

Lebanon picks Najib Mikati as next PM-designate

Lebanese lawmakers on Monday tasked ex-premier and billionaire Najib Mikati with forming a government and ending one year of political deadlock that has crippled the economy. Mikati, seen by many as a symbol of Lebanon's oligarchy, will pick up where Saad Hariri left off earlier this month, after failing to broker a deal. **SEE P6**



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RYANAIR LOSSES WIDEN ON TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS



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OHRID LAKE REGION AVOIDS UNESCO 'IN DANGER' LIST



MUSCAT

160 OMANIS TO GET ON-THE-JOB TRAINING

Riyada (Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises Development) said it has approved applications of 160 job-seekers for its on-the-job training programme. Riyada said it has received 1,035 applications, out of which 875 are under review. It confirmed that applications that meet the conditions will be approved soon. The aim is to train 3,000 job-seekers for employment, which will improve the competitiveness of the small and medium enterprises sector.

DETAILS ON P2

ROP GETS NEW BATCH OF HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

A new batch of national health professionals of various assistant medical specialties has joined the Royal Oman Police (ROP). The move comes in continuation to the ROP plans to employ national cadre graduating from higher education institutions in coordination with the relevant authorities. Brig Dr Abdulmalik bin Sulaiman al Kharousi, Director-General of Medical Services at the ROP, met with the new medical professionals and briefed them about the job nature in the ROP medical services and their national role in providing medical care.

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Enjoy nature's treat... as Salalah is calling **LAKSHMI KOTHANETH**

Affinity with nature and identification with the celestial... **Dr Khalid Mohammed al Balushi**

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TUNISIA IN CRISIS AFTER PRESIDENT OUSTS GOVERNMENT

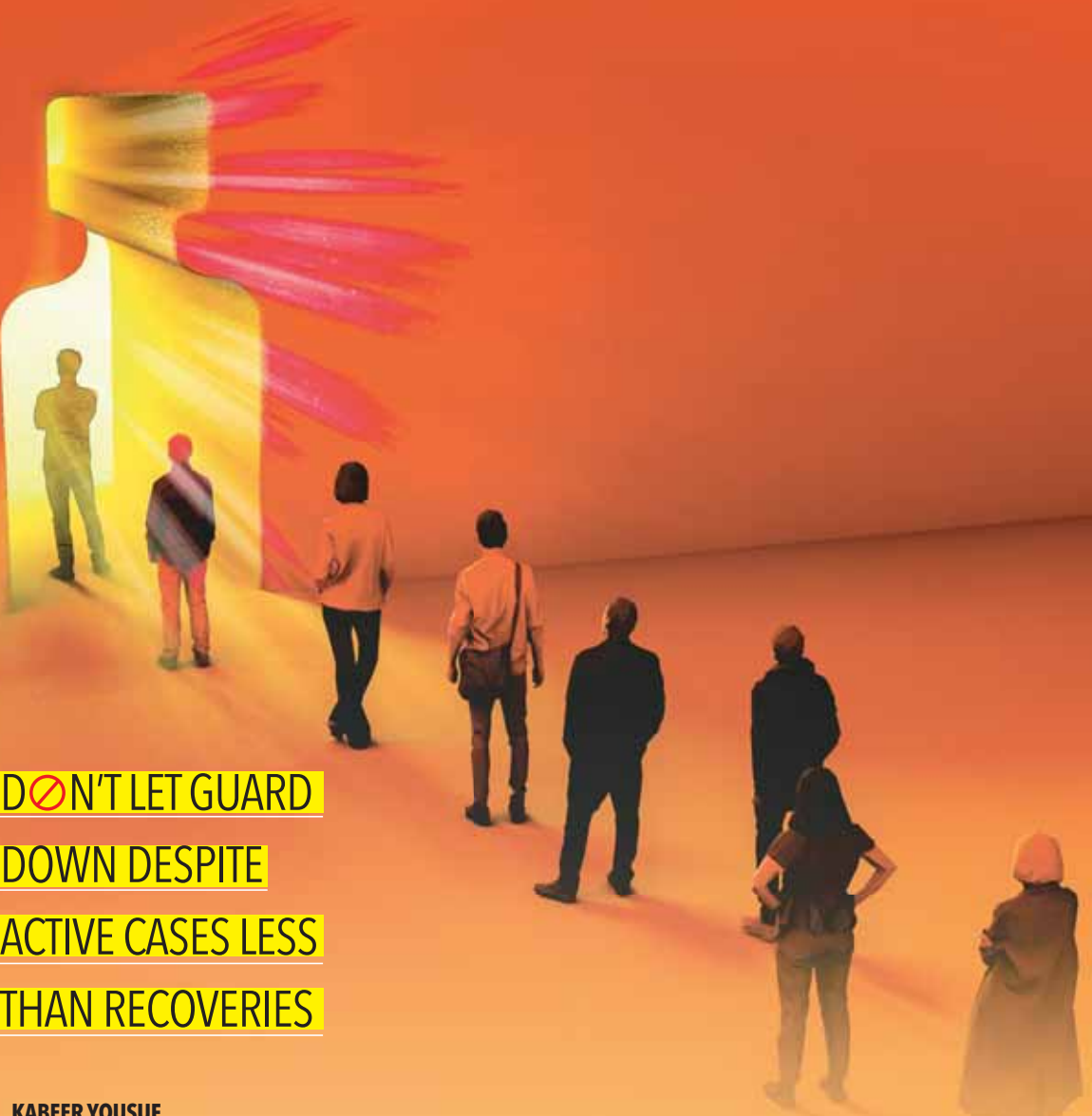
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SOUTHERN EUROPE BATTLES WILDFIRES AS NORTH CLEANS UP

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2 MILLION VACCINATED AGAINST COVID-19



DON'T LET GUARD DOWN DESPITE ACTIVE CASES LESS THAN RECOVERIES

KABEER YOUSUF @kabeeryousef

For the first time after the Covid-19 tightened its grip on the country last year, the number of active cases was lower than the new ones on Monday, giving hope to healthcare workers as well as the public. But we should not let the guard down, cautions a senior doctor in the Ministry of Health.

The ministry has reported 572 fresh Covid-19 cases of infection and 723 recoveries

on Monday. The toll also fell to 18 deaths, which is a fall of nearly 35 per cent compared to the previous day.

"The present statistics is a relief... but we shouldn't be taking it for granted. This is the time we stick to preventive measures including social distancing so that we can sooner or later conquer the virus completely," said Dr Mahmood al Rahbi, Head of Emergencies at Al Nahdha Hospital.

Meanwhile, as many as 1,926,307 people have been vaccinated against Covid-19 in the Sultanate since the start of the National Immunization Campaign (53 per cent of the targeted population).

The number of those who took the first dose of vaccine stood at 1,587,784 comprising 45 per cent, while the number of those who took two doses stood at 338,523 comprising 10 per cent.

TURN TO P2

New CBD and metro to change face of Muscat

SAMUEL KUTTY @samkuttyvp

Ghala as a new central business district of the capital city and a light metro rail line linking Al Seeb and Ruwi are part of Oman's national urban strategy to make Muscat a world-class city based on solid foundations of cultural traditions and Omani values.

The development plans are envisaged in the ambitious Oman National Spatial Strategy (ONSS) which is the National Framework for guiding Oman's spatial development sustainably for the next 20 years.

The plans seek to balance socio-economic development while preserving the Sultanate's valuable natural and cultural resources for the next generations, in alignment with the national goals and priorities of Oman Vision 2040.

The Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning is set to conduct a number of initiatives in this regard and implementation and investment programs for the

The city emerges as a pioneer at the level of the Gulf Cooperation Council due to its natural characteristics attracting people to live, work and recreate altogether

ONSS REPORT

next 20 years are divided into four five-year plans for each governorate.

According to features identified in ONSS, among many major projects, to be implemented in the Muscat Governorate are a commuter rail line to transport passengers between Al Seeb and Suhar and a light metro linking Ruwi and Seeb.

TURN TO P2

Cashless transactions mandatory from Jan 1

MUSCAT: With effect from January 1, 2022, all commercial transactions at select stores and business establishments will be cashless as part of the government's drive to promote electronic channels as the principal mode of payment – a key objective of the Oman 2040 Vision.

An announcement to this effect was made by the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion on Monday. In a post on social media, the ministry said the new cashless payment scheme will be rolled out in stages.

Covered in the first phase will be shopping malls, cafes and



restaurants, commercial centres, gift markets, jewellery stores, electronic shops, grocery stores, vegetables and fruit sellers, building material shops and outlets in industrial areas.

DETAILS ON P13

Swimmer Issa aims for good show in Tokyo Olympics today

ADIL AL BALUSHI TOKYO, JULY 26

Oman's talented swimmer, Issa al Adawi, will be eager for a solid show during his debut in the 32nd Summer Olympic Games – 2020 Tokyo as he will commence the national team's participation in the top Olympic event.

Al Adawi will begin his competition in the men's 100m freestyle competitions on Tuesday

beside the top-ranking swimmers from different parts of the world.

Despite the expected difficulty in the competition, Issa's hopes are high to put up a good show and improve his performance. His current best timing is 51.69s.

The 22-year-old was very close to securing a qualified record in the Olympics but he could not take part in many events and championships due to the



ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. However, he managed to earn the Olympic invitation card beside his other national athletes including runners Barakat and Mazoon, shooter Ahmed al Khatri and weightlifter Amur al Khanjri.

Adawi is set for competing in the prestigious Olympic event after he completed his preparatory program for the Tokyo Olympics.

DETAILS ON P11

WEATHER

MUSCAT: Max 41°C Min 32°C SALALAH: Max 29°C Min 25°C NIZWA: Max 44°C Min 32°C

PRAYER TIMINGS

SUNRISE: 05:35 FAJR: 04:11 DHUHR: 12:18 ASR: 15:41 MAGHRIB: 18:57 ISHA: 20:16



2 million vaccinated against COVID-19

FROM PAGE 1

Muscat Governorate came first in the number of vaccinated people which has reached 618,264 (55 per cent of the target category) followed by North Al Batinah with 234,808 (39 per cent), then South Al Batinah by 153,277 (45 per cent).

On Monday, vaccination centres in all governorates of the Sultanate witnessed good turnout from the target segments.

Till today, the total number of coronavirus cases in the Sultanate touched 294,526 with

recovery at the rate of 93.9 per cent. Total recovered cases stood at 276,483. Total deaths reached 3,771. The number of active cases was 14,272.

A total of 292 Covid-19 patients were admitted to intensive care units in the last 24 hours.

Meanwhile, authorities have asked people to avoid gatherings in public and private places, wash hands, use facemasks, failing which stringent actions will be initiated against the offenders. (With ONA inputs)



Riyada okays on-the-job training for 160 Omanis

ZAINAB AL NASSRI

@zainabalnasseri

Riyada (the Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises Development), said it has approved applications of 160 job seekers for its on-the-job training programme.

Riyada said it received 1,035 applications out of which 875 are under review. It confirmed that applications that meet the conditions will be approved soon.

The aim is to train 3,000 job seekers for jobs, which will improve competitiveness of the small and medium enterprises sector

In the first year, 100 per cent of the salary will be paid by the Ministry of Labour as follows: RO 500 per month for graduates, RO 400 for university diploma holders, and RO 300 for general diploma holders. In the second year 50 per cent of the salary will be paid.

Registration requires a completion of the application form, an entrepreneurship card (optional), data of the trainees nominated for jobs, a proof of the institution's activity from audited



In the first year, 100 per cent of the salary will be paid by the Ministry of Labour as follows: RO 500 per month for graduates, RO 400 for university diploma holders, and RO 300 for general diploma holders. In the second year 50 per cent of the salary will be paid

accounts, contracts, financial statements or sales report, the institution's profile, and a detailed reference to job needs data with a training plan.

Riyada had clarified that the trainee's contract will be registered by the institution with the Ministry of Labour and the Public Authority for Social Insurance at the expense of the ministry, provided that the owner of the institution pays the subscription fees to the Authority, and his name is included in the company's employee statements immediately after the start of the training programme.

627 job-seekers vie for 43 vacant posts

SAID AL SHANDOUDI

IBRI, JULY 26

In response to the Royal attention His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik is giving to the employment dossier, and his continuous affirmation that employment of Oman youth is a top national priority, the Ministry of Labour on Monday conducted interviews and tests for job-seekers in Al Buraimi and Al Dhahirah governorates, at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences in Ibri.

Salim bin Khalfan al Wuhaibi, head of the government interviews and tests committee at the Ministry of Labour, said that 627 national job-seekers from Al Buraimi and Al Dhahirah governorates are vying for 43 vacant jobs at the public sector. They underwent a 30-minute e-tests comprising 30 varied questions in the specialisation field, general culture and mental skills.



Al Khalil bin Muhammad al Khalili, said: "I applied for a job as a civil engineer at the Ministry of Health — praise be to God — I passed the test. The testing methodology was excellent and the questions were easy and straightforward. There were also questions in the field of specialisation in addition to questions of intelligence and culture. The test environment was

convenient."

Al Khalili expressed his thanks for the government of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, who he said, supports the Omani youth and makes it easy for them to join the labour market.

Sumayabint Salem al Khasibiya, said that she had passed the electronic test conducted as part of the conditions for appointment in the job of accountant in one of

the government institutions in the governorates of Al Dhahirah and Al Buraimi. The e-test comprises questions in the field of mental skills and specialisation, as well as general questions. She added that the exam method followed by the Ministry of Labour, is excellent and marked by transparency and clarity, especially that the results are announced soon after the completion of the electronic test.

New CBD and metro to change face of Muscat

FROM AGE 1

The Urban Strategy aims to achieve more balanced development based on a clear hierarchy of service centres distribution, which shall lead to job opportunities in various centres based on their developmental capabilities, and thus reducing internal migration towards cities and towns.

The establishment of Greater Muscat is based on a diversified economic base. It will absorb Barka, and revolves around a finance, knowledge and innovation-based economy, including logistics and tourism

sectors.

"The city emerges as a pioneer at the level of the Gulf Cooperation Council due to its natural characteristics attracting people to live, work and recreate altogether", says an ONSS report.

ECOTOURISM

In addition, permissible mining (high value minerals) will be allowed with strict controls encouraging ecotourism, and allowing the establishment of environmental research centres, enhancement of wadis into public parks and provision of multiple transportation modes encouraging mobility without



private vehicles and walking.

