaries, among them James To, Lam Cheuk-ting, Benny Tai and Lester Shum.

Police said campaigning to win a majority in Hong Kong's 70-seat Legislative Council with the purpose of blocking government proposals to increase pressure on democratic reforms could be seen as subversive. The city's leader is not directly elected and only half the legislative seats are open to democratic vote. — Reuters

Georgia on cusp of delivering Senate to Democrats: Warnock wins, Ossoff leads

SET FOR SWEEP IN A FORMER REPUBLICAN STRONGHOLD

ATLANTA: Democrats won one US Senate race in Georgia and led in another on Wednesday, moving closer to a surprise sweep in a former Republican stronghold that would give them control of Congress and the power to advance President-elect Joe Biden's agenda.

Raphael Warnock, a Baptist preacher from the historic church of Martin Luther King Jr, beat Republican incumbent Kelly Loeffler to become the first Black senator in the deep South state's history.

Jon Ossoff, a documentary filmmaker who at 33 would become the Senate's youngest member, also declared victory with a narrow lead over incumbent David Perdue, although media had yet to declare a winner in that race.

If upheld, the results would amount to a final defeat for outgoing President Donald Trump, who stands to be the first US president since 1932 to lose the White House and both chambers of Congress in a single term.

Trump held rallies for both Republican candidates, but overshadowed the campaign with false accusations that his own loss in the November presidential election was tainted by fraud, repeatedly attacking Republican officials in the state.

With 98% of the vote counted, Warnock was ahead of Loeffler by 1.2 percentage points, roughly



People wait on the National Mall outside a security perimeter for a rally of supporters of President Donald Trump challenging the results of the 2020 US Presidential election on the Ellipse outside of the White House on Wednesday in Washington, DC. — AFP

54,000 votes, according to Edison Research. Ossoff led Perdue by more than 17,000 votes, just shy of a 0.5 per cent threshold to avoid a recount. Most outstanding votes were from Democratic-leaning areas.

Winning both contests would give Democrats control of the Senate, creating a 50-50 split and giving Vice President-elect Kamala Harris the tie-breaking vote once she and Biden take office on Jan. 20. The party already has a

narrow majority in the US House of Representatives.

Republicans would retain control of the Senate if they held on to at least one of the seats. That would allow them to block Biden's political and judicial appointees, as well as his legislative priorities from coronavirus relief to climate change.

The campaign's final days were overshadowed by Trump's attempts to pressure Republican Georgia officials to "find" enough

votes to overturn Biden's victory in the state.

ON TRUMP'S SHOULDERS

If Democrats won, the losses would "fall squarely on the shoulders of President Trump and his actions since Nov. 3," Gabriel Sterling, a Republican and a top election official in the state, told CNN.

The election signalled a shift in the politics of Georgia and the wider deep South. At least 4.5 million voters participated,

smashing earlier turnout figures for runoff races. Democrats have worked hard to increase turnout among Black voters, their most reliable supporters in the region.

In a video message, Warnock, whose Ebenezer Baptist Church is legendary in Georgia because of its role in the civil rights movement under King, recalled his humble upbringing as one of 12 children of a woman who worked in cotton fields.

"Because this is America, the 82-year-old hands that used to pick somebody else's cotton went to the polls and picked her youngest son to be a United States senator," he said.

Declaring victory, Ossoff said he looked forward "to serving you in the United States Senate with integrity, with humility, with honour".

Both Republican senators, following the lead of Trump who has never conceded his own loss, predicted they would ultimately win and insisted they would fight on: "We have a path to victory and we're staying on it," Loeffler told supporters in Atlanta.

During the campaign, Republicans had painted Ossoff and Warnock as radicals who would pursue a hard-left agenda. But that message failed to resonate with many white suburbanites who have increasingly abandoned the Republican party under Trump. — Reuters

New Venezuela parliament sworn in, US-backed Guaido out



Supporters of the Venezuelan government lead by president Nicolas Maduro hold signs celebrating the new Venezuelan parliament, outside the National Assembly, in Caracas, on Tuesday. — AFP

CARACAS: A new Venezuelan parliament was sworn in on Tuesday with President Nicolas Maduro's party in firm control and opposition leader Juan Guaido officially without a job, but with foreign backing to keep up a parallel legislature. The new assembly was denounced as "a fraudulently elected body" by outgoing US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who said in a statement Washington recognised Guaido as "the legitimate president of Venezuela".

"We consider this group to be illegitimate and will not recognise it nor its pronouncements," he said of the new parliament which was also rejected by Colombia, Brazil and Uruguay.

A total 256 of the National Assembly's 277 seats are in the hands of Maduro's United Socialist Party of Venezuela and its allies after December 6 elections boycotted by the opposition, who claimed fraud. — AFP

WikiLeaks' Assange denied bail by London court

LONDON: WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange was denied bail on Wednesday by a British judge who said he might flee justice while the United States tries again to secure his extradition, a decade after he enraged Washington by publishing troves of secret documents.

Assange had asked to be freed on bail after the judge ruled on Monday that he should not be extradited because he would be at risk of suicide.

But Judge Vanessa Baraitser refused that request, citing the seven years he spent holed up in the Ecuadorean embassy in London after an earlier flight from justice in 2012.

"I am satisfied that there are substantial grounds for believing that if Mr Assange is released today he would fail to surrender to court to face the appeal proceedings," she told London's Westminster Magistrates Court.

Assange, 49, wearing a navy suit, showed no reaction.

Baraitser said the United States, where Assange faces 18 criminal charges of breaking an espionage law and conspiring to hack government computers, had to be allowed to challenge her decision to reject extradition.

That appeal could take months, ensnaring Assange — who has been in prison since being dragged out of the embassy in 2019 — in yet more legal wrangling.

Assange's fiancée, Stella Moris, with whom he had two children while in the embassy, said the judge's decision to deny him bail was a huge disappointment and urged the United States to pardon him. WikiLeaks said it would appeal against the denial of bail.

Admirers hail Assange as a hero for exposing what they describe as abuses of

JULIAN ASSANGE

Australian founder of WikiLeaks

July-Oct 2010

WikiLeaks releases around 470,000 classified US documents on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq

Nov 2010

Sweden issues European arrest warrant for Assange on sexual assault charges. He denies the claims

Dec 2010

Assange turns himself in to British police and is released on bail

2012

Assange seeks asylum in Ecuador's embassy in London to avoid extradition to Sweden

2016

WikiLeaks publishes 20,000 hacked emails from the US Democrats' presidential election campaign

May 2017

Sweden closes assault case

April 2019

Assange is arrested at embassy after Ecuador withdraws asylum and served with a US extradition warrant

May 2019

Assange is jailed in Britain for 50 weeks for jumping bail. Washington charges Assange with violating the US Espionage Act

Feb 24, 2020

London court hears US extradition request

Early July

Around 40 non-government organisations call for his immediate release

September

Extradition hearing resumes and then closes for a ruling in January

January 4, 2021

British judge blocks Assange's extradition saying he faced "oppressive conditions" if detained in the US

January 6

Judge denies Assange bail, on grounds he would be a flight risk pending the US appeal on the extradition ruling

FREE ASSANGE

NO U.S. EXTRADITION

A supporter of Assange holds a placard calling for his freedom outside a court in London, Feb. 24. AFP Photo (2), Erol Olivas

power by the United States. But detractors cast him as a dangerous figure who has undermined the security of the West, and dispute that he is a journalist.

WikiLeaks published hundreds of thousands of secret US diplomatic cables that laid bare often critical US appraisals of world leaders, from Russian President Vladimir Putin to members of the Saudi royal family.

Assange made international headlines in early 2010 when WikiLeaks published a classified US military video showing a 2007 attack by Apache helicopters that killed a dozen people in Baghdad, including two Reuters news staff.

Clair Dobbin, a lawyer representing the United States at the hearing, said Assange had gone to extraordinary lengths to avoid extradition and that he could try to leave the United Kingdom to flee justice.

— Reuters

SHORT TAKES

LONDON

UK records highest daily deaths since April

The United Kingdom has recorded more than 1,000 COVID-19 daily deaths for the first time since April as the government struggles to deal with a new, more infectious variant of the coronavirus. The four nations of the United Kingdom recorded 1,041 deaths within 28 days of a positive test for the virus on Wednesday and a further 62,322 new COVID-19 cases, according to official data.

The figures were another stark reminder of the severity



of the crisis as England and Scotland started new COVID-19 lockdowns this week, with citizens under orders to stay at home. Tuesday's data had shown 60,916 new coronavirus infections and 830 deaths. — Reuters

MADRID

One dead, 18 hurt in old-age home blaze

An 89-year-old woman died and another 18 pensioners were hospitalised, some with severe burns, after a fire ripped through an elderly care residence in Spain, rescuers said on Wednesday. The blaze began late on Tuesday at the care home in the southern city of Seville, with some 170 police, medics and rescuers involved in the operation in which another 78 residents had to be rehoused, the emergency services said in a statement.

