

Sultanate backs Egypt's efforts in solving Renaissance Dam issue

In a statement issued by the Foreign Ministry, the Sultanate voiced solidarity and support for the Arab Republic of Egypt in its efforts to solve the dispute over the Renaissance Dam by means of dialogue and negotiations in order to achieve stability in the region and preserve the interests of all parties. — ONA



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TSUNODA BEST F1 ROOKIE IN YEARS, SAYS BRAWN



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BELGIUM UNVEILS NEW SHOWCASE FOR ILL-TREATED GHENT MASTERPIECE



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OMAN FISHERIES WINS COMPENSATION OVER 'DUMPED FISH'



MUSCAT

HM GREETINGS TO PRESIDENT OF LAOS

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Thongloun Sisoulith of the Laos People's Democratic Republic, on the occasion of him being elected as the new president of his country. In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his sincere greetings, wishing President Sisoulith success in leading the friendly Lao people towards further progress and prosperity. His Majesty also wished friendship relations between the two countries further development and growth.

— ONA

CBO ISSUES BONDS FOR RO 100 MILLION

On behalf of the Government of Sultanate of Oman, represented by the Ministry of Finance, the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) announced the new issue of Government Development Bonds. The size of the new issue is at RO 100 million (with an option to increase the size) with a maturity period of 7 years and will carry a coupon rate of 5.50 per annum. The issue will be open for subscription from April 4 to 19, 2021 while the auction will be held on April 20. The issue settlement date will be on April 22. Interest on the new bonds will be paid semiannually on October 22 and April 22 every year until maturity date on April 22, 2028.

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US thanks HM for supporting Yemen peace efforts

WASHINGTON: The United States expressed its thanks to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik for supporting the efforts undertaken by the office of the United Nations special envoy for Yemen and the UN envoy for Yemen.

In a statement issued on Tuesday evening, the US affirmed its commitment to achieving a ceasefire and reaching a comprehensive political settlement to the crisis in Yemen.

Meanwhile, the United Nations Special Envoy for Yemen, Martin Griffiths expressed his gratitude to His Majesty the Sultan for his constructive efforts and constant support to Yemen to take the path of lasting peace.

The UN special envoy for


The Sultanate is an essential partner of the United Nations in its efforts aimed to mediate a comprehensive political settlement for the crisis in Yemen. His Majesty's constructive efforts and constant support will lead to the path of lasting peace

MARTIN GRIFFITHS
UN Special Envoy for Yemen



Yemen said that the Sultanate is an essential partner of the United Nations in its efforts aimed to mediate a comprehensive political settlement for the crisis in Yemen.

Earlier, the Sultanate on Royal Orders of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, is exerting efforts in close coordination with Saudi Arabia, the UN and the US envoys to Yemen and the Yemeni parties concerned to hammer out a comprehensive political solution to the ongoing crisis in Yemen.

Oman hopes that these contacts will achieve the desired results shortly to help restore peace, security and stability in Yemen and to safeguard the security and interests of the countries in the region. — ONA

Expat free exit scheme extended till June 30

KABEER YOUSUF
[@kabeeryousef](#)

The free exit programme, announced by the government for those expatriates residing in the country even after the expiry of their residency status, has been extended for three more months. The programme will now end on June 30, 2021.

This is the second time the date has been extended. The scheme was first announced on November 15, 2020, with validity till December 31, 2020. That was extended till March 31, 2021, and now, till June 30.

A Twitter message from the Ministry of Labour said that due to the ongoing pandemic, the closing date for illegal emigrants to register for free exit on the ministry's website will be June 30.

This period allows all undocumented workers to leave the country without any fine or legal implications. The Ministry of Labour has urged all who have not yet registered to come forward and register online and use the scheme. All undocumented workers and overstaying visitors can register at the ministry's website ([www.mol.gov.om](#)) or through Sanad offices.

"No application for change in labour status will be entertained after June 30," said the ministry, noting that expatriate workers benefiting from the grace period, should leave in three months, or by June 30, 2021.

Speaking to the Observer, Munu Mahawar, Indian Ambassador to the Sultanate, said that campaigns among the Indian citizens have been on since November 2020, resulting in nearly 3,000 people registered for exit through the scheme.

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No sports activities, 50% attendance in govt offices

SULTANATE HOLDS TALKS TO GET MORE COVID-19 VACCINES

ONA & VINOD NAIR
[@vinot_nair](#)

The Supreme Committee on Wednesday issued the following decisions including suspension of student attendance at private and international schools and shifting to distance education with the exception of grade 12 students, from Sunday (April 4) until further notice.

Suspending official and public sports activities from Thursday (April 1), until further notice.

Reducing the number of employees who are required to attend the workplace at the units of the state administrative apparatus and other public legal entities, to 50 per cent of the total number of



employees with effect from Sunday (April 4), until further notice.

Meanwhile, the number of cases continued to be on the higher side with the Ministry of Health (MoH) reporting 1,162 new cases on Wednesday, bringing the total number of Covid-19 cases registered in the Sultanate

to 159,218.

The government said it is in talks with envoys from countries like China, South Korea and Russia to get more doses of vaccines.

Dr Ahmed Mohammed al Saeedi, Minister of Health, held a meeting with Dmitry Dogadkin, Ambassador of the Russian Federation to the Sultanate, and discussed the pandemic situation, vaccine manufacturing and imports.

On Tuesday, Dr Al Saeed received Kim Chung-kyu, Ambassador of the Republic of South Korea to the Sultanate, and discussed ways to obtain supplies of AstraZeneca vaccines from Korean manufacturing facilities.

A gift of chocolate from Queen Victoria, intact after 121 years

LONDON: A 121-year-old chocolate bar, from a batch commissioned by Queen Victoria for British troops fighting in South Africa, has been found in its original tin in the attic of an English manor.

The chocolate belonged to an English aristocrat who fought in the Second Boer War, Sir Henry Edward Paston-Bedingfield, and was found in his helmet case at his family's ancestral home,

500-year-old Oxburgh Hall in Norfolk, eastern England.

"Although... you wouldn't want it as your Easter treat, it is still complete and a remarkable find," said Anna Forrest, Cultural Heritage Curator at the National Trust, a heritage charity that manages Oxburgh Hall.

The tin lid has a message in Victoria's handwriting that says "I wish you a happy New Year" and the inscription "South Africa



1900", as well as a portrait of the queen.

The National Trust said it believed Henry had kept the helmet and the chocolate together as mementoes of his participation in the war. The items were discovered among the belongings of his daughter Frances Greathead following her death aged 100 in 2020. The Second Boer War, from 1899 and 1902, pitted British troops against

the forces of two independent South African states run by the Boers, Afrikaans-speaking farmers, where huge gold and diamond deposits had been found. Victoria commissioned 226-gm bars to raise morale among the troops there.

Britain's three main chocolate manufacturers at the time, Cadbury, Fry and Rowntree, were run by Quakers who opposed the war. — Reuters



Dial 9999 only for emergencies and 1099 for Covid enquiries

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
@lakshmioman

The night lockdown has a series of checkpoints to maintain the ban on commercial activities and individuals' movement to control the current spike in the number of Covid-19 cases.

Traffic and security patrols are there to control and maintain the excluded categories to the lockdown from 8 pm to 5 am, such as the medical staff, logistics, and travellers to and back from the airports.

Major Sulayem al Jabri, from the Directorate General of Operations, said the Royal Oman Police has two main operation centres. "The first operation centre handles all the emergency cases and the second deals with reports of Covid-19 as well as handling the telephone call on 1099," explained Major Al Jabri.

"We would like to reassure that Royal Oman Police activated police patrolling in the cities and main roads and at the police checkpoints to ensure smooth operations. The ROP is also conducting air patrolling with police helicopters to maintain the commitment of people. We urge the community to cooperate with us by not calling the emergency numbers unless they really need it so they can get help at the right time."

The night closure decision by the Supreme Committee began on March 28, and on that very day, the Royal Oman Police had to handle 8,000 calls.

"We received 8,000 calls in one shift within eight hours.



The calls to 1099 were about Supreme Committee decisions, seeking permits to move during the lockdown or reporting on someone breaking the regulations, or requiring an ambulance due to someone being sick.

There were call duplications as many people called both numbers. We request people to use the number only if there is a real emergency," he said.

"People can call 1099 for enquiries about Supreme Committee's Covid-19 related decisions, as well as for reporting any of the violations of the pandemic regulations. Because people are more

We urge the community to cooperate with us by not calling the emergency numbers unless they really need it so they can get help at the right time

MAJOR SULAYEM AL JABRI
Directorate General of Operations

familiar with 9999 they call that number. There are not too many lines for 1099 as well, but the result is, simple enquiries are blocking lines for people who need real assistance due to emergencies.

There are emergencies due to health or death, and they need access to the emergency number at times even to receive the bodies of their family members," he explained.

Numerous emergencies the Royal Oman Police have been handling during this period. That is why it is imperative to adhere to using the specific numbers entitled to emergency and Covid-19 requirements.

FROM PAGE 1

Oman holds talks to get more Covid-19 vaccines



While Oman is yet to receive the new batches of vaccines, 132,493 people have been vaccinated so far, of which 31,879 are from Muscat, 16,140 in North Al Batinah, and 11,909 in South Al Batinah.

Meanwhile, Oman Airports has said that travellers whose flight timings coincide with Covid-19 curfew hours are not required to reach the

airport earlier than normal. No traveller will be allowed into the Departures Hall till the required time. Royal Oman Police (ROP) will consider the hard or soft copy of the e-ticket, in addition to the identification documents to pass through the checkpoints for travellers and one person accompanying them to/ from the airport during the curfew hours.

Expat free exit scheme extended till June 30

"Out of those 3,000, as many as 2,000 secured approvals to travel and the rest 1,000 applications will be processed in due course. All those who have secured the out pass will be leaving before the extended grace period," he added.

He further said that the 'Air bubble' agreement between Oman and India is working well, and there are 6,000 seats from Oman to India and an equal number back to Oman.

PENALTIES

After June 30, all applications and approvals for the free exit will be cancelled and any further delay in registering online will entail the penalties prescribed in the law," said

Salim Said al Badi, Director General of Labour Welfare at the Ministry of Labour.

Meanwhile, representatives from different community welfare wings have informed the *Observer* that nearly 70,000 expatriate workers have applied to rectify their status, and around 50,000 of them have been able to leave the Sultanate.

"Out of the registered nearly 70,000 expatriates, there are only about 4,000 Indians. I am sure there are some more who are either not aware of such a scheme or are not bothered about any facility," said P M Jabir, Secretary at the Social Welfare section of the Indian Social Club.

Oman Air announces flights to Sharjah

MUSCAT: Oman Air, the national carrier of the Sultanate of Oman, has launched its new service between Muscat and Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), with 3 weekly flights on Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays, operated with Airbus 330 aircraft.

Wednesday and Sunday flights from Muscat will depart at 14:25 and arrive in Sharjah at 15:40. Flights from Sharjah will depart at 17:15 and arrive in Muscat at 18:30.

The Saturday flight from Muscat will depart at 20:15 and arrive in Sharjah at 21:30 while the flight from Sharjah will depart at 23:00 and arrive in Muscat at 00:15.

Oman Air will maintain



its comprehensive safety programme throughout all elements of the travel journey to ensure that guests fly confidently. Masks are required when guests are on board the aircraft and in Oman's airports.

Distancing is maintained while guests board and exit the aircraft, which are carefully cleaned after each flight and at the end of every day. Cabin crew all wear a full set of personal protective equipment. Meal service has been modified

to further ensure safety. Other measures have been implemented to ensure that the airline's guests and crew are safe at all times.

Guests who are planning to travel to Muscat should visit the Civil Aviation Authority website, paca.gov.om, to ensure they are prepared to comply with requirements to enter the Sultanate.

Guests travelling to the UAE should ensure they are aware of official requirements to enter or transit through the country.

Guests departing from Oman should also ensure that they are aware of all pre-departure requirements, as well as requirements during their flights, which are provided at omanair.com.

Sultanate-funded Unesco project for East Africa region launched

PARIS: The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco) has launched the "Supporting capacity-building of World Heritage sites in East Africa" project, financed by the Sultanate.

In a statement on its website, Unesco said the ambassadors of the Sultanate of Oman, Comoros, Kenya, Madagascar, United Republic of Tanzania, and a representative from Somalia joined the Unesco World Heritage Centre to launch the three-year project entitled: "Supporting capacity-building of World Heritage sites in East Africa" financed by the Sultanate.

Dr Hamad bin Saif al

Hamami, the Sultanate's Permanent Representative to the Unesco, reiterated the Sultanate's commitment to providing support to the Eastern Africa region in the implementation of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, he emphasised that the launch of this project is a good start for stronger collaboration between the Sultanate and the Eastern Africa region.

Mechtild Rössler, Director of the Unesco World Heritage Centre stressed the importance of this project that is anchored in Unesco's Global Strategy to encourage countries to become state parties to the convention and to support them

in preparing tentative lists and credible nomination dossiers that will be represented on the World Heritage List. This project will also contribute to the objectives and main actions of Unesco Priority Africa, the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, and Aspiration 5 of the African Union's Agenda 2063.

Samwel William Shelukindo, Representative of Tanzania to Unesco, extended his thanks to the Sultanate for financing the project, stressing the urgent need of rehabilitation of the House of Wonders in Stone Town of Zanzibar and thanked the timely support of the Sultanate in this regard. — ONA

Boost for Oman-origin products

GENEVA: The Sultanate has deposited the document needed for joining World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO)'s Lisbon Agreement of Appellations of Origin and Geographic Denominations.

Idris Abdulrahman al Khanjari, Permanent Representative of the Sultanate to the United Nations (UN) and International Organisations in Geneva, said that the Sultanate's government attaches great importance to the protection of unique qualities of products of Omani origin, including the outputs of Omani soil, climate and cultural heritage. Al Khanjari added that



upon the Sultanate's joining the Lisbon Agreement document, the producers of Oman-origin products, like the famous Omani

khamjars or daggers (particularly the Sa'eedi Khanjar), Omani halwa (sweets), Omani lemon products, the breeders of abalone, mountain

goats, Batinah plain goats and other artisans have wide scopes for marketing their products at a global level and that consumers may confidently purchase those typical Omani products and discover their unique qualities.

Al Khanjari pointed out that the Sultanate's joining the Geneva-based Lisbon Agreement will act as an incentive to producers to increase output. He noted that the move will provide protection to the Sultanate against any breach of its rights and allow the country to promote its unique geographic denominations, which reflects positively on Omani economy. — ONA



Oman, Albania sign agreement on mutual visa exemption

RIYADH: The Sultanate of Oman and the Republic of Albania signed at Oman's Embassy in Riyadh on Wednesday an agreement on mutual visa exemption for holders of diplomatic, special and service passports. The agreement was signed on

behalf of the governments of the two countries by Sayyid Faisal bin Turki al Said, Sultanate's Ambassador to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and Sami Shiba, non-resident Ambassador of the Republic of Albania to Oman. — ONA

Solar-powered mosque in Wilayat of Al Seeb



MUSCAT: Amana Waqf Funds Management Company has finalised the first of its investment projects, which is the conversion of buildings of mosques into green, environment-friendly units operated by solar power.

Amana recently converted Hassan bin Thabit Mosque in the Wilayat of Al Seeb, Muscat Governorate, into a fully day-time solar-powered mosque.

The mosque, which occupies an area of 130 square metres, uses 10-kilowatt solar panels installed in cooperation with a firm classed under the category of small and medium enterprises. The project

cuts down power consumption in prayer areas by 40% and generates a power surplus of 2%.

Yousef al Harthy, CEO of Amana, told ONA, that this initiative fits with Oman Vision 2040 in establishing an environment whose elements are sustainable. The overall aim is to tap power alternatives to enhance social welfare, diminish spending on conventional power solutions and realise Amana's objectives to create a new concept for the management of Waqf establishments in accordance with the most modern methods. — ONA

Dialogue on food systems

MUSCAT: The Sultanate, represented by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, took part on Wednesday in the Arab Regional Food Systems Dialogue, in preparation for the Food Systems Summit 2021.

The meeting was organised by the UN Economic Commission for Western Asia (ECWA), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), World Food Programme, World

Health Organization (WHO), International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the Arab Organization for Agricultural Development (AOAD).

The meeting highlighted the challenges facing the region in light of the outbreak of Covid-19 in terms of food security, besides reviewing solutions, which can be adopted to limit the impacts of the current crisis. — ONA

Tenders worth RO 3.374m approved



MUSCAT: The Tender Board on Wednesday approved RO 3,373,974 worth tenders and additional works for the following development projects:

- 1- Renewal of leasing contract in Asalah Towers in Al Ghubra, Muscat, for the Directorate General of Roads and Transport at RO 370,375.
- 2- Renewal of the contract signed with ARABSAT for broadcasting channels of Oman TV on Hotbird for a duration of 5 years at RO 1,164,240.
- 3- Renewal of leasing contract of accommodation for students at Sharia Sciences College in Al Khuwair, Muscat, for a duration of 3 years at RO 378,000.
- 4- Extending leasing contract for the National Centre for Statistics and Information at Ghala, Muscat, for a duration of 6 months at RO 125,000.
- 5- Additional works of the internal tender related to consultancy services for the supervision on internal designs

of Innovation Complex – Muscat at RO 58,752.

6- Additional works of the tender related to establishing Al Batinah Expressway (Second package) at RO 702,853.

7- Additional works of the internal tender related to consultancy services of the supervision on 600 residential units with internal roads and lighting in the Wilayat of Suhar, Governorate of North Al Batinah at RO 129,200.

8- Additional works of the internal tender related to consultancy services of the supervision on 272 residential units and public utilities in the Wilayat of Mahout, Governorate of Al Wusta at RO 67,133.