The introduction of the Greater Cities concept within the National Spatial Strategy is

in response to the important functional roles that economic gateways and national centres will play as major engines of

growth.

The significant economic and population growth in these cities will require expansion of their

urban containment boundary so that they integrate with their neighbouring settlements, which in turn will benefit from the opportunities available in the larger cities, leading to the emergence of Greater Cities concept, represented in Greater Muscat, Greater Salalah, Greater Suhar and Greater Nizwa.

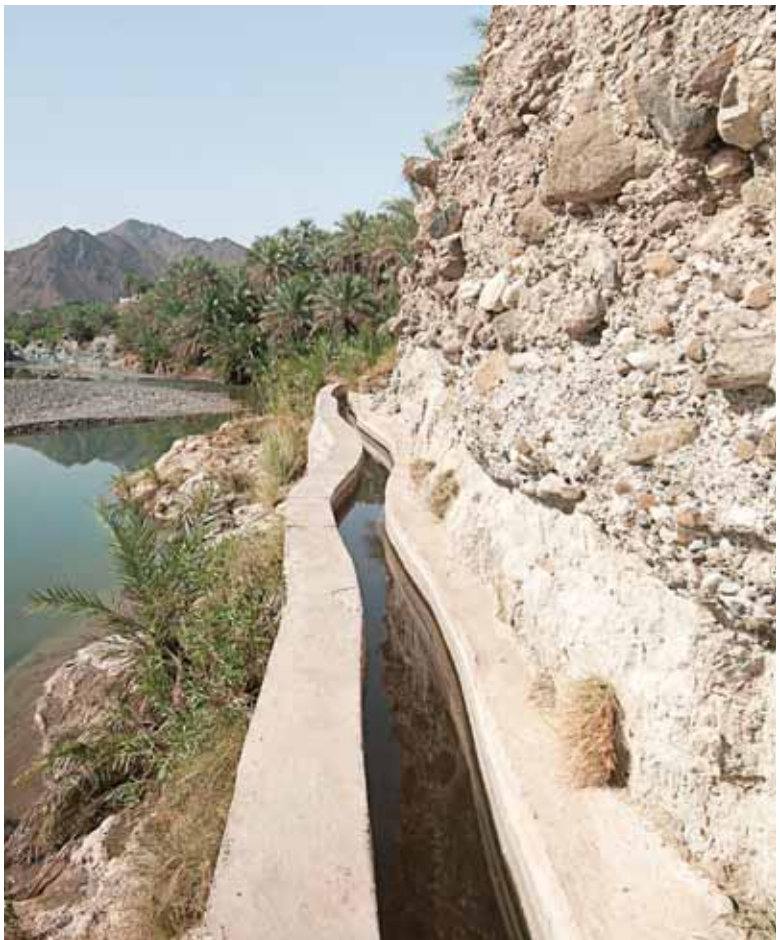
"This shall enable these cities to provide high-quality services, qualifying them to be centres of innovation, creativity and advanced education, involving various sectors that provide services to a wider range of urban and rural areas", says the ONSS.



THE
RECENT
RAINFALL HAS
FILLED WADI AL
HOQAIN AND ITS
TURQUOISE POOLS
WITH CRYSTAL
CLEAR WATER

WADI AL HOQAIN

COOL DIP IN TURQUOISE POOLS



TEXT & PHOTOS
BY YAHYA AL SALMANI

If you are itching for respite from the scorching summer and relax in the company of splendid nature, here is a location which is just 2 hours of drive from Muscat. Welcome to Wadi Al Hoqain home to gentle, burbling streams and gushing torrents.

If you are driving from the capital, then you need to take a left turn at Al Suwaiq roundabout to Al Rustaq City, passing by Rustaq Fort, Wadi Bani Awf, and Qasra Museum before reaching this best kept tourist secret of Al Batinah governorate.

There is actually something more to Al Hoqain than its

beautiful dam.

The recent rainfall has filled Wadi al Hoqain and its turquoise pools with crystal clear water. People are flocking to the wadi for a cool dip and picnic under the shade of lush greenery on the banks.

It is located in the Niyabat of Al Hoqain in the Wilayat of Al Rustaq. It is 40 km away from Al Rustaq and 150 km from Muscat. It is bordered by the Wilayat of Al Suwaiq to the North, by the Niyabat of Wadi Bani Hani to the south, Al Rustaq city to the east and Wadi Al Hajer villages and Wadi Al Haimli.

The wadi and its surrounding spot will also take you back to the ancient architecture and culture of

Oman.

Start with the Al Hoqain Fort, which was built in the year 1722 AD. This fort was built on a hill surrounded by greenery and can be seen from a long distance. The area is dotted with many towers that were used as watchtowers like Al Khodour, Al Sarooj and Al Sayegh. One can also find remnants of some ancient houses that are distinguished by their geometric shapes.

Another landmark is the majestic Al Hazm Castle. Make sure you get the audio guide, so you will also enjoy some local legends and Arabic stories

Al Hoqain is blessed with many aflaj like Al Janaiba, Al Shuaiba, Al Damtha, Al Hafi,

and Al Aali. Ain Al Khor, Ain Al Zalt, Ain Fenga, Ain Al Hamam, Ain Al Sawad and Ain Al Safia are some of the cool springs of this wadi.

When this writer visited the Wadi, many residents were seen cleaning aflaj, which were clogged with leaves and barks brought down by the heavy rains. For the villagers, aflaj is a source of water for irrigation and cattle.

For the adventure enthusiasts, Al Hoqain has many caves including: Khabat Al Zarqa, Al Saradeeb, Al Sraifiniyah, Jewar Thuraya, Al Mirsurasah and Janat Al Fard. These multiple natural attractions will make a visitor to Al Hoqain want to come again.

IN THE MATTER OF THE EXEMPTED PARTNERSHIP ACT 1992 OF BERMUDA and IN THE MATTER OF PRICEWATERHOUSECOOPERS (the "Partnership")

NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN pursuant to Section 13B(2)(f) of the Exempted Partnership Act 1992 of Bermuda that the Partnership intends to de-register under the laws of Bermuda and continue in the Dubai International Financial Centre as if the Partnership had been incorporated under the laws of the Dubai International Financial Centre.

Dated: 27 June 2021 at the Sultanate of Oman

For and on behalf of PricewaterhouseCoopers LLC



Every little bit



In the eighties, there was this slogan carried out by several electricity distribution companies that read, ‘Power saved is power produced.’ That slogan is still valid because there are several countries where continuous electricity supply for industrial and domestic purposes is a luxury”

MUSTAFA AHMED

Former senior electrical engineer

counts

VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

While the surge in household utility bills has been talked about in recent times, energy savings is also equally important because people spend more time at home due to Covid-19 lockdown measures.

There are many different ways to reduce your household’s energy use, ranging from simple steps to using energy-efficient appliances.

The two major motives for conserving energy are to save on utility bills and protect the environment. With finite energy resources, actively conserving energy when possible is beneficial individually and to our larger energy systems.

According to experts, very

few people give importance to measures that can help them trim power and water expenses.

“In the eighties, there was this slogan carried out by several electricity distribution companies that read, ‘Power saved is power produced.’ That slogan is still valid because there are several countries where continuous electricity supply for industrial and domestic purposes are luxury due to lack of enough fossil fuel reserves,” said Mustafa Ahmed, who retired as a senior electrical engineer from a power distribution company.

He said that average indirect electricity wastage in average homes can be nearly 40 per cent or more. “Some consumers are not literate enough on ways to save energy while others do not care as long as utility bills are within their

estimated monthly budget.”

Time and again electricity companies enlighten consumers to follow energy conservation can be as simple as turning off lights or appliances when you do not need them.

Air conditioners, heaters and other home appliances are primary energy guzzlers.

The use of energy-efficient lighting, automated air-conditioning units, and remote-controlled power technologies can help rationalise electricity use, which will subsequently help to bring down power bills. Similarly, water bills can be managed by periodically fixing leaking taps and pipes that often go undetected.

“Children are taught about electricity and water conservation from elders even before our school

days. We tell them to switch off lights or to close water taps nicely, but what we do not tell them is to rationalise the use of various devices and gadgets, especially the modern ones,” said Nushrat, a call centre employee.

“The mobile phones and tablets that we use at home also require substantial electricity for charging. By focusing on minimising unwanted use, we can help ourselves from high bills. The same goes with the use of water.”

Industry experts and officials warn energy will never be a cheap commodity with governments running short of revenues to cover subsidies and the spending on social and health sectors requiring priority. Saving every unit ensures that we continue to enjoy the benefits without pain.





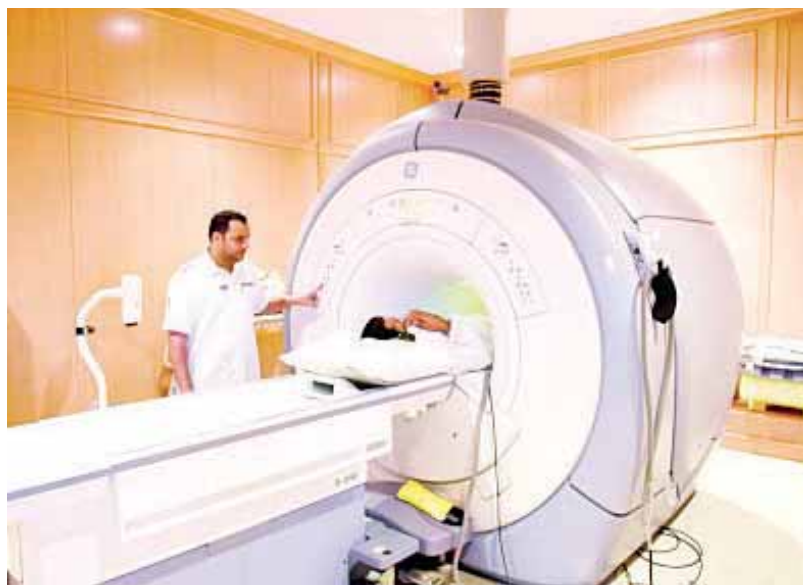
New batch of medical professionals join ROP

MUSCAT: A new batch of national health professionals of various medical and assistant medical specialties have joined the Royal Oman Police (ROP). The move comes in continuation to the ROP plans to employ national cadres graduating from higher education institutions in coordination with the relevant authorities.

Brigadier Dr Abdulmalik bin Sulaiman al Kharousi, Director-General of Medical Services at ROP, met with the new medical professionals and briefed them about the job nature in the ROP medical services and their national role in providing medical care.

Al Kharousi said that that the joining of the new group is among the priorities of the Police General Command to provide quality medical services for the ROP employees and personnel, and to improve standard of the police medical sector in order to ensure the effective and professional police work.

The appointment of a number of nationals in assistant medical jobs (general practitioners, nurses, x-ray and lab technicians), was in response to the directives of the Police General Command after they passed the evaluation



procedures. The move aims to supply the Directorate-General of Health Services at ROP with medical professionals in line with the Omanisation strategy and in accordance to a plan aimed to expand and develop health services provided to the police affiliates and their families.

It is also aimed to meet the geographical expansion of the Directorate-General of Health Services at ROP to cover all police sites with new clinics and health institutions, Al Kharousi said.

The new medical professionals expressed their happiness to join

the Royal Oman Police. Doctor Ali bin Sulaiman al Hina'i, a graduate of the College of Medicine and Health Sciences at Sultan Qaboos University, majoring in general medicine and surgery, said, "I would like to thank those in charge of the recruitment procedures at the Royal Oman Police for giving me the opportunity to join the ROP." I pray to Allah the Almighty to help us serve this dear country in the medical services provided by the Royal Oman Police."

Doctor, Mohammed bin Rashid al Qasimi, a graduate from Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), majoring in general medicine and surgery, said, "We are proud and happy to join the ROP, and with God's help, we will be able to provide the best health services to ROP personnel."

Yaqoub bin Mohammed al Rahbi, a radiologist who graduated of the Oman College of Health Sciences, said: "I thank the Royal Oman Police for their efforts to recruit Omani youth, and I am really honoured to work for ROP, which is one of the most effective authority in the Sultanate, and I hope to contribute to performing the national duty in the healthcare system of the Royal Oman Police.

Oman Airports employee wins freediving competition

MUSCAT: Oman Airports celebrates one of its employee's, Omar al Ghilani's, accomplishment in the World Freediving Competition.

Omar al Ghilani has won the first place in AIDA's championship — World Freediving Championship 2021 held in Sharm El Sheikh in Egypt.

Saud al Hubaishi, the Vice President of Muscat International Airport, commented on this occasion: "I am glad to congratulate our colleague, Omar al Ghilani, the world's freediving champion, on behalf



of myself and all members in the administration and company for his international accomplishment. He surely walked through this challenge with great spirit and well-preparation that hopefully will pave the way for other Omani honouring accomplishments. We are proud Omar has become a role model, setting an example as a national athlete and making his way in achieving highest accolades for his country."

Omar al Ghilani, the champion, said: "I thank the administration in Oman Airports for such an honour and reception that reflect

the usual moral support I had since I began my participation, and set the right environment for me to succeed. I would also like to thank all my colleagues in Muscat International Airport and the units of Oman Airports for believing in such talents and supporting them."

Al Ghilani has also achieved many accomplishments in different types of diving. He won first place in monofin-diving, bifen-diving and without-fin diving. He also won third place in diving using a rope. He also broke the record in bifen-diving in Asia.

Zubair SEC, FAO seek to enhance SMEs' participation in agriculture, food sector

MUSCAT: In line with enhancing mutual cooperation between both parties, the Zubair Small Enterprises Centre (Zubair SEC) and Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations held a consultative meeting to discuss aspects of their cooperation. The meeting sought to enhance the capabilities of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) active in the fields of agriculture and food industries, entrepreneurship, and administration and finance.

The meeting was attended by Nora Ourabah Haddad, FAO representative in Oman, and Said bin Salim al Sahib, Director of Zubair SEC, alongside the presence of advisers from both parties.

Each entity expressed their satisfaction regarding the level of cooperation that currently exists and the proposed initiatives to enhance food security in the Sultanate. The role played by Zubair SEC to support the directions of the FAO in this regard was also highlighted.