"An 89-year-old woman died



as a result of the fire... and 18 people were taken to different hospitals in the city", they said. Of those, five were in serious condition after being badly burnt. — AFP

THE HAGUE

EU watchdog gives nod for second jab

The EU's medicines watchdog approved a coronavirus jab by US firm Moderna on Wednesday, giving a shot in the arm for Europe's slow-moving vaccine roll-out. The vaccine is the second to be authorised by the European Medicines Agency for the 27-nation bloc after Pfizer-BioNTech's got the green light in late December. The Moderna approval comes as criticism mounts of the EU's sluggish start to its vaccination campaign, which is lagging behind the



United States, Britain and Israel. "This vaccine provides us with another tool to overcome the current emergency," EMA Executive Director Emer Cooke said in a statement. — AFP

US regulators ignored workers' COVID-19 safety complaints

CHRIS KIRKHAM AND BENJAMIN LESSER

Miguel Cabezola, a driver for United Parcel Service Inc in Tucson, Arizona, complained on March 27 to US workplace safety regulators, alleging the company was taking a lax approach to social distancing, sanitizing equipment and quarantining workers with COVID-19 symptoms. He hoped for an inspection of the facility that would force changes to protect worker safety.

Instead, the state arm of the US Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) summarised Cabezola's concerns in an email to company management, reviewed the UPS response and closed the file.

Over the next two months, a COVID-19 outbreak infected more than 40 Tucson UPS workers — including a manager who eventually died — and caused delivery delays throughout southern Arizona, according to interviews with six Tucson UPS workers and local union officials of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters.

Cabezola's complaint to the regulator, along with that of another worker in May, had "zero effect", said Karla Schumann, head of the local Teamsters union representing UPS workers.

Asked about the outbreak, UPS expressed regret about the manager's

THE WORKERS' REGULATORY COMPLAINTS CAME FROM A CROSS-SECTION OF COMPANIES THAT INCLUDED SOME OF AMERICA'S BEST-KNOWN FIRMS

death and said it has strengthened protocols requiring social distancing and sanitation since the early days of the pandemic.

The UPS outbreak is among dozens of cases identified by Reuters where OSHA largely disregarded workers who reported lax pandemic safety practices, according to agency records.

Reuters identified the workplace outbreaks through federal, state and local government data and news accounts detailing infections and deaths.

The news agency examined the regulatory response through OSHA data on complaints filed by workers and records of resulting inspections.

Reuters identified 106 US workplaces where employees complained of slipshod pandemic safety practices around the time of outbreaks — and regulators either never inspected the facilities or, in some cases, waited months to do so, according to the OSHA records.

The agency never inspected 70 of those workplaces, where at least 4,500 workers were infected by the coronavirus and 26 died after contracting COVID-19, according to the Reuters analysis.

The workers' regulatory complaints came from a cross-section of companies that included some of America's best-known firms, including

Tesla Inc and Tyson Foods Inc.

As of mid-December, just 12 of the 106 facilities have been penalised in response to workers' complaints. The complaints came from a wide range of workplaces, from meatpacking plants and factories to e-commerce warehouses and nursing homes.

Their employees alleged failures to enforce social distancing and mask-wearing; managers pressuring sick employees to work; and a lack of notification to employees about co-workers' infections.

The 106 cases represent a sample of how OSHA has responded to the public health crisis. Reuters was unable to conduct a comprehensive examination of how the agency responded to safety complaints, infections and deaths because most state and local governments do not track or publicise data on workplace outbreaks.

UPS spokesman Matt O'Connor said the company's safety practices have evolved over time as health authorities updated public guidance about COVID-19 and as personal protective equipment became more available after early shortages. The company, he said, had appropriate infection-control protocols in place at the time the manager died.

He said UPS takes "swift action" in response to workers' reports of lax safety practices. — Reuters

SLUGGISH LAUNCH

Facing slow vaccine rollout, scientists weigh new tactics

ISSAM AHMED

Should COVID-19 boosters be delayed? Could the dose levels be reduced, and would mixing and matching shots from different makers work just as well? These are questions now facing governments around the world as vaccine rollout falters and the coronavirus continues to rage, spurred on by new variants that are believed to be more contagious.

British health officials set the pace, announcing they will stretch out the second dose of vaccines authorised for use there up to three months, well beyond the three or four weeks recommended.

The idea is to scale up the number of people who can be reached quickly, even if the level of individual protection falls short of what is reached with the booster.

The World Health Organization on Tuesday effectively endorsed the UK position, saying that the second Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine dose could, in "exceptional circumstances", be delayed a few weeks.

Authorities in England have also granted permission to give people a second shot from a

“We didn't pick three weeks for Pfizer or four weeks for Moderna because we knew it to be perfect

HOWARD FORMAN
Public health expert

different vaccine maker if the kind they got the first time has run out. The United States, meanwhile, has tacked a more cautious line. On Monday night, Food and Drug Administration chief Stephen Hahn said that while these are "reasonable questions to consider and evaluate", the moves are "premature and not rooted solidly in available evidence."

The debate has exposed a division among experts, with respected scientists falling on both sides.

Ideally, policy decisions should rest solely on the parameters in which clinical trials were conducted. But with the virus threatening to spiral out of control, some argue we're in far from an ideal situation. "We didn't pick three weeks for Pfizer or four weeks for Moderna because we knew it to be perfect", Howard Forman, a public health expert at Yale University said.

"It was the best guess for an optimal time for the booster dose to be given to augment immunity."

Forman added that much of medicine is based on imperfect data — such as how long a course of drugs should be taken, and physicians routinely prescribe medicine approved for one purpose for other conditions. "So modest changes to what we've already recommended may make all the difference in getting a lot more bang for the vaccines that we have", he said.

Forman stressed that he's only suggesting delaying the second dose — seen as vital to ensuring longer-term protection — and only in the case of under-65s and those who are less medically vulnerable.

The US had set vaccinations for 20 million people as its target for December but as of January 4, it had only reached 4.5 million.

Both the US and UK have covered about 1.4 per cent of their populations, Europe is far behind, while Israel is out front having covered some 13.5 per cent. Dean said she was worried that the discussion around changes could be confusing to the public, "and I'm concerned about anything that could jeopardize trust"

— AFP

WOMEN PLAYING THEIR PART

A new voice in Indian farm protests

ABHAYA SRIVASTAVA

India's rural landscape is notoriously male-dominated, but thousands of women have become a pillar of the farmer protests blocking roads into New Delhi that have become a huge challenge to the government.

Women of all occupations and ages — from those who tend cattle or toil in the fields, to city professionals and grandmothers in wheelchairs — are braving the freezing winter temperatures in a bid to make the government withdraw market reforms.

"I am fighting for my children and my grandchildren", said Parminder Kaur, 40, who chants slogans at rallies during the day, then in the evening helps make chapati flatbread and curry to feed the tens of thousands of protesters.

Women have traditionally been the silent backbone of Indian agriculture — working the land without the influence that goes with it. Repeat studies have shown how they suffer from poverty, discrimination and domestic violence.

About 85 per cent of women in rural areas have some kind of agricultural activity, yet only 13 per cent own land, according to anti-poverty activist group Oxfam. But Kaur was visibly proud at the way women were "walking shoulder-to-shoulder" with men to defend rural welfare.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been forced onto the back foot over three laws which allow farmers to sell their produce on the free market, after decades of channelling their wheat and rice through state-run markets with a

WOMEN OF ALL OCCUPATIONS AND AGES ARE BRAVING THE FREEZING COLD IN A BID TO MAKE THE GOVERNMENT WITHDRAW MARKET REFORMS



Farmer Parminder Kaur prepares food for the protesting farmers at the Delhi-Haryana state border in Kundli. — AFP

guaranteed minimum price.

Modi insists the reforms will attract badly needed investment to a sector which employs about two-thirds of India's 1.3 billion population, but only contributes about 15 per cent to its economy. However, farmer leaders say the changes will lead to a takeover of the agriculture business by Indian conglomerates. Kaur's family has two acres (about 8,000 square metres) of land where they grow wheat.

"This land is everything for us, it is like our mother", she said.

"They want to snatch our mother

away from us, how can we allow this?"

Ranjana Kumari, who heads the Centre for Social Research, a Delhi-based non-profit group, said that while women do not own the land, they fear a cut in revenue will badly hit their households. "When the family income falls, it affects women's health and well-being the most. Less income also means more tension and violence at the hands of men. "That is why they are angry and vocal about these laws."

The women's active participation in the protests has been appreciated by the leaders. — AFP



Peterhansel retains overall lead

AL ATTIAH CLAIMS HAT-TRICK STAGE WIN



Mini’s driver Stephane Peterhansel and his co-driver Edouard Boulanger of France change a tyre as they compete during Stage 3 of the Dakar Rally around Wadi Ad-Dawasir, in Saudi Arabia, on January 5, 2021. – AFP

RIYADH: France’s Stephane Peterhansel remained atop the overall standings despite Qatari Nasser al Attiyah claiming his third stage win of the Dakar Rally on Wednesday.

Al Attiyah completed the 337km special fourth stage, as the caravanserai travelled a total of 813km from Wadi Ad-Dawasir to Riyadh, in 2hr 35min 59sec, just 11sec ahead of Peterhansel, a 13-time champion nicknamed ‘Mr Dakar’.