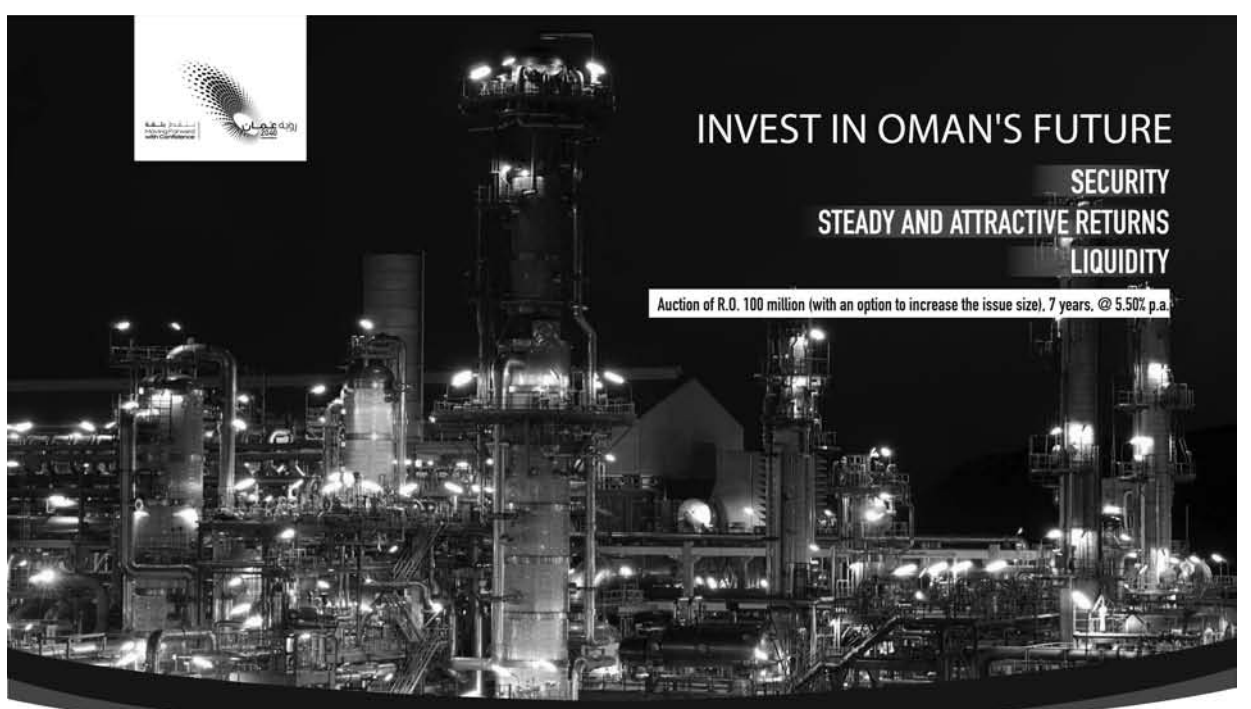
9- Additional works of the internal tender related to consultancy services of the supervision on 1050 residential units with internal roads and lighting in the Wilayat of Al Khabourah, Governorate of North Al Batinah at RO 9,718.

10- Additional works of the internal tender related to consultancy services of the supervision on 2500 residential units with internal roads and lighting in the Wilayat of Al Suwaiq, Governorate of North Al Batinah at RO 26,420.

11- Additional works of the internal tender related to consultancy services of the supervision on 150 residential units with internal roads and lighting in the Wilayat of Shinas, Governorate of North Al Batinah at RO 13,000.

12- Renewal of leasing contract related to the provision of medical cadre, a nutritionist and technicians for offering care to disabled people at Dar Al Aman Rehabilitation Centre in Al Khouhd, Muscat, for one year at RO 329,250.

The board held the meeting under the chairmanship of Dr Said bin Mohammed bin Ahmed al Saqri, Minister of Economy and Chairman of the Tender Board. — ONA



Sultanate of Oman Government Development Bonds

On behalf of the Government of Sultanate of Oman, represented by the Ministry of Finance, the Central Bank of Oman announces an issue of Government Development Bonds to be sold by auction. The 67th Issue of Government Development Bonds will be issued on Thursday, 22/04/2021, carrying a coupon rate of 5.50% per annum for a maturity period of 7 years (maturing on Saturday, 22/04/2028). These Bonds will be auctioned on Tuesday, 20/04/2021. 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 5.50% per annum is payable half-yearly during the life of the Bond, commencing from the date of issue (i.e. 22nd April 2021). The interest will be paid semi-annually on 22nd October and 22nd April, every year till maturity of the Bond on Saturday, 22/4/2028. The first interest payment will be on 22/10/2021.

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.

67th ISSUE OPENS ON SUNDAY, APRIL 4th, 2021.
CLOSES ON MONDAY, APRIL 19th, 2021.

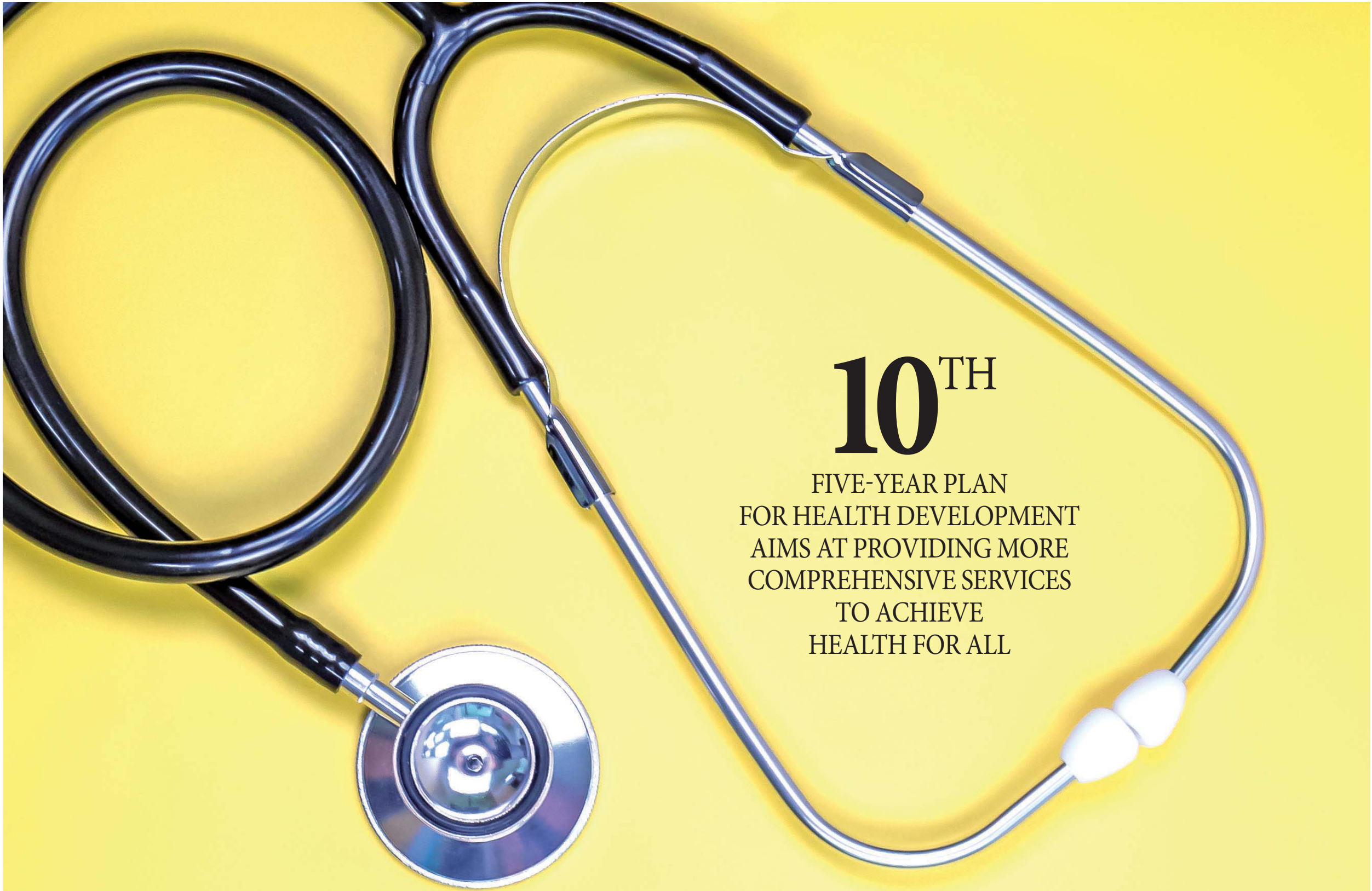
THE MINIMUM SUBSCRIPTION AMOUNT IS R.O. 500 AND IN MULTIPLES OF R.O. 100 THEREOF



Central Bank of Oman

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10TH
FIVE-YEAR PLAN
FOR HEALTH DEVELOPMENT
AIMS AT PROVIDING MORE
COMPREHENSIVE SERVICES
TO ACHIEVE
HEALTH FOR ALL



The private health sector in the Sultanate has grown well and is taking more responsibility in providing healthcare to both expatriates and nationals

DR BENNY PANAKKAL
Medical Director,
Badr Al Samaa

TRANSFORMING HEALTHCARE

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

Health practitioners have hailed the 10th Five-Year Plan for Health Development (2021-2025), as a well perceived and farsighted plan for the health sector that requires much-needed attention following recent challenges being faced by the sector. A senior medical professional called it a visionary document, well drafted for the health sector’s development. “Oman’s healthcare has seen tremendous development in recent years. It strives to grow and upgrade, and it is a very good sign that the government is preparing for the sector’s future needs”, he said. The Plan focuses on a public-private partnership to render the best possible services to both the citizens and residents, as public health is of paramount importance, according to the Ministry of Health (MoH) 10th Five-Year Plan for Health Development (2021-2025). The Plan was launched on Tuesday by Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Saeedi, Minister of Health. “Public health is the national priority in Oman Vision 2040 and will adhere to the principles of the Vision”, he said. “The plan aims at achieving more comprehensive services for all, better

care and quality by collaborating with other health sectors and stakeholders.” The 10th Five-Year Health Development Plan, according to him, is based upon the Health Vision 2050, and the sustainable development goals (SDGs) of the country. It stands close to the World Health Organization’s work programme, the Political Declaration of the United Nations General Assembly on the Prevention and Control of Non-Communicable Diseases, as well as Salalah Declaration on Universal Health Coverage (UHC) by 2030. It also strives to evaluate the results and recommendations of the 9th Five-Year Health Plan. The Plan is developed on five strategic objectives, key priority initiatives, and 43 expected results to be carried out by the ministry, including central directorates and directorates in the governorates, according to implementation levels. **HEALTH SERVICES** The 10th Five-Year Plan envisages the National Health Plan, including governmental and private agencies providing health services in the Sultanate. It aims to establish a joint planning and implementation culture, emphasising that health is everyone’s responsibility. “The private health sector in the Sultanate has grown well and is taking more responsibility in providing healthcare to both expatriates and nationals”, said Dr Benny Panakkal, Medical Director at Badr Samaa. He feels that private and government healthcare providers during the current pandemic situation. The MoH’s 10th Five-Year Plan recognises the role of private sector. It has been developed in line with the National Health Plan that includes governmental and private agencies offering health services in the Sultanate. It aims to establish a culture of joint planning. The Plan comprises six strategic programmes carried out through initiatives and projects to achieve universal health coverage, health sector governance and restructuring, a more sustainable efficient health sector planning and financing system, human resource development for health, sustainable availability of medical and pharmaceutical products and equipment, and digital transformation in the health sector. “This Plan aims at efficient health sector planning and financing system, sustainable availability of medical and pharmaceutical products and equipment as well as digital transformation in the health sector. All these are very exciting, and I am sure will transform the health sector in the Sultanate in a very positive way”, he said.



Oman Trading Establishment LLC



Sultanate of Oman
Consumer Protection Authority

RECALL CAMPAIGN
For Cadillac Escalade model vehicles



Date of Campaign : 1 / 4 / 2021
Campaign Type : Non-compliance
Recall Segment : Airbags
Product Description : Cadillac Escalade 2021

Model Year	Division	Vehicle Model	Affected Vehicle VIN Range	No. of Affected Vehicles in Oman
2021	Cadillac	Escalade	1GYS47KL0MR184123 to 1GYS48KLXMR189528	2

Description:
The front passenger seat belt and airbag status telltale lights located in the overhead console in these vehicles may be set to “night mode”, when the vehicle is started using remote start or when the vehicle is turned off and re-started after approximately ten minutes without opening the door. In the daytime, if “night mode” is active, these telltales may not be visible, as required by the applicable standards and the driver and front passenger may not be informed that the front passenger is unbuckled or has a deactivated airbag.

Procedure: Dealers will reprogram the body control module.

For More information: Customers of above mentioned vehicles may please call Oman Trading Establishment LLC.

Contact Details:
Toll free No for OTE 80050002 on all working days between 8.00pm to 1.00pm and 2.00pm to 5.30pm

Italy expels two Russian officials after spies 'caught red-handed'

ROME: Italy expelled two Russian officials on Wednesday after an Italian navy captain was allegedly caught red-handed selling secret documents to a Russian military officer.

The Italian frigate captain was arrested on spying charges after a "clandestine meeting" with the Russian late on Tuesday in Rome, according to a police statement.

Special operations police stopped both men but only the Italian was arrested. He is accused of passing on "confidential documents" in exchange for money.

The Russian, an embassy official, avoided custody thanks to diplomatic immunity, police said.

Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio summoned Russia's ambassador to Rome, Sergey Razov, on Wednesday morning to lodge a formal protest.

The diplomat was notified of "the immediate expulsion of the two Russian officials involved in this very serious affair", Di Maio said.

According to La Repubblica newspaper, the navy captain worked at the office of Chief of the Defence Staff and had access "to a wide range of documents" concerning both Italian defence and Nato activities.

The *Corriere della Sera* newspaper said the captain was paid 5,000 euros (\$5,860) in cash by the Russian.

In London, Britain's Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab expressed "solidarity" with Italy and condemned "Russia's malign and destabilising activity that is designed



A view of Italy's 'La Farnesina' Foreign Ministry building in Rome. – AFP

to undermine our Nato ally."

RUSSIAN SPATS

Police said the suspected spy was discovered after long investigations led by Italy's domestic intelligence agency AISI, with support from the Chief of the Defence Staff.

La Repubblica said it was the "most serious" incident with Russia since the end of the Cold War, recalling a 1989 incident when Russian and Bulgarian spies were discovered in Italy.

Moscow is embroiled in a series of rows with the West, most recently over the jailing of Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny, a move that triggered EU sanctions against senior Russian officials.

But Italy is one of the countries

within the European Union and Nato with the warmest relations with Russia. Former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi is a friend of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The Russian embassy in Rome confirmed that a member of the office of the military attache was stopped by police on Tuesday, but said it was "inappropriate to comment" in detail.

"In any case, we hope that what happened will not affect the bilateral relationship between Russia and Italy," the embassy said.

In a later statement, it expressed "regret" for the expulsion of two members of its military attache office, but made no mention of possible retaliatory moves.

In Moscow, Kremlin spokesman

Dmitry Peskov said: "We don't have information about the reasons for or the circumstances of this detention."

"But in any case, we hope that the very positive and constructive nature of Russian-Italian relations will continue and will be preserved," he added.

Bulgaria, an EU and Nato member like Italy, expelled two Russian diplomats last week after six people were arrested, including several defence ministry officials, on suspicion of spying for Russia.

Also last week, the Kremlin issued a statement in which Putin bemoaned "the unsatisfactory state of Russia-EU ties", which he blamed on the "unconstructive, often confrontational policies of our partners". — AFP

Russia registers world's first Covid-19 vaccine for animals: Watchdog

MOSCOW: Russia has registered the world's first vaccine against Covid-19 for animals, the country's agriculture safety watchdog Rosselkhoz nadzor said on Wednesday. Russia already has three coronavirus vaccines for humans, the most well known of which is Sputnik V. Moscow has also given emergency approval to two others, EpiVacCorona and CoviVac.

The vaccine for animals, developed by a unit of Rosselkhoz nadzor, was named Carnivac-Cov, the watchdog said.

"The clinical trials of Carnivac-Cov, which started last October, involved dogs, cats, Arctic foxes, minks, foxes and other animals," said Rosselkhoz nadzor's Deputy Head Konstantin Savenkov.

"The results of the



trials allow us to conclude that the vaccine is harmless and highly immunogenic as all the vaccinated animals developed antibodies to the coronavirus in 100% of cases."

Immunity lasts for six months after vaccination, but the shot's developers are continuing to analyse this, the watchdog said.

Mass production of the vaccine could start as early as April, Rosselkhoz nadzor added.

— Reuters

ANNOUNCEMENT



Name : Srinivasulu Siragam
R/C No. : 117903228
Passport No : L8683470
Nationality : Indian
Profession : Projects Manager
Sponsor : Oman International Group SAOC

Dr. Srinivasulu Siragam is no longer employed at Oman International Group SAOC effective from 28/03/2021

OMAN EDUCATION & TRAINING INVESTMENT COMPANY SAOG

Directors Report

On behalf of the Directors of Oman Education Training and Investment S.A.O.G. it is my pleasure to present the Second Quarterly Report of the company for the period from 1/9/2020 to 28/2/2021.

On 28 January 2021, His Excellency the Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion and his delegation visited Intaj Sohar Production Project at Sohar University. He praised the progress of the work on the two projects and emphasized that these two projects are important projects that serve the industrial sector. He wished to complete the two projects as soon as possible. His Excellency also noted the need for cooperation between the ministry and the university on the next phase of the two projects to achieve the desired objective of the two projects as planned.