During the session, several key themes were reviewed including topics related to the

Topics related to the sustainability of food ecosystems in Oman, methods to strengthen relations and establish channels of communication between various sectors in the fields of agriculture and food industries were also discussed

sustainability of food ecosystems in Oman, methods to strengthen relations and establish channels of communication between various sectors in the fields of agriculture and food industries and working on developing programmes to support the role of small enterprises in the agricultural and fisheries sector.

Commenting on the meeting, Nora Ourabah Haddad said, "SMEs active in the food sector, along with associations of farmers and fishermen and other similar entities, are active contributors to the sustainable development of food ecosystems. They are considered vital stakeholders across the value chain in the Sultanate."

"We consider Zubair SEC as a strategic partner. We continuously and effectively communicate

with them on programmes and activities that support small farmers and small enterprises, working together to achieve food security and sustainable development goals. We look forward to furthering partnerships and towards enhancing this fruitful cooperation during the upcoming period," she added.

Said al Sahib said, "Since its establishment, Zubair SEC has aligned itself with the objectives of the Oman Vision and the national strategy for sustainable development. The Center always focuses its efforts to enhance its economic and social impact sustainably. In this context, the importance of food security is a key area that we can work on to enhance the presence of small enterprises within this significant sector."

"We are proud of our cooperation with FAO to empower small enterprises and small farmers to enhance their performance and increase their contribution to the national GDP. In addition, we work hand-in-hand to discover potential opportunities in the respective sector and identify the challenges facing its workers at every stage of production.

This way, we are in line with the Sultanate's national approach aimed at raising the level of food security and sustainability. We are keen to work with all the stakeholders who were a part of this discussion, to follow up and implement the recommendations that were made during the consultative meeting. Moreover, through the study presented by the Center, we can collectively empower and activate the role of these institutions across various supply chains.

We also look forward to the continuation of this robust cooperation between both of our entities, especially within the new programmes and initiatives," he added.

Guest satisfaction key to hotel's brand image



Najla al Sheidi



Jalal Zeaiter

LIJU CHERIAN
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Competitiveness of a hotel highly depends on the satisfaction of its customers which also translates into stronger brand and higher revenues, according to a recent study. Najla al Sheidi and Jalal Zeaiter, faculty members of Oman Tourism College (OTC), have published their research findings on consumer behaviour of Crowne Plaza Muscat.

The main objectives of the research finding determined the factors influencing consumer behaviour at the hotel in particular and examined the impact of consumer behaviour on the hospitality sector in general.

They also assessed the role of consumer satisfaction towards ensuring success for the hospitality industry along with providing recommendations regarding the improvement of consumer behaviour.

The research findings also concluded that the factor of guest loyalty was of utmost importance as it was the base of the hotel's revenue.

A customer's experience was also identified as a core element for building a long-lasting image and brand loyalty, the study noted.

The study also aims to

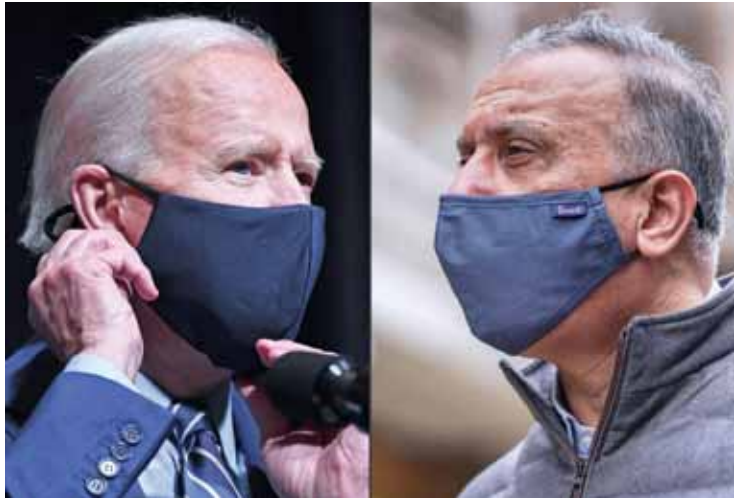
analyse the impact of consumer behaviour and their preferences for growth and performance. The paper also focused on the inter-relationship between hotel management and consumer behaviour entailing satisfaction and reviews. The faculty members also felt that it was crucial to analyse customer behaviour for the growth of the hospitality sector to provide a "refined experience for the customers, which can help the company grow further towards internationalisation."

The study also notes that the repetitive purchase of consumers does not reflect their loyalty towards brands, rather there were several other factors.

This, they felt, increases the need to conduct a study determining the consumer behaviour that led to an increase in guests at the hotel and help the company towards achieving a competitive edge. This also allows the hotel management towards taking appropriate measures to ensure consumer satisfaction and retention.

Their method of research was based on data collection and guest interviews. Thematic analysis was also used for analysing the gathered information in order to reach a valid conclusion, the study noted.

Biden, Kadhimi to seal agreement on ending Iraqi combat mission



US President Joe Biden and Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al Kadhemi. – AFP

WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden and Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al Kadhimi on Monday will seal an agreement formally ending the US combat mission in Iraq by the end of 2021, more than 18 years after US troops were sent to the country.

Coupled with Biden's withdrawal of the last American forces in Afghanistan by the end of August, the Democratic president is completing US combat missions in the two wars that then-President George W Bush began under his watch.

Biden and Kadhimi are to meet in the Oval Office for their first face-to-face talks as part of a strategic dialogue between the United States and Iraq.

A statement to be issued after the meeting will announce the end of the US combat

mission in Iraq, a senior Biden administration official said.

There are currently 2,500 US troops in Iraq focusing on countering the remnants of IS. The US role in Iraq will shift entirely to training and advising the Iraqi military to defend itself.

The shift is not expected to have a major impact since the United States has already moved toward focusing on training Iraqi forces.

A US-led coalition invaded Iraq in March 2003 based on charges that then-Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein's government possessed weapons of mass destruction. Saddam was ousted from power, but such weapons were never found.

In recent years the US mission was dominated by helping defeat IS fighters in Iraq and Syria. — Reuters

Tunisian president suspends parliament, sacks premier

TUNIS: Tunisia faced its worst crisis in a decade of democracy on Monday after President Kais Saied ousted the government and froze parliament with help from the army in a move denounced as a coup by the main parties.

It follows months of deadlock and disputes pitting Saied, a political independent, against Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi and a fragmented parliament as Tunisia has descended deeper into an economic crisis exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Parliament Speaker Rached Ghannouchi, the head of the moderate Ennahda party which has played a role in successive coalitions, decried it as an assault on democracy and called on Tunisians to take to the streets in opposition.

Supporters and opponents of the president threw stones at each other outside parliament on Monday morning leading to injuries with one man sitting on the pavement bleeding from the head. Tunisia's hard-currency bonds tumbled.

The army, which has yet to comment on Saied's moves, deployed to the government palace in the Kasbah and stopped workers from entering the building on Monday. Troops also surrounded parliament and stopped Ghannouchi from going in.

Al Jazeera television said police had stormed its Tunis bureau and expelled staff. In a statement late on Sunday, Saied invoked the



Members of Tunisian security forces face off with anti-government demonstrators during a rally in front of the Parliament in Tunis. – AFP

President Saied invoked the constitution and decree a freeze of parliament for 30 days, saying he would govern alongside a new premier



Tunisian President Kais Saied (L) and Ennahda Party founder Rached Ghannouchi. – AFP

constitution to dismiss Mechichi and decree a freeze of parliament for 30 days, saying he would govern alongside a new premier.

Mechichi, also an independent, is at his home and not under arrest,

and Ennahda, the biggest party in parliament, following a spike in Covid-19 cases and growing anger over chronic political dysfunction and economic malaise.

It poses the greatest risk to Tunisia's stability since the 2011 revolution that triggered the "Arab spring" and ousted an autocracy in favour of democratic rule, but has failed to deliver sound governance or prosperity. Hours after Saied's announcement, huge crowds gathered to back him in Tunis and other cities, cheering, dancing and ululating while the military blocked off parliament and state television station. — Reuters

Businessman Mikati set to be named Lebanese PM

BEIRUT: Lebanese President Michel Aoun on Monday held a brief meeting with leading businessman Najib Mikati, set to receive the backing of a majority of parliamentarians later in the day to try to form a government.

Mikati, who has been prime minister twice before and unlike many Lebanese leaders does not hail from a political bloc or dynasty, did not give any statement after the meeting that formally began consultations to designate a prime minister.

Like the previous nominee, Saad al Hariri, he faces major challenges in navigating Lebanon's power-sharing structure to secure agreement on a cabinet to tackle a crippling financial crisis.

While Lebanon has been run by a caretaker administration for nearly a year, since a huge blast



Lebanon's President Michel Aoun meets with businessman Najib Mikati at the presidential palace in Baabda, Lebanon. – Reuters

devastated large parts of Beirut, its currency has collapsed, jobs have vanished and banks have frozen accounts. The economic freefall is Lebanon's worst crisis since the 1975-90 civil war.

Hizbullah, the heavily armed movement that Washington deems a terrorist group, nominated Mikati in Monday's consultations and most of the main parliamentary blocs supported the nomination.

"Today, with signs that hint at the possibility of forming a government... that's why we named Mikati, to give an extra boost to facilitate forming a government," Muhammad Raad, the leader of Hizbullah's parliamentary bloc told reporters. Among Mikati's endorsers was Hariri, who abandoned his effort to form a new government last week after nearly 10 months of failing to agree its

makeup with Aoun.

Hariri told reporters after meeting Aoun that he hoped Mikati would be chosen and succeed in forming a cabinet.

"The country has a chance today," he said.

The news of Mikati's likely designation boosted the Lebanese pound on the unofficial parallel market, where dollars changed hands at around 16,500 pounds, compared to over 22,000 at the height of the deadlock over the government.

Western governments have been piling pressure on Lebanon, one of the most heavily indebted states in the world, to form a government that can set about reforming the corrupt state. They have threatened to impose sanctions and said financial support will not flow before reforms begin. — Reuters

SHORT TAKES

ISTANBUL

Turkey daily Covid cases top 14,000

Turkey's daily Covid-19 cases surged past 14,000, marking the highest toll since May. "If we don't take measures and if we don't get vaccinated, it might take a very long time to stop the pandemic," Health Minister Fahrettin Koca tweeted.



According to official data, Turkey recorded 14,230 daily cases over the past 24-hours, a sharp increase from around 4,000 daily in the early days of July. The country of 83 million reported more than 60,000 cases a day in

April, prompting the government to force a strict lockdown. But the restrictions have been removed from July 1, feeding fears the new surge will continue during the summer season. — AFP

ALGIERS

Algeria reimposes curbs to stem coronavirus cases

Algeria will reimpose restrictions on gatherings from Monday to cope with a rapid spread of the more infectious Delta variant of the coronavirus that has led to an increase in the number of patients, the prime minister's office said. The measures, which will apply to 35 out of 58 provinces, include mainly closing gyms, cultural centres, leisure venues, beaches and used car markets, as well as an 8 pm-6 am curfew, a statement from the office said.



All gatherings, including wedding celebrations will be banned, while cafes and restaurants will be allowed to provide only take away services. — Reuters

TEHRAN

Iran's Covid caseload exceeds 30,000 in new high

Iran's daily Covid caseload crossed the 30,000 mark for the first time on Monday, its health ministry said, marking a second record daily high within a week. In the past 24 hours, the Islamic republic registered a record 31,814 new infections to bring its total number of positive cases since the start of the pandemic to 3,723,246.

It also recorded 322 additional coronavirus-related deaths, taking the total to 89,122. Iran's daily infections had hit a record



of 27,444 last Tuesday, prompting the national virus taskforce to close down government offices and banks in Tehran and nearby Alborz provinces for several days. — AFP

In brief

■ MUMBAI



INDIA BEGINS LANDSLIDE, FLOOD CLEAN-UP

Rescuers waded through waist-deep mud in western India to reach injured residents and start a massive clean-up after heavy monsoon rains triggered landslides and floods that killed 159 people. India's western coast was hit by severe rainstorms over several days, with a quarter of a million people evacuated from their homes in three states and power cut across vast areas.

Experts say climate change is increasing the frequency and intensity of the annual deluge — which is critical to replenishing rivers and groundwater but also causes widespread death and destruction. — AFP

■ HANOI



VIETNAM'S ECONOMIC HUB IMPOSES NIGHT CURFEW

More than 10 million residents of Ho Chi Minh City will be placed under a strict overnight curfew beginning on Monday, an unprecedented move to curb infections as Vietnam battles a rapid Covid-19 surge. After successfully containing limited coronavirus outbreaks last year, the communist country is now recording increasing infections and deaths fuelled by the highly contagious Delta variant.

Hardest-hit are the northern industrial centres and Ho Chi Minh City in the south, which has registered more than 62,000 infections since April — making up the bulk of Vietnam's 101,000 cases. — AFP

■ ISLAMABAD



SCOTTISH CLIMBER DIES ON PAKISTAN'S K2

Scottish climber Rick Allen has died while attempting to summit Pakistan's K2, his expedition team said, the latest death on the world's second-highest peak. Allen was killed after being hit by an avalanche while attempting a new route on the mountain over the weekend. His body was recovered on Sunday.

"After consulting with his family and friends, the legend will be buried this morning under the foot of Mighty K2," Karakorum Expeditions wrote on Facebook. A charity that Allen was raising money for during the climb also confirmed his death. — AFP

UN warns of 'unprecedented' Afghan civilian deaths from Taliban offensives

KABUL: The United Nations warned on Monday that Afghanistan could see the highest number of civilian deaths in more than a decade if the Taliban's offensives across the country are not halted.

Violence has surged since early May when the insurgents cranked up operations to coincide with a final withdrawal of US-led foreign forces.

In a report released on Monday documenting civilian casualties for the first half of 2021, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) said it expected figures to touch their highest single-year levels since the mission began reporting over a decade ago.

It also warned that Afghan troops and pro-government forces were responsible for a quarter of all civilian casualties.

"Unprecedented numbers of Afghan civilians will perish and be maimed this year if the increasing violence is not stemmed," UNAMA head Deborah Lyons said in a statement released with the report. "I implore the Taliban and Afghan leaders to take heed to the conflict's grim and chilling trajectory and its devastating impact on civilians."

During the first half of 2021, some 1,659 civilians were killed and another 3,254 wounded, the UNAMA report said — a 47 per cent increase compared with the same period last year.