It left the Toyota-driving Qatari 4:58 off Peterhansel in the overall standings.

“It wasn’t an easy stage. We lost a minute to an error, but we were hardly the only ones to make a mistake and we quickly got back

on track,” said Al Attiyah, an Olympic skeet bronze medallist at the 2012 London Games.

Peterhansel said the stage had been marked by “one relentless attack after another, and in the end we finished in the same time!”

“Apart from a small navigation error near the finish, I don’t think I can attack much more,” said the Frenchman, whose previous Dakar victories came both in a car (seven) and on a motorbike (six).

“To stay in contention, we need to go all out. So far, so good, as we aren’t making too many mistakes.”

Defending champion Carlos Sainz went some way in making

up for a costly navigation error on Tuesday by surging through the field to eventually finish fifth, a result that took him into third in the general classification, 36:19 off his Mini team-mate’s leading time.

Barreda at the double

Spain’s Joan Barreda Bort, on a Honda, won the motorbike category, his second stage win of this Dakar.

The Spaniard timed 2hr 46min 50sec to finish the stage 5:57 ahead of Botswana’s Ross Branch (Yamaha), with Australian Daniel Sanders (KTM) taking third, at 6:09.

“It was another good stage. I started very far back because of my result yesterday, but that’s



To stay in contention, we need to go all out. So far, so good, as we aren’t making too many mistakes

STEPHANE PETERHANSEL
French driver

the way it is in this Dakar, you’re either at the front or far back. We need to keep it up,” Barreda said.

Barreda has been alternating victories with Toby Price since the first stage, but the Australian

AUTO STANDINGS AFTER STAGE 4			
Pos	Driver	Car	Time/Gap
1	Stephane Peterhansel	Mini	13hr15ms12s
2	Nasser al Attiyah	Toyota	4m58s
3	Carlos Sainz	Mini	36m19s
4	Sebastien Loeb	BRX	48m14s
5	Henk Lategan	Toyota	48m44s
6	Jakub Przygonski	Toyota	49m16s
7	Matthieu Serradori	Century	51m58s
8	Khalid Al Qassimi	Peugeot	59m19s
9	Martin Prokop	Ford	1hr08m51s
10	Nani Roma	BRX	1hr17m50s

MOTO STANDINGS AFTER STAGE 4			
Pos	Rider	Bike	Time/Gap
1	Xavier de Soultrait	Husqvarna	15hr00m25s
2	Joan Barreda	Honda	15s
3	Kevin Benavides	Honda	3m24s
4	Ross Branch	Yamaha	4m24s
5	Skyler Howes	KTM	4m26s
6	Luciano Benavides	Husqvarna	5m31s
7	Sam Sunderland	KTM	7m13s
8	Toby Price	KTM	7m47s
9	Jose Ignacio Cornejo	Honda	8m06s
10	Pablo Quintanilla	Husqvarna	09m31s

lost almost a quarter of an hour after opening the road for the stage and now sits 7:47 behind new overall leader Xavier de Soultrait.

Frenchman De Soultrait’s fifth-placed finish on his Husqvarna was enough to see him take a narrow 15sec lead over Barreda, with Argentinian Kevin Benavides in third (+3:34).

Overnight leader Skyler Howes (KTM) dropped down to fifth after only managing 20th place on the stage.

Howes’ American compatriot Ricky Brabec finished 18th at 12:53 and currently lies 15th in the general classification (+16:21), the defending champion perhaps riding more conservatively in a

bid to make the most out of his tyres — motorcyclists are allowed only six rear tyres for the duration of the rally.

Barreda admitted that he had already used three tyres.

“The one I used today is quite worn, but I was supposed to use it for three days, so it’s not great news,” he said. “But we’ll see what we can do in the coming days.”

Thursday’s fifth stage sees competitors racing a 485km special between Riyadh and Al Qaisumah, to the north of Saudi Arabia. Organisers said the stage featured a tough dunes section and tracks littered with stones.

“Haste makes waste — or, in this case, a flat tyre,” they warned.

— AFP

In brief

LOS ANGELES



JAMES, DAVIS CARRY LAKERS TO WIN

LeBron James and Anthony Davis picked up the pace when the Los Angeles Lakers needed them most, coming up big in the waning minutes of a 94-92 NBA victory over the Grizzlies in Memphis on Tuesday. James and Davis scored 26 points apiece as the reigning NBA champions escaped with a victory that kept them unbeaten in four road games this season and improved their record to 6-2 overall.

NBA RESULTS
Chicago bt Portland **111-108**
Brooklyn bt Utah **130-96**
San Antonio bt LA Clippers **116-113**
Denver bt Minnesota **123-116**
LA Lakers bt Memphis **94-92**

PARIS



FORMULA E SEASON TO START IN SAUDI ARABIA

The 2021 Formula E season will spark into life in Saudi Arabia with two floodlit races at Diriyah on February 26 and 27, organisers announced on Tuesday.

The campaign had initially been due to start in Chile on January 16-17 but those races have had to be postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The all-electric championship's calendar for the remainder of its seventh season has yet to be determined. — AFP

LONDON



QUERREY DEFENDS 'ESCAPE' FROM RUSSIA

American Sam Querrey, who was sanctioned by the ATP for breaching COVID-19 protocols at the St Petersburg Open in October, has defended his actions, saying he did what he felt was right as a father and a husband.

Querrey left Russia in a private jet with his wife and baby son after all three tested positive for the virus before the start of the tournament, sneaking out of their hotel early in the morning without informing reception.

The ATP, the men's governing body, handed the 33-year-old a suspended \$20,000 fine which will be lifted if Querrey does not commit further breaches of health and safety protocols related to COVID-19 within a probationary six-month period.

"I... had to make a decision between 10 pm and 10 am the next day," Querrey told Sports Illustrated in an interview. "I had my wife there, and I had my baby there, and as a human decision, I was like, 'Hey, I don't feel comfortable with this.' So we made the decision to charter a plane and leave." — Reuters

Jamieson's first 11 humbles Pakistan

SERIES SWEEP PUTS NZ PAST AUSTRALIA AS NO 1

CHRISTCHURCH: Towering paceman Kyle Jamieson completed an 11-wicket match haul on Wednesday as New Zealand thrashed Pakistan in the second Test to become the world's top-ranked team.

Jamieson was near unplayable in Pakistan's second innings, finishing with six for 48 after his five for 69 in the first innings, to give New Zealand victory by an innings and 176 runs.

The win inside four days in Christchurch, which completed a 2-0 series sweep, also confirmed New Zealand had overtaken Australia to be the world's number one Test side for the first time.

"It's hard to beat really," said victorious captain Kane Williamson, whose double century set up the win.

New Zealand batted Pakistan out of contention with a first innings 659 for six, with Williamson's masterful 238 supported by Henry Nicholls (157) and Daryl Mitchell (102 not out). But there was still a chance Pakistan could force a draw until Jamieson took the ball.

"The most impressive thing is his attitude, his ability to run in and hit the wicket hard for long spells," Williamson said.

In his sixth Test after making his debut against India 10 months ago, Jamieson has taken 36 wickets at a stunning 13.27 average and with four five-wicket hauls to his credit. But he said he's far from being the finished product.

"I'm a long way off the cricketer that I want to be," he said after his man-of-the match performance.



New Zealand's paceman Kyle Jamieson (L) bowls a bouncer to Pakistan's Azhar Ali (R) during day 4 of the second Test match at Hagley Oval in Christchurch on Wednesday. — AFP

"I'm 12 months into my international career and it's a long process and hopefully I've got another nine-10 years in this

group and if that happens I've got more to come."

Pakistan captain Mohammed Rizwan was disappointed with his side's fielding and multiple dropped catches. But he said their biggest problem was Jamieson.

"He's the only difference between both teams. The conditions were fair to bowlers but the way he bowled he took too many wickets in the series," Rizwan said. "We need to improve in all departments, especially in fielding. If you drop catches you can't win a Test match."

LEADING ROLE

Pakistan resumed the day at eight for one, needing to bat for the better part of two days to salvage a draw, but they were never in the hunt.

Trent Boult had nightwatchman

Mohammad Abbas out for three in the fifth over and after that the day was mainly about Jamieson, who recorded his best match performance.

Although he is the junior member of a pace attack headed by higher-ranked veterans Tim Southee and Boult, the 26-year-old has rapidly advanced to playing a senior role.

After Abbas departed, Abid Ali and Azhar Ali looked to be laying the groundwork for a solid third-wicket stand and moved the score to 46 when the 2.3 metre (6ft 8in) Jamieson removed Abid for 26.