Consolidated Financial Statements:

The consolidated financial statements for the period from 1/09/2020 to 28/2/2021 indicated the following:-

1. Net profit 1,068,868 OMR for the period ended 28/02/2021 compared to 410,127 OMR for the period ended 29/02/2020 due to the increase in tuition fees and low expenses, in addition to that there are no occupancy rate in student accommodation due to the Corona pandemic.
2. The government grant was registered for deferred government

CONSOLIDATED STATEMENT OF COMPREHENSIVE INCOME (Un Audited) Period ended 28 February 2021

	Group 28-Feb-21 OMR	Group 29-Feb-20 OMR	Group 31-Aug-20 OMR
Tuition fee	6,735,927	6,349,204	12,546,989
Other income	82,401	306,865	590,144
Total income	6,818,328	6,656,069	13,137,133
Expenses			
Salaries and related costs	(4,454,858)	(4,741,111)	(8,853,935)
Administrative and other operating expenses	(638,270)	(836,679)	(1,593,375)
Depreciation of property and equipment	(590,860)	(727,372)	(1,429,395)
Release of deferred government grant	236,166	233,502	469,704
Reversal of bad and doubtful debts	-	-	113,054
Provision of right-of-use assets	(6,634)	-	(13,269)
Total Expenses	(5,454,456)	(6,071,660)	(11,307,216)
Profit / (loss) for the period from operations	1,363,872	584,409	1,829,917
Finance cost	(78,783)	(64,208)	(148,334)
Finance income	8,955	5,763	9,658
Profit for the year before tax	1,294,043	525,965	1,691,241
Income Tax	(225,175)	(115,838)	(559,128)
Net Income After Tax	1,068,868	410,127	1,132,113
Profit attributable to:			
Equity holder of the parent	1,068,868	410,127	1,132,113
Minority interest	-	-	-
Earnings per share	0.015	0.006	0.016

The complete accounts will be sent by mail to any shareholder who requests them. The request to be made at P.O. Box 44, P.C. 311, Tel: 26850120, Fax: 26721258

grants, reflecting the value of its extinguishment of the company's profits equivalent to the consumption of property and equipment funded by that grant, which was valued during the current fiscal year in the amount of 236,166 OMR.

3. Purchase of fixed assets and assets of the group (computers, laboratory devices, furniture, equipment and projects under completion) during the period for 102,627 OMR.

Finally, I would extend my sincere congratulations to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, may Allah protect him, as well as Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation. I would like also to extend my profound thanks to the Board of Directors, as well as the University Board of Governors and the company Executives, Academic and Administrative staff for their great effort, looking forward for a successful future in the next period.

Hassan bin Ihsan bin Nasseb Al-Nasseb
Chairman

CONSOLIDATED STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL POSITION (Un Audited) At 28 February 2021			
	Group 28-Feb-21 OMR	Group 29-Feb-20 OMR	Group 31-Aug-20 OMR
ASSETS			
Non-current asset			
Property and equipment	33,200,226	34,408,316	33,689,226
Right-of-use assets	159,439	-	166,074
	33,359,665	34,408,316	33,855,300
Current assets			
Inventories	18,891	90,664	74,773
Trade and other receivables	5,257,378	9,350,569	4,936,199
Bank balances and cash	6,037,586	3,008,954	3,074,152
TOTAL ASSETS	11,313,855	12,450,187	8,065,124
	44,673,520	46,858,503	41,940,424
EQUITY AND LIABILITIES			
Equity attributable to equity holders of the parent			
Share capital	7,000,000	7,000,000	7,000,000
Statutory reserve	3,388,502	3,064,646	3,281,615
Property revaluation reserve	5,301,623	5,301,623	5,301,623
(Retained earnings / Loss)	1,485,991	858,929	1,364,010
	17,176,116	16,225,198	16,947,248
Non-current liabilities			
Deferred grant related to assets	15,192,823	15,852,574	15,428,989
Term loan	-	115,841	-
Deferred tax liability	1,141,083	1,163,514	1,141,083
Employees' end of service benefits	1,322,185	1,398,616	1,372,104
Lease liabilities	145,526	-	154,556
Student Deposit-Non Current portion	232,615	180,068	211,754
	18,034,231	18,710,613	18,308,486
Current liabilities			
Bank Overdraft/short Term loan	-	2,000,000	3,000,000
Current portion of term loan	115,841	625,000	428,341
Lease liabilities	4,512	-	9,238
Trade and other payable	8,765,600	9,102,923	2,586,622
Provision for Income Tax	577,220	194,769	660,489
	9,463,173	11,922,692	6,684,690
Total Liabilities	27,497,404	30,633,305	24,993,176
TOTAL EQUITY AND LIABILITIES	44,673,520	46,858,503	41,940,424
Net assets per share	0.245	0.232	0.242

EU takes Poland to court over law 'undermining' judges

BRUSSELS:

The European Commission said on Wednesday it is taking Poland to the European Court of Justice over a reform it says undermines judicial independence.

Brussels is also asking the court to make an interim order suspending the 2019 Polish law until a final judgment is delivered.

EU Justice Commissioner Didier Reynders told a news conference that "the commission believes that the law infringes upon the independence of the judiciary in Poland and is incompatible with the primacy of the law of the union".

Government spokesman Piotr Muller tweeted in response that the commission move "has no legal or factual justification" and argued that judiciary matters are "an exclusively national domain". — AFP



Sahara Hospitality Co. (S.A.O.G.)
P.O. Box 311, Muscat, Postal Code 100, Sultanate of Oman.

DIRECTORS' REPORT FOR THE FIRST QUARTER ENDED ON FEBRUARY 28, 2021.

On behalf of Board of Directors, I am pleased to submit the unaudited financial statements of the company for the first quarter ended on February 28, 2021 along with its related reports.

The company has reported revenue of RO. 2,630,617 for the period under review as against RO 3,586,755 in the corresponding period of previous year. Net profit after tax for the same period was RO. 518,053 as against RO. 751,613 recorded in the same period of last year.

The total shareholders fund increased from RO. 22,607,219 at the end of the first quarter of the year 2020 to RO. 24,112,906 in the same period of 2021. And as a result of this growth, the net assets per share have recorded R.O 3.195.

On behalf of the Board of Directors, I express our most sincere gratitude to His Majesty Sultan Haitham Bin Tariq Bin Taimour for his wise leadership and generous support to the private sector. Also I would extend our gratitude to the Muscat Securities Market, Capital Market Authority and other government organizations involved in private sector business development.

I conclude this report by expressing our appreciation to our shareholders, Petroleum Development Oman, our bankers and customers for their valued support and cooperation.

For and on behalf of Board of Directors,

TALAL BIN QAIS AL ZAWAWI
CHAIRMAN

Unaudited Consolidated Statement of Financial Position at 28 th February, 2021		
	2021 RO. '000	2020 RO. '000
Fixed assets	16,527	17,476
Current assets		
Inventories	26	23
Trade receivables	4,877	5,162
Receivable from related party	48	52
Bank and cash	5,048	6,221
	9,999	11,458
Total assets	26,526	28,934
Current liabilities		
Trade and other payables	484	1,908
Payables to related parties	916	2,305
Bank loans and over drafts	688	1,179
Lease liability	20	--
Tax liability	87	132
	2,195	5,524
Long term liabilities		
Bank loan	--	688
Lease liability	81	--
Deferred tax liability	137	115
	218	803
Total liabilities	2,413	6,327
Net Assets	24,113	22,607
Shareholders' funds		
Share capital	7,546	6,738
Legal reserve	2,246	2,065
Retained earnings	14,321	13,804
Total shareholders' equity	24,113	22,607

Unaudited Consolidated Statement of Comprehensive Income For 3 months ended 28 th February, 2021		
	2021 RO. '000	2020 RO. '000
Turnover/Revenue	2,631	3,586
Gross Profit	960	1,285
Depreciation	(271)	(268)
Administration & general expenses	(113)	(151)
Operating profit	576	866
Finance charges	33	18
Profit before taxation	609	884
Taxation	(91)	(133)
Net profit attributable to ordinary Shareholders	518	751
Net profit margin	20%	21%

The complete accounts in either Arabic or English will be delivered to any shareholder within 7 days of receipt of the request. Such requests may be sent to the Board Secretary, Sahara Hospitality Co. (S.A.O.G.), PO Box 311, Postal Code 100, Muscat.

Looking for job, car, flat and furniture? Check out the *Observer* classified page. It's where buyers meet sellers.

Netanyahu gets official results of deadlocked polls

TEL AVIV: Final results from last week's elections in Israel — the fourth time the country has gone to the polls in the last two years — showed voters had once again evenly split, giving no candidate a clear path to victory as coalition talks loom.

As has become the norm, the split lies essentially between a bloc supporting centre-right Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and a group of other parties hoping to oust the long-serving leader.

The results were officially released on Tuesday by the election commission and handed over to President Reuven Rivlin on Wednesday.

Rivlin said at the handover event that people wanted “unconventional alliances,” from all sectors of society, and were looking for an end to the political paralysis gripping the country.

Rivlin will begin talks with the various party leaders on Monday. He has until April 7 to decide which party leader will get the first chance to try to form a coalition.

There are 120 seats in the

Knesset, meaning 61 are needed for a majority. In all, 13 parties will be represented in the new Knesset.

Netanyahu's Likud party again got the most votes, with 30. Next came the centrist Atid party of Yair Lapid, which has ruled out a coalition with Likud. It got 17. The conservative religious Shas party came in third place, with nine mandates.

That presages another

round of tough negotiations. The last election resulted in a broad and wobbly coalition of political enemies that would have seen them taking turns in the prime minister's

office. It collapsed after only a few months amid a fight about the budget. Few have ruled out a fifth election later this year.

A key factor will be the course charted by Raam, an Arab party, that has reportedly considered supporting a Likud-run coalition without joining it, under the condition that a far-right politician who might be in the coalition be blocked from any ministerial position. — dpa

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Syrian children watch a puppet show performed by a local theatre group amidst the ruins of buildings destroyed during Syria's civil war, in Al Fua, in the country's northwestern Idlib province, on Tuesday. — AFP

Donors fall short of UN Syria aid goal with \$6.4 billion pledge

BRUSSELS: International donors on Tuesday pledged \$6.4 billion in aid for Syria and refugees in neighbouring countries, falling well short of a UN target aimed at dealing with growing needs.

The United Nations had been hoping to raise a record \$10 billion at a two-day video conference as the coronavirus pandemic has helped push the number of people requiring assistance to new highs after a decade of conflict.

EU crisis management commissioner Janez Lenarcic said \$4.4 billion was promised for 2021 and \$2 billion was for 2022 and beyond. Donors also offered \$7 billion in loans.

The shortfall from the more than 50 donor nations at the fifth

Brussels Conference on Syria, co-hosted by the European Union and the UN, was immediately condemned by international aid organisations working in Syria.

“The money pledged confirms fears that donors are not listening to the pleas of the millions of Syrians who have fled their homes and had their lives torn apart by ten years of conflict,” Moutaz Adham, Oxfam Syria's country director, said in a statement.

“Many stated at the Brussels Conference that aid was needed now more than ever. Yet this funding sends a bleak message to those trying to find a future after ten years of darkness and despair.”

The UN said that the \$10 billion

needed in 2021 was intended to be split with \$4.2 billion for humanitarian relief inside Syria, and the rest for refugees sheltering in the region.

The need for aid has increased on the back of the coronavirus pandemic and a slump in the value of the Syrian pound.

That is despite the intensity of the fighting dropping in Syria after the Russia-backed forces of President Bashar al Assad reconquered most of the country.

“Things are getting worse, not better. More than 13 million people need humanitarian assistance to survive this year,” United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said.

— AFP

US extends Iraq's sanction waiver ahead of talks

BAGHDAD: The US has granted Iraq the maximum extension to a sanctions waiver allowing it to import Iranian gas ahead of talks next month, an Iraqi official said on Wednesday.

Iraq buys gas and electricity from Iran to supply about a third of its power sector, worn down by years of conflict and poor maintenance, and unable to meet the needs of the country's 40 million population.

The US blacklisted Iran's energy industry in late 2018 as it ramped up sanctions, but granted Baghdad a series of temporary waivers, hoping Iraq would wean itself off Iranian energy by partnering with US firms. Since the imposition of its sanctions against Tehran at the end of 2018 by former US president Donald Trump, Washington has continued to extend the time allowed for Baghdad to find other suppliers.

In January, Trump's administration granted a three month exemption, and US President Joe Biden's team has now granted a further four months, the official said on condition of anonymity.

The extensions, the maximum that can be offered, comes ahead of the start of a “strategic dialogue” between Washington and Baghdad, slated to open via videoconference on April 7.

— AFP

Yemen gets first Covid-19 vaccines as second wave spreads

ADEN: Yemen received its first Covid-19 vaccines on Wednesday, a week after the war-ravaged country's internationally-recognised government declared a health emergency in response to a second wave of the pandemic.

The 360,000 doses of AstraZeneca's vaccine arrived by plane at Aden, part of a consignment from the global Covax vaccine-sharing scheme expected to total 1.9 million doses, UN Children's Fund Unicef said.

In the southern city — the government's interim capital — patients at an isolation centre in the grounds of a hospital lie on temporary beds in tents next

to oxygen cylinders, breathing heavily.

“We need more staff, because the rise in cases is not normal. We are exhausted from work, exhausted,” said Zainab al Qaisi, a doctor and director of the centre, set up by the Red Cross last year.

“The centre is overwhelmed. We need oxygen, to expand intensive care across all provinces.”

The Covax vaccines will be free, and distributed across the divided country, spokesman for the government's health ministry Ali al Walidi confirmed last week, two days after it declared the health emergency in areas under its control.



A man looks on as a worker prepares oxygen cylinders at a Covid-19 quarantine centre in Aden. — Reuters

Walidi also said more shots would arrive in May.

Aid group Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) said last week it has seen a dramatic influx of critically ill Covid-19 patients in various parts of the country, and that all aspects of the Covid-19 response were lacking.

“While some countries have successfully vaccinated half of their population, Yemen finds itself at the back of the queue,” said MSF's Head of Mission in Yemen, Raphael Veicht.

Yemen's health system has been battered by war, economic collapse and, recently, a shortfall in humanitarian aid funding.

Its six-year war has restricted

testing and reporting, with the Ansar Allah movement that is battling a pro-government coalition, and which controls most large urban centres, having provided no figures since an initial few in May.

But numbers of confirmed cases have risen rapidly since mid-February.

Yemen's emergency coronavirus committee reported 132 confirmed and 19 deaths on Tuesday. It has recorded more than 4,100 coronavirus infections and 864 deaths so far.

Walidi said the true figures were likely much higher, a view shared by the UN and aid agencies. — Reuters

SHORT TAKES

TEHRAN

Private companies allowed to import vaccine

Private companies may now import coronavirus vaccines into Iran, said President Hassan Rouhani on Wednesday, as the country tries to overcome problems in securing enough jabs.

Rouhani noted that vaccine doses supplied by private companies will not be distributed for free, unlike those supplied by the government. Also, only companies that have been approved by the Health Ministry will be allowed to bring in the medicine. Until now, that function has been



reserved for the Health Ministry.

Rouhani said last week that the country is having problems importing sufficient quantities of vaccines, primarily because of US sanctions. — dpa

UNITED NATIONS

UN report points to Ansar Allah for attack

A deadly attack on December 30, 2020, on Aden airport in Yemen was carried out with missiles similar to those possessed by Ansar Allah fighters and fired from locations under their control, according to a report submitted to the UN Security Council.

The attack killed about 20 people, including the deputy minister of public works, and injured more than 100 people.

“Three explosions occurred... minutes after a plane carrying



Prime Minister Maen Abdulmalik Saeed, members of his ‘unity’ cabinet and other senior government officials had landed,” the report said. — AFP

GAZA CITY

Gaza sees spike in coronavirus cases

Gaza's health ministry said on Wednesday that more than a thousand cases of coronavirus were recorded over the previous day, the highest daily infection toll in several months.

The spike in the coastal Palestinian enclave, controlled by Hamas, stands in contrast to the slowdown in infections in Israel, which maintains a tight blockade on Gaza.

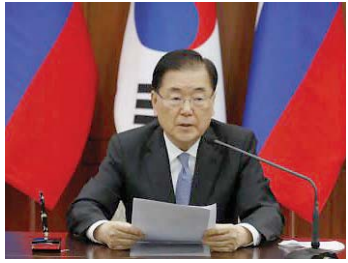
“The epidemiological situation in the Gaza Strip is



dangerous,” said Magdy Dahir, deputy director of primary care at the Gaza health ministry. “There is a clear increase in hospitalisations.” — AFP

In brief

■ SEOUL



SOUTH KOREAN FM GOING TO CHINA FOR FIRST TIME IN 3 YEARS

A South Korean foreign minister will visit China this week for the first time in three years, looking for ways to improve ties even as tensions are running high between Beijing and the United States, the South's most important ally.

Chung Eui-Yong will go to China on Friday, and on Saturday will meet with the Chinese government's top diplomat, State Councillor Wang Yi, South Korea's foreign ministry said in a statement.

"This meeting of the diplomatic ministers of Korea and China will serve as an opportunity to explore ways to develop bilateral relations."

— Reuters

■ JALALABAD



THREE WOMEN POLIO WORKERS SHOT DEAD IN AFGHANISTAN

Gunmen killed three Afghan women involved in a nationwide polio immunisation programme on Tuesday, officials said, a day after authorities launched a new drive against the crippling disease. The three women were killed in two separate attacks in the restive eastern city of Jalalabad, officials said.

"They were all on duty going from house to house to vaccinate children", supervisor Wahidullah, who like many Afghans uses only one name, said.

A relative of one of the victims said his niece had joined the immunisation programme to earn some money for her family. — AFP

■ INDIA



INDIA'S DAILY VIRUS CASES RISE AT SLOWER PACE

India reported 53,480 new cases of the coronavirus, health ministry data showed on Wednesday, the second day that cases have risen less than the day before.

Deaths were at their highest since mid-December, according to a Reuters tally, with 354 people dying of the coronavirus in the last 24 hours, the ministry said, taking total mortalities to 162,468.

India has been reporting a spike in cases this month, with its richest state of Maharashtra, home to the financial capital of Mumbai, accounting for a majority of its case load.

— Reuters



Indonesian officials carry a box containing cockpit voice recorder (CVR or blackbox) at the port in Tanjung Priok in Jakarta, on Wednesday. — AFP

Indonesia recovers cockpit voice recorder of crashed Sriwijaya Air jet

JAKARTA: Indonesia has recovered the cockpit voice recorder from a Sriwijaya Air jet that crashed into the Java Sea in January, and the air accident investigator said on Wednesday it could take up to a week to be able to listen to the recording.

The CVR could help investigators understand the actions taken by the pilots of the doomed jet, which crashed shortly after take-off on January 9, killing all 62 people on board.

A preliminary report by investigators released in February said the plane had an imbalance in engine thrust that eventually led it into a sharp roll and then a final dive into the sea. The report included information from the flight data recorder (FDR).