An Afghan policeman keeps watch at the check post on the outskirts of Kabul. — Reuters File Photo

The rise in civilian casualties was particularly sharp in May and June — the initial period of the Taliban's current offensives — with 783 civilians killed and 1,609 wounded, it added.

"Particularly shocking and of deep concern is that women, boys and girls made up of close to half of all civilian casualties," the report said.

UNAMA blamed anti-government elements for 64 per cent of civilian casualties — including some 40 per cent caused

The report also warned that Afghan troops and pro-govt forces were responsible for a quarter of all civilian casualties

by the Taliban and nearly nine per cent by the IS group.

About 16 per cent of casualties were caused by "undetermined" anti-government elements.

But Afghan troops and

pro-government forces were responsible for 25 per cent, it said.

UNAMA said about 11 per cent of casualties were caused by "crossfire" and the responsible parties could not be determined.

The Taliban's ongoing assault has seen the insurgents capture half of Afghanistan's districts and border crossings as well as encircle several provincial capitals.

The fighting is largely in the rugged countryside, where government forces and insurgents clash daily. The Taliban rejected



US Marine Corps General Kenneth McKenzie, commander of US Central Command, during a news conference in Kabul. — Reuters

the UN report. "In the past six months, the Mujahideen of the IE have not deliberately killed civilians anywhere or carried out attacks that could have resulted in civilian casualties," the Taliban said in a statement.

Last week, Human Rights Watch said there was "growing evidence" that the Taliban were committing atrocities against civilians in areas they had captured — including in Spin Boldak, the town near the border with Pakistan they took earlier this month.

Afghan security forces spokesman Ajmal Omar Shinwari said about 400 people had been "taken out of their houses" in Spin Boldak by the Taliban in recent days, and that 100 of them had been killed. He did not offer details on the fate of the remaining 300.

— AFP

Covid-19 sufferers in Indonesian capital rent oxygen cylinders



Port officials unload 100 metric tonnes of liquid oxygen aid from India brought by Indian Navy Ship Airavat at Tanjung Priok port in Jakarta. — AFP

JAKARTA: Muhammad Ihsan gratefully lugs an oxygen cylinder into a small office in Jakarta's outskirts, lining the breathing equipment up with scores of others against a wall.

Ihsan has taken advantage of a new rental service, established by volunteers in response to the coronavirus outbreak ravaging the Indonesian capital, borrowing the cylinder to give his infected mother some much-needed oxygen.

"Thank God, this really helped my mother," Ihsan said, adding that her Covid-19 diagnosis was complicated by pre-existing asthma.

"This oxygen cylinder really helped," Ihsan, 25, said as he returned the equipment.

"I tried looking everywhere, from Bekasi to Bogor but couldn't find one. Coincidentally, a friend recommended borrowing from here so I tried and thank God, I got one."

A group of volunteers called Action of Our Indonesia Movement, or GITA, set up the oxygen cylinder rental system in early July, aiming to help Covid-19 sufferers in the capital who could not afford access to hospitals or other treatment.

The cylinders — around 400 have been donated to the group — are lent out to users for free for a week at a time, but they must be refilled with oxygen before they are returned.

Indonesia is one of the countries most affected by the

pandemic in Southeast Asia, with around 3.08 million cases and 80,000 deaths. Jakarta, in particular, has been struggling to combat the rapid spread of the Delta variant of the coronavirus, stretching its healthcare system to breaking point.

"When we saw conditions getting worse, with many people in self-isolation and a lack of oxygen cylinders, we took the initiative to lend oxygen cylinders to people in need, free of charge," said volunteer Suranto Kurniawan, 43.

The cost of an oxygen cylinder has skyrocketed in Jakarta to a minimum of around \$120 (1,800,000 rupiah), a price that is out of reach for many in the capital. — AFP

Singapore aims to start quarantine-free travel by September

SINGAPORE: Singapore is looking to allow quarantine-free travel for those who are fully vaccinated against Covid-19 from September, when 80 per cent of the city-state's population should be inoculated, the government said on Monday.

Singapore will establish travel corridors with countries or regions where Covid-19 is under control, and those who are vaccinated may not have to quarantine or may be allowed to isolate at home, Finance Minister Lawrence Wong said.

The city-state is also set to review whether to loosen curbs in early August, when two-thirds of its population would be fully inoculated. "The easing will be differentiated and extended to only vaccinated persons, because they are much better protected against the effects of the virus," Wong said.

"If you want to go out to dine in the restaurant or workout in the gym, you have to be fully vaccinated."

About 54 per cent of the country had already received both doses of an mRNA vaccine, Ong told parliament. Singapore has approved vaccines from Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna.

Last week, the country tightened social curbs, including halting restaurant dining and banning gatherings of more than two people for one month, after a rise in infections.

More than half the country



Finance Minister Lawrence Wong

has received both doses of either Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna vaccines. It has inoculated nearly 75 per cent of its 5.7 million people with at least one dose, the world's second-highest rate behind the United Arab Emirates, a Reuters tracker shows.

As countries with advanced vaccination campaigns prepare to live with Covid-19 as an endemic disease, their focus is turning to preventing death and serious diseases through vaccination.

Still, Singapore may not do away with all of its social distancing measures. For example, it may remove its mask mandate for outdoors, but require people to keep them on in an indoor enclosed environment, Wong said.

As of July 25, Singapore had 1,537 active cases, with 12 cases of serious illness requiring oxygen, and two patients in critical condition in the intensive care unit (ICU). None of the 14 cases is fully vaccinated. — Reuters

Father builds exoskeleton to help wheelchair-bound son walk



Jean-Louis Constanza helps his son Oscar using a robot exoskeleton at the company headquarters in Paris. — Reuters

PARIS: “Robot, stand up” — Oscar Constanza, 16, gives the order and slowly but surely a large frame strapped to his body lifts him up and he starts walking.

Fastened to his shoulders, chest, waist, knees and feet, the exoskeleton allows Oscar — who has a genetic neurological condition that means his nerves do not send enough signals to his legs — to walk across the room and turn around.

“Before, I needed someone to help me walk... this makes me feel independent,” said Oscar, as his father Jean-Louis Constanza, one of the co-founders of the company that makes the exoskeleton, looks on.

“One day Oscar said to me: ‘dad, you’re a robotic engineer, why don’t you make a robot that would allow us to walk?’” his father recalls, speaking at the company Wandercraft’s headquarters in Paris.

“Ten years from now, there will be no, or far fewer, wheelchairs,” he said.

Other companies across the world are also manufacturing exoskeletons, competing to make them as light and usable as possible. Some are focused on helping disabled people walk, others on a series of applications, including making standing less tiring for factory workers.

Wandercraft’s exoskeleton, an outer frame that supports but also simulates body movement, has been sold to dozens of hospitals in France, Luxembourg and the United States, for about €150,000 (\$176,000) a piece, Constanza said. — **Reuters**

Southern Europe battles wildfires as north cleans up after floods

ATHENS: Wildfires burned in regions across southern Europe on Monday, fuelled by hot weather and strong winds, as some northern countries cleaned up after a weekend of torrential rain and flooding.

In Greece, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said firefighters had battled around 50 fires during the past 24 hours and it was likely there would be more with meteorologists warning that a further heatwave was in prospect.

“I want to emphasise that August remains a difficult month,” he said. “That is why it is important for all of us, all state services, to be on absolute alert until the firefighting period is formally over.”

Fire service officials said negligence on farms and construction sites had been behind several incidents, many of which were in the southern Peloponnese region. No casualties were reported.

Conditions in southern Europe were in sharp contrast to the torrential rainstorms that lashed northern countries from Austria to Britain following the catastrophic flooding in Germany and neighbouring countries last week.

On the Italian island of Sardinia, firefighting planes from France and Greece reinforced local aircraft battling blazes across the island where more than 4,000



Fire crews do mop-up work in Division Echo Echo of the Bootleg Fire in their efforts to fight the blaze in the Fremont-Winema National Forest of Oregon. — AFP

hectares of forest were burnt and more than 350 people evacuated.

In Sicily, fires broke out near the western town of Erice. In Spain, the northeastern region of Catalonia saw more than 1,500 hectares destroyed near Santa Coloma de Queralt, forcing dozens to be evacuated, although the blazes were 90 per cent stabilised on Monday, firefighters and authorities said.

In Lletor, in the central east region of Castilla-La Mancha, more than 2,500 hectares burned during the weekend before being brought under control, authorities said.

Fire service officials said negligence on farms and construction sites had been behind several incidents

So far this year, wildfires have burned across 35,000 hectares in Spain, still, some way off the 138,000 hectares burned in 2012, the worst year of the past decade.

Meanwhile, emergency services were still locked in battle with fires in the west of the Italian island of Sardinia on Monday.

In the province of Oristano, the fire brigade announced on Twitter that the operation was going on without a break. Sixty units are fighting the flames on the ground. In addition, five fire-fighting planes are in action.

Greece and France each sent two planes to help extinguish the flames, according to the Italian civil defence authority.

The flames have been burning in the western part of the island for a few days. Hundreds of people have had to leave their homes and thousands of hectares of land have burned so far, the ANSA news agency reported. — **Reuters/dpa**

Britain braces for more storms after torrential rainfalls

LONDON: There are more thunderstorms on the way after Britain was battered with almost a month’s worth of rain in a day.

The Met Office has issued yellow warnings for thunderstorms and rain in England and Scotland for the next four days possibly causing more flooding and transport disruption.

The new warnings come as homes, roads and Tube stations were flooded in the south of England, with a flooded hospital cancelling all surgery and outpatient appointments on Monday due to the heavy rain.

The basement at Whipps Cross Hospital in east London was flooded, causing damage to the electrical system and a loss of power.

A major incident was called across Barts Health NHS Trust, with staff moving around 100 inpatients from affected wards, including to other hospitals within

It seems as if there is a reluctance from govts to act decisively on climate change until the flood waters are lapping at your toes

DOUG PARR
Greenpeace UK’s policy director

the Barts Health group.

Ambulances are currently being diverted to other hospital emergency departments to relieve the pressure on Whipps Cross.

The emergency department at the hospital remains open for walk-ins but patients requiring urgent treatment are asked to attend alternative hospitals where possible. Newham Hospital is now fully operational after also being



Vehicles drive through deep water on a flooded road in The Nine Elms district of London during heavy rain. — AFP

affected by flooding.

A spokesperson for Barts Health NHS Trust said: “We are continuing to experience operational issues at Whipps Cross Hospital due to the heavy rainfall yesterday.

“We cancelled all planned surgery and outpatient appointments for today, and are

diverting ambulances while we work hard to clean up affected areas of the hospital. “We are keeping the situation under constant review and will post updates about services as necessary.

“Meanwhile, we cleaned all areas affected by the flooding at Newham Hospital yesterday and its emergency department is now open to people needing emergency care.

“We are working closely with other hospitals across the Barts Health group to maintain patient care and asking the public to check the latest visiting arrangements for each hospital on our website before coming to any site.”

The average rainfall for July in London is 45mm, so almost a month’s worth of rain fell in one 24-hour period. The daily rainfall value of 41.8mm recorded at St James’s Park is that weather station’s second-wettest July day on record. — **dpa**

DAKAR

Equatorial Guinea to close embassy in London

Equatorial Guinea will close its diplomatic mission in London, the country’s foreign minister said, after Britain last week sanctioned the son of its president for misappropriating millions of dollars.

“The first decision that the Malabo executive has taken is the total closure of our diplomatic headquarters in London,” Foreign Minister Simeon Oyono Esono said on state TV.

“Equatorial Guinea will not accept interference in the internal affairs of the country,



which violates the principle of international law,” Esono said. Britain sanctioned Teodoro Obiang Mangué (pictured) for misappropriating millions of dollars which London said were spent on luxury mansions and private jets. — **Reuters**

MOSCOW

Russia blocks 49 Navalny-linked websites

Russia’s media regulator has blocked 49 websites linked to jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny, his ally said, as pressure mounts on the movement of the opposition leader ahead of parliamentary elections in the autumn.

Navalny, President Vladimir Putin’s most vocal domestic critic, was arrested in January after he returned to Russia following months of treatment in Germany for a nerve agent poisoning he blames on the Kremlin.



He was subsequently jailed for two-and-a-half years on old fraud charges and his organisations were banned as ‘extremist’, barring members and sponsors from running in parliamentary elections in September. — **dpa**

PARIS

French parliament clears stricter coronavirus rules

The French parliament approved a tightening of the country’s coronavirus rules on Monday, after an extended debate. The changes will introduce compulsory vaccination for health workers and the obligation to provide proof of a negative coronavirus test, vaccination against Covid-19 or recovery from the disease for access to some venues will be extended.

Prime Minister Jean Castex welcomed the new regulations, but said he would refer the



matter to the Constitutional Council, which is to issue an opinion on August 5. The changes are controversial. More than 160,000 people nationwide took to the streets to protest them on Saturday, according to the Interior Ministry. — **dpa**

Extreme weather renews focus on climate change

ANDREA JANUTA

As scientists gather online to finalise a long-awaited update on global climate research, recent extreme weather events across the globe highlight the need for more research on how it will play out, especially locally.

The list of extremes in just the last few weeks has been startling: Unprecedented rains followed by deadly flooding in central China and Europe. Temperatures of 49 Celsius in Canada, and tropical heat in Finland and Ireland. The Siberian tundra ablaze. Monstrous US wildfires, along with record drought across the US West and parts of Brazil.

“Global warming was well projected, but now you see it with your own eyes,” said Corinne Le Quere, a climate scientist at the University of East Anglia.

Scientists had long predicted such extremes were likely. But many are surprised by so many happening so fast — with the global atmosphere 1.2 degrees Celsius warmer than the preindustrial average. The Paris Agreement on climate change calls for keeping warming to within 1.5 degrees.

“It’s not so much that climate change itself is proceeding faster than expected — the warming is right in line with model predictions from decades ago,” said climate scientist Michael Mann of Pennsylvania State University. “Rather, it’s the fact that some of the impacts are greater than scientists predicted.”

That suggests that climate modelling may have been underestimating “the potential for the dramatic rise in persistent weather extremes,” Mann said.

Over the next two weeks, top scientists with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) will finalise the first instalment of its sixth Assessment Report, which will update the established science around greenhouse gas emissions and projections for future warming and its impacts. Government representatives are also taking part in the virtual two-week meeting.