Jamieson whipped up a fuller delivery and the batsman's attempt to switch to a drive was sliced to backward point where substitute Will Young took a one-handed, diving catch. — AFP

SCOREBOARD

Pakistan 1st innings 297
New Zealand 1st innings 659-6
Pakistan 2nd innings
S Masood c Southee b Jamieson0
Abid Ali c sub b Jamieson26
M Abbas c Watling b Boult3
Azhar Ali c Watling b Jamieson37
H Sohail c Watling b Jamieson15
F Alam c Taylor b Boult16
M Rizwan b Jamieson10
F Ashraf c Watling b Jamieson28
Z Gohar c Henry b Boult37
S Afridi c Taylor b Williamson7
N Shah not out0
Extras (b1, nb2, w4)7
Total (10 wickets: 81.4 overs) ----- 186
Fall of wicket: 1-3, 2-17, 3-46, 4-79, 5-88, 6-98, 7-126, 8-145, 9-171
Bowling: Southee 20-8-45-0, Boult 18.4-6-43-3, Jamieson 20-6-48-6, Henry 15-5-25-0, Mitchell 5-1-8-0, Williamson 3-0-16-1

Warner, Rohit return to opening slots

SYDNEY: Australia and India will both take new-look opening partnerships into the high-stakes third Test in Sydney, with star players David Warner and Rohit Sharma set to add firepower after injury lay-offs.

The cricketing heavyweights head into the clash on Thursday with the series locked at 1-1, with both desperate for a win ahead of the final game in Brisbane next week.

Barring last-minute hiccups, Australia will welcome back veteran Warner with Will Pucovski tipped to make his debut alongside him after Joe Burns was dumped.

Skipper Tim Paine hinted the 22-year-old would play, which would see makeshift opener Matthew Wade drop back to his favoured number five and Travis Head likely axed. "Davey's been awesome, he brings really high intensity. It fills guys with confidence around him, he's a player that you love having on your side," said Paine of Warner's return from a groin injury.



Rohit Sharma

India will also have a fresh feel with the big-hitting Sharma back after missing the first two Tests. Rohit will open alongside youngster Shubman Gill, who keeps his spot after an impressive debut in the second

Test at Melbourne. Mayank Agarwal, who has struggled for runs, misses out.

"We are all really excited to have him (Sharma) back in the team, especially with his experience at the highest level, which



David Warner

matters a lot," said stand-in skipper Ajinkya Rahane. They also have a new-look attack with Navdeep Saini making his debut in place of Umesh Yadav, who hurt his calf in Melbourne and is out of the series. — AFP

Easy wins for Al Jadidi, Safara, Danmark and Aflag

MUSCAT: Al Jadidi Engineering rode on Rizwan Muhammed's magnificent 85 not out to thrash Pitspot by 9 wickets in a D Division T20 League game at Muscat Municipality ground 4 in Al Amerat on Friday.

Chasing Pitspot's 103 for 8, Al Jadidi raced to the target in just 12.1 overs, scoring 106 for 1 thanks to brilliant batting by Rizwan.

Uzair helps Safara to victory

In another D Division game, Syed Uzair Saman struck an elegant half century to steer Safara International to a comfortable 7-wicket win against Al Rehwan at Muscat Municipality ground 3.

Safara bowled well, restricting Al Rehwan to 147 for 8, Sandesh Pulkar taking 3 for 11, and then chased the total down in the 17th over, scoring 150 for 3 thanks to useful knocks by Syed Uzair (50) and Ahmed Mohammed (39).

Doresh steers Danmark to easy win

Doresh Devender's superb 50 guided Danmark to an easy 8-wicket win over OCT Al Nahdha in an E Division match at Muscat Municipality ground 3.

Rafeeq Mohammed's 66 was the highlight of OCT Al Nahdha's 128 for 6 which Danmark surpassed in only 13.4 overs, scoring 129 for 2. Doresh and Syamlal Sasidharan

(36) were their main scorers.

Haris takes Aflag to victory

In another E Division game, Haris Alam struck an unbeaten 84 off 46 to help Aflag Group to a comfortable 53-run victory against OCT Al Hail B at Muscat Municipality ground 3.

Batting first, Aflag scored 195 for 5 and then restricted Al Hail side to 142 for 4 in 20 overs. Khalid Rahim (50) and Abdul Jalil (49) were Al Hail's main scorers.

BRIEF SCORES

D Division
Pitspot 103 for 8 in 20 overs (Bilal Suleiman 38 – 2x4, 1x6, Ahmed Shahzad 2-15, Rizwan Muhammed 2-20, Gokul Gopinath 2-21) lost

to Al Jadidi Engineering and Contracting 106 for 1 in 12.1 overs (Rizwan Muhammed 85 – 16x4) by 9 wickets.

Al Rehwan 147 for 8 in 20 overs (Puthan Marachalil 37 – 4x4, Sandesh Pulkar 3-11, Ali Akbar Husain 2-22) lost to Safara International 150 for 3 in 16.3 overs (Syed Uzair Saman 50 – 5x4, 1x6, Ahmed Mohammed 39 – 6x4, Sandesh Pulkar 38 – 5x4) by 7 wickets.

E Division

OCT Al Nahdha 128 for 6 in 20 overs (Rafeeq Mohammed 66 – 10x4, Mustafa Subhan 2-24) lost to Danmark CC 129 for 2 in 13.4 overs (Doresh Devender 50 – 5x4, Syamlal Sasidharan 36 – 5x4) by 8 wickets. Aflag Group Ct 195 for 5 in 20 overs (Haris Alam 80 – 6x4, 3x6,

Junaid Iqbal 30 – 8x4, Asim Abdul Qadeer 2-24) beat OCT Al Hail 'B' 142 for 4 in 20 overs (Khalid Rahim Bakhsh 50 – 2x4, Abdul Jalil al Balushi 49 – 6x4, 1x6) by 53 runs.

F Division

KCA Deutag 176 for 5 in 20 overs (Sultan Ali 69 – 9x4, 3x6, Munthir al Balushi 36 – 6x4) beat Team Coorg Muscat (TCM) 131 all out in 15.5 overs (Dinal Napanda Devaiah 23 – 2x4, Sultan Ali 2-19, Irfan Ur Rahman 2-24) by 45 runs.

Israr Ghala 132 all out in 17 overs (Ihshan Ullah 38 – 7x4, 1x6, Prashant Rana 4-33, Sanjay Makwana 3-05, Ashwinkumar Dave 2-22) beat Y Horizon 73 all out in 15.1 overs (Gajendran Thathapillai 16 – 2x4, Muhammad Islam 3-16, Muhammad Saqib 3-10, Amir Munir 2-11) by 59 runs.

Dhofar to begin HM Cup defence against Rustaq

LAST 16 MATCHES TO BE HELD ON JAN 21, 22

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, JAN 6

Title holders Dhofar will commence their campaign in the His Majesty's Football Cup Championship against Al Rustaq in the last 16 round.

Omantel League champions Seeb will have a tough fixture as they will take on five-time winners Al Nasr. The runner-up of the 2019-2020, Al Oruba, will clash against Al Ittihad.

First division league representatives Samayil will meet

Saham while Al Suwaiq and Sohar will clash in Al Batinah North derby.

The draw of the coveted cup of last 16 stage took place on Wednesday at the Oman Football Association (OFA) premises at Seeb Stadium in presence of OFA officials and the exclusive sponsors QNB.

In the other fixtures, Al Musannah will play against Oman Club. Four-time champions Sur will take on Ibri. Al Nahda, who are yet to win the first title, will meet Majees.



The last-16 round matches will be held on January 21 and 22. The round 16 will be similar to the previous round and will be played as a single round. The OFA will announce the schedules of the matches and the stadiums soon through the official social media accounts.

Five teams from the first division league will look for impressive show in this round of the prestigious cup including Samayil, Al Oruba, Ibri, Majees and Sur. In the previous edition, Ibri managed to reach the semifinals. The Al

Dhahirah representative team had exited from the competition after losing against Al Oruba.

Al Shabab had reached the quarterfinal in the last edition. Eleven teams will represent Omantel League clubs featuring Oman Club, Saham, Al Rustaq, Al Musannah, Al Suwaiq, Al Ittihad, Sohar, Al Nahda, Al Nasr, Seeb and Dhofar.

ROUND OF 16 SCHEDULE
Al Musannah vs Oman Club, Al Oruba vs Al Ittihad, Al Rustaq vs Dhofar, Al Nahda vs Majees, Sur vs Ibri, Al Seeb vs Al Nasr, Saham vs Samayil, Sohar vs Al Suwaiq.



Tottenham Hotspur's Tanguy Ndombele in action with Brentford's Mathias Jensen and Henrik Dalsgaard. – Reuters

Son, Sissoko send Spurs into League Cup final

LONDON: Jose Mourinho urged Tottenham to kick on after Son Heung-min fired them into the League Cup final with the decisive goal in a 2-0 win against Brentford on Tuesday.

Moussa Sissoko put Mourinho's team ahead in the semifinal at the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium.

But Tottenham were still searching for the knockout blow against spirited second tier Brentford until Son netted with 20 minutes remaining.

Tottenham will face Manchester United or holders Manchester City, who meet in the second semifinal on Wednesday, at Wembley on April 25.

It will be the club's first domestic final since losing the 2015 League Cup showpiece against Chelsea, and their first final in any competition since the 2019 Champions League defeat against Liverpool in Madrid.

“We have the FA Cup, the Premier League, the Europa league, so let's forget the final for now. But when April arrives we have to be ready and to fight for the trophy”

JOSE MOURINHO
Tottenham manager

“The final is now in a pocket for three months, we have to wait for the final so we have to focus on what we have coming up,” Mourinho said.