Divers found the casing and beacon of the CVR from the 26-year-old Boeing Co

737-500 within days of the crash but had been searching for the memory unit in relatively shallow but muddy waters, where currents are sometimes strong.

The CVR of Srwijaya flight 182 was located late on Tuesday, Indonesia's

transport minister told a media conference. A navy official said it had been found under a metre of mud.

"We will take CVR to lab for reading, about three days to one week", Indonesia National Transportation Safety Committee (KNKT) head Soerjanto Tjahjono said. "After that we'll transcribe and match it to FDR. Without a CVR, in the Sriwijaya 182 case it would be very difficult to determine the cause."

Safety experts say most air accidents are caused by a combination of factors that can take months to establish.

— Reuters

Suu Kyi 'looks healthy', lawyer says, as US orders needless staff to leave

YANGON: Myanmar's deposed leader Aung San Suu Kyi appeared in good health on Wednesday during a video meeting, one of her lawyers said, as the United States ordered its non-essential embassy staff to leave after weeks of violence over a February 1 coup.

The detained Nobel laureate, who has been in custody since the military seized power, had wanted to meet lawyers in person and did not agree to a wide discussion by video in the presence of police, lawyer Min Min Soe told Reuters by telephone.

"Amay looks healthy, her skin complexion is good", Min Min Soe said, using an affectionate term meaning "mother" to refer to Suu Kyi.

Only the legal cases against her filed since the coup were discussed during the video conference, the lawyer said.

Suu Kyi, 75, was arrested the same day the military seized power and faces charges that include illegally importing six handheld radios and breaching coronavirus protocols.

The military has also accused her of bribery in two recent news conferences.

Her lawyers say the charges were trumped up and dismissed the accusation of bribery as a joke.

The next hearing in her case is on Thursday.

The military seized power saying that November elections won by Suu Kyi's party were fraudulent. The election commission said the vote was fair.

Myanmar has been in turmoil since the reimposed military rule after a decade of tentative steps towards democracy.

At least 521 civilians have been killed in protests, 141 of them on Saturday, the bloodiest day of the unrest, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP). Fighting has also flared between the army and ethnic minority insurgents in



A protestor with his face covered stands near a burning makeshift barricade along a road during a protest against the military coup, in Yangon on Tuesday. — AFP

“Amay looks healthy, her skin complexion is good”

MIN MIN SOE

Lawyer

frontier regions. Refugees fleeing the turmoil are seeking refuge in neighbouring countries.

The AAPP said a further eight people were killed on Tuesday, when thousands came out to march in several towns, according to media and photos on social media.

There were also new candle-lit protests overnight in several towns in defiance of a curfew and at least one dawn march on Wednesday, media reported.

There is growing concern in many countries about prospects for the country with no sign of a path out of the crisis. The junta has not taken up offers from its Southeast Asian neighbours to help find a solution.

The United States on Tuesday ordered the departure of non-emergency US government

employees and their family members due to concerns over civil unrest.

Police and a spokesman for the Myanmar junta did not answer calls seeking comment.

'HORRIFYING VIOLENCE'

City-based opponents of military rule have called for a united front with insurgent groups that have battled the government for decades for greater autonomy in the border regions.

The military has defended its long grip on power by saying it is the only institution capable of holding the country together.

Myanmar's oldest rebel group, the Karen National Union (KNU), said on Tuesday it was bracing for a major government offensive on its areas of operation along the eastern border with Thailand.

The KNU urged the international community, Thailand in particular, to help Karen people fleeing the "onslaught" and called for countries to cut ties with the junta to stop the violence against civilians.

Military aircraft bombed KNU fighters at the weekend, sending about 3,000 villagers into Thailand. — Reuters

Australia's Covid-19 vaccine roll-out misses targets

CANBERRA: Australia has fallen far behind its target for Covid-19 vaccinations, figures showed on Wednesday, with only about 670,000 people inoculated against an initial target of 4 million by end-March.

The slow roll-out, which puts Australia behind many other developed countries, has been blamed by the government on supply issues from Europe, while recent floods across the east coast have slowed the delivery of vaccines.

State governments have also complained about slower-than-expected distribution and a lack of certainty on supplies, while local media have reported errors by private contractors hired to assist with the roll-out.

Federal Health Minister Greg Hunt on Wednesday, however, pointed to a record 72,826 vaccinations on Tuesday, which he said showed the inoculation programme was accelerating following the start of domestic production of the AstraZeneca



Police officers patrol the Valley Mall in Brisbane, the third largest city which remained in lockdown on Wednesday. — AFP

vaccine by Australian biotech company CSL Ltd.

"We remain on track to complete first doses for all Australians who seek it by the end of October", he told a media conference.

Australia has largely curtailed the spread of the coronavirus, with snap lockdowns, border closures

and speedy tracking systems, reporting just under 29,300 Covid-19 cases and 909 deaths.

However, health officials conceded the slow vaccination pace means the risk of another wave of cases has not diminished.

"We are in a situation where we are at as high a risk as we

have been since the beginning of the pandemic", Australia's Chief Medical Officer Paul Kelly said on Tuesday.

The missed target comes as an outbreak of Covid-19 cases in Queensland state has led to a snap three-day lockdown of its capital Brisbane, throwing Easter holiday

The slow roll-out, which puts Australia behind many other developed countries, has been blamed by the government on supply issues from Europe, while recent floods across the east coast have slowed the delivery of vaccines

plans for thousands in disarray.

Queensland on Wednesday said it had detected only two new local cases of Covid-19 in the past 24 hours, fuelling some optimism that a three-day snap lockdown in state capital Brisbane will be lifted on Thursday.

More than two million residents of Australia's third-largest city have been asked to stay home as authorities try to contain two distinct virus clusters, now comprising 17 cases.

— Reuters

‘It wasn’t right’: Witness to Floyd death tells court

MINNEAPOLIS: The teenager who took the viral video of George Floyd’s death said on Tuesday at the trial of the white police officer charged with killing the 46-year-old Black man that she knew at the time “it wasn’t right.”

Darnella Frazier, 18, was among the witnesses who gave emotional testimony on Tuesday at the high-profile trial of former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin.

Chauvin, 45, is charged with murder and manslaughter for his role in Floyd’s May 25, 2020 death, which was captured on video by Frazier and seen by millions, sparking anti-racism protests around the globe.

In the video, Chauvin, who was subsequently fired from the police department, is seen kneeling on the neck of a handcuffed Floyd for more than nine minutes.

Floyd, who was being arrested for allegedly passing a counterfeit \$20 bill in a nearby store, complains he cannot breathe and eventually falls unconscious.

Other witnesses included an off-duty firefighter who said her attempts to render assistance to Floyd were rebuffed by police and a man who made an emergency 911 call after the incident to report a “murder.”

“I have a Black father. I have a Black brother,” Frazier tearfully told the court. “That could have

been one of them.

“It’s been nights I stayed up apologising and apologising to George Floyd for not doing more and not physically interacting and not saving his life,” she said.

At the same time, “it’s not what I should have done,” Frazier added in a reference to Chauvin, who was seated at the defence table.

Frazier described Floyd as “scared” and “terrified” and “begging for his life.”

“It wasn’t right. He was suffering. He was in pain,” she said. “I knew it was wrong. We all knew it was wrong.”

‘WITNESSED A MURDER’

Also testifying was Genevieve Hansen, 27, a Minneapolis firefighter and emergency medical technician (EMT) who was off-duty and out taking a walk in the neighbourhood the day of Floyd’s arrest. Hansen said she identified herself as a firefighter to police on the scene because she “noticed he needed medical attention.”

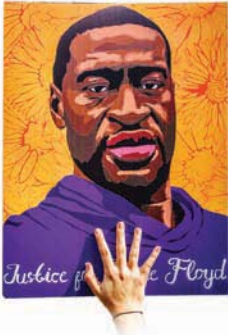
“He wasn’t moving and he was cuffed,” she said.

Hansen, who testified wearing her white firefighter’s uniform with a black tie, said a police officer rebuffed her offers to help, leaving her “totally distressed.”

“I was desperate to help and wasn’t gaining access,” she said. “I don’t know if you’ve seen anybody

George Floyd murder trial

WHAT HAPPENED?



GEORGE FLOYD, 46, a Black man, died after a white police officer pressed his knee to his neck for nearly 9 minutes during an arrest May 25, 2020 Minneapolis, Minnesota

His death was captured on video

THE TRIAL

March 8
Start of trial, jury selection

March 29
Opening arguments

End April
Verdict expected

THE ACCUSED

DEREK CHAUVIN
44, white Minneapolis officer



- Facing charges of:
 - second-degree murder** (max. sentence: 40 years)
 - third-degree murder** (max. sentence: 25 years)
 - manslaughter**

- 19-year veteran, fired by Minneapolis Police department after incident

THE PROTESTS

Floyd’s death sparked protests across US and the world that continue under the banner of “Black Lives Matter”



Protesters in front of the Hennepin County Government Center, Minneapolis, Mar 7

AFP photos/Handout/Hennepin County Jail

be killed but it’s upsetting.”

Another witness said he called 911 after an unconscious Floyd was taken away in an ambulance.

“I believed I witnessed a murder,” Donald Williams, 33, a

mixed martial arts instructor, told the court. “I didn’t know what else to do.”

Williams said Floyd was already in “danger” when he arrived on the scene.

OTHER ACCUSED

ALEXANDER KUENG



THOMAS LANE



TOU THAO



- Charged as accomplices
- Will stand trial separately from August
- Also fired by Minneapolis Police department

AFP

held by Chauvin in a “blood choke” used in wrestling or martial arts. Portions of his recorded 911 call were played in court.

“He just went and killed this guy,” Williams said in the call. “Murderers, bro... they just killed that man in front of the store.”

Asked who he was referring to, Williams said “the officer sitting over there” and pointed to Chauvin.

‘TRAINED TO DO’

Under questioning from Chauvin’s defence attorney, Eric Nelson, Williams acknowledged that he called Chauvin and the officers names at the scene.

“You called him a tough guy,” Nelson said. “You called him a ‘bum’ 13 times.”

“They were not listening to anything I was telling them,” Williams said. “I had to speak out for Floyd.” The video of Floyd’s death has been played repeatedly for the nine-woman, five-man jury at Chauvin’s trial.

Prosecutors are seeking to demonstrate that Chauvin had no justification for using a dangerous neck restraint on a compliant Floyd.

Chauvin’s attorney claimed in opening arguments that Floyd’s death was caused by a combination of illegal drugs and a medical condition rather than asphyxiation. — AFP

Police arrest suspect in assault of Asian woman in New York

NEW YORK: Police in New York arrested early on Wednesday a suspect in a brutal, videotaped assault of a 65-year-old Asian-American woman, the latest incident of anti-Asian violence in the United States.

Police announced the arrest on Twitter and said the man was charged with felony assault as a hate crime. The tweet did not give his name but US news outlets identified the man as Brandon Elliot, 38.

The attack, which took place on a sidewalk in broad daylight in Midtown Manhattan on Monday, was caught on CCTV footage from inside an adjacent building.

In the video, posted online by police, the man can be seen walking up to the woman and kicking her in the stomach, knocking her to the ground.

He then kicks her several times in the head before walking away.

The video also shows a man,



A poster of a suspect hangs from a post as a man holds a placard after an Asian American anti-violence press conference on Tuesday, outside the building where a 65-year-old Asian woman was attacked in New York. — AFP

who appears to be a delivery worker, watching the attack unfold from inside the building.

He is then joined by two other men, one of whom closes the door rather than coming to the woman’s aid as the assailant walks away.

Police had asked the public for help in identifying the attacker.

Residents identified him as a local homeless person and directed police to a hotel serving as a shelter for people without homes, and he was arrested there, New York news outlets reported.

The victim, whose identity has not been released, was hospitalized with multiple injuries, including a broken pelvis. She was in a stable condition on Tuesday, police said.

In a statement, the NYPD said the attacker “made anti-Asian statements” towards the victim as he kicked her. It added that the force’s hate crime task is investigating the assault.

The same unit is still looking for another man who struck a woman in the face in a subway station on Saturday night.

The woman was not seriously injured and declined any medical assistance.

New York and other US cities have seen an upsurge in crimes against people of Asian descent since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, with activists attributing the rise to ex-president Donald Trump’s repeated references to Covid-19 as the “Chinese virus.” — AFP

Attack on Niger presidency repelled ahead of handover



In this file photo taken on February 24, riot police officers patrol on a pick-up truck during clashes with demonstrators as opposition supporters protest after the announcement of the results of the country’s presidential run-off in Niamey. — AFP

NIAMEY: A military unit tried to seize the presidential palace in Niger’s capital Niamey overnight but it was pushed back by heavy gunfire and order has been restored, a senior Niger security source said on Wednesday, days before a handover of power.

The assailants, from a nearby airbase, fled after their attack was met with heavy shelling and gunfire from the presidential guard unit, three other security sources said, adding that a search was ongoing. The sources all

requested anonymity because they are not authorised to speak to the media.

The sources did not comment on the whereabouts of president-elect Mohamed Bazoum, who is due to be sworn in on Friday after an election victory disputed by his opponent, former president Mahamane Ousmane.

Former US Sahel envoy J Peter Pham tweeted that both men were safe. The government of Niger was not immediately available to comment. — Reuters

JAKARTA

Indonesian firefighters battle refinery fire

Indonesian firefighters were working on Wednesday to put out a large blaze at one of the country’s biggest oil refineries that have been burning for more than two days after an explosion rocked the facility. Crews blasted fire-suppressing foam on two still-burning storage tanks to quench the inferno that severely injured at least six people early on Monday.

Thick plumes of black smoke shot into the sky at the Balongan refinery in West Java, owned by



state oil company Pertamina. By Wednesday, two of the tanker fires had been extinguished.

“Pertamina is focused on extinguishing fires at the two other tankers,” it said. — AFP

ISLAMABAD

Pakistan lifts ban on cotton imports from India

Pakistan lifted a nearly two-year ban on sugar and cotton imports from India on Wednesday, the finance minister said, a step towards reviving suspended trade between the two nuclear-armed neighbours. Pakistan’s Economic Coordination Council (ECC), a top decision-making body, allowed the private sector to import 0.5 million tonnes of white sugar.

New Delhi is yet to make any comment on the decision.

Pakistan Finance Minister



Hammad Azhar announced the decision after the ECC concluded, confirming what sources had said earlier, adding it will also import cotton and cotton yarns from India. — Reuters

WASHINGTON

Sudan pays \$335 million for US victims in deal

Sudan has paid \$335 million as agreed to compensate victims of past anti-US attacks as part of a deal that removed the struggling country from the US terror blacklist, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday.

The transitional, civilian-backed government provided the funds for survivors and victims’ families from attacks including the 1998 bombings of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania by Al Qaeda, which was backed by



Sudan’s then ruler. “We hope this aids them in finding some resolution for the terrible tragedies that occurred,” Blinken said in a statement.

— AFP

The stark reality of modern life...

One of the greatest Arab poets, Al Mutanabbi, has once said: “The cherished place in the world is a saddle and the best companion of the time is a book.”

Much later, English playwright and poet William Shakespeare wrote: “A beggar’s book outworths a noble’s blood.” Now there are no takers for such words of wisdom.

This dearest and most prized place is nowadays occupied by none other than WhatsApp. This is a stark reality of our modern-day life. The reading habit and practice of exchanging books has been washed away in the tide of the Internet. There are also apprehensions that this change would have serious implications on the culture and awareness of the people. It will also harm their capability of deep thinking about their future.

The flood of the Internet has reshaped our lifestyle, robbed our times, controlled our practices and compelled us to focus on the mobile phone screens round-the-clock just for some entertainment or as a consumer.

Sometimes, jokes and disgraceful audio and video clips are also exchanged. All this reflects the wide changes which have taken place in the culture of all segments of the society pushing them to the abyss or at least near that.

When we argue about this issue, we



Ali Al Matani
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THE INTERNET
HAS RESHAPED
OUR LIFESTYLE,
ROBBED
OUR TIMES,
CONTROLLED
OUR PRACTICES,
AND COMPELLED
US TO FOCUS
ON THE MOBILE
PHONE SCREENS
ROUND-THE-
CLOCK

also find that the Arab world is also not far when it comes to spending time between a book and mobile screens.

If we hold other factors responsible for this change, the education system is also to be blamed for this change in habits and practises. The education system is not strictly centred on serious reading which actually helps in deepening the thought process as well as sharpens minds and imagination for literary creativity.

Whereas the traditional and social media has temptations in its visual contents, illustrations and images. This has developed a high-rise wall between the new generation and the old — the book. Books on the shelves are waiting for the dust to be removed from them. The same is the case in Oman. It also requires taking care of the issue as reading of books is the foundation of deep thought process and practical knowledge and learning from other’s experiments and thinking.

According to the data from the National Centre for Statistics and Information, more than 94 per cent of Omanis use social media.

They spend six hours per day on an average. The most popular social media platform they use is WhatsApp. It is used by 93 per cent of them followed by YouTube which is used by 70 per cent, and Instagram by 50 per cent.

These statistics clearly reveal the volume of the problem. This can be solved only by certain practical steps. Students should be made to read a physical book. If they are expanding their activities into the electronic spheres, they should equally focus on reading and spending time between covers of books.

This will restore the thinking of the new generation and change the methodology of research and studies. This will reduce the time spent on the world wide web. The culture of reading should be promoted. Competitions should be organised to meet the objective.

Students should be encouraged to attend book fairs. They should be motivated to balance their time between books and the Internet. This is important for their brighter future. Of course, there are youth who go on reading and stick to it. They value the habit of reading to attain knowledge and get information. But a large part of the new generation is still glued to phone screens.

They need to be liberated from this prison. We are hopeful that the authorities concerned will formulate new and innovative methods to bring the youth of the country back to books. The parents, guardians and the entire family must play a pivotal role to restore the habit of reading.

WRITE FOR US

Oman Daily Observer welcomes original contributions for publication in its opinion page. The newspaper reserves the right to publish or edit the article accordingly. The article’s length must not exceed 550 words. Please send the articles to opinion@omanobserver.om

POLITICAL ATTACK

Brazil’s Bolsonaro goes on the offensive

STEPHEN EISENHAMMER & EDUARDO SIMÕES

Under attack from all sides, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro did what might have been expected of a former army captain — he went on the offensive.