— Reuters

It’s not so much that climate change itself is proceeding faster than expected — the warming is right in line with model predictions from decades ago

MICHAEL MANN
Climate Scientist



Braving the typhoon

The photo shows a man riding a bicycle as waves, caused by Typhoon In-Fa further down the Chinese coast, surge over a barrier along the seacoast in Qingdao in China’s eastern Shandong province. — AFP

Enjoy nature’s treat... as Salalah is calling



Lakshmi Kothaneth
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UNFORTUNATELY THIS IS THE SECOND YEAR THE KHAREEF SEASON ARRIVES DURING THE PANDEMIC

Get vaccinated, hop onto a flight and head to Salalah. Monsoon Salalah has become part of life for many local tourists consisting of nationals and residents. And a 24-hour or a partial lockdown is not going to stop them.

This year there will be no physical festival, but it is not going to deter them from not making the trip across the 1,000 km. Many prefer to go by road, but that will be tricky during lockdown in the evening hours.

There are no concerts to sit at the open theatre and enjoy gentle drizzle. During our live coverage from the Festival Ground while at Radio Oman 90.4 FM there could never be two evenings alike. From exhibitions to concerts to circus to theatre, the Salalah Tourism Festival was a platform for opportunities for artists and entrepreneurs. It has been for decades an annual event which brought together folk dancers, singers and musicians from many wilayats across the Sultanate. The time was spent in their own respective towns practicing the art forms, choosing the theme for the competition and representing age old traditions of their communities.

Unfortunately this is the second

year the khareef season arrives during the pandemic where gatherings are considered harmful for us. But the travellers have already arrived to marvel at the spectacular scenery Dhofar’s picnic spots offer during the monsoon. When you miss the sun and dry weather all you have to do is drive to Thamrait or to the desert to enjoy the ambience of Ubar, the ancient caravan post.

The satellite images have shown the camel routes which were basically the land routes for the export of frankincense and other goods.

It is amazing to see the archeological sites today which also show the empty water table underneath the structure which probably could be one of the reasons why the structures collapsed and the caravan post probably moved to another spot.

If you allow yourself to flow with imagination you would be able to visualise the setting of a bustling caravan post. The discovery announced in 1992 by British explorer Ranulph Fiennes along with a group of US researchers led by Nicholas Clapp was much celebrated because this was an ancient trade route, and at that point the search was on for

the lost Arab city. Before I experienced Ubar, I was introduced to it by Amouage Perfume of Oman with a new range titled Ubar. The fragrance was one of the best.

Finally when I stood at Ubar, I could relate to the magic of desert at sunset. On our trip to Ubar it was intriguing to go through the mini museum and the exhibits.

The desert sand shifts directions with the wind and there must be so much more to be unravelled to take us back in time to know more about the merchants, camels and the caravans as well as the lands they reached with the precious frankincense.

We ought to increase our interest in Ubar which some historians felt they might have called it as Wubar as it relates to camel.

The mist, the fog, the drizzle, the springs, birds, the frankincense and the water falls all beckon one to Salalah to enjoy the nature’s treat.

While in Salalah do not forget to enjoy camel milk, after all if the best thing to do during the pandemic is to build one’s immunity, then camel milk might be exactly what the nature prescribed!

Most of all enjoy the walk in the drizzle!

Affinity with nature and identification with the celestial...



Dr Khalid Mohammed al Balushi
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THERE’S AN ATMOSPHERE OF MYSTICS AND SUFISM IN AL BALUSHI’S POETRY. HIS TREATMENT IS CHARACTERISED BY AN INTUITIVE, DIRECT AND IMMEDIATE SUBJECTIVITY

Born in 1967, Abdullah al Balushi is among Oman’s most prolific contemporary poets. He’s published more than 10 collections. These include Crossing the Bar (1994), Immortality’s Seasons (1996), Tear’s Path (2007), The Darkness that Brightened (2016), A Bird Kneeling in Supplication on the Riverbank (2017) and Turning Away towards Triumphant Immortality (2018).

As might be inferred from these titles, there’s an atmosphere of mystics and Sufism in Al Balushi’s poetry. Divine love, universal brotherhood, transcendence of the worldly, a close affinity with nature and an intimate identification with the celestial are recurrent themes in his extensive repertoire. His treatment of these themes is characterized by an intuitive, direct and immediate subjectivity.

The following poems are from his Crossing Solitude’s Bar (1994): **Five Scenes before the Mirror of a Night Creature.**

(1) You O bird
Cawing on the tower
Go away
I pray thunder
To bless your feathers.
(2) Orphanage is a blind tree
That digs death’s chambers
Innocence is ashes falling in the gloom
Wars are finger rings that bury flocks.
(3) Next to a luminous icon
A hand holds a scene ready to fall
A mother cloaked in black
Carrying a child on her strong shoulders.
After the sea bled
My father brought an oyster
An oyster I drew with the face of a baby
Drowning in a dark ocean.
(4) The shadow dances
Behind the window’s mouth
A tree planted on a grave’s rim
Dropped its soul onto my solitude.

(5) Your water overflows
O night
Wash away the remnants
Of stove ashes.
Childhood’s Holy Book
Like a night it looked
I still remember it
The metamorphosis tree
I remember my silent kiss
On its fearful trunk.
Those were times I devoted to night
I planted my dawn in the sun’s roots.

Like a shadow, I move
Might not the roots have printed
A kiss upon my lips?
I wish they’d given me a remission
I’d then live with a butterfly in the desert.

Like a leper,
I looked at night
That day heavens had no locked

doors
And the earth was adorned with ice.

I remember the chant
That washed the sin every evening
The gate wide open to the wind
To the skies
To the saints
And to the Mother Tree!

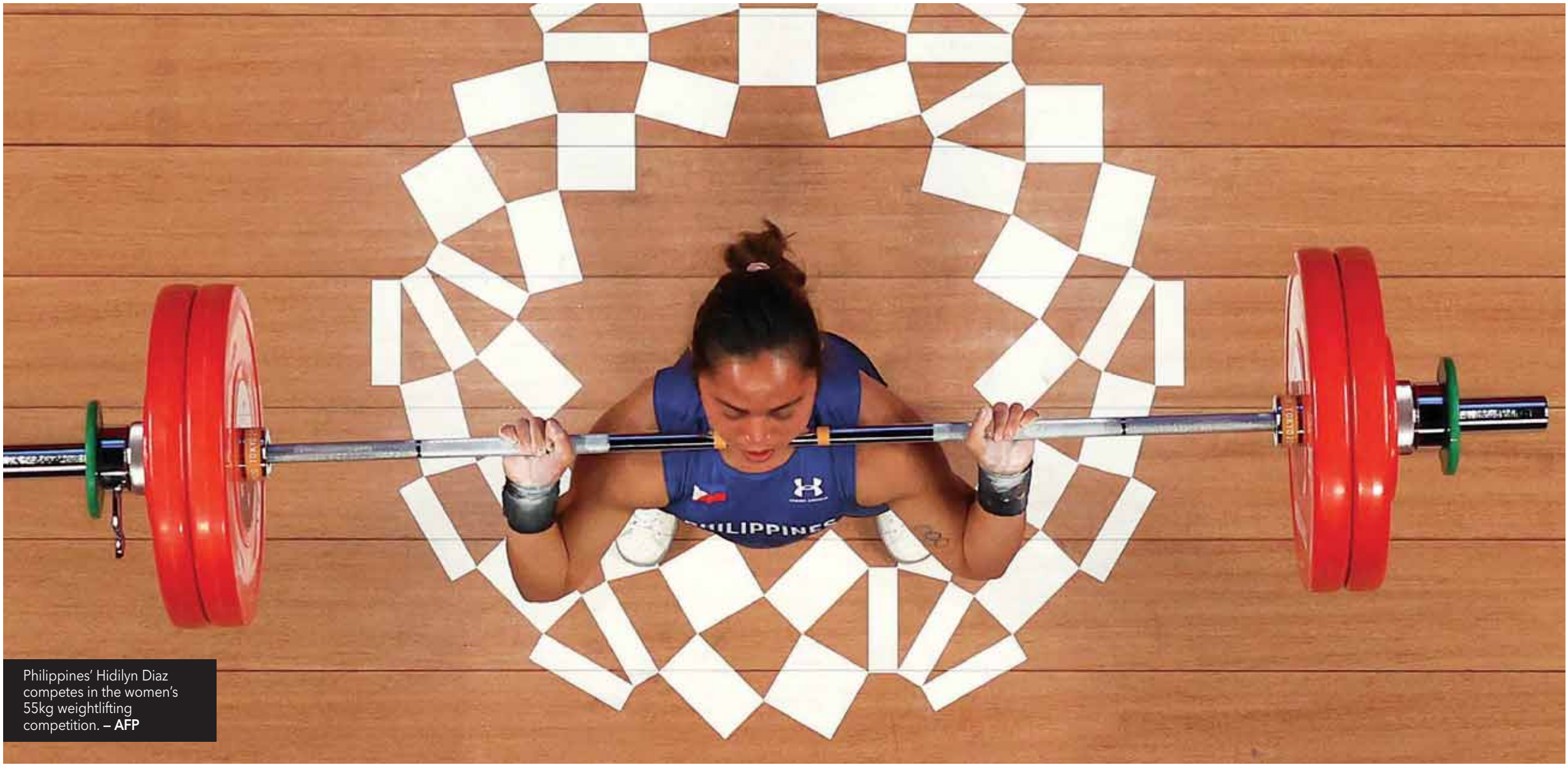
The roots carry me to distant paths
Where I’m home to raving birds
Burned by winter.

Virgin are those times and travelers
Virgin are those first skulls
For they look like trees cuddled by heaven.

Today
Desolate is the angel’s doorstep
No cradle hymn
Nor the water I bathed in some

winter.
I stand before the door
Carrying many tears in the mirror.

Here I am
Waiting for a hand
To stroke the shiver of injury.
Shall I lean on the wall
After the roof has collapsed?
But I’ll still dig the desert
To look maybe for a hill
Or for the maze of a child
Drowned in tears.
A Dream
In the corners of the world
There’s some spot that shelters me again:
Blue windows
A tree on whose shadows silence sits
The travellers
Glorifying fountains and huts wrapped by angels
Might remember me
I, the forgotten in the shadow of a blind tree.



SCHOOLGIRL SCOOPS GOLD

AS JAPAN WARMS TO GAMES

TOKYO: Japan struck more gold on Monday to lead the medals table as sentiment towards the pandemic-delayed Tokyo Olympics appeared to shift, and local fans defied organisers to grab a glimpse of the Games.

The hosts now have eight golds, one more than the US and two ahead of third-placed China.

Pint-sized 13-year-old Momiji Nishiya took gold in street skateboarding — new to the Olympics in Tokyo — while in one of the Games' staple sports a "Terminator" hunted down a dominator to set the swimming pool alight.

Love and laughter filled the fencing venue where a marriage proposal was accepted a decade after an original rebuffal, but smiles were thin on the ground for boxing refugee Eldric Sella who, having dreamt for years of competing in the Olympic Games, lasted 67 seconds.

Britain's four-time Olympian Tom Daley finally won a long-yearned-for gold when, together with new diving partner Matty Lee, he pulled off a stunning victory in the men's 10-metre synchronised platform, ending China's stranglehold on the event.

MAIDEN GOLD

Philippines' Hidilyn Diaz won her country's first-ever gold medal, triumphing in the weightlifting 55kg category.

The 30-year-old Rio 2016 silver medallist from the southern city of Zamboanga realised her dream at the Tokyo International Forum, smashing her personal best to see off world record holder Liao Qiuyun of China who had to settle for silver.

With Liao setting a target of 223kg, just 4kg shy of her own world record, Diaz was faced with a final clean and jerk of 127kg to win — fully 5kg more than she had ever



Momiji Nishiya of Japan takes part in skateboarding women's street final. - Reuters

achieved in the competition.

With a massive effort, she hoisted the huge Olympic record weight and the tears of joy began to flow even before she dropped the bar to the floor after a triumphant effort.

Liao took the silver, with Kazakhstan's Zulfia Chinshanlo the bronze 10kg adrift of the top two.

"It's unbelievable, it's a dream, come true," Diaz said moments after the Philippines Air Force woman shed more tears on the podium as she saluted her flag and sung the national anthem.

"I want to say to the young generation in the Philippines, 'You can have this dream of gold too'.

"This is how I started and finally I was able to do it." Diaz has already assured a place in her country's sporting folklore, alongside the likes of boxing icon Manny Pacquiao, as the only woman from the sprawling archipelago ever to win an Olympic medal — her surprise silver five years ago breaking a 20-year medal drought for the Philippines.

GLIMPSE OF GAMES

In the pool, Ariarne Titmus lived up to her "Terminator" moniker by clawing back American Katie Ledecky's early lead to win the 400m freestyle final and pour petrol on the fierce Australia-US pool rivalry.

"I can't believe it, I'm trying to contain my emotions," said Titmus.

Team USA got their victory in the 4x100m men's relay, while Adam Peaty roared with pride after becoming the first British swimmer to defend an Olympic title with gold in the 100m breaststroke.

Locals defied organisers and gathered along the route of the triathlon, grabbing a rare opportunity to see live competition at the pandemic-hit Games.

"I think the risk of getting infected is extremely low, almost equal to zero," said Masao Kitada, a 35-year-old finance worker standing at the roadside. "The Tokyo Games are very special, so I can't miss this chance."

Medals					TOKYO 2020	
Table						
Short version						
As of July 26						
Standings						
	Gold	S	B	TOTAL		
1 Japan	8	2	3	13		
2 United States	7	3	4	14		
3 China	6	5	7	18		
4 ROC*	4	5	3	12		
5 Britain	3	3	1	7		
6 South Korea	3	0	4	7		
7 Australia	2	1	3	6		
8 Kosovo	2	0	0	2		
9 Italy	1	4	4	9		
10 France	1	2	2	5		
11 Canada	1	2	1	4		
12 Hungary	1	1	0	2		
- Tunisia	1	1	0	2		
14 Croatia	1	0	1	2		
- Slovenia	1	0	1	2		
*Athletes from Russia					AFP	

Norwegian Kristian Blummenfelt took gold at the open-air triathlon route on the island of Odaiba in Tokyo Bay.

SCHOOLGIRL SKATEBOARDER

Organisers reported 16 new Olympics-related coronavirus cases on Monday, bringing the total number to 148.