“We have the FA Cup, the Premier League, the Europa league,



Tottenham Hotspur's Son Heung-min celebrates scoring their second goal with team-mates during the League Cup semifinal in London. – Reuters

so let's forget the final for now. But when April arrives we have to be ready and to fight for the trophy.”

Mourinho, appointed in November 2019, is hoping to lead Tottenham to their first major trophy since the 2008 League Cup.

He has already won the competition four times, landing his first silverware in English football in 2005 with Chelsea, where he won it twice more before a further success at Manchester United in 2017.

Mourinho is the third manager to reach a League Cup final with three different clubs, following Ron Atkinson and Ron Saunders.

“This is a game that takes us to a final. Of course we are very, very happy with this,” Mourinho said.

“We didn't play brilliantly, sometimes wrong decisions, sometimes one more touch, not with that soft control that allows you to play fast but the game is always under control against a team that will probably be in the Premier League next year.”

The Tottenham boss had labelled Brentford's visit to north London as the biggest game of his reign, so it was no surprise he picked Son and Harry Kane in a team featuring five changes from Saturday's Premier League win over Leeds.

CRUCIAL MOMENT

Brentford, fourth in the

Championship, had already beaten four Premier League clubs in Southampton, Newcastle, Fulham and West Bromwich Albion to reach their first domestic cup semifinal.

But Tottenham needed just 12 minutes to take the lead as Sergio Reguilon's pin-point cross from the left evaded Brentford defender Ethan Pinnock and found Sissoko, who finished his burst into the six-yard box with a powerful header into the top corner.

It was the French midfielder's first goal since December 2019, ending a barren run that had stretched to 36 matches.

Crucial moment came as Son struck in the 70th minute.

Kane fed Tanguy Ndombele and the midfielder's defence-splitting pass teed up Son, who fired high into the roof of the net for his 16th goal of the season. — AFP

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Al Riadah

94 foodstuff items zero-rated for VAT

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 6

As many as 94 foodstuff items have been zero-rated for Value Added Tax (VAT), which is set to be implemented in the Sultanate with effect from April 16, 2021.

The items in questions are detailed in an executive decision issued by Oman's Tax Authority on Wednesday.

The list includes meat, fish, poultry, dairy products, fresh eggs, vegetables, fruits, coffee, tea, cardamom, cereals, olive oil, sugar, baby foods and cereals, bread, bottled drinking water and table salt.

In a series of executive decisions issued on Wednesday, the Tax Authority also announced the framework and related guidelines for registration of tax-eligible businesses and organisations in the Sultanate.

Businesses with an annual turnover of a minimum of RO 38,500 are required to mandatorily register with the Tax Authority. However, registration is optional for businesses with a minimum turnover of RO 19,250.

These limits are in with the provisions of the GCC Unified VAT Agreement signed by the Sultanate in November 2016.

SMEs and micro-businesses have been given additional time to register their firms in order for them to equip themselves with



the requisite IT systems and bookkeeping methods required to comply with the requirements of the VAT law.

First to register will be businesses with an annual turnover of over RO 1 million. They must register between February 1 and March 15, 2021.

For businesses with a turnover of over RO 500,000, the deadline for registration is July 1, 2021.

VAT is an indirect tax on most goods and is levied on the value-added of business operations, which is the difference between the final price of a commodity and the cost of materials and services.

Confirming the implementation of VAT,

NEW DETAILS: Tax Authority issues three Executive Decisions on upcoming new levy

the Ministry of Finance announced in the 2021 General Budget that the new level would be imposed on goods and services in Oman starting from April 2021, with exception of the education and health sectors and some basic commodities.

According to Royal Decree 121/2020, a 6-months grace period has been granted for the taxpayer to register, and prepare their internal system to implement the VAT. The

value-added tax rate of 5 per cent to be applied in Oman is among the lowest rates at the international level.

"Therefore, it is expected that the impact of VAT on the cost of living in Oman will be minimal. The VAT will have a positive impact on the economic and social development and the international competitiveness of Oman.

The financial resources obtained from this tax will contribute to building a sustainable economy for future generations, and it will also contribute to improving public services and continuing the development of infrastructure in future," the ministry noted.

Oman banks disclose indirect exposure to embattled firm

CONRAD PRABHU
@conradprabhu

Local Omani bank Sohar International has revealed that it has exposure to the tune of RO 6.5 million to the Omani joint venture partner of Drake & Scull International (DSI), a UAE-based construction services firm that it is currently being restructured after running up losses estimated at over \$1.3 billion.

The lender is the second publicly listed Omani firm to have so far disclosed exposure, albeit indirect, to DSI.

It follows a circular issued by the Capital Market Authority (CMA) requiring all banks and financing companies listed on the Muscat Securities Market (MSM) to share details of any exposure — direct or indirect — to the embattled construction firm.

In its filing, Sohar International stated it has already made 100 per cent provision for its exposure to the Omani JV partner of DSI.

The latter, it noted, had "unconditionally and irrevocably" guaranteed the RO 6.50 million outstanding as sponsor of the Omani JV.

Ahmed al Musalmi, CEO, Sohar International, also stated that the lender is considering "all options and measures" to recover its exposure to the Omani JV.

Earlier, on Monday, Ahli Bank announced that it has similar exposure to the Omani JV partner of DSI amounting to RO 4.4 million.

The loan was sanctioned to help fund Omani projects, the lender said, adding that it has made adequate provisions to cover the exposure.

Last month, Dubai-based DSI said it had completed the first phase



RESTRUCTURING PLAN: Ahli Bank and Sohar International reveal exposure totalling nearly RO 11m to Omani JV partner of loss-ridden Drake & Scull International

of a debt restructuring plan sought by creditors. It also claimed that, despite its current financial troubles, it continues to implement a healthy order-book of construction contracts around the UAE.

Earlier, in a filing to the Dubai Financial Market, DSI had asked creditors to register proof of their claims with officials appointed by local authorities.

DSI, once a leading provider of engineering and construction services in the region, attributed its financial losses and accumulating debt to the economic downturn, as well as rising debt servicing costs.

According to its website, DSI's main business streams include engineering (Mechanical, Electrical and Plumbing), construction, oil and gas, and water and wastewater. The company operates across the GCC and the rest of the Middle East as well as Europe.

2021 Budget first step in delivery of Oman 2040 Vision

CONRAD PRABHU
@conradprabhu

Oman's 2021 General Budget, replete with bold but judicious measures to drive fiscal sustainability amid a severe economic crunch, sets the tone for the implementation of the road map for achieving the country's long-term growth objectives enshrined in the Oman 2040 Vision blueprint.

According to a key Muscat-based tax expert, the Budget also has the potential to put the Omani economy, weighed down by low oil prices and the coronavirus pandemic, on a promising path to recovery.

"This is an aspirational and prudent budget that has all of the essential ingredients necessary to invigorate the economy and return the country to health and eventual prosperity over the long-term," commented Alkesh Joshi (pictured), Oman Tax Leader and MENA Energy Tax Leader at global professional services firm EY.

In comments to the *Observer*, Joshi listed a number of standout features in the Budget that, he said, augurs well for efforts to put the country on a stronger economic and fiscal footing in the shortest possible time.

"Take, for example, the assumed average oil price for the 2021 Budget: a conservative \$45 per barrel is, in fact, a realistic basis for 2021 as crude is expected to remain range-bound between \$48 and \$52 per barrel for most of the year," he pointed out.

In comparison, the 2020 Budget was based on an average oil price assumption of \$58 per barrel, although the actual oil price per barrel for Oman crude in 2020 was \$48 per barrel. A conservative \$45 is a good fit for the 2021 Budget, with average daily production estimated at 960,000 barrels for the year, which is slightly lower than the actual average daily production of 974,000 barrels in 2020, he explained.

Importantly, the Budget also makes a robust commitment to safeguarding the vital interests

and concerns of economically disadvantaged sections. The government has carefully factored the impacts of subsidy reforms and new tax levies on their economic well-being.

"It's true that the budget takes into account savings in subsidy of RO 215 million, but in reality, the total allocation towards subsidy and other expenditure has been increased from 6 per cent to 10 per cent in the current budget. This is a huge step in ensuring that the vulnerable households are taken care of by reallocation of the resources for the needy sections of the society notably via the National Subsidy System (NSS)."

Additionally, despite measures to reduce overall expenditure, spending on basic services such as education, health care, housing and social welfare as a percentage of total expenditure has been



KEY FEATURE: Non-oil revenue as a percentage of total revenue has been budgeted at 37 pc, which is the highest ever and aligns very well with the Vision 2040 goal of diversifying the economy away from oil

maintained in line with the previous year.

"This portrays the Sultanate's emphasis on providing high quality basic social services for its

citizens, while there is also a clear directive to enhance the delivery of education through digital means," he remarked.

Significantly, revenues from

taxes and fees will play an important role in buoying the government's fiscals in the face of a sharp decline from hydrocarbon export earnings, said Joshi.

"We are witnessing a notable increase in the taxes and fees collection from 21 per cent in 2020 to 35 per cent in the 2021 budget, which is largely due to the introduction of tax reforms. The introduction of the new taxes (expansion of Excise Tax and VAT) is a huge opportunity for our citizens and expatriates living in Oman to contribute towards nation-building activities. VAT is a socially level playing tax system as it is linked to consumption with majority of the needy items being zero rated. Hence the lower income sections of the society do not end up with a large VAT bill," he explained.