Thousands of Brazilians are dying daily of Covid-19, the economy is struggling and the president’s political arch-rival now threatens his 2022 re-election bid. So Bolsonaro shuffled the deck, putting loyalists in key ministerial positions and smoothing relations with capricious allies in Congress.



Bolsonaro started yesterday morning on the ropes, taking hits from all sides. But as the day passed, he turned it around

PAULO KRAMER
A Political Scientist

By making six changes to his Cabinet, the largest shake-up of his presidency so far, Bolsonaro regained the initiative. The reshuffle began with allies’ demands to tone down the far-right rhetoric, including the ouster of anti-China firebrand Ernesto Araujo as top diplomat.

But Bolsonaro’s main objective, according to political analysts, was gaining greater control over the armed forces and the federal police.

Unexpected shake-ups at the Defence Ministry and the Justice Ministry, which oversees the police, put staunch Bolsonaro supporters in charge. A Cabinet position handling legislative priorities went to a member of the powerful congressional coalition known as the “centrão,” whose support is vital to keeping impeachment at bay.

“Bolsonaro started yesterday morning on the ropes, taking hits from all sides,” said Paulo Kramer, a political scientist in Brasilia. “But as the day passed, he turned it around.”

Signs of easier relations between Congress and the president helped Brazilian stocks, which hit a one-month high on Tuesday. For Kramer, Bolsonaro’s moves were at their core focused on short-term survival, although next year’s election and the prospect of facing leftist former President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva is never far from the leader’s mind.

“He knows the next two months are going to be really tough until the curve flattens”, Kramer said, referring to the explosion of cases that has made Brazil the current epicentre of the coronavirus pandemic. The country trails only the United States in total Covid-19 deaths and cases. So far, Bolsonaro has held on to his core support of about 30 per cent in opinion polls. But his rejection rates continue to climb and, if epidemiologists are right, the worst of Brazil’s Covid-19 outbreak is still to come.

It was too early, Brasilia watchers said, to know if the high-stakes gambit would work. The military, in particular, is a complex organisation not easily swayed by a single appointment.

— Reuters

REAL TIME EVOLUTION

In mutant variants, has the coronavirus shown its best tricks?

KATE KELLAND AND JULIE STEENHUYSEN

The rapid rise in different parts of the world of deadly, more infectious coronavirus variants that share new mutations is leading scientists to ask a critical question — has the Sars-CoV-2 virus shown its best cards?

New variants first detected in such far-flung countries as Brazil, South Africa and Britain cropped up spontaneously within a few months late last year. All three share some of the same mutations in the important spike region of the virus used to enter and infect cells.

These include the E484k mutation, nicknamed “Eek” by some scientists for its apparent ability to evade natural immunity from previous Covid-19 infection and to reduce protection offered by current vaccines — all of which target the spike protein.

The appearance of similar mutations, independent of one another, springing up in different parts of the globe shows the coronavirus is undergoing “convergent evolution”, according to a dozen scientists interviewed by Reuters. Although it will continue to mutate, immunologists and virologists said they suspect this coronavirus has a fixed number of moves in its arsenal.

The long-term impact for the virus’ survival, and whether a limit on the number of mutations makes it less dangerous, remains to be seen. “It is plausible that this virus has a relatively limited number of antibody escape mutations it can make before it has played all of its cards, so to speak”, said Shane Crotty, a virologist at the La



A health worker prepares a dose of the Covid-19 vaccine at a vaccination clinic set up inside the Derby Arena at Pride Park in Derby, Derbyshire on Wednesday. — AFP

NEW VARIANTS
FIRST DETECTED IN
SUCH FAR-FLUNG
COUNTRIES AS
BRAZIL, SOUTH
AFRICA AND
BRITAIN CROPPED
UP SPONTANEOUSLY
WITHIN A FEW
MONTHS LATE LAST
YEAR

Jolla Institute for Immunology in San Diego.

That could enable drugmakers to stay on top of the virus as they develop booster vaccines directly targeting current variants, while governments struggle to tame a pandemic that has killed nearly 3 million people.

The idea that the virus could have a limited number of mutations has been circulating among experts since early February, and gathered momentum with the posting of a paper showing the spontaneous appearance of seven variants in the United States, all in the

same region of the spike protein.

The process of different species independently evolving the same traits that improve survival odds is central to evolutionary biology. The vast scope of the coronavirus pandemic — with 127.3 million infections globally — allows scientists to observe it in real time.

“If you wanted to sort of write a little textbook about viral evolution, it’s happening right now”, Dr Francis Collins, a geneticist and director of the US National Institutes of Health, said in an interview.

— Reuters

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sport



AlphaTauri's Yuki Tsunoda in action during the Bahrain GP. – Reuters

Tsunoda best F1 rookie in years, says Brawn

LONDON: Formula One's motorsport managing director Ross Brawn has hailed Yuki Tsunoda as the best rookie in years after the Japanese scored points on his debut in Bahrain last Sunday.

The former Ferrari technical director who also ran the Honda, Brawn and Mercedes teams, said he had been impressed by the 20-year-old AlphaTauri driver's "brilliant spells" in the season-opener.

"He is the best rookie F1 has had for years, having been fairly stunning in whatever series he has competed in," said the Briton in a column for the formula1.com website.

"His promotion by Red Bull looks like a brilliant move. We can all remember the glorious days of full grandstands at Suzuka and the passion of the Japanese fans.

"I think we are going to have that again, which is incredibly exciting."

Formula One has three rookies this season, one of them last year's Formula Two winner Mick Schumacher — the son of seven-



AlphaTauri's Yuki Tsunoda

time world champion and Ferrari great Michael — and the other his Haas team-mate Nikita Mazepin.

Schumacher finished 16th, lapped and last on track on Sunday while Russian Mazepin spun off at the third corner — the shortest F1 debut since 2002.

Canadian Nicholas Latifi was the sole rookie last year, failing to score a point with Williams, but the sport had a strong injection of talent in 2019 when Britons George Russell and Lando Norris moved up from F2.

Russell shone last year when

he replaced seven-time champion Lewis Hamilton at Mercedes for a race in Bahrain after his compatriot contracted Covid-19.

Norris, fourth on Sunday for McLaren, became the youngest Briton to stand on the F1 podium when he took third in Austria last year.

Tsunoda, who was ninth in Bahrain, was the first Japanese to score points in nearly a decade and the 65th driver to do so on his debut.

His result was the best result by a Japanese since Kamui Kobayashi finished sixth for Toyota in Abu Dhabi in 2009. Kobayashi also finished ninth on his debut that year but points were only awarded to the top eight at the time.

Japan has never had a Formula One race winner, let alone a champion, but Red Bull motorsport consultant Helmut Marko told racefans.net that Tsunoda was the best chance yet.

The last previous rookie to score points in his first race was Belgian Stoffel Vandoorne with McLaren in 2016. — **Reuters**



Aston Martin's Lance Stroll and AlphaTauri's Yuki Tsunoda in action during the Bahrain GP. – Reuters



OFA to decide on 2020-21 season today

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, MARCH 31

The board directors of Oman Football Association (OFA) will decide the status of domestic football competition including the top-tier league and first division league during the board meeting which will take place on Thursday at OFA premises in Seeb Stadium. The meeting will be chaired by OFA Chairman Shaikh Salim al Wahaibi in presence of the board members.

The continuation or cancellation of 2020-21 Omantel League and First division league is the hot topic under discussion of board members as many clubs' officials raised proposals on cancellation of this year's season due to rapid

increase of Covid-19 positive cases recently. The implementation of night lockdown has impacted the week 11 and 12 which was scheduled to be played on April 4 and 8 but postponed until further notice.

On Tuesday, OFA chief Shaikh Salim al Wahaibi met the chairmen and representatives of Omantel League clubs and nine teams, which qualified to the finals of first division league.

During the meeting which was held at Seeb Stadium, the OFA officials stated that the postponement of the top-flight league may extend for more than one month as the night lockdown decision could also be extended by the Supreme Committee. The OFA chief and seniors pointed out

that the season is linked with the national team's plan as the senior team is gearing up for the joint World Cup qualifiers and Arabian Gulf Cup while the Olympic team is warming up for different upcoming assignments including Islamic Solidarity Games. The clubs' representatives raised their concerns to the OFA high level management on the financial impacts in case of postponement of the league similar to the last season scenario.

Dhofar are leading the Omantel League with 26 points after reclaiming six points which were deducted since beginning of the existing season while defending champions Seeb are positioned in second place with 22 points and Al Musannah are third with 20 points. Nine more weeks remain for the

completion of the top domestic league. Meanwhile, the OFA on Wednesday announced the new schedule of the first division league matches.

Both first and second group matches will be held in Muscat during April 3 to 11 and all the matches will be played at 4 pm. Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex and Seeb Stadium are the two approved venues for the matches.

Bausher and Sur will open the finals round matches from the second group on Saturday at Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex, while Al Mudhaibi will take on Samayil at the Seeb Stadium. The opening match for the first group is scheduled on Sunday between Al Oruba and Masirah, while Ibri will take on Majees.



Bangladesh coach Domingo upset after DLS fiasco

Bangladesh coach Russell Domingo cut a frustrated figure after his side started their run chase in Tuesday's second Twenty20 against New Zealand without knowing what tally they needed to win and criticised the conduct of the match officials.



Pant to captain Delhi after Iyer injury

Indian batsman Shreyas Iyer has been ruled out of the Indian Premier League (IPL) season after injuring his left shoulder during India's one-day international series with England, his franchise the Delhi Capitals announced on Tuesday.

BARTY, MEDVEDEV MARCH ON

KORDA RUN CONTINUES WITH UPSET OF SCHWARTZMAN



Ashleigh Barty of Australia hits a forehand against Aryna Sabalenka of Belarus in the Miami Open.
— USA Today Sports



Daniil Medvedev of Russia hits a backhand against Frances Tiafoe of the United States.
— USA Today Sports

MIAMI: World number one Ashleigh Barty advanced to the semifinals of the Miami Open on Tuesday as Russian top seed Daniil Medvedev booked his place in the quarterfinals of the men's tournament.

Barty battled through her third three-setter of the fortnight to oust seventh seeded Aryna Sabalenka of Belarus in 2hr 16min on the Grandstand Court. The Australian will face Elina Svitolina of Ukraine in the semifinals following her gruelling 6-4, 6-7 (5/7), 6-3 win.

Fifth seed Svitolina advanced to the last four after defeating Latvia's Anastasija Sevastova 6-3, 6-2 later on Tuesday.

After taking a close first set, Barty appeared to be on the brink of victory after grabbing a 3-1 lead in the second set tie-break.

Sabalenka staged a superb recovery however to snatch the tie-break 7-5, forcing a decisive third set.

Barty regrouped in the third though and with Sabalenka clearly in pain clutching her stomach, rammed home her advantage to complete a deserved win.

The victory leaves Barty one semifinal win away from retaining her world number one ranking, though the Australian insisted she was not preoccupied with holding on to top spot.

"It's an amazing thing to be No 1 in the world at the moment, but I promise you that's not what makes me happy," Barty said afterwards.

"It's a focus of course. I want to try to do the best that I can, but it's not a distraction or a pressure in any way."

MEDVEDEV DOWNS TIAFOE

Medvedev meanwhile had an easier ride in the men's tournament, easing past Frances Tiafoe of the United States in straight sets, 6-4, 6-3.

Medvedev hammered down 11 aces in the win, breaking Tiafoe three times en route to victory.

Medvedev will face Roberto Bautista Agut in the last eight after the Spaniard eliminated John Isner in three sets to avenge his 2019 quarterfinal loss in Miami.

Bautista Agut saved a match point at 5-6 down in the third set tie-break to claim a 6-3, 4-6, 7-6 (9/7) win.

"I think I played a brilliant set the first set, and then with John you feel always under pressure," Bautista Agut said. "It was a really tough fight until the last point."

The biggest upset of the day saw world number 87 Sebastian Korda continue his giant-killing run by knocking out Argentina's fifth seed Diego Schwartzman,

winning 6-3, 4-6, 7-5.

"I played an incredible match today," said Korda, the Florida-born son of former Australian Open champion Petre Korda.

"I think mentally I was great out there. I stayed calm. Even when in the tight situations I believed in myself and I went for it," the 20-year-old added.

Korda will face Russia's fourth-seeded Andrey Rublev in the last eight. Rublev reached the quarters with a 6-4, 6-4 defeat of Marin Cilic.

In other last 16 matches on Tuesday, Italy's 21st-seeded Jannik Sinner downed Finland's Emil Ruusuvuori 6-3, 6-2 to advance to the last eight.

ATP/WTA MIAMI OPEN RESULTS

MEN (FOURTH ROUND):

Daniil Medvedev (RUS x1) bt Frances Tiafoe (USA) 6-4, 6-3; Roberto Bautista Agut (ESP x7) bt John Isner (USA x18) 6-3, 4-6, 7-6 (9/7); Jannik Sinner (ITA x21) bt Emil Ruusuvuori (FIN) 6-3, 6-2; Alexander Bublik (KAZ x32) bt Taylor Fritz (USA x22) 6-7 (5/7), 6-3, 6-4; Hubert Hurkacz (POL x26) bt Milos Raonic (CAN x12) 4-6, 6-3, 7-6 (7/4); Sebastian Korda (USA) bt Diego Schwartzman (ARG x5) 6-3, 4-6, 7-5; Stefanos Tsitsipas (GRE x2) bt Lorenzo Sonego (ITA x24) 6-2, 7-6 (7/2); Andrey Rublev (RUS x4) bt Marin Cilic (CRO) 6-4, 6-4

WOMEN (QUARTERFINALS):

Ashleigh Barty (AUS x1) bt Aryna Sabalenka (BLR x7) 6-4, 6-7 (5/7), 6-3; Elina Svitolina (UKR x5) bt Anastasija Sevastova (LAT) 6-3, 6-2

It is the first time the 19-year-old has reached the quarterfinals of an ATP Masters event.

"For me it means a lot," Sinner said. "The first goal is always trying to improve day after day, going on practice courts and then when you have sometimes good results, it makes you happy."

Sinner will play 32nd seed Alexander Bublik of Kazakhstan in the quarterfinals. Bublik advanced to the last eight with a 6-7 (5/7), 6-3, 6-4 win over 22nd-seeded Taylor Fritz of the United States. — AFP

Sri Lanka make steady progress after Windies' 354

NORTH SOUND, Antigua and Barbuda: Captain Kraigg Brathwaite was last out in the West Indies' first innings of 354 before the visitors rallied behind Lahiru Thirimanne's third consecutive half-century to reach 136 for three at stumps on the second day of the second and final Test in Antigua on Tuesday.

After scores of 70 and 76 in the drawn first Test, Thirimanne's run of good scores — going back to the series in South Africa last December — continued with another composed innings of 55.

However, his dismissal to Kemar Roach in the day's final session necessitated consolidation which the unbroken fourth-wicket pair of Dinesh Chandimal (34 not out) and Dhananjaya de Silva (23 not out) provided on an increasingly placid surface with an unbroken stand of 59.

Earlier, Brathwaite extended his occupation of the crease to eight-and-a-half hours which brought him 126 off 311 deliveries with 13 fours, a ninth Test century in which he fulfilled the role of anchor of the innings.

His opposite number Dimuth Karunaratne, by contrast, survived

16 balls before an edged drive off fast bowler Alzarri Joseph produced a stunning diving catch at third slip by Nkrumah Bonner to send the left-hander back to the pavilion for just one when Sri Lanka started their reply immediately after lunch.

As in the first Test a week earlier at the same venue, occasional seamer Kyle Mayers accounted for Oshada Fernando and when Roach bowled Thirimanne through the gate, the innings was at a crossroads at 77 for three.

"I think it's about even-steven at this stage," said former West Indies captain Jason Holder.

"This is a pretty good batting wicket. You have to be really patient. Maybe if we can grab one or two more wickets early tomorrow before the new ball becomes due, we can put them under greater pressure."

LAKMAL IMPRESSES

Suranga Lakmal again led the Sri Lankan bowling effort with figures of four for 94 off 28 overs as the West Indies batted through the morning session after resuming on 287 for seven.

It was Lakmal, the experienced



Lahiru Thirimanne of Sri Lanka hits a four. — AFP

fast-medium bowler, who finally broke through for an increasingly frustrated Sri Lankan team halfway through the morning session when he terminated a 103-run eighth-wicket partnership between Brathwaite and Rahkeem Cornwall.

Very much the aggressor for the two-and-a-half hours of their time in the middle, Cornwall went past his previous best in Tests — 61 in the first innings of the first Test just a week earlier.

But he miscued a heave to the on-side and offered a simple catch to Vishwa Fernando at mid-on.

His 73 came off 92 balls and was embellished by 10 fours and one six. Brathwaite, who resumed on 99 overnight and went to three figures by turning the third ball of the morning from Lakmal to fine leg, never eased out of first gear, even with the demise of Cornwall.

He eventually stroked two more boundaries to add to his tally of 11 from day one but then saw the dismissal of Kemar Roach off Dushmantha Chameera, giving wicketkeeper Niroshan Dickwella his fifth catch of the innings.

Joined by last man Shannon Gabriel, someone with no

SCOREBOARD

WEST INDIES 1ST INNINGS

K Brathwaite b Chameera 126
J Campbell c Dickwella b Lakmal 5
N Bonner b Lakmal 0
K Mayers c Dickwella b Fernando 49
J Blackwood c Dickwella b Lakmal 18
J Holder c Thirimanne b de Silva 30
J de Silva c Dickwella b Chameera 1
A Joseph lbw Embuldeniya 29
R Cornwall c V Fernando b Lakmal 73
K Roach c Dickwella b Chameera 9
S Gabriel not out 1
Extras (lb-6, nb-7) 13
Total (111.1 overs, all out) 354
Fall of wickets: 1-11, 2-15, 3-86, 4-120, 5-171, 6-185, 7-222, 8-325, 9-351
Bowling: S Lakmal 28-11-94-0, V Fernando 27-4-71-1, L Embuldeniya 25-5-88-1, D Chameera 21-1-4-69-3, D de Silva 10-3-26-1

SRI LANKA 2ND INNINGS

D Karunaratne c Bonner b Joseph 1
L Thirimanne b Roach 55
O Fernando lbw Mayers 18
D Chandimal not out 34
D de Silva not out 23
Extras (lb-2, nb-3) 5
Total (61 overs, 3 wickets) 136
Fall of wickets: 1-18, 2-64, 3-77
Bowling: K Roach 12-4-39-1, S Gabriel 10-2-28-0, A Joseph 10-2-31-1, J Holder 12-2-20-0, K Mayers 7-4-6-1, R Cornwall 9-5-8-0, J Blackwood 1-0-2-0

pretensions to batsmanship, it seemed almost inevitable that Brathwaite would complete the rare feat of carrying his bat through a completed Test innings twice, having done so previously against Pakistan in Sharjah in 2016.