But Japanese media was full of Olympic success.

The Yomiuri Shimbun broadsheet, one of the world's largest newspapers by circulation, splashed photos of the judo gold medal-winning Abe siblings, swimmer Yui Ohashi and skateboarder Yuto Horigome with the word 'Gold' beneath each of their names.

Schoolgirl skateboarder Nishiya



Ariarne Titmus of Australia celebrates winning gold in women's 400m freestyle swimming. - Reuters

is sure to lead bulletins and adorn front pages now. "I welled up in tears because I was beyond happy," Nishiya said, describing the moment when she realised she had won gold.

Jun Mizutani and Mima Ito put Japan on top of the table late on Monday when they beat China's Xu Xin and Liu Shiwen to win gold in the table tennis mixed doubles.

Naomi Osaka looked good to add to the local haul later in the Games when she sailed into the third round of the tennis competition, sweeping past Swiss Viktorija Golubic.

RUSSIAN MEN TRIUMPH

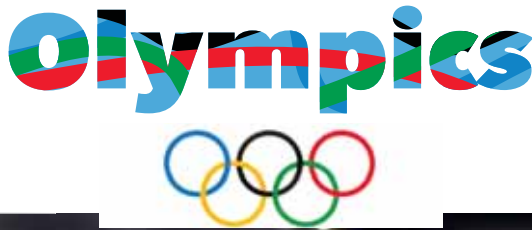
Nikita Nagornyy led the Russian team to the coveted men's artistic gymnastics gold at the Tokyo Olympics to add to their world title.

The Russians turned the tables on Japan, who had pipped them to the title in Rio 2016. China had to settle for bronze.

— Agencies



TOKYO 2020



ISSA AIMS FOR GOOD SHOW IN 100M FREESTYLE



Olympic veterans: Katie Ledecky

TOKYO
2020



Sport: Swimming

Country: USA

Age: 24



Source: olympics.com
AFP

OLYMPICS

2012	London	1 x GOLD	800 m freestyle
2016	Rio	4 x GOLD	200 m freestyle 400 m freestyle 800 m freestyle 4 x 200 m freestyle
		1 x SILVER	4 x 100 m freestyle

World Championships

2013 - 2019

15 x GOLD | 3 x SILVER

ALADAWI WILL BEGIN
HIS COMPETITION
IN THE MEN'S
100M FREESTYLE
COMPETITIONS ON
TUESDAY BESIDE
THE TOP RANKING
SWIMMERS FROM
DIFFERENT PARTS OF
THE WORLD

Surfing

Making waves at the Olympic Games for the first time

Initial rounds
4 to 5 person heats

Surfers normally have 30 minutes to ride a maximum of 25 waves; their two highest-scoring performances count to their heat total

The exact length of the heat is decided by a technical director based on the conditions of the day

Venue
Tsurigasaki Surfing Beach, Chiba

Schedule* July

	25	26	27	28
	S	M	T	W
Women				
Men				

*Subject to change depending on the wave conditions

Main rounds
2-person heats

Knockout format where the winner goes on to the next round

Judging criteria

Five-judge panel scores each ride

Based on

- Degree of difficulty
- Innovation and progressive moves
- Combination of manoeuvres
- Speed
- Power
- Flow

In the uncontrolled environment of the open sea, no two waves are the same, each breaking differently, offering different scoring opportunities



1.8 m shortboards to be used at Tokyo 2020

Did you know?

Surfing was popularised by Duke Kahanamoku from Hawaii, who won three gold medals in swimming at the Stockholm 1912 and Antwerp 1920 Games

Source: olympics.com/britannica.com AFP

ADIL AL BALUSHI TOKYO, JULY 26

Oman's talented swimmer, Issa al Adawi, will be eager for a solid show during his debut in the 32nd Summer Olympic Games – 2020 Tokyo as he will commence the national teams participation in the top Olympic event.

Al Adawi will begin his competition in the Men's 100m freestyle competitions on Tuesday beside the top ranking swimmers from different parts of the world.

Despite the expected difficulty in the competition, Issa's hopes are high to put up a good show and improve his performance. His current best timing is 51.69s.

The 22-year-old was very close to securing a qualified record to the Olympics but he could not take part in many events and championship due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.

However, he managed to earn the Olympic invitation card beside his other national athletes including: runners Barakat and Mazoon, shooter Ahmed al Khatri and weightlifter Amur al Khanjiri.

Adawi is set for competing in the

prestigious Olympic event after he completed his preparatory programme for the Tokyo Olympics. The young domestic swimmer was very keen to take part in any friendly and open tournaments in Japan during the last period.

He managed to take place in a domestic swimming tournament in Japan last February at 100 and 200 metre freestyle swimming. He registered his best record which was 50:17 in Open swimming event in 100 metre freestyle swimming category in Japan. It is expected that he may register a new record during the Olympics.

HEAT THREE!

The national swimmer Issa al Adawi assigned in heat three and will be in seventh line at the Tokyo Aquatics Center among other eight competitors on Tuesday's race. As many as 72 swimmers were distributed into nine heats. The best 16 swimmers will advance to the semifinals. Brazil's Cesar Cielo holds the world record of 46.91s which was set in 2009. Heat three will feature swimmers: Miguel Mena (NCA), Jean-LucZephir (LCA), Yousuf al Matrooshi (UAE), Stefano Mlitchell (ANT), Andrew Chetcuti (MNT), Kledi

Kadiu (ALB) and Danilo Rosafo (KEN).

Semis round will take place in the following day while the finals is on Thursday where the medals will be delivered to the top three winners. The domestic swimming star will seek to confirm his top show in competing with other opponents from different part of the world.

KISHRY MEETS SWIMMING TEAM

Secretary-General of Oman Olympic Committee, Taha al Kishry, met the national swimming team on Monday at the Olympic Village in presence of Kazem al Balushi, Oman's Chef De Mission.

During the meeting, Oman Swimming Association chief congratulated swimmer Issa al Adawi and his technical staff on their debut presence in Tokyo 2020 Olympics.

"We are confident that you will represent the Sultanate in an honourable manner and achieve positive and new records," he added.

OOC Secretary-General appreciated the support received from the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth to secure Oman's presence in top sporting event including the Olympics.

HISTORIC PARTICIPATION

Swimmer Issa al Adawi said that he is proud to represent the Sultanate in Tokyo 2020 Olympics for the first time. "Attendance in the Olympic Games is a great honour for any athlete. During the last period, we had an intensive plan to shape our readiness for my debut in Tokyo 2020. I hope to register outstanding results in this historic participation," he ended.

ISSA'S JOURNEY

Oman's most promising swimmer's journey began in an early stage when he was eleven years old. He has got the full confidence from the technical coaching staff at that time to start taking part in the official tournaments and championships.

The national technical swimming panel recommended on beginning of Issa at the GCC swimming championships.

In 2012, Al Adawi had started his first official assignment abroad at GCC tournaments level. During the last eight years, he had demonstrated the titles in different categories and competitions including: U-13, U-14, U-15 and U-17 in the 50, 100 and 200 metre freestyle swimming.

After his remarkable results and solid

shows at the GCC championship level, swimmer Issa went to participate at the regional and international levels. He took part in many different events and tournaments including his presence at the 2nd Asian Youth Games which was held in Nanjing, China in 2013, 2018 Youth Olympic Games in Buenos Aires, Argentina and the last edition of 2018 Asian Games in Jakarta, Indonesia.

The top officials at Oman Swimming Association (OSA) were eager to involve talented swimmer Issa in the top aquatic sporting showpieces including South Korea World Swimming Championships beside his attendance at the 10th Asian Championship that was held in India two years ago.

Despite the current condition of the ongoing pandemic including its negative impact on the sporting field, swimmer Issa was eager to participate in the tournaments held in Japan as he is a student in Chukyo University including the swimming championship in Japan hosted by the city of Tsuda beside to his recent participation in the Japan Open Swimming Championship and act as Olympic qualifier in tournament which was held last June in Tokyo.

Stunning Race Two victory for Al Zubair and Soucek in Imola

IMOLA (ITALY): Al Faisal al Zubair and Andy Soucek delivered a sensational performance in race two of the International GT Open Championship at Italy's Imola circuit on Sunday. After qualifying in sixth place, they pushed the Lechner Racing Team's Porsche 911 GT3 R through the field to claim victory by 1.507 seconds in the pulsating one-hour race.

Michele Beretta pushed Soucek hard in the latter stages of the 35-lap race in the Vincenzo Sospiri Racing Lamborghini and he and team-mate Frederik Schandorff secured second place and vital championship points to maintain their slender series lead.

Loris Spinelli's Mercedes AMG came home in third place and Yuki Nemoto brought the second of the Lamborghini's home in fourth ahead of Marcus Paverud's Honda NSX.

Al Zubair said: "Qualifying for me didn't go the best. I qualified in sixth. But in the race, in the first stint, I overtook the Mercedes to go to P5 and there was a bit of contact ahead and made it into P4. From there, I maintained the gap and came into the pit early for a nice pit stop for Andy to go on new tyres.

"From there, Andy did a great job. I think we struggled for pace a little bit, relative to the Mercedes and the Lamborghini, but nonetheless to come with a third on Saturday and a first in race two was way more than we expected for the weekend. It was the best way to get into the summer break."

Al Zubair began the race from sixth on the grid and managed to push up to fourth behind Frederik Schandorff, Loris Spinelli and Ollie Millroy after three laps. The quartet held station through the next 11 laps with the Lamborghini heading the Mercedes by 2.723 seconds heading into lap 16 and Millroy's McLaren by 7.227 seconds.

It was then that Al Zubair pitted and was replaced by Soucek for the



“Qualifying for me didn’t go the best. I qualified in sixth. But in the race, in the first stint, I overtook the Mercedes to go to P5 and there was a bit of contact ahead and made it into P4. From there, I maintained the gap and came into the pit early for a nice pit stop for Andy to go on new tyres

AL FAISAL AL ZUBAIR
Omani racer



final 32 minutes with the Lechner Porsche now down in seventh place. Spinelli snatched the lead from Schandorff when the leading Lamborghini pitted for Michele Beretta to take over driving duties and Soucek climbed to fifth place heading into the remaining 29 minutes.

Spinelli's pit stop enabled Millroy to snatch the lead and Soucek found himself in fourth behind the McLaren, Spinelli and Agostini's Audi R8. But the Spaniard took further advantage of his rivals' pit stop strategies and stormed into second place on lap 19 at the expense of Beretta and Spinelli.

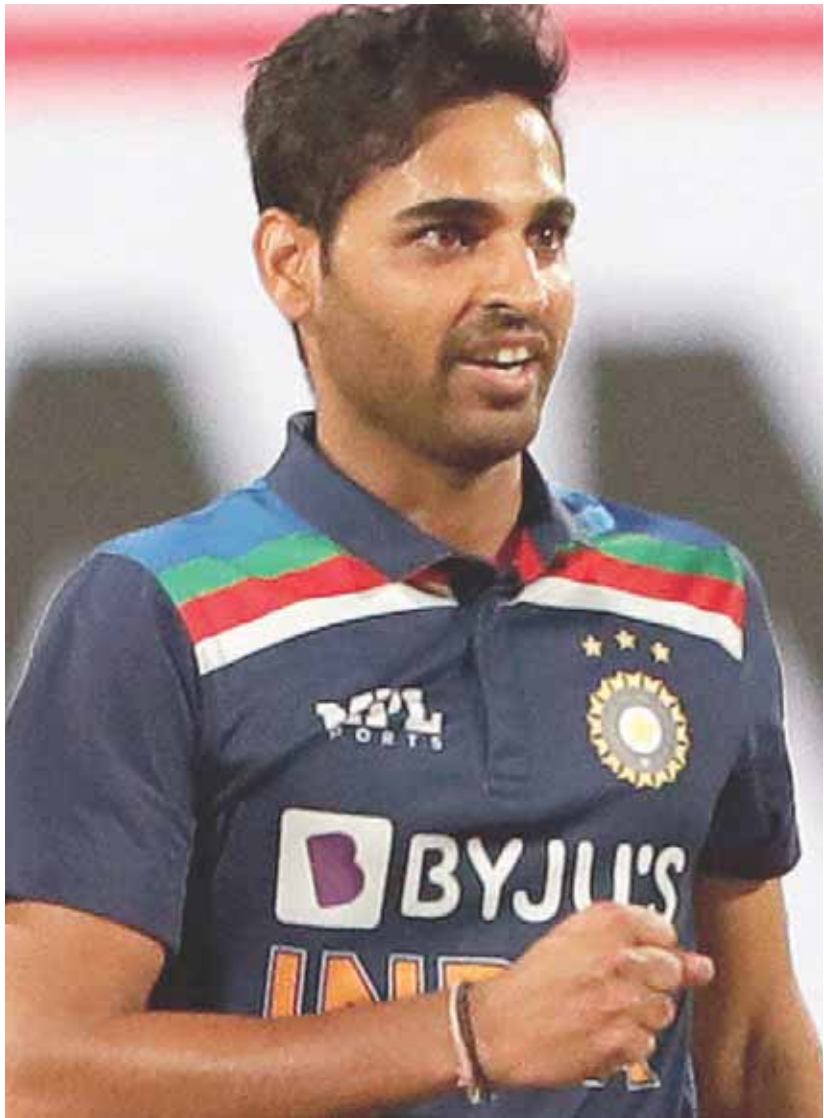
He now began to hunt down the leading McLaren into the final 25 minutes of the race and snatched the lead when Millroy pitted and was replaced by Brendan Iribe.

It was now a straight fight to the finish with Soucek carving out a lead of 6.585 seconds heading into lap 20. The lead over Beretta was 5.78 seconds with 20 minutes of the race remaining after 22 laps and 4.669 seconds with a quarter of an hour to go.

Beretta was slowly edging closer but Soucek managed to keep the gap to 3.111 seconds through lap 28 with 10 minutes of the race to run. The Italian kept up the pressure and Soucek headed into the last five minutes of the race, with 31 laps completed, defending a slender lead of 1.893 seconds.

The Spaniard managed to hold on to pass the chequered flag and secure a thrilling victory for Lechner Racing by the margin of 1.507 seconds after 35 laps.