Indeed, non-oil revenue as a percentage of total revenue has been budgeted at 37 per cent, which is the highest ever and aligns very well with the Vision 2040 goal of diversifying the economy away from oil, he added.

Enhancing the productivity of governmental entities

IN the 70's of the last century, the Sultanate needed to establish government-owned companies due to the lack of foreign investments inflows and the weakness and reluctance of the private sector to invest in new projects.

This led the government to move towards establishing some national companies in vital sectors such as tourism, industry, fisheries and others.

The question currently being asked, therefore, is: "Do we now need government companies in light of the established presence of the private sector?"

The truth is although the private sector has proven itself capable of setting up new

businesses, it has sometimes hesitated to venture into certain areas of strategic significance to national and social development because of the high risks involved.

Nevertheless, it must be emphasised that the private sector is better placed to set up new companies in today's environment. The government, for its part, must be focused on legislation and regulation.

Managing companies requires great responsibility, and the members of their boards of directors must step up to face the difficulties and challenges. With the presence of companies, whether governmental or public, this means working to increase the methods of control, auditing and governance methods.



HAIDER ALLAWATI
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MANAGING COMPANIES REQUIRES GREAT RESPONSIBILITY, AND THE MEMBERS OF THEIR BOARDS OF DIRECTORS MUST STEP UP TO FACE THE DIFFICULTIES AND CHALLENGES

Lamentably, some companies resort to corruption and manipulation of public funds in order to strengthen their positions and work in their own self-interests.

At the beginning of the 70's the government began developing, among other things, a chain of hotels after finding the private sector hesitant to invest in this sector.

It has also established companies specialising in flour milling, mining, fish processing, and so on. An airline and maritime transportation service were also established to serve the citizens of the country. However, due to the absence of sound auditing and accounting practices in some of these

companies, they accumulated losses which piled up over the years and became a burden on the state's finances.

This happened due to the lack of transparency, governance and integrity since key officials in these companies believed that oil prices would remain at \$110 or \$120 per barrel, and the government would continue to support and finance the businesses even if they were losing money.

Some of them also acted as if these companies belonged to them without any religious, moral or national scruples, as some put their personal interests above the interests of these companies. The same was also the case in some public shareholding companies,

which went bankrupt during the past years.

The establishment of the Omani Investment Authority (OIA) by Royal Decree last June is a key step in transforming these loss-making entities into productive and profitable businesses.

The Authority has been tasked with restructuring government companies, professionalising their administrative and operational structures, making them lean in their expenditure models, and ensuring they deliver on their corporate objectives in the interest of the national economy and the Omani people. Understandably, this mandate will take a while to achieve the desired goals.

Omran sets up facilities for camper trailer-based holidays

DOMESTIC
TOURISM: Pedestal points installed for recreational vehicles at three popular locations

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 6

Omran Group, the executive arm of the Sultanate for tourism development, recently installed pedestal points for Recreational Vehicles (RV) in three of its hospitality assets.

This initiative comes in line with the group's efforts to enrich local tourism by introducing unique services and benefits directed to citizens and residents, while also promoting tourism products associated with camping activities.

The pedestal points will provide many features for the users, such as 110-120V power outlet, water supply and waste services. These RV points are activated in three prime tourism locations nearby Omran hospitality assets and tourism destinations. The locations were selected based on the high demand by the local visitors, including, Atana Stay Salalah, Ras al Jinz Turtle Reserve and Atana Stay Ashkara.



"Recently, we have witnessed an increase in the usage of RVs by nature and adventure enthusiasts. As such, we took the initiative to provide this unique service in several prime locations that are known for its picturesque landscape and natural sights. Through such projects, Omran Group aspires to meet the

expectations of tourists and attract visitors from across the Sultanate, providing them with a memorable experience," said Eng Khalid Mohammed al Ajmi, Director of Special Project at Omran Group.

The hospitality assets will provide these services to visitors, thus enhancing their tourism

experience by making use of the various facilities and offers available at the hotels.

Omran Group seeks to establish tourism products and services that meet the interests of the various groups of visitors and tourists enjoying the unique offerings in its hospitality assets and destinations.

In addition, the facilities and services associated with camping are considered promising tourism products that will contribute to achieving an added value to the tourism industry in the Sultanate, and ultimately supporting the domestic tourism, economic diversification and the growth of the tourism sector.

PRESS RELEASE

BANK NIZWA CEO JOINS 15TH AAOIFI-ISDB CONFERENCE

Representing Oman's leading Islamic bank, Khaled al Kayed, CEO, Bank Nizwa, joined international experts and fellow industry leaders at the 15th annual AAOIFI-ISDB conference which was conducted virtually under the auspices of Central Bank of Bahrain and sponsored by Bank Nizwa.

The conference, organised by Accounting and Auditing Organization for Islamic Financial Institutions (AAOIFI) and the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB), was themed around 'Adaptability of Islamic finance post-COVID-19: navigating through the unprecedented times.' Al Kayed participated as a panellist discussing the 'Future of Islamic finance in the post-COVID-19 world: change of business model in consideration of social and economic developments.'



BANK MUSCAT'S UPGRADED BM WALLET, MBANKING APPS SEE STRONG RESPONSE



More and more customers have begun using the upgraded BM Wallet and mBanking apps for daily transactions. The upgraded apps which were launched in line with Bank Muscat's vision to 'To serve you better, everyday', has made it easy for customers to transfer money to or request funds from others using the Mobile Payments System of the Central Bank of Oman.

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Sweets of Oman revises losses after review

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 6

Sweets of Oman SAOG, the Sultanate's leading confectionery maker, said its financial statements for the second quarter of 2020 had 'misstated' its losses which, following an independent audit review, was revised to RO 4.523 million as of September 30, 2020. The Rusayl-based firm, in its financial results for the third quarter, had shown a net loss of RO 3.303 million (versus a net profit of RO 4,144 for the corresponding period of 2019).

Turnover for the nine months ended September 30, 2020, amounted to RO 2.790 million (versus RO 8.138 million for the corresponding period of 2019). Following the correction, however, accumulated losses have been updated to RO 4.523 million as of September 30, 2020, the company's Chairman noted in a filing to CMA.

Sharakah concludes 'Zaad Al Ruwad' workshops

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 6

In partnership with bp Oman, Sharakah (Funds for the Development of Youth Projects) has recently concluded the 'Zaad Al Ruwad' virtual workshops.

These workshops aimed to create awareness of financial management and entrepreneurship-related topics aiming at upskilling the entrepreneurs understanding to manage businesses effectively and efficiently.

A total of five online workshops were conducted in collaboration with bp Oman Social Investment Programmes partners which included Al Rudha, Youth Sada and Global Connections Centre known as Tawasul, which are local companies with programmes targeting the entrepreneurship.

In addition to MEDRC, which is an international organisation established in Oman and mandated to find solutions to



freshwater scarcity that carries out a programme enabling entrepreneurs in this sector. An additional workshop targeted

individuals from the general public. A total of 86 Omanis participated in these workshops.

Shamsa al Rawahiya, bp Oman

Social Investment Manager, commented: "The workshops offered an interactive fun opportunity to the participants. They are based on real-life business simulations, which takes the participants through a step-by-step journey in small project establishment, including on how to deal with risks and opportunities. We hope that these workshops have supported the participants to sustain and grow their business in the future."

'Zaad Al Ruwad' is a 2-day interactive workshop where participants can enhance their practical business knowledge. The workshop covers the basic fundamentals of running a business.

This includes learning about how to select the best the location for your business, cost planning, products and service pricing, resource allocation, how to manage a business, how to utilise opportunities as well as how to deal with challenges that may arise.



In brief

■ SAN SALVADOR

**COURT ORDERS EX-PRESIDENT TO RETURN \$4.4M IN STOLEN FUNDS**

A civil court in El Salvador on Tuesday found former president Elias Antonio Saca and his wife Ana Mixco guilty of “illicit enrichment” and ordered them to return \$4.4 million to state coffers, authorities said.

Prosecutors had found irregularities in the couple's wealth declaration and accused both of transferring public money to their personal bank accounts and to those of broadcasting companies they owned during Saca's presidency, said Gerver Montoya, an attorney from the prosecutor's office. Along with the order to return stolen funds, Saca was banned from public office for 10 years. — **Reuters**

■ LONDON

**SOFTWARE START-UP RAISES \$47M IN LATEST FUNDING ROUND**

Self-driving software start-up Oxbotica said it has raised \$47 million in its latest funding round led by the venture arm of oil giant BP and including health and safety device maker Halma Plc and Tencent.

The start-up, an Oxford University spin-out which develops autonomous systems that could be used in vehicles from taxis to freight trucks, said the funding will speed up commercial deployment of its software platform “across multiple industries and key markets”. “We have a vision, we have the technology, we have the team, we see the markets and we have the customers”, Oxbotica founder Paul Newman said in a statement. — **Reuters**

■ SAN FRANCISCO

**APPLE TIES EXECUTIVES BONUSES TO SOCIAL, ENVIRONMENTAL VALUES**

Apple is making environmental and social values factors it will weigh when calculating bonuses for top executives, according to a regulatory filing.