— AFP

RONALDO POWERS PORTUGAL



BELGIUM HIT EIGHT PAST BELARUS IN WC QUALIFER

PARIS: Cristiano Ronaldo helped Portugal to a hard-fought 3-1 win over Luxembourg on Tuesday with his first goal of the 2022 World Cup qualifying campaign, while Belgium hit eight past Belarus.

Juventus forward Ronaldo bagged his 103rd international goal five minutes after the break to stop his side falling foul of a Luxembourg team whose recent performances have defied their small status and tiny population.

Ronaldo had been controversially denied what looked to have been an added-time winner in Saturday's draw against Serbia in Belgrade, but he was not to be denied when he tapped home Joao Cancelo's cross.

Luxembourg beat the Republic of Ireland last time out and another shock result looked possible when Gerson Rodrigues put the hosts in the lead with a glancing header half an hour into the Group A contest at the Stade Josy Barthel.

Diogo Jota put the European champions back on level terms in first-half stoppage time with a close-range header of his own, finding himself unmarked to nod home Pedro Neto's cross.

Ronaldo put Portugal ahead and then Joao Palhinha added a third to save Portugal's blushes and put them top, level on seven points with Serbia, who won 2-1 at Azerbaijan earlier on Tuesday thanks to an Aleksandar Mitrovic brace. The 36-year-old Ronaldo is now six goals short of Iranian Ali Daei's all-time record of 109 international strikes.

"The goal before half-time came at the worst time," said Luxembourg coach Luc Holtz.

"That is the turning point because I would have liked to return to the dressing room at 1-0. After, the individual quality made the difference."

— AFP

**WORLD CUP 2022
EUROPEAN ZONE
QUALIFYING RESULTS
ON TUESDAY**

GROUP A

At Luxembourg

Luxembourg 1 (Rodrigues 30) Portugal 3 (Jota 45+2, Ronaldo 51, Joao Palhinha 80)

At Baku

Azerbaijan 1 (Makhmudov 59-pen) Serbia 2 (A. Mitrovic 16, 81)

GROUP E

At Cardiff

Wales 1 (James 82) Czech Republic 0

At Leuven, Belgium

Belgium 8 (Batshuayi 14, Vanaken 17, 89, Trossard 38, 76, Doku 42, Praet 49, Benteke) Belarus 0

GROUP G

At Gibraltar

Gibraltar 0 Netherlands 7 (Berghuis 42, L. de Jong 55, Depay 61, 88, Wijnaldum 62, Malen 64, Van de Beek 85)

At Podgorica

Montenegro 0 Norway 1 (Sorloth 35)

At Istanbul, Turkey

Turkey 3 (Kenan Karaman 2, Hakan Calhanoglu 33, Burak Yilmaz 52) Latvia 3 (Savainieks 35, Uldriks 58, D. Ikaunieks 79)

GROUP H

At Rijeka, Croatia

Croatia 3 (Perisic 62, Modric 76-pen, Brekalo 90) Malta 0

At Nicosia

Cyprus 1 (Pittas 42) Slovenia 0

At Trnava, Slovakia

Slovakia 2 (Skriniar 38, Mak 74) Russia 1 (Mario Fernandes 71)

Moriyasu lauds clinical Japan after record win

TOKYO: Japan coach Hajime Moriyasu praised his side's ruthlessness after they recorded their biggest win in World Cup qualifying with Tuesday's 14-0 thrashing of Mongolia.

The win fell one goal short of matching their all-time record, a 15-0 victory over the Philippines in Olympic qualifying in 1967, but Moriyasu was delighted with the way his side had taken Mongolia apart in the Group F match behind closed doors

at Chiba's Fukuda Denshi Arena.

"The players were focused on what they could accomplish rather than thinking about their opponent," Moriyasu said.

"In the middle of the game we changed our system, and I'm glad the players who came on for the first time did so well." Werder Bremen striker Yuya Osako scored his first hat-trick in international football while Junya Ito, Kyogo Furuhashi



Japan coach
Hajime
Moriyasu

and Sho Inagaki all claimed braces in a brutally one-sided affair.

The win was Japan's fifth in a row in World Cup qualifying and came on the heels of their 3-0 victory over fierce rival South Korea in a friendly last week.

Victory over Myanmar on June 3 will see them advance to the next phase, when the continent's four guaranteed qualifiers for Qatar 2022 will be determined.

— Reuters

features

How the pandemic has brought a new era of staycations to Oman

The pandemic has driven many people to consider local travel – exploring and capturing pictures of their hometowns. Through staycations, people find out more about their home countries and this pandemic has shown people that you do not have to go far to have a vacation... **P14**

INSIDE STORIES

LOCAL SCENE



SAMKAT: THE OASIS AND BEAUTIFUL VILLAGE HIDDEN IN THE HEART OF AL AMERAT

The abundance of palm trees in some wilayats of the Sultanate constitutes a huge agricultural fortune and the residents of these wilayats consider this fortune the first source of income... **Story on P16**

ANIMAL PLANET



DO OCTOPUSES HAVE DREAMS? TINY ONES, PROBABLY

An octopus named Marshmallow lies at rest at the bottom of her tank, suddenly shifting in colour from a pale white-green to brown and then orange, as her muscles twitch, suckers contract and her closed eyes shift around... **Story on P15**

READ



WILD SIGN

BY PATRICIA BRIGGS

The sixth book in the Alpha and Omega series, Mated werewolves Charles Cornick and Anna Latham look into what might have caused everyone living in a small town to disappear.

ART



BELGIUM UNVEILS NEW SHOWCASE FOR ILL-TREATED GHENT MASTERPIECE

A 15th century Flemish masterpiece emerges from a decade of restoration this week in a new exhibition space in Belgium's Ghent cathedral, with updated technology to plunge visitors into an intricate work with a troubled past... **Story on P15**

TOURISM



YEMEN'S SOCOTRA ARCHIPELAGO AWAITS ECOTOURISTS

With its lush landscape, distinctive trees, unique animals and turquoise waters home to dolphins, Yemen is hoping its Socotra archipelago will become a dream destination despite the country's nightmarish conflict. **Story on P14**



TOURISM

Yemen's Socotra archipelago awaits ecotourists



WITH ITS LUSH landscape, distinctive trees, unique animals and turquoise waters home to dolphins, Yemen is hoping its Socotra archipelago will become a dream destination despite the country's nightmarish conflict.

Lying in the Indian Ocean some 200 kilometres (120 miles) off the Yemeni coast, the four islands and two rocky islets are home to some 50,000 people and have remained relatively untouched by the war that has devastated the mainland.

While most of Yemen is embroiled in a conflict that erupted in 2014 between Huthi rebels and the government — plus the ravages of the coronavirus pandemic — adventurous travellers are showing a growing interest in visiting Socotra.

Many set off from the wealthy United Arab Emirates, which is close to the authorities that control the islands.

"Fortunately, Socotra has never been affected by the war dynamics of the Yemeni mainland," local travel agency Welcome to Socotra said.

"No tensions or fights have ever been reported, hence there is no reason for tourists to worry."

Since flights resumed with a chartered Air Arabia aircraft once a week from Abu Dhabi, the agency



has received "hundreds" of requests, it said. Yemen, already the poorest country on the Arabian Peninsula even before the war, has for years been trying to develop the archipelago into a hub for ecotourism.

But despite the reassuring words and the lure of the pure white beaches, Socotra hit the headlines in June 2020 when Yemen's UAE-trained southern separatists seized it from the government.

The two sides have since established a power-sharing deal, substantially dialling down tensions in the south.

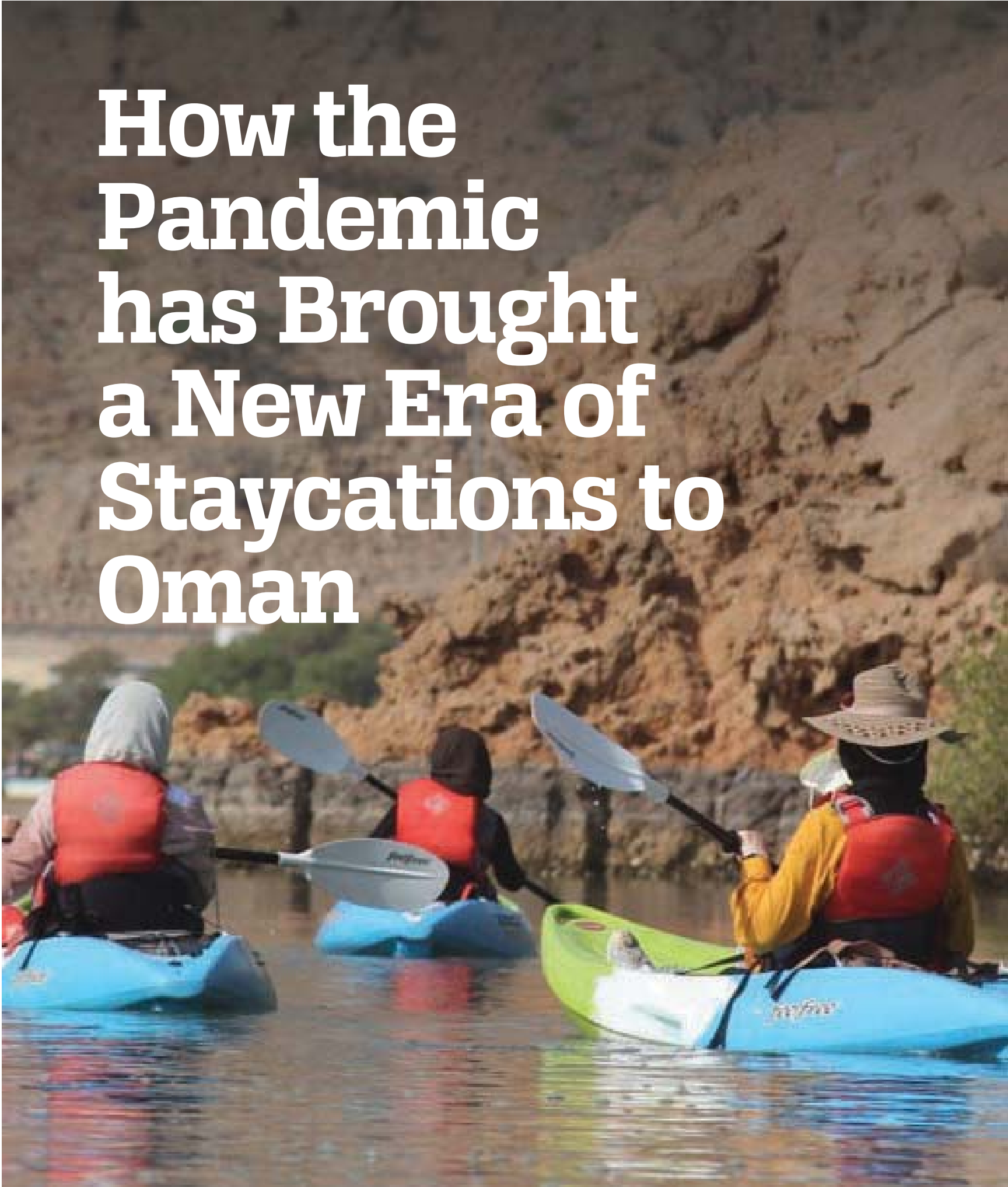
Socotra is located just 250 kilometres (155 miles) from the Horn of Africa, and 1,000 kilometres from the southern city of Aden where Yemen's government is based.

It is famed for its unique biodiversity: nearly one-third of its 825 plants and 90 per cent of its reptile species are considered unique to the island, according to the UN's cultural agency Unesco.

The unique and spectacular vegetation, such as the Dragon's Blood Tree with its distinctive umbrella-shaped canopy and red sap, has earned it a listing as a World Heritage Site.

"Socotra is of particular importance to the Horn of Africa's biodiversity hotspot," Unesco says on its website.

"As one of the most biodiversity rich and distinct islands in the world, (it) has been termed the 'Galapagos of the Indian Ocean'." — AFP



How the Pandemic has Brought a New Era of Staycations to Oman

BY NADIA AL HINAEI

Going on a two-hour drive away from home to Sur to explore Wadi Tiwi and catch the waterfalls falling from a height of ten metres is just what Al Anood al Wahaibi needed after months in quarantine.

"After being in lockdown for so long, it was much needed to go for a staycation and a change in place and a new experience," said Al Wahaibi.

"Getting to go for an adventure in-between nature was a remedy to my brain," she added.

Due to the current travel restrictions, you'd probably have to park your vacation trips on hold till when it's safer. However, traditional vacationing is not an ideal option under this pandemic. That is why the concept of staycations has become more popular.

"While in a staycation, you won't bother to think of food or night stay, you can always go back home to sleep because you will be travelling somewhere new but close to your home. It is easier and cheaper," says al Anood.

The pandemic has also driven people to become more cautious of their hygiene and the number of people they interact with physically. Staycations can make the perfect solution to this as you do not have to go through any airports or see countless travellers and tourists.

"I think many people turned to staycations because of the safety of themselves and their families", said Al Wahaibi.

Staycations being more intimate and isolated make them the perfect activity that you can do outside your home during this pandemic as you can



continue to stay safe yet be able to add a change of scenery to your lifestyle.

Social media users are not able to travel like before and capture fascinating photos of their trips abroad. Instead, they resort to exploring and capturing pictures of their hometowns. As a result, the pandemic has made staycations a trend amongst social media users.

Teepee Oman is a luxury camping service in Oman that was launched at the time the lockdown began in March of 2020. Their goal unexpectedly shifted to targeting local consumers because tourists from abroad were not able to come. This created a challenge for them to shift their strategy

into targeting a whole new group of consumers.

However, they got an unexpected benefit from this as now locals are looking for different ways for an outing without having to travel and interact with people. Even though the campsites that Teepee sets up can be more expensive than a one-night stay in a cheap hotel, they believe that consumers will still choose them because of the experience that their campsites and services provide.

"People started travelling internally and we're looking for something different," said Omaira Mahmood, co-founder of Teepee Oman.

"People are looking for something that they can share

with their friends on Instagram and other media means," she added. This reaffirms the idea of staycations becoming popular now in the pandemic. Also, social media is a major world that can aid the formations of trends amongst users.

Nuzha is an Omani tour agency that organises outdoor trips for females only inside the Sultanate of Oman. They provide a range of outdoor activities for women. Co-founder Sara Saif discussed how a small area in Oman called Sidab which was not well-known before, became the new hiking hotspot in Muscat as many people began promoting their trips to Sidab online after some of the restrictions were eased.

"The lockdowns and curfews in Oman began to impact people mentally and made them want to go out more than ever," said Sara.

Sara also emphasised how going on these staycations raises awareness about the importance of preserving cultural artefacts and the environment in the country. This is due to people exploring their country more than before hence wanting to preserve the beauty that they see.

The question now that is circulating is whether staycations will still be common when people can go back to traditional vacations. The benefits of staycations are not limited to the pandemic period only. Isolation is a great benefit, however, staycations can offer more than that.

Through staycations, people find out more about their home countries and this pandemic has shown people that you do not have to go far to have a vacation.

"People started to realise there are places to [explore] in their hometown," said Al Wahaibi.



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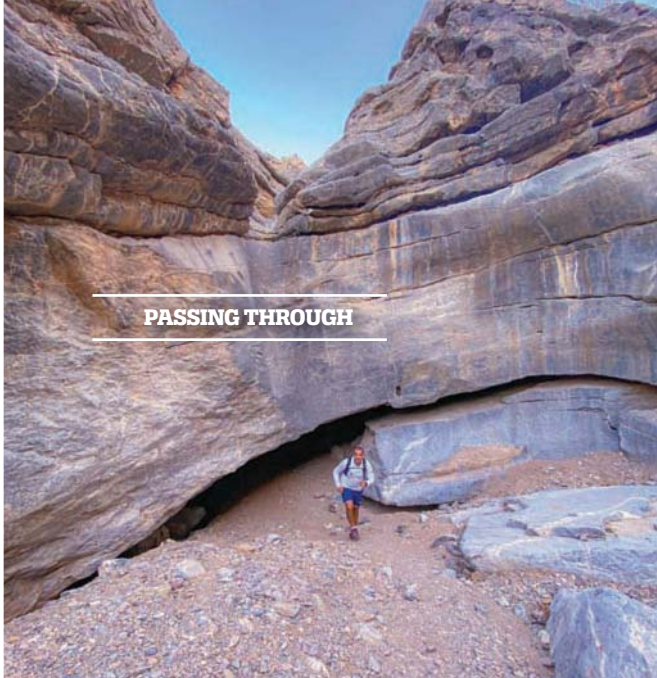
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ANIMAL PLANET

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Do octopuses have dreams? Tiny ones, probably

An octopus named Marshmallow lies at rest at the bottom of her tank, suddenly shifting in colour from a pale white-green to brown and then orange, as her muscles twitch, suckers contract and her closed eyes shift around. This moment was captured in remarkable footage shot by scientists in Brazil, who published a new study in the journal *iScience* on Thursday that says the sophisticated cephalopods experience at least two different types of sleep.