Frederik Schandorff had qualified the Vincenzo Sospiri Racing Lamborghini in pole position for the second of the weekend's races with a best lap of 1min 40.121sec. Italy's Riccardo Agostini was second in the Audi Sport Italia R8 and Ollie Millroy settled into third place with a lap of 1min 40.648sec in the Inception Racing McLaren.



Kumar stars as India thrash Sri Lanka

COLOMBO: Seam bowler Bhuvneshwar Kumar led a disciplined bowling performance as India hammered Sri Lanka by 38 runs in the opening Twenty20 international after a Covid scare at the stadium on Sunday.

Chasing 165 for victory, Sri Lanka were bowled out for 126 in 18.3 overs with Kumar returning figures of 4-22 in Colombo. India lead the three-match series 1-0.

Earlier skipper Shikhar Dhawan (46) and Suryakumar Yadav (50) guided India to 164-5 in 20 overs after being put into bat first.

"I thought we were 10-15 runs short but we felt it was still a good total," said Dhawan.

"Surya is a great player and we enjoy watching him bat. He was taking pressure off me as well. Sri Lanka were playing well but we knew our spinners will get some turn."

Spinners Krunal Pandya, Yuzvendra Chahal, debutant

Varun Chakravorthy and quick bowler Hardik Pandya took one wicket each.

A ground staffer at the R Premadasa Stadium tested positive for Covid-19 following a rapid antigen test, Sri Lanka Cricket said, before the hosts won the toss.

As a precaution, reporters and photographers were not allowed inside the 35,000 capacity ground where the white-ball series is being played.

Spectators were already barred from attending since the start of the three-match one-day series which India won 2-1.

Kumar struck with opener Avishka Fernando's key wicket for 26 before the pace spearhead returned to wipe off the tail.

Pace partner Deepak Chahar took two wickets in one over including debutant Charith Asalanka for 44 to derail Sri Lanka's chase.

But it was Dhawan and Yadav

SCOREBOARD	
INDIA	M Bhanuka c Yadav b K Pandya..... 10
P Shaw c Bhanuka b Chameera 0	D de Silva b Chahal..... 9
S Dhawan c Bandara b Karunaratne..... 46	C Asalanka c Shaw b Chahal 44
S Samson lbw Hasaranga 27	A Bandara c H Pandya 9
S Yadav c sub b Hasaranga 50	D Shanaka st Kishan b Chakravorthy..... 16
H Pandya c Bhanuka b Chameera..... 10	W Hasaranga b Chahal..... 0
I Kishan (not out)..... 20	C Karunaratne b Kumar..... 3
K Pandya (not out)3	I Udana c Yadav b Kumar..... 1
Extras (LB-2, W-6)..... 8	D Chameera c K Pandya b Kumar..... 1
Total (For 5 wickets, 20 overs)..... 164	A Dananjaya (not out)..... 1
Fall of wickets: 1-0, 2-51, 3-113, 4-127, 153-5	Extras (W-6)..... 6
Bowling: Chameera 4-0-24-2, Karunaratne 4-0-34-1, Dananjaya 3-0-40-0, Udana 4-0-32-0, Hasaranga 4-0-28-2, Shanaka 1-0-4-0	Total (all out, 18.3 overs)..... 126
SRI LANKA	Fall of wickets: 1-23, 2-48, 3-50, 4-90, 5-111, 6-111, 7-122, 8-124, 9-125
A Fernando c Samson b Kumar..... 26	Bowling: Kumar 3-3-0-22-4, Chahal 3-0-24-2, K Pandya 2-0-16-1, Chakravorthy 4-0-28-1, Chahal 4-0-19-1, H Pandya 2-0-17-1

who set up the win with their 62-run third-wicket stand that helped India to a challenging total.

Dhawan, a left-hand opener who put on 51 for the second wicket with Sanju Samson (27), missed out on his fifty after being caught in the deep.

Yadav raised his second T20 fifty in his fourth match but got out next ball to leg-spinner Wanindu Hasaranga.

Hasaranga and pace bowler Dushmantha Chameera, who got Prithvi Shaw out first ball of the innings, claimed two wickets each.

"I thought our bowlers did an amazing job on this wicket," said Sri Lanka skipper Dasun Shanaka. "I hope boys come out and deliver for us."

The second T20 is on Tuesday at the same venue. — AFP

MUSCAT STOCK EXCHANGE

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CRUDE OIL PRICE

Oman Crude	\$71.99
Brent Crude	\$73.10
Light Crude	\$71.68



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Tethys Oil share from Blocks 3&4 is 11,415 barrels/day for June

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JULY 26

Swedish energy firm Tethys Oil announced that its share of the production, before government take, from Blocks 3&4 onshore Oman amounted in June 2021 to 342,446 barrels per day (bpd) of oil, corresponding to 11,415 bpd.

“Oil production in Oman is currently subject to production limitations under the OPEC+ agreement. As a consequence, production from Blocks 3&4 is subject to limitations but is likely to fluctuate on a monthly basis,” said the Stockholm-based international oil and gas

company.

The Official Selling Price (OSP) for Oman Export Blend Crude Oil for the month of June 2021 amounts to \$63.10 per barrel. The OSP, as published by the Ministry of Energy and Minerals, is the benchmark price for Tethys Oil’s monthly oil sales excluding trading and quality adjustments.

Tethys Oil AB, through its wholly-owned subsidiary Tethys Oil Block 3 & 4 Ltd, has a 30 per cent interest in Blocks 3&4. Partners are Mitsui E&P Middle East B.V. with 20 per cent and the operator CC Energy Development SAL (Oman branch) holding the remaining 50 per cent.

Cashless transactions mandatory at key outlets from January 1

VISION 2040: Covered in the first phase will be shopping malls, cafes and restaurants, commercial centres, gift markets, jewellery stores, electronic shops, grocery stores, vegetables and fruit sellers, building material shops and outlets in industrial areas. Commercial stores figuring in this list must enable cashless payment services in the form of credit card-readers, (point of sale) POS terminals, and other facilities

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JULY 26

With effect from January 1, 2022, all commercial transactions at select stores and business establishments will be cashless as part of the Omani government’s drive to promote electronic channels as the principal mode of payment – a key objective of the Oman 2040 Vision.

An announcement to this effect was made by the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion on Monday. In a post on social media, the Ministry said the new cashless payment scheme will be rolled out in stages.



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The Ministry noted that it is working with the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) to ensure that the requisite hardware and facilities required by commercial outlets are provided by local banks and service providers without imposing any cost burden on the business community.

Fees for electronic transactions

will be regulated by the Central Bank and must not exceed 1.5 per cent of the billed amount where payment is made by credit card. Fees levied on payments made by mobile wallets will be limited to a maximum of 0.75 per cent.

The measure is seen as a big boost to Oman’s rapidly growing epayments and fintech sector, which has capitalised on the burgeoning e-commerce industry to gain traction in the local market. The apex bank, for its part, has been working on the formulation of a robust and comprehensive strategy to support the growth and adoption of financial technology (fintech) services in the Sultanate.

Oman’s fintech strategy, according to the Central Bank, has the potential to fuel, among other

things, the roll-out of innovative banking and financial products, promote venture capitalism, drive entrepreneurship and employment generation, and spur economic development in general.

The CBO’s fintech strategy is aimed at establishing a comprehensive fintech ecosystem in Oman to foster and nurture fintech start-ups, SMEs and technology firms besides facilitating the existing players to innovate, develop and offer digital solutions.

Thus, apart from being in the lead in current times, the strategy will also serve as an impetus to our country’s economic growth, open new job opportunities and hopefully attract venture capitalists.

Move to secure Oman’s smart meters from cyber-attacks

CYBER-SECURITY:
The move comes as countries around the world warn of the risks posed by hackers to electricity meters not only to manipulate meter readings for fraudulent reasons, but more alarmingly, to penetrate the wider electricity infrastructure with sinister objectives

CONRAD PRABHU
[@conradprabhu](https://twitter.com/conradprabhu)

Seeking to insulate Oman’s elaborate electricity metering system from potential cyber-attacks, the power sector regulator – the Authority for Public Services Regulation (APSR) – is preparing to enact cybersecurity standards and regulations to secure this key component of the country’s power infrastructure.

A draft cyber-security standard combined with a draft regulation for the country’s Electricity Metering System has been made

public by the regulator with a view to eliciting feedback from the general public before it is finally issued.

The move comes as countries around the world warn of the risks posed by hackers to electricity meters not only to manipulate meter readings for fraudulent reasons, but more alarmingly, to penetrate the wider electricity infrastructure with sinister objectives.

In recent years, the Sultanate’s electricity authorities have been deploying tens of thousands of smart meters across the country as part of efforts to modernise and digitalise services at the consumer end. These smart meters have enabled, among other things, consumers to monitor and prepay for their consumption, get accurate bills, pay online, and plan their consumption at cost-competitive off-peak hours.

“The objective of this Standard and the Electricity Metering System Regulation (the Regulation) is to ensure that the End-to-End Electricity Metering System (the System) is secure from reasonably foreseeable cyber-



attacks, throughout its lifecycle (design, implementation, testing, operation, decommissioning and disposal),” said the Authority in its advisory on the public consultation.

The overarching objective, it said, is to protect the supply of electricity to consumers; prevent financial fraud; provide accurate

consumption data to enable accurate and timely billing; protect consumer data; protect the integrity, function and trust in the supply system and market; and support future changes in the electricity supply system and market.

Significantly, the Electricity Metering System is not limited

The overarching objective, it said, is to protect the supply of electricity to consumers; prevent financial fraud; provide accurate consumption data to enable accurate and timely billing; protect consumer data; protect the integrity, function and trust in the supply system and market; and support future changes in the electricity supply system and market

to the smart meter alone, but encompasses the multiple elements at the consumer’s premises, the communications hub, in-house display unit, and all communications and telecommunications used with the system. Not included, however, are the associated systems for customer relationship management, billing,

scheduling, payment, and so on.

While representing a tiny component of the power network, electricity meters – because of their widespread distribution and ubiquitous presence – can serve as staging points for more serious cyberattacks, it is pointed out.

“The System will provide a much larger “attack surface” for cyber-attacks with the installation of connected, advanced meters in consumer premises throughout Oman. This increases the cybersecurity risk to the System with the potential to cause disruption of electricity supply to consumers, enable financial fraud, unauthorised disclosure of consumers’ personal data, and undermine confidence in the electricity sector,” the Authority noted.

It stressed, in this regard, the need for a “continuous risk management process to identify, evaluate and treat the risks.”

Interested members of the public have until August 22, 2021, to offer their comments or observations to the Authority on the draft standard and regulation.

Tanweer
boosts
Mahout
power grid
to meet
economic
growth



BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JULY 26

The Rural Areas Electricity Company (Tanweer), Member of Nama Group, announced the commencement of work on a project to strengthen the electrical power grid and raise its efficiency in the Wilayat of Mahout in Al Wusta Governorate, at a total cost of RO 770,000.

The project, located in the Khaluf area, will introduce vital improvements to the power grid, which will be completed before the end of the year. It includes constructing a 17 km-long overhead and ground 11 kilovolts (KV) power lines between Khaluf power station and the 0.433 KV substation.

The project is part of Tanweer's efforts to raise the grid's efficiency, develop its assets, and safely operate them.

The company's new project aims to cover the increasing demand for energy due to the economic and social growth in the Wilayat of Mahout.

The company is working on several projects to strengthen the electricity system in its concession areas and activities covering 75 per cent of the Sultanate.

Tanweer is the only company in the electricity sector in the Sultanate whose licence includes generation, transmission, distribution and supply of electricity and water desalination in the areas in which the company operates.

During the last five-year plan, Tanweer invested more than RO 300 million in expanding, developing and improving power stations, substations and connected grid to keep pace with the population and urban growth in its concession areas extending from the north to the south of the Sultanate.

Injaz Oman launches 'Let's Discover Science Together' initiative

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JULY 26

Injaz Oman, a non-profit committed to inspiring young Omanis and enhancing their creative and leadership capabilities, has launched a summer training programme in cooperation with Injaz regional Arab branches.

Titled, 'Let's Discover Science Together', the programme is conducted by Injaz Oman for the second year in a row, to inspire and encourage the youth to pursue their studies in the scientific fields in the future.

The programme, which targets 100 participants, is designed by engineers and educators in the relevant industry sectors. The preparations of the programme targets training the volunteers who will run the programme in order to provide them with behavioural and educational guidance to help present the learning process in an enjoyable and attractive methods.

Five trainers were provided with optimal training that combines proactive and critical thinking to meet the challenges



presented to the participants.

Commenting on the initiative, Khaula bint Hamoud al Harthi, CEO of Injaz Oman, said: "As part of our work at Injaz Oman, we target school students to qualify them to lead the developments and innovations in the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics.

To achieve this, we launched 'Let's Discover Science Together' programme for the second year looking to inspire and enrich this targeted segment intellectually and practically."

The programme is sponsored by Boeing as part of the

company's social responsibility programmes. Bernard Dunn, President of Boeing Middle East, North Africa and Turkey, said: "We are proud of our partnership with Injaz Oman for the second year in a row. Teaching such programmes is a shared responsibility and priority in our industry, and we all aspire to achieve a shared goal of building a workforce that has the skills and knowledge necessary to meet market demands."

Launched in February 2006, Injaz Oman is part of the non-profit "Junior Achievement Worldwide" Foundation,

The programme, which targets 100 participants, is designed by engineers and educators in the relevant industry sectors.

which was established in 1919. Injaz Oman provides vital programmes that contribute to developing youth skills, empowering and enhancing their creative and leadership abilities, in addition to preparing them to enter the labour market with confidence.

Through the programmes, youth discover their potential talents by participating in a number of special training courses run by a group of pioneers in the private sector who provide a summary of their expertise, scientific and practical experiences, and the secrets of their success.

Through these courses, young people acquire many skills that are the main support for entering the labour market with merit and learning more about marketing and competition.

OAB hosts virtual graduation ceremony of LEAD 3 programme



MUSCAT: Oman Arab Bank (OAB) recently celebrated the graduation of the third cohort of the 'LEAD 3' programme under the patronage of Shaikh Nasr bin Amer al Hosni, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Labour. The graduation ceremony was held via an online platform, where graduates were presented with their graduation certificates.

The ceremony was attended by Rashad bin Mohammad al Zubair, Chairman of OAB, Rashad bin Ali al Musafir, CEO of the bank and saw the presence of several executive members and guests.