The change taking effect this year is intended to motivate Apple executives “to meet exceptionally high standards of values-driven leadership in addition to delivering strong financial results”, the Silicon Valley technology titan said in proxy documents filed with the Securities and Exchange Commission. “Beginning in 2021, an environmental, social, and governance modifier based on Apple Values and other key community initiatives will be incorporated into our annual cash incentive programme”, Apple said in the filing. — **AFP**

Stocks fall as investors brace for possible ‘blue sweep’ in Georgia

TOKYO: Global stock prices slipped and bond yields rose on Wednesday as investors braced for the prospect that Democrats could win both seats at stake in a US Senate run-off election in Georgia, handing them control of the chamber.

Along with their narrow majority in the House of Representatives, a ‘blue sweep’ of Congress could usher in larger fiscal stimulus and pave the way for President-elect Joe Biden to push through greater corporate regulation and higher taxes.

Broadcaster NBC called one of the races for Democrat Raphael Warnock, unseating incumbent Kelly Loeffler, while Democratic challenger Jon Ossoff held a slim lead over Republican David Perdue in the other with 98 per cent of votes counted.

“With Biden proposing to reverse President Donald Trump's tax cut, increase the minimum wage, and strengthen oversight on various industries, some might argue that his agenda is not particularly market-friendly”, said



Currency dealers work in front of an electronic board showing the Korea Composite Stock Price Index at a dealing room of a bank in Seoul. — **Reuters**

Vasu Menon, investment strategy executive director at OCBC Bank in Singapore.

Futures for the S&P 500 fell 0.8 per cent, while Nasdaq futures shed 1.6 per cent on fears Democrats could pursue tighter regulations on big tech firms.

Other industries, such as banks, oil and gas and healthcare, could come under heavier scrutiny, while infrastructure and alternative energy sectors could benefit.

Japan's Nikkei fell 0.4 per cent

while MSCI's index of Asian-Pacific excluding Japan erased earlier gains to trade flat.

European stocks are on course to rise in a catch-up with rebound in Wall Street shares overnight, with European stock futures trading 0.5 to 0.7 per cent higher.

The 10-year US Treasuries yield rose above 1 per cent for the first time since March, on expectations of larger government borrowing under a Senate where Vice President-elect Kamala Harris would become a tie-breaker.

Big tech regulation fears push Nasdaq futures down 1.6 pc

“US bonds’ reaction reflects growing wariness about Democrats’ victory in the runoffs”, said Shogo Maekawa, global market strategist at JPMorgan Asset Management.

“It is also natural for stocks to fall near-term as there could be tax hikes and tighter regulations on big techs and so on. But on the other hand, there should be positive factors as well, such as more stimulus and further infrastructure spending.”

Vishnu Varathan, economist at Mizuho Bank in Singapore, expects the falls in shares to be short-lived.

“My suspicion is that the immediate knee-jerk reaction would be a slightly stronger dollar and a slight setback in equities, because people are still sizing things up”, he said. “I don't think this is a trade that markets will continue to chase and extend.” — **Reuters**

■ CAMPAIGN TO SUPPORT SMALL BUSINESSES



Signs calling for more relief, a second Paychex Protection Programme, and support from elected officials are setup as part of a campaign by Goldman Sachs supporting small businesses near the US Capitol in Washington, DC. — **AFP**

Brazil's president says country is 'broke'



Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro

SAO PAULO: With state subsidies to fight poverty now ended, Brazil's far-right President Jair Bolsonaro on Tuesday said his country is “broke” and he is unable to do anything about it, attributing the crisis to “the press-fueled” coronavirus.

The subsidies which have kept millions of Brazilians from destitution ended as the pandemic, which has killed almost 200,000 people in the country, only worsens.

“Brazil is broke, boss, I cannot do anything”, the former army officer said, responding to one of the supporters who greeted him in front of his official residence in the capital Brasilia.

“I wanted to modify the tax reduction table, but there was that press-fuelled virus that we have there, that press without any character”, Bolsonaro said.

The reform he was referring to was a campaign promise for a raise in the level of tax-exempt income. Bolsonaro attributes the country's economic collapse to lockdown measures pushed by state governors to combat the coronavirus pandemic.

Despite his country's soaring death toll, Bolsonaro saw his popularity rise thanks to emergency aid paid out for nine months to 68 million Brazilians, almost a third of the population.

But those payments ended this month under pressure from markets worried about the country's high deficit and debt. — **AFP**

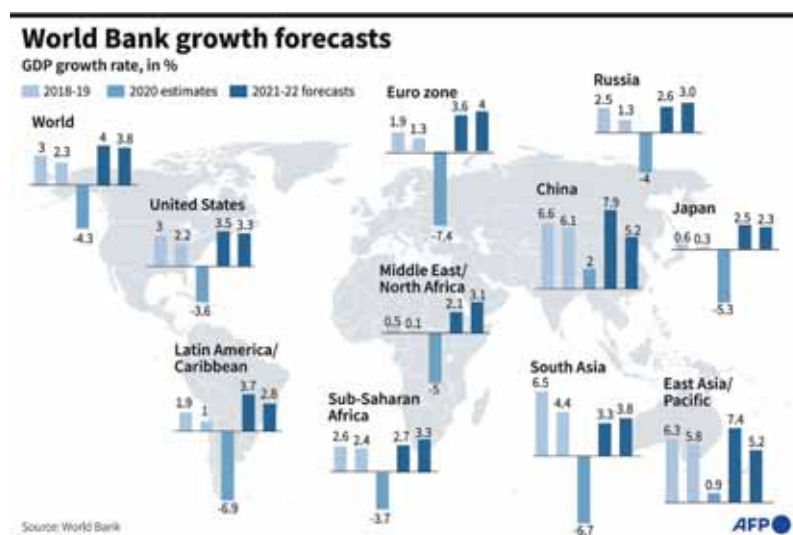
WB: Global recovery could erode if virus worsens

WASHINGTON: The World Bank on Tuesday downgraded its outlook for the global economy, and warned the situation could deteriorate if COVID-19 infections accelerate or the vaccine rollout is delayed.

The coronavirus pandemic also has worsened the risks surrounding the rising debt load in developing nations, and it will take a global effort to avoid a new crisis in those economies, the bank cautioned.

After shrinking 4.3 per cent in 2020, the world economy is projected to grow by 4.0 per cent this year, two-tenths lower than previously forecast, as more than half of countries were downgraded in the semi-annual Global Economic Prospects report.

China was a bright spot with a surprisingly fast recovery in 2020, but advanced countries which did better last year will fare



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Climate change caused mangrove collapse

Study points to sudden decrease of precipitation as cause for the disappearance of the trees about 6,000 years ago in Oman... **P18**



INSIDE STORIES

LOCAL SCENE



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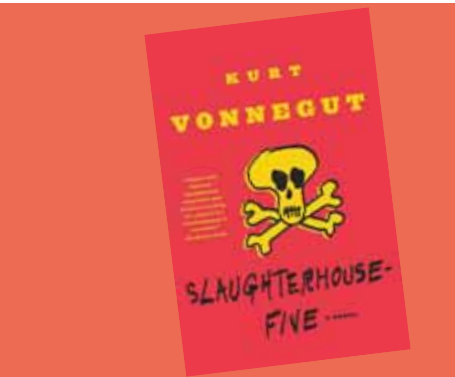
TRADITIONS



PANDEMIC RAINS ON SPAIN'S GLITTERING EPIPHANY PARADES

For children, it's the most wonderful time of the year, when Spaniards turn out to welcome the gift-laden Three Kings. But this year's glittering parades have been torpedoed by the pandemic. In Spain, it's not Father Christmas nor... **Story on Page 19**

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BY KURT VONNEGUT

Slaughterhouse-Five is arguably one of the greatest anti-war books ever written. This rich and amusing tale follows the life of Billy Pilgrim as he experiences World War II from a peculiar perspective.

MUSIC



GRAMMY AWARDS POSTPONED UNTIL MARCH OVER COVID-19

The Grammy music awards slated for January 31 in Los Angeles have been postponed until March over COVID-19, which has been rapidly spreading in California. The Recording Academy released a statement saying it rescheduled the show to March 14... **Story on Page 19**

AROUND THE WORLD



MOSCOW METRO HIRES FIRST WOMEN TRAIN DRIVERS

The Moscow metro said on Sunday it had hired female drivers for the first time in its recent history, following recent changes in controversial Russian legislation prohibiting women from many professions.



Climate change caused mangrove collapse

SAMUEL KUTTY
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Although the reason for this was not entirely clear until now, most of the mangrove forests on the coasts of Oman disappeared about 6,000 years ago.

According to a study by the University of Bonn, and the results of which are published in the journal Quaternary Research, the collapse of coastal ecosystems was caused by climatic changes.

"Falling sea level or overuse by humans are not likely to be the reasons. The speed of the mangrove extinction was dramatic: Many of the stocks were irreversibly lost within a few decades", point out the study results.