One of these states, which they dubbed "active sleep," is akin to rapid eye movement (REM) in mammals, birds and some reptiles — raising the

intriguing possibility that, like humans, octopuses experience dreams. "Octopuses are unique in terms of their complexity, both behavioural and neural," senior author Sidarta Ribeiro of the Brain Institute of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil said, noting they have the most complex brains of any invertebrates. "But they're nevertheless very different from us." To explore the question of octopus sleep patterns, the researchers continuously recorded four octopuses in their tanks over several days, then went back to analyse the footage. They found during "quiet

sleep," the animals were still, with pale skin and their pupils contracted to a slit. During "active sleep," however, they dynamically changed their skin colour and texture, noticeably heaved and twitched, and their eyes moved around. The pattern was cyclical, with the quiet period lasting around six or seven minutes and followed by an active cycle lasted about 40 seconds. The cycle might then repeat, or the octopus could wake up, but usually fell back asleep 30 to 40 minutes later. All told, their slumbers take up a quarter of the day. To establish whether these states really represented sleep, the researchers devised visual and tactile stimulation tests, the paper's first author, graduate student Sylvia Medeiros said. The first test involved playing a video of a crab on a screen that was placed next to the octopuses. "When they are awake, because crab is a natural prey, they try to attack," she said. But they didn't try to pounce in the two states where they were presumed sleeping. In the second test, they struck the octopus tanks with a rubber hammer, with the animals physically reacting and changing their colour when awake, but not when asleep. **VIDEO CLIPS, OR EVEN GIFS** Learning more about what makes us similar to octopuses, whom our species diverged from 500 million years ago, can shed new insight into our distinct evolutionary paths, said Ribeiro. "If we see a similar phenomenon, in this case, a sleep cycle

comprising quiet sleep and then active, it's most likely due to convergent evolution," he said, meaning our two species independently evolved the same biological mechanisms. That in turn sheds light on the evolutionary pressures that shaped this behaviour. For mammals, REM usleep represents a time of memory consolidation and triggers a variety of molecular mechanisms that have a restorative effect on brain health and cognition. The authors think this could be the case for octopuses too. Most human dreaming also comes during REM sleep — so might this also be the case for the eight-limbed molluscs? "We cannot affirm it for sure," said Medeiros. But if they do, it's unlikely to be similar to the complex narratives we can experience, given how short the active phase is for octopuses, she added. "It should be more like small video clips, or even gifs." The colour patterns the octopuses form on their skins during sleep could offer a window into their minds, as they can mirror patterns they exhibit while they are awake. For example, the "half and half," where they are black on one side and white on the other, is sometimes seen during courtship — so might an octopus that displays this pattern during sleep be dreaming of romance? Maybe, but it's too early to say, said Ribeiro, and the subject of future research. The team next hopes to find ways to record octopuses' neural data — a tricky proposition given they are moving around in water — and to learn more about the role sleep plays for the animals' metabolism and cognition. — **AFP**

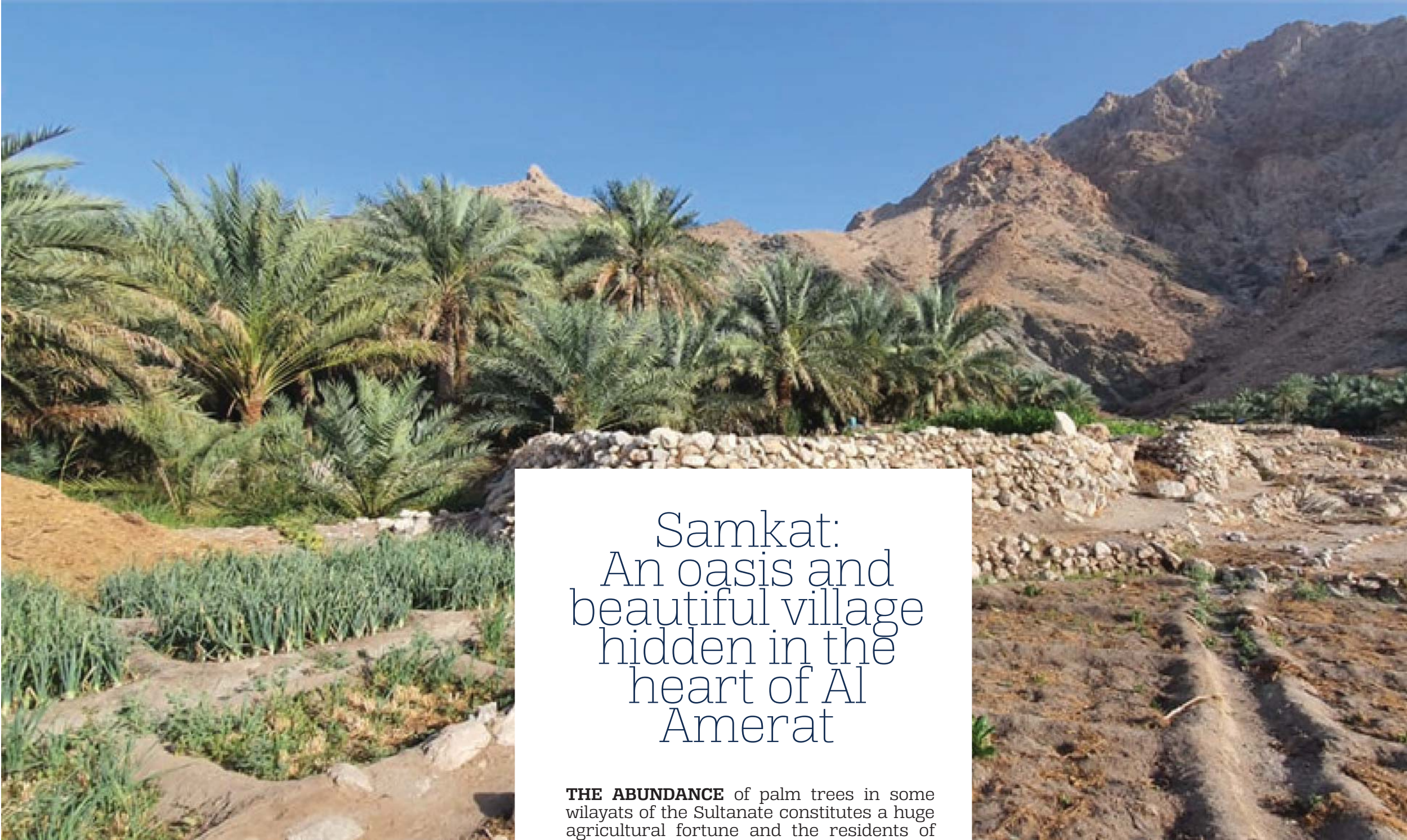
ART

Belgium unveils new showcase for ill-treated Ghent masterpiece



A 15th century Flemish masterpiece emerges from a decade of restoration this week in a new exhibition space in Belgium's Ghent cathedral, with updated technology to plunge visitors into an intricate work with a troubled past. Completed in 1432 by brothers Jan and Hubert van Eyck, the "Adoration of the Mystic Lamb" is an altarpiece of 12 detailed panels that is widely considered one of the most important pieces of early Renaissance art. Over the centuries, various parts of it were painted over, seized, hidden by the Nazis and later stolen again and it now has a reinforced fire-proof glass housing as part of a 30 million euro (\$35.4 million) revamp for visitors. The city of Ghent planned to host Van Eyck year in 2020, with all parts of the altarpiece returned to St Bavo's Cathedral after restoration, but the pandemic pushed that into 2021. Previously crammed into a small chapel near the cathedral entrance, visitors used to listen to an audio guide while

viewing the work. "It was decided we couldn't go on with a visitor experience like that because it didn't match the virtuosity of the Van Eyck brothers. There were often complaints about the display case, the lighting etc," said visitor centre project leader Ben De Vriendt. Now visitors will pass through the crypt, with virtual reality glasses and tablets revealing the panels' colourful 600-year history, before reaching a single larger chapel to view the altarpiece inside an acclimatised glass case. The panels were partially painted over in a 1550 restoration, survived the destruction of religious images which swept through the Low Countries in 1566 and most double-sided ones were split in the 19th century to separate the paintings. They were taken by invading French and German forces in different wars, ending up in an Austrian salt mine at the end of World War Two. Two panels were stolen in 1934 and only one recovered. The one entitled "Just Judges" is a 1945 copy. — **Reuters**



Samkat:
An oasis and
beautiful village
hidden in the
heart of Al
Amerat



THE ABUNDANCE of palm trees in some wilayats of the Sultanate constitutes a huge agricultural fortune and the residents of these wilayats consider this fortune the first source of income. Many people living in different villages across the Sultanate also consider farming as their permanent job.

Samkat village in the wilayat of Al Amerat is known for its high quality “Naghal” palm trees, and many agricultural crops that grow along the wadi. These palm trees are irrigated by the Samkat Falaj that feeds the whole village.

The visitor to the town will notice large oases of date palms and other seasonal crops that grow the whole year long.

In the village, there are many ancient houses, an old mosque and an archaeological site that was used for quarantine previously, in addition to a special cemetery in which those who died from infectious diseases were buried, which indicates an awareness of the Omanis from old times on the importance of preserving the souls of people.

It is also famous for the Samkat Mountains, the Al-Wasf, Al-Nahas, Al-Rasas, Al-Salt and Al-Mumian, in addition to the Schist rocks that form mountain hills, one of the oldest geological formations in the Sultanate.

In the rainy season, this village turns into one of the most visited locations in the Sultanate, where people from different parts of Oman come to visit to enjoy the greenery and the abundance of water in the wadis.



business

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Opec cuts, vaccines to sustain oil’s recovery

WASHINGTON: Oil prices will stabilise above \$60 a barrel level this year, as vaccine rollouts support a demand recovery and Opec and its allies continue to rein in supply, a poll showed on Wednesday.

The survey of 48 participants forecast Brent would average \$63.12 per barrel in 2021, up from last month’s consensus of \$59.07 and the average price so far this year of \$59.36. The benchmark was trading close to \$64 on Wednesday.

“With vaccinations expected to gain pace and Opec+ likely to keep to a cautious approach — reducing production cuts when demand recovers — we expect oil inventories to normalise by mid-year, which should support prices,” said UBS analyst Giovanni Staunovo.

Oil demand was seen growing by 5 million-7 million barrels per day (bpd) this year, despite renewed Covid-19 lockdowns in Europe.

Edward Moya, senior market analyst at OANDA, said the US economy was recovering fast, driving global demand for oil higher despite a faltering outlook in Europe. — Reuters

‘Royal medal celebrates PDO’s contribution to the nation’: MD

Remarkable celebration: ‘Honorarium Medal is a reaffirmation of the incredible talent all around me and the great support from all our stakeholders’: Restucci

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 31

Raoul Restucci, Managing Director – Petroleum Development Oman (PDO), received earlier this week the Honorarium Medal from His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik in recognition of his prominent role in leading the Company in the past decade and his outstanding contribution and achievements in the energy industry.

The medal was presented on behalf of His Majesty by His Highness Sayyid Asaad bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for International Relations and Cooperation Affairs, Personal Representative of His Majesty the Sultan.

In a brief Q&A interview, Restucci described the Royal honour as a source of great pride, as well as recognition of PDO’s contribution to the nation.

Q: Could you please tell us what it means for you to receive such an order?

MD: To receive the special recognition by His Majesty is a source of great pride for my family and the undersigned and a remarkable celebration of the contribution of PDO and its



We have identified many renewable energy projects that will deliver low cost, sustainable energy and domestic employment opportunities for decades to come

RAOUL RESTUCCI

Managing Director – Petroleum Development Oman

employees as we work to serve the nation as best we can. It’s a reaffirmation of the incredible talent all around me and the great support from all our stakeholders.

Q: Can you highlight PDO’s latest achievements?

MD: We continue to raise oil and condensate production and provide swing gas to meet domestic and export demands. We have reduced our unit production costs to ensure greater

government recourse funding and the accelerated pivoting to renewable energies, scope for which Oman is very well positioned and endowed with.

We continue to champion In-Country Value as a strategic imperative and alongside partners Oman LNG, OQ and OPAL, have progressed a maintenance turnaround integrated work programme for the entire up/ mid-downstream sector that will enable increased Omanisation and local supply chain opportunities.

Q: What are the future goals that you are planning to achieve in order to serve the Petroleum field and that will ultimately help serve the 2040 vision of Oman?

MD: Our two-pronged strategy focuses on delivering top quartile lowest carbon and lowest cost in the industry and accelerating the energy transition.

On the former, our goal is to continue to be a key source of revenue and opportunity for the Sultanate, while pervasively implementing policies, processes and technologies that will continue to reduce CO2 and other emissions while concurrently progressing nature-based solution offsets.

On the latter and for both PDO and EDO, we have identified many renewable energy projects that will deliver low cost, sustainable energy and domestic employment opportunities for decades to come. We continue to partner with many ministries in support of Oman Vision 2040 and our combined Lean and digital management enablers are unleashing increased levels of productivity and value creation.

Oman Fisheries wins compensation over ‘dumped fish’: MSE



BUSINESSREPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 31

Oman Fisheries Co SAOG, a publicly traded company listed on the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSE), announced on Wednesday that the Administrative Judiciary Court of Appeal has ruled in its favour in its claim for compensation over a quantity of fish dumped in 2017.

In a filing to the Capital Market Authority (CMA), the minority state-owned company whose government stake is held by Fisheries Development Oman (FDO), said the court had granted Oman Fisheries compensation to the tune of RO 141,288 in addition to legal expenses.

“Since the Appeals Court is considered the last level of litigation, the judgment issued possesses the power of the adjudicate order and is not subject to appeal and further judgment,” it further added.

OTTCO to build new storage capacity at Port of Duqm

New boost: Oman Tank Terminal Company (OTTCO) and Port of Duqm Company inked two agreements regarding the usufruct and berth operation licence of liquid terminal

Oman Tank Terminal Company (OTTCO), a wholly owned subsidiary of OQ — the Sultanate’s integrated energy group — is planning to build additional storage infrastructure in the Port of Duqm with a designed capacity up to 300,000 cbm, as part of the Duqm Liquid Export Terminal.

An announcement to this effect was made during the signing of

two agreements between OTTCO and Port of Duqm Company (PODC) regarding a Sub-Usufruct Agreement and a Berth Operating Licence Agreement.

The two agreements were signed recently at OQ’s head office in Muscat by Hilal al Kharusi, Chief Commercial Officer — representing OTTCO, and Reggy Vermeulen, CEO, Port of Duqm Company.

These agreements represent the strong partnership between the two companies to jointly strengthen Duqm’s status as the upcoming regional hub for petroleum and petrochemical products, said OQ in a statement.

The additional infrastructure will provide storage for the import and export of petroleum and (green) petrochemical products, making this development a next step in strengthening Oman’s independent terminal network.

On this occasion, Hilal al



These agreements represent the strong partnership between the two companies to jointly strengthen Duqm’s status as the upcoming regional hub for petroleum and petrochemical products

Kharusi, Chief Commercial Officer, said, “These strategic agreements are an example of integrating our efforts with our partners in Duqm Port and will boost the progress of the special Economic Zone of Duqm to become a global hub contributing the economic developments of the Sultanate of Oman.”

Van Hoof, CEO OTTCO, highlighted that, “In our journey towards becoming Oman’s independent terminal network company, we are pleased with

the collaboration between our two companies in strengthening the port’s prospects as an investment destination, feeding into the Sultanate’s economy and promoting the Port of Duqm competitiveness as a regional storage hub.”

Reggy Vermeulen, CEO, PODC, stated, “We are delighted to formalise this collaboration, with OQ and OTTCO. This is a major step in the support towards the development of the national capability and success of the Port of Duqm.”

OTTCO is Oman’s independent tank storage company. It emerged in 2014 with the objective to develop Oman’s crude oil hub in Ras Markaz, located 70 km south of Duqm. The first phase of the development, with a designed capacity of 25 million barrels, is partly used to accommodate for the crude oil supply to OQ8 refinery in Duqm.

Cultivating the habit of saving

The disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic are prompting some people to consider making the most of their salaries, as well as any earnings from real estate and other holdings to fend for themselves and their family members for the difficult months ahead.

New variants and rising infections have pushed many governments to adopt tough preventive measures along with lockdowns of commercial and business activities for a number of hours. This will likely impact the daily earnings potential of business owners.

Amid these difficult times, some Omanis and others have taken to social media to talk about the need to curtail expenses and save for a rainy day.

Some have lamented that the pandemic conditions have forced

them to shutter their businesses or opt for retirement.

Others said they are saddled with debts accruing from the bankruptcy of their businesses. The added concern for them is the value-added tax (VAT) that will come into force next month.

The question many of them have to grapple is thus: How can people with limited income of RO 400 or less be able to bear any increase in prices? Also, how will such people think of saving in these circumstances?

Savings may be possible for those earning RO 1000 or more per month. The latter group should think about saving 20 per cent of their income monthly by depositing this portion in financial and banking products as is the case in other countries.

This does not mean that all those earning RO 400 or less cannot save. It requires such individuals to be financially



HAIDER ALLAWATI
haiderdawood@hotmail.com

NEW VARIANTS AND RISING INFECTIONS HAVE PUSHED MANY GOVERNMENTS TO ADOPT TOUGH PREVENTIVE MEASURES ALONG WITH LOCKDOWNS OF COMMERCIAL AND BUSINESS ACTIVITIES FOR A NUMBER OF HOURS

savvy and prudent in his daily expenditures.

Any success in saving now will enable him to live a better life in the future. It requires prudence in the spending behaviour of his family while eschewing expenses that are unnecessary and potentially harmful too.

While we cannot do without the essentials of daily living, we can certainly dispense with luxuries as much as possible.

We must strive to save some money to secure our future live and ensure that our children are not a burden on others once we depart from this life.

In the coming period the prices of goods will be raised following the application of 5 per cent value-added tax on many luxury products. We need to budget our expenses based on our family's priorities by rationalising spending and embrace saving as well.

Meethaq's Easy Payment Plan makes high value purchases easy for customers

MUSCAT: In line with its vision 'To serve you better, everyday' and commitment to offering an attractive value proposition for customers, Meethaq Islamic Banking from Bank Muscat has announced the

availability of an attractive Easy Payment Plan for the benefit of all its credit cardholders.

The Meethaq Easy Payment Plan is available at 0 per cent profit rate on high-value purchases made using a credit card. It allows customers to purchase goods and services and then pay conveniently for them over a period of 12 months.

Customers are not required to provide any additional documents and the scheme



ensures affordability for high-end products and services.

Meethaq currently offers the following credit cards to its customers — Hafawa Visa Signature Credit Card, Meethaq Titanium Mastercard

Standard Mastercard Credit Card and the Meethaq Lulu Credit Card.

The cards are based on the concept of Ujrah, which is free from any interest-based charges. Meethaq Credit Cards offer a large number of unmatched Sharia compliant services and rewards which include convenience and flexibility for customers in performing day-to-day transactions at shopping malls, restaurants or during travel.

Islamic banking sector growth to continue despite Covid-19

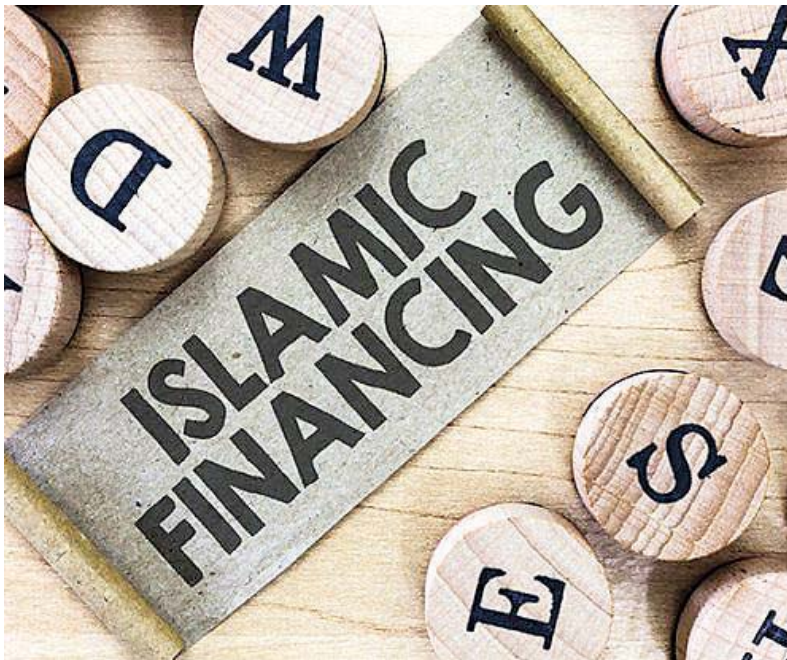
BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 31

Growth in Oman's Islamic banking sector is likely to continue into 2021-2022 building on the strong momentum seen in 2020, despite the dual impacts of Covid-19 and lower oil prices, according to IM Insights, citing Fitch.

The penetration of Islamic banking and finance products is expected to keep rising, with Islamic financing in Oman having risen a strong 9.5 per cent in 2020 versus just 2.1 per cent growth in loans from conventional banks.

Demand for Islamic banking and finance products is the main driver, together with support from conventional banks offering Islamic products through 'Islamic windows' and favourable sector regulations.

The potential for growth is high, given Oman's majority-Muslim demographic and low banking penetration. Of Oman's adult population, only 56 per



cent held a bank account as at 2016; 14 per cent cited religious reasons for not having one, according to the World Bank. Fitch therefore expects Islamic banking and finance penetration to grow through training and awareness campaigns, innovative products and the use of fintech to target clients.

The market share of Islamic banking and Islamic windows rose to 14.3 per cent at end-2020 (end-2019: 13.6 per cent), with total assets of RO 5.1 billion (\$13.5 billion). This is high, given that Oman was the last Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) country to introduce Islamic banking in 2013, said Fitch.

PRESS RELEASE

BANK NIZWA SIGNS MOU WITH CULTURAL CLUB



Bank Nizwa, the leading Islamic bank in Oman, signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) recently with the Cultural Club, to promote cultural awareness among Omanis, and boost the Sultanate's cultural scene. The MoU was signed by Khalid al Kayed, CEO, Bank Nizwa and Dr Mahmood al Sulaimi, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Cultural Club.

As per the MoU, Bank Nizwa will sponsor First Storyteller Forum, the first of its kind in Oman. The bank will also sponsor Child Play Production Workshop that aspires to enhance children's playscripts in the Sultanate. Additionally, the bank will organise a workshop on Islamic banking in order to raise awareness about this industry. It would also financially support the club in providing trainers, advertisements, scientific material, marketing, printing and prizes for the Child Play Production Workshop and the Storyteller Forum.

Speaking on the initiative, Khalid al Kayed said: "Delivering various effective initiatives resonates with Bank Nizwa's belief in the importance of investing in the communities where we operate, and contribute to its development. Being the first Islamic bank in the Sultanate, the social responsibility is an integral part of Bank Nizwa's business philosophy."

DRIVE HOME IN YOUR DREAM CAR THIS RAMADHAN



Making journeys more peaceful and comfortable, Mercedes-Benz Oman is celebrating this Ramadhan with a host of special offers on its range of new models. Drivers can now own one of the most luxurious and innovative cars on the road with a host of great benefits.

Available from April 1 until May 31, the Mercedes-Benz Oman Ramadhan offer extends across the new Mercedes-Benz cars and SUVs stock range, with the exception of the Mercedes-AMG G-Class. Customers can enjoy a five year/75,000 kms service package, four years Mobilo on-road assistance and three years unlimited mileage warranty.

The offer also includes free registration for the first year and a complimentary gift from the Mercedes-Benz Lifestyle Collection.

"The Holy month of Ramadhan is a special time and we're excited to celebrate it with our valued customers by offering them unbeatable offers that cater to them and their family's needs. With the help of our dedicated team, customers can discover the car of their dreams and rest assured that they will enjoy quality, performance and excellent after-sales care for years to come", said Shaun Michael, Chief Executive Officer at Mercedes-Benz Oman.

Stress on closer trade ties to overcome pandemic challenges

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 31

With the world deeply embroiled in the Covid-19 turmoil, academics in Oman and their partners in Egypt have called for closer ties in trade and entrepreneurship to help international companies to overcome the threats in the middle of the pandemic.

The call came in a two-day International Conference in Business and Entrepreneurship jointly hosted by Modern College of Business and Science (MCBS) with its partners Egypt's Arab Academy for Science, Technology and Maritime Transport.

"It is the international collaboration which is needed to overcome the challenges in business and entrepreneurship. The second part of it is researches,

Students need to understand the complexity in the global challenges. This is the only way they can contribute effectively to help model solutions that would help to smooth out the challenges we are facing now

ISMAIL
ABDELGHAFAR
FARAG

President of the Arab Academy for Science, Technology and Maritime Transport



which is a factor that would help cement better ties with international institutions to identify the obstacles and provide a solution", Dr Hesham Magd, Head of Business and Economics

at MCBS, said in his opening speech.

Professor Ismail Abdelghaffar Farag, President of the Arab Academy for Science, Technology and Maritime Transport, said

it was important for academic institutions to orient their students in decision making to solve complex problems in the current challenging times when the global economy is experiencing the pandemic challenges.

"Students need to understand the complexity in the global challenges. This is the only way they can contribute effectively to help model solutions that would help to smooth out the challenges we are facing now.

They are the future and it is important we equip them with the right technology. However, to do that, learning institutions must develop their academic curriculum to prepare students to solve contemporary problems that face business and entrepreneurship."

The highlight of students

contribution was marked by the Final Project Research work by Abdulaziz al Sinani, the MCBS student in Commercial Law.

The undergraduate student has concluded a research work titled 'Corporate Governance's Best Practices Aligned with Oman Vision 2040. Al Sinani looked into corporate governance of international businesses and how geopolitical tensions and financial crisis can be solved.

The Conference called for research papers in transport and logistics to enhance global supply chain to keep the world supplied with essential operations. The event also touched on the impact of seaborne trades, the hotel industries, women entrepreneurship, crisis management, leadership and Covid-19 vaccinations.

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INDIAN male, 24, B.E. computer science, masters in GIS from UK. Seeking placement in GIS field. Having Oman driving licence. Contact: 99738614.

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MANAGER Sales and Distribution seeks suitable placement. Sales Professional with 25 years' experience in Oman, includes 12 years in Sales Management, with LEADING FMCG, Consumer Durables Companies. Currently working with a leading group as Branch Manager for Retail and Distribution. Accountable for the total business and P&L. NOC available. 99369127.

MECHANICAL engineer, 21, Indian male currently in Oman looking to work at any engineering field. Contact 96511338. Email: rkdhanush11@gmail.com

LOOKING for teaching/office jobs. Having family visa, can join immediately. Experience in software field & teaching. Contact: 94858464. Email: hamidarahmath@gmail.com

YOUNG experienced Pakistani driver with Omani light vehicle driving licence seeks suitable opening. Speaks Arabic, Hindi, English and familiar with interior and Muscat areas. Contact GSM 95856719.

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OMANI male, 17 years experience as driver. Looking for transporting job for nurses, office goers, sight seeing. Contact: 97947900.

INDIAN, male, Master Degree in Accounting, 15+ years of experience in Oman, UAE & India as Finance / Accounts Manager / Chief Accountant. looking for a job and have noc on visit. contact: 79007124 / 78039524. email: kadercok@outlook.com

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COLD store in Al Seeb for lease or sale. Contact: 94272979, 96252664.

NEW 3 storey villas for sale/rents Wadi Kabir/Al Khuwair), (Shops/offices for rent/ Al Khuwair) (Flats for rent/Wadi Kabir). 96596348.

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Announcement of Capital Reduction

IN accordance with the provisions of Article 150 of the Commercial Companies Law. The company Al Khouri Distinct Trading SPC, which is registered with the Commercial Registration No 1152411, hereby announces that it is going to reduce its capital from RO 250,000.000 to 100,000.000. Whoever has any objection to the foregoing shall present the reasons for such objection to the Secretariat of Commercial Registry at the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion within 30 days from the date hereof.

Announcement of Change of Legal Form

IN accordance with the provisions of Article 3 Bis 2 of the Companies Law No 4/74 and the amendments there to, **Abu Majid Al Zaabi Trading and Contracting Company** (Recommendation), which is registered with the Secretariat of Commercial Registry Under No 1178540, hereby announces that it is going to change its legal form from Limited Partnership to Sole Proprietor Company. Whoever has any objection to the foregoing shall present the reasons for such objection to the Secretariat of Commercial Registry at the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion in Muscat within two months from the date of publication hereof. Secretariat of Commercial Registry.

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Biden to unveil \$2 trillion infrastructure plan

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden will propose a \$2 trillion infrastructure plan aimed at modernising the United States' crumbling transport network, creating millions of jobs and enabling the country to "out-compete" China.

The first phase of Biden's "Build Back Better" programme, which he will unveil in a speech in Pittsburgh, will detail massive investment spread over eight years.

It plans to inject \$620 billion into transport, including upgrading 20,000 miles (32,000 kilometres) of roads and highways, repairing thousands of bridges and doubling federal funding for public transit.

The president, whom Donald Trump tried to caricature as "Sleepy Joe" and a man without strong ideas or motivation, intends to make the bold infrastructure plan one of his flagship policies.

"He views his role as laying out... a broad vision, a bold vision for how we can invest in America, American workers, our communities", White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said.

The first phase of Biden's "Build Back Better" programme, which he will unveil in a speech in Pittsburgh, will detail massive investment spread over eight years

The investment would be partly paid for by raising corporate tax from 21 per cent to 28 per cent. "The president is proposing to fundamentally reform the corporate tax code so that it incentivizes job creation and investment... and ensures that large corporations are paying their fair share", a senior administration official said ahead of the speech.

The new legislative offensive comes soon after Congress passed a nearly \$2 trillion Covid-19 economic stimulus plan.

And Biden's speech is set to open a bitter battle in Congress, where the Democrats hold only a narrow majority and will face strong opposition from the



US President Joe Biden signs a document at The Oval Office of the White House in Washington, in this file photo. — Reuters

Republicans.

The coming months will test the negotiating skills of the Democratic president, a veteran of Washington politics and deal-making, to the limit, and the chances of his infrastructure plan passing into law remain uncertain.

"It's an important initiative to start the process with the

president being very clear that he's got a plan, and that he's open to hearing what others think", the administration official said.

"But what he is uncompromising about is the urgency of the moment and the need to really deliver for the American people and make good on building back better in this

moment."

The plan also vows to "spark the electric vehicle revolution" by building a network of 500,000 EV chargers, replacing 50,000 diesel transit vehicles and electrifying 20 per cent of the famous yellow school buses. And it aims to make infrastructure more resilient to climate change.

With much of the country's creaking infrastructure dating back to the 1950s, the dream of new roads, bridges, railways and airports is shared by many Americans.

But building a political consensus to transform Biden's plan into reality is no easy task. Both his predecessors Barack Obama and Trump had great ambitions and made heady promises over infrastructure investment, but struggled to make any progress.

The issue keeps coming back to the same question: How to pay for it? Biden's new transportation secretary Pete Buttigieg, who ran against him in the Democratic primaries, will be on the front lines of the battle, trying to ensure that this time, the stars are all aligned.

"I think that there's a tremendous opportunity now to have bipartisan support for a big, bold vision on infrastructure", the youthful politician said.

"Americans don't need a lot of selling to know that we've got to do big things when it comes to our infrastructure." — AFP

Huawei posts record \$9.9 bn profit last year



A man talks on his phone beside a Huawei billboard in Beijing. — Reuters

SHANGHAI: Chinese telecom giant Huawei said on Wednesday it achieved a record profit last year, but revenue growth slowed sharply amid the pandemic and tightening US pressure that has pushed the company into new business lines to survive.

Unlisted Huawei said net profit rose 3.2 per cent to 64.6 billion yuan (\$9.9 billion) in 2020, while revenue inched 3.8 per cent higher to 891.4 billion yuan.

The world's leading supplier of telecom networking gear and a top smartphone brand, Huawei's future has clouded over since the former Trump administration

in 2018 launched a campaign to contain the company which has gradually eaten into its bottom lines.

Before the US pressure began, revenue growth was routinely in the neighbourhood of 30 per cent or more, though it slowed to around 19 per cent in 2019.

"Over the past year we've held strong in the face of adversity", chairman Ken Hu said in a statement. Smartphone sales have plateaued after the US cut Huawei off from key components and banned it from using Google's Android operating systems in its handsets.

— AFP

UK economy grew more than thought at end of miserable 2020

LONDON: Britain's coronavirus-hammered economy grew more quickly than previously thought in the final three months of last year but still shrank by the most in more than three centuries in 2020 as a whole, official data showed on Wednesday.

The figures also revealed the biggest pile of household savings on record last year, which the Bank of England thinks will fuel a recovery when consumers are freed from lockdown.

Gross domestic product increased by 1.3 per cent between October and December from the previous three-month period, the Office for National Statistics said.

Economists polled by Reuters had expected the growth rate to remain at the ONS' preliminary 1.0 per cent estimate.

In 2020, gross domestic product fell by 9.8 per cent from 2019, only slightly less sharp than an initial estimate of a 9.9 per cent slump.

Britain's economy suffered the biggest drop of all countries in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development



An image of Britain's Queen Elizabeth II is displayed on a big screen behind the Eros statue at Piccadilly Circus in London, in this file photo. — AFP

except for Argentina and Spain last year, OECD data has shown. It remained 7.3 per cent smaller than before the pandemic, in inflation-adjusted terms, the second biggest drop among eight major economies listed by the ONS.

Although this partly reflects the way different countries produce the data, some of the weakness shown by Britain's economy

— particularly in household spending — was real.

After a rollercoaster 2020, when GDP careened 19.5 per cent lower in the second quarter, during the first lockdown, and grew by almost 17 per cent in the third, the BoE expects growth of 5 per cent in 2021 as a whole, helped by Europe's fastest vaccination programme.

A survey published earlier

on Wednesday showed employers were much more confident about hiring staff. Key to the recovery prospects will be the extent to which households spend savings they racked up while stuck at home.

The savings ratio rose to 16.1 per cent from 14.3 per cent in the third quarter and for 2020 as a whole it hit a record high of 16.3 per cent, compared with 6.8 per cent in 2019, the ONS said.

Samuel Tombs, an economist with Pantheon Macroeconomics, said the rise in savings might be offset by the hit to the value of shares held by investors. "Households, therefore, likely will cling on to this cash, or top up their underperforming pensions, rather than spend it", he said.

The figures also showed growth in business investment which rose by 5.9 per cent in the fourth quarter from the previous three months. But household spending fell by 1.7 per cent and government spending, up by almost 7 per cent, was the key support for the economy.

— Reuters

SHORT TAKES

LONDON

Deliveroo shares dive on London stock market IPO

Deliveroo shares slumped 23 per cent as it launched on the London stock market, with the app-driven meals delivery group facing criticism over its treatment of riders.

The Deliveroo IPO was London's biggest stock market launch for a decade, valuing the group at £7.6 billion (\$10.4 billion) after the eight-year-old British company enjoyed surging sales during the coronavirus pandemic as locked-down people ordered in.

— AFP



Deliveroo said that it had seen "very significant demand from institutions across the globe", but some asset management firms decided against buying any shares, citing the job insecurity and conditions of its riders.

JUBA

IMF plugs South Sudan's balance of payment

The International Monetary Fund said on Wednesday it had released \$174.2 million to South Sudan under its Rapid Credit Facility to address urgent balance of payments needs, after floods and an oil price shock hurt economic performance.

In 2018, South Sudan ended five years of civil war that killed an estimated 400,000 people, but President Salva Kiir and Vice President Riek Machar's disagreements kept the peace process from being fully finalised.

They repeatedly pushed back deadlines to form a government of national unity, but in 2020 finally did so.

"The pandemic-related oil price shock and devastating floods have led to an economic downturn. The... downturn widened the fiscal and the balance of payments deficits, opening large financing gaps in the absence of concessional financing", the IMF said in a statement late on Tuesday.

— AFP

BERLIN

German unemployment falls by 8,000 in March

German unemployment fell in March, data showed on Wednesday, as lockdown measures to curb the coronavirus Europe's biggest economy had a limited effect on the labour market.

The Federal Labour Office said the number of people out of employment fell by 8,000 in seasonally adjusted terms to 2.745 million.

Germany is struggling to control a third wave of the pandemic and has been in



lockdown since November although some measures were eased in early March with schools and hairdressers re-opening.

The unemployment rate remained unchanged from the previous month at 6.0 per cent.

— Reuters