Mangroves are trees that occupy a very special ecological niche: They grow in the so-called tidal range, meaning coastal areas that are under water at high tide and dry at low tide. Mangroves like a warm climate; most species do not tolerate sea surface temperatures below 24 °C. They are tolerant to salt, but only up to a tolerance limit that varies from species to species.

"This is why we find them nowadays mostly in regions where enough rain falls to reduce salinisation of the soil," explains Valeska Decker of the Institute for Geosciences at the University of Bonn, the lead author of the study.

The journal gives references to Valeska Decker, Michaela Falkenroth, Susanne Lindauer, Jessica Landgraf, Zahra al-Lawati, Huda al-Rahbi, Sven Oliver Franz and Gösta Hoffmann to the study titled "Holocene mangrove ecosystems changes along the coastline of Oman".

Fossil finds prove that there used to be many mangrove lagoons on the coast of Oman. However, some 6,000 years ago these suddenly largely vanished - the reasons for this were previously disputed.

Over the past few years, Decker travelled several times to the easternmost country of the Arabian Peninsula to pursue this question for her doctoral thesis. With the support of her doctoral supervisor Prof. Gösta Hoffmann, she compiled numerous geochemical, sedimentological and archaeological findings into an overall picture.

"From our point of view, everything suggests that the collapse of these ecosystems has climatic reasons," she says.

Low pressure trough shifted to the south
Along the equator there is a low pressure trough, the Inter-tropical Convergence Zone, which is situated a little further north or south depending on the season. The Indian summer monsoon, for example, is linked to this zone.

It is believed that about 10,000 years ago this zone was much further north than today, which meant the monsoon affected large parts of the Arabian Peninsula. Just over 6,000 years ago this low-pressure trough then shifted to the south, but the reason for this and how fast is still not completely clear.

"That this was the case has been well documented for several years," explains Decker. "Our results now indicate that this climate change had two effects: On the one hand, it caused salinisation of the soil, which put the mangroves under extreme stress. On the other hand, the vegetation cover in the affected areas decreased in general due to the greater drought."

This increased erosion: The wind carried large amounts of the barren soil into the lagoons. These silted up and successively dried up. The whole thing happened surprisingly fast: "The ecosystems probably disappeared within a few decades," stresses Decker.

According to previous studies, the environmental changes were gradual. The mangrove ecosystems struggled till a certain threshold was reached and then collapsed within decades. Nowadays, the only mangroves in Oman are those of a particularly robust species and are found only in a few places.

She was able to exclude other possible causes for the disappearance of the mangroves in her study. For example, the researchers found no evidence of a drop in sea level 6,000 years ago that could have triggered the mangrove extinction.

"Archaeological findings also speak against a man-made ecological catastrophe," she says. "It is true that there were humans living in the coastal regions who used the mangroves as firewood. However, they were nomads who did not build permanent settlements. This meant that their need for wood was relatively low – low enough to rule out overuse as a cause."

Decker and her colleagues now want to further investigate how much the annual precipitation changed and what impact this had on the region. To this end, the researchers plan to study the pollen that has persisted in the lagoon sediment for thousands of years.

They want to find out how the vegetation changed as a result of the drought.

"The results could also be relevant", she says. In many regions of the world, the climate is changing at a dramatic pace. Germany has also suffered increasingly from long droughts in recent years. Foresters are therefore already planning to plant more drought-resistant species in this country; this is a consequence of climate change that may leave long-term marks in the history of vegetation.



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Music

Grammy awards postponed until March over COVID-19



THE GRAMMY MUSIC awards slated for January 31 in Los Angeles have been postponed until March over COVID-19, which has been rapidly spreading in California.

The Recording Academy released a statement saying it rescheduled the show to March 14, a week earlier than the date briefly listed on its website.

"The deteriorating COVID situation in Los Angeles, with hospital services being overwhelmed, ICUs having reached capacity, and new guidance from state and local governments have all led us to conclude that postponing our show was the right thing to do," organisers said.

"Nothing is more important than the health and safety of those in our music community and the hundreds of people who work tirelessly on producing the show."

The ceremony's delay comes less than a month before it was set to take place in the shadow of the pandemic, which has dealt devastating blows to the music industry.

The organisation had said the show set for late January would be mostly virtual, but had not released specific plans.

Beyonce, Dua Lipa, Taylor Swift and rapper Roddy Ricch are the top nominees at the normally star-studded gala. Comedian Trevor Noah was set to host the 2021 show, and it wasn't im-

mediately clear if that was still the plan.

The nominations were rolled out late last year by stars across the globe speaking via video chat. Other awards shows, like the Emmys and the Latin Grammys, have been forced to go partially or fully virtual in light of pandemic restrictions on large gatherings.

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The Oscars meanwhile are due to take place April 25, eight weeks later than previously scheduled.

Los Angeles is now among the centres of the coronavirus pandemic, with hospitals reeling from record cases and residents under a stay-at-home order.

The southern California surge follows Thanksgiving and the holiday season, with reports of oxygen rationing and patients forced to spend hours waiting in ambulances for beds to open. — **AFP**

Pandemic rains on Spain's glittering Epiphany parades

For children, it's the most wonderful time of the year, when Spaniards turn out to welcome the gift-laden Three Kings. But this year's glittering parades have been torpedoed by the pandemic.

In Spain, it's not Father Christmas nor Christmas Eve that beguiles the children, but Melchior, Caspar and Balthasar who arrive bearing gifts on the night of January 5.

Every year, millions flock to the streets across Spain to watch fairytale parades welcome the royal visitors with music, dancing and

bucketloads of sweets that are hurled into the excited crowds.

But with all outdoor gatherings banned to slow the spread of the virus this year, officials across the country have been scrambling for creative ways to keep the magic of "Reyes" alive.

Kings sail into Barcelona. In Barcelona, organisers had been working on a detailed plan since the summer, fearing even back then that life would not yet have returned to normal come January.

"It's a really traditional celebration — total madness, a real family event with dancing, lights, floats and



everyone packing the streets to watch," said Esteve Carames, in charge of Barcelona's Reyes festivities, which normally sees 700,000 people massed along the three-kilometre (two-mile) route.

This year, however, the Three Kings arrived by boat, an event broadcast live from Barcelona's port on TV, which then screened footage of a parade recorded in advance.

Barcelona also set up an open-air amusement park based on The Three Kings. With a capacity for 400 visitors, it has lights, music and scenery, but no actors and nothing that can be touched.

The 50,000 free tickets to enter the park, which is open from December 28 to January 5, were snapped up

in just four hours.

This year's festivities have been more expensive than usual given the extended duration of the events, costing roughly 1.2 million euros (\$1.5 million) compared with 800,000 euros in a normal year.

In other cities — including Seville and Cordoba — the kings arrived in hot-air balloons.

BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

In Madrid, where hundreds of thousands usually throng the streets, City Hall broadcast on a live televised event inside a cultural centre with no spectators.

"It is the most special night of the year and we wanted the magic to be felt throughout the city," said Andrea Levy, one of the capital's top cultural advisers. — **AFP**



MAINTENANCE OF Al Dhuwaiqa Falaj COMPLETED

Jusoor Foundation has completed the maintenance of Al Dhuwaiqa Falaj in Wadi Al Jizi area in the Wilayat of Suhar, which is a project funded by OQ within the cooperation with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources. Costing nearly RO 25,000, this project is part of the commitment of OQ to social responsibility through Jusoor Foundation, the social investment arm of Sohar Aluminium, Vale Oman and OQ companies. The falaj is expected to serve citizens residing in the area of Hail Dhuwaiqa in Wadi Al Jizi through providing them with groundwater for their farms and

MAINTENANCE COST NEARLY RO 25,000 AND INCLUDED THE CONSTRUCTION OF AN 800M-LONG OPEN-AIR WATER DISTRIBUTION CANAL AND A 5-METRE FLY-OVER

animals. Maintenance of the Falaj will enhance the added-value through preparing it to be a tourist attraction and through the preservation of Oman's attractions and heritage. Al Dhuwaiqa Falaj is categorised as a 'ghaili falaj', which refers to the type of falajes that is fed through ponds and running water. Measuring 880 metres long and locating 5 km away from

the highway, this falaj is the water source on which people depend to irrigate their crops and for their other daily uses. The maintenance work included the construction of an 800m-long open-air water distribution canal. This process required the removal of the old canal, deeper digging and expansion especially near mountainous surfaces.

This was followed by cementing the bottom of the canal and constructing a 5-metre fly-over. Saif al Shibli, Supervisor of Al Dhuwaiqa Falaj, said, "This project is of great importance to the people who rely heavily on this historic falaj in many aspects of their life, in addition to their connection to it. Therefore, this maintenance will revive the falaj and enable the

best utilisation of its water and will certainly preserve it as part of the Omani heritage and one of the beautiful tourist attractions in Wadi Al Jizi area." It is worth mentioning that the social investment funded by the founding companies of Jusoor for the maintenance projects for the various falajes in North Al Batina Governorate reached RO 188,000, which included maintenance works for 5 'ghaili' and 'dawoodi' falajes. These projects included the reconstruction of old water canals and the construction of new ones with fly-overs in order to sustain the genuine water heritage of the Sultanate.