Rashad al Musafir noted,

"Today's celebration of the 'LEAD 3' graduation is a testimony of OAB's commitment to empowering its employees to become future leaders. The previous LEAD graduates have assumed management and leadership positions across various departments and divisions of the bank.

Today, they are joined by their colleagues and have been prepared to be leaders, within each of their respective fields. This approach affirms our long term vision to localise knowledge resources and provide opportunities for national talent to take charge of the future."

Sohar International to offer attractive home loan facilities

MUSCAT: In line with the bank's purpose of helping people 'win' by delivering banking for their ever-changing world as well as supporting Omanis' to achieve their dreams by making the right investments, enabling them to prosper and grow, Sohar International recently joined hands with Al Hekmani Trading to provide housing loans for the real estate developers' properties in key locations in Oman.

The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed at the Sohar International head office located at the Waterfront, Shatti Al Qurum, between Khalil bin Salim al Hedaifi, Chief Retail Banking Officer, Sohar International and Said bin Ali Salim al Hekmani, Chairman of M/S Said al Hekmani Trading.

According to the agreement, Sohar International will provide preferential housing loan facilities to those interested in purchasing properties in the various projects developed by Al Hekmani Properties. "Sohar International's home financing options are designed to offer personalised services that are tailor-made to the unique needs of our customers. Our home financing options seek to support customers in making important investments and acquiring properties of their choice," said Khalil bin Salim al Hedaifi.



Al Ahlia launches new online motor insurance platform



MUSCAT: Al Ahlia Insurance Company has launched its Online Motor Insurance Platform, which is set to simplify the way people conduct everyday business and make purchasing or renewing your insurance policy simple.

Shaikh Khalid bin Abdullah al Khalili, Chairman of Al Ahlia, pointed out that the platform fulfils the need of the hour, as the ongoing pandemic has placed the onus on companies to stay ahead of the game through digitisation.

"The ongoing digital transformation has set the tone for both old and new companies around the world. And as is perceptible, traditional retail modules have, for a while, been disrupted by the advent of digital technology.

Although the pandemic has brought along its own social and economic challenges, it has, in a way, orchestrated the demand for digitisation. It has not only thrown the spotlight on the importance of digital adoption and augmentation, but it has also bolstered confidence among customers in Oman to adopt digital as a safe and convenient option," he stated.

Praveen Kumar, CEO of Al Ahlia, stated: "We have established ourselves as digital leaders, and this new venture is a testimony of the several planned improvements on our agenda; it is a validation of our belief that the future is, indeed, digital" he explained, pointing out that the leverage behind the ongoing digital venture has been the unwavering spirit of leading the industry into tomorrow."

Congratulating Al Ahlia on this milestone, Shaikh Aimen bin Ahmed al Hosni, CEO of Oman Airports and Chief Guest at the launch event, said, "This platform will empower customers by giving them easy and convenient access to the company's products, whilst they stay safe at home, which is the need of the hour."

Ascend to new heights in the Toyota Corolla Cross SUV

MUSCAT: The Corolla Cross makes a fine mark with its powerful performance, stylish design and exciting driving dynamics. It combines key elements like strength and functionality taking centre stage with its stunning looks, high ground clearance, roomy interiors and occupant focused detailing.

The Corolla Cross SUV is built from the ground up with a TNGA platform, to

encourage you to ascend to new heights. And to 'live elevated'. Sporting a bold profile, the Corolla Cross is powered to amplify arrivals.

With a 1.8L engine paired to an electronically controlled CVT transmission. This hybrid electric vehicle produces dynamic acceleration and a world-class fuel efficiency. A wide and tough stance is emphasised by the front grille resulting in a mature front



expression.

Together with the bumper, the double trapezoid form expresses a bold and stable design. Angular and wrap around design of the headlamps integrated with daytime running lights, flow outwards from the grille.

Highlighting its dynamic looks and bolder stance. Sleek defined lines run along the side, culminating at the front of an aerodynamic cabin exuding a sophisticated impression.

A muscular wheel arch adds to the sturdy looking lower body. A comfortable driving experience is made possible by TNGA platform and is complemented by the large 17" alloy wheels.

The solid forms of rear fenders are fused to the body, contrasting with the aerodynamically tapered cabin, which expresses an imposing stance. The rear spoiler not only contributes to vehicle performance but also increases the appeal of exterior styling.



Supply shortages
darken German
business
sentiment



A woman shops at a fashion store in Freyung, Germany. — Reuters

BERLIN: German business confidence fell in July for the first time since January, a key survey showed on Monday, dampened by shortages in the supply of materials and fears of a further rise in Covid-19 infections.

The Munich-based Ifo institute's monthly confidence barometer, based on a survey of 9,000 companies, dropped to 100.8 points, down from 101.7 in June. Factset analysts had expected a rise to 102.0 points.

"Companies evaluated their current business situations as somewhat better, but their expectations for the coming months were significantly less optimistic," the institute said in a statement.

"Supply bottlenecks and concerns over newly rising infection numbers are weighing on the German economy," it said.

The indicator had not fallen since January but remains well above 75.6, the level it fell to in April 2020 at the height of the first wave of the pandemic.

— AFP

China's new private tutoring rules put billions of dollars at stake

Under the new rules, all institutions offering tutoring on the school curriculum will be registered as non-profit organisations, and no new licences will be granted

HONG KONG: China's sweeping new rules in private tutoring has left private education firms facing a significant business impact as Beijing steps up regulatory oversight of a \$120 billion industry that investors had bet billions of dollars on in recent years.

The new rules released on Friday bars for-profit tutoring in core school subjects in an effort to boost the country's birth rate by lowering family living costs.

The news sent shockwaves through the sector and parents struggled to understand how exactly the move would impact their children in a highly competitive education system.

Under the new rules, all institutions offering tutoring on the school curriculum will be registered as non-profit organisations, and no new licences will be granted, according to an official document.

The rule changes, which are much tougher than previously expected, have put at risk billions of dollars of public and private capital ploughed into the sector over the last few years on hopes for continued demand in the



Primary students take exam inside a classroom in Beijing, China. — Reuters

world's most populous country.

The move triggered a massive fall on Friday in the Hong Kong and New York-listed shares of Chinese private education companies, and the sell-off continued on Monday with some of the stock plummeting between 30 per cent and 40 per cent.

China's education industry sub-index dropped as much as 14 per cent on Monday.

US-listed TAL Education Group said on Sunday it expected the new rules to have "material adverse impact on its after-school tutoring services ... which in turn may adversely affect" its operations and prospects. It did not elaborate.

Gaotu Techedu, New Oriental Education & Technology Group

, Koolearn Technology Holding, Scholar Education Group, and China Beststudy Education Group made similar statements.

The new rules will result in existing online tutoring firms being subjected to extra scrutiny and after-school tutoring will be prohibited during weekends, public holidays and school vacations, the document said.

Curriculum-based tutoring institutions would also be barred from raising money through listings or other capital-related activities, while listed companies would be banned from investing in such institutions, it said.

Scholar Education said that authorities had yet to provide details around the implementation of the rules and

there were uncertainties as to when and how such rules will become specifically applicable to the group.

Goldman Sachs said in a research note its one year price targets on the listed tutoring stocks would be cut by 78 per cent on average.

The impact, the note said, would be mostly due to the ban on weekend and winter and summer holiday tutoring, which brought in up to 80 per cent of the firms' revenue.

China's for-profit education sector has been under scrutiny as part of Beijing's push to ease pressure on school children and reduce a cost burden on parents that has contributed to a drop in birth rates. — Reuters

Oil prices
fall as slower
imports hit
demand

LONDON: Oil prices fell \$1 on Monday as concerns about fuel demand caused by the spread of Covid-19 variants as well as changes to import rules in China offset expectations of tight supplies through the rest of the year.

Brent crude futures for September fell 97 cents, or 1.3 per cent, to \$73.13 a barrel by 08:50 GMT while US Texas Intermediate crude was at \$71 a barrel, down \$1.07. Coronavirus cases continued to rise over the weekend with some countries reporting record daily increases and extending lockdown measures that could slow oil demand.

China, the world's largest crude importer, has also seen a rise in Covid-19 cases. Also, Beijing's crackdown on the misuse of import quotas combined with the impact of high crude prices could see China's growth in oil imports sink to its slowest in two decades this year, despite an expected rise in refining rates in the second half.

"The delta variant is still spreading and China has started to clamp down on teapots so their import growth would not be that much," said Avtar Sandu, a senior commodities manager at Singapore's Phillips Futures, referring to independent refiners.

Strong US demand and expectations of tight supplies have helped both contracts recover from a 7 per cent slump last Monday to mark their first gains in 2-3 weeks last week. — Reuters



A man walks past oil drums at Pertamina main depot in north Jakarta in Indonesia. — Reuters

With \$4 billion in losses, Heathrow tells UK: open up travel

LONDON: London's Heathrow Airport urged Britain on Monday to open up travel to vaccinated passengers after its recovery fell behind Europe, pushing its cumulative pandemic losses to \$4 billion.

Heathrow, which before the pandemic was the busiest airport in Europe, said that fewer than four million people travelled through the airport in the first half of 2021, a level which would have been surpassed in 18 days of 2019's traffic.

It said it now believes 21.5 million passengers will travel through Heathrow in 2021, driven by what it hopes will be pent-up



Passengers arrive at Heathrow Airport in London, Britain. — Reuters

Heathrow, which before the pandemic was the busiest airport in Europe, said that fewer than four million people travelled through the airport in the first half of 2021

demand for holidays.

"The UK is falling behind its EU rivals in international trade by being slow to remove restrictions," Heathrow Chief Executive John Holland-Kaye said in a statement.

Britain's travel industry continues to be plagued by

surging Covid-19 cases at home and government caution, causing last-minute rule changes and cancellations.

Heathrow said it had increased liquidity to 4.8 billion pounds (\$6.60 billion), and sought a waiver of its Heathrow Finance ICR covenant for the financial year 2021 due to pressures on its cashflow.

For the six months to June 30, Heathrow posted an adjusted loss before tax of 787 million pounds (\$1.08 billion), compared to the 471 million loss for the same period last year which was only half affected by the pandemic.

— Reuters

Ryanair losses widen on travel restrictions in Europe



Ryanair planes are seen at Dublin Airport in Ireland. — Reuters

LONDON: Irish no-frills airline Ryanair announced a widening

of losses in its first quarter, hit by Covid travel restrictions in Europe.

Losses after tax hit 272.6 million euros (\$321 million) in the group's first quarter, or three months to June 30.

That compared with a net loss of 185.1 million euros one year earlier for the Dublin-based carrier that flies mainly throughout Europe.

"Covid-19 continued to wreak havoc on our business during the first quarter with most Easter flights cancelled and a slower-than-expected easing of EU government travel restrictions into May and June," Ryanair chief executive Michael O'Leary said in the company's earnings statement.

Costs more than doubled in its first quarter, offsetting a near trebling of revenues. Traveller numbers however soared to 8.1 million from just half-a-million one year earlier.

And Ryanair was experiencing a "strong rebound of pent up travel demand into August and September," noted O'Leary, adding that the airline expects the rebound to continue. "We are encouraged by the high rate of vaccinations across Europe," he said.

"If, as is presently predicted, most of Europe's adult population is fully vaccinated by September,

then we believe that we can look forward to a strong recovery in air travel for the second half of the fiscal year."

Fierce European rival EasyJet last week ramped up its summer capacity and revealed narrowing losses on improving demand. With travel restrictions easing however, Ryanair earlier this month announced plans to hire more than 2,000 pilots.

At the start of the pandemic, it had slashed 3,000 pilot and cabin crew jobs, or 15 per cent of staff, mirroring moves by airlines globally to save cash in the face of collapsing demand.

Ryanair had in May posted an annual net loss of 1.0 billion euros as the pandemic grounded planes.

Ryanair's latest results "painted a rosy picture of the future for European air travel as vaccination passports open the door to a summer travel season," noted Laura Hoy, equity analyst at Hargreaves Lansdown.

"However, despite an influx of travellers, Ryanair's losses widened over the past three months.. Ticket prices, on the other hand, were depressed." Shares in Ryanair rose 3.3 per cent to 16.26 euros in morning deals following the results. — AFP



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features



Halima's tale makes its way to South Korea

Oman's folk tales are part of a rich cultural heritage in which women played an integral role. Halima and the Snake is a tale that has been passed down through generations, slowly getting lost without any physical existence other than tales told by the older generations to the new, teaching the morals to the growing generations. Check out how this story is now shared abroad... **P20**

ASTRONOMY

READ



THE PAPER PALACE
BY MIRANDA COWLEY HELLER

After an extramarital dalliance, Elle must choose between her husband and her childhood love.

Large meteorite sighted in Norway; researchers hunting for fragments

AN "UNUSUALLY LARGE METEOR" briefly lit up southern Norway on Sunday, creating a spectacular sound and light display as it rumbled across the sky, and a bit of it may have hit Earth, possibly not far from the capital, Oslo, experts said. There were no

immediate reports of injuries or damage. Reports of sightings started arriving around 1 am with the phenomena being seen as far north as Trondheim. A web camera in Holmestrand, south of Oslo, captured a fireball falling

from the sky and erupting into a bright flash lighting up a marina. The Norwegian Meteor network was analysing video footage and other data on Sunday to try to pinpoint the meteor's origin and destination. Preliminary data suggested a meteorite may have hit Earth in a large wooded area, called Finnemarka, just 60 km west of the capital, Oslo, the network said. "This was crazy," the network's Morten Bilet, who saw and heard the meteor, said. By Sunday afternoon no debris had been found and given the "demanding" location, one could take "some 10 years" searching for possible meteorites, Bilet said. The meteor travelled at 15-20 km



per second and lit up the night sky for about five to six seconds, Bilet said. The summer sky was dark, with the days starting to get shorter from

the end of June. Some eyewitnesses also said they felt a stronger wind blow with the event also causing a pressure wave, Bilet said. — Reuters



Home Sweet Home (Ahlan Wa Sahlan)

The rush of pleasure that overtakes you when you think of Oman is something cognizant of every individual living in this breathtaking beauty. A tapestry woven with history, nature and hospitality that never fails. Oman, the land of wonder, the land of

rugged mountains and the land of generosity that ensures a smile and a steaming cup of Arabic coffee — no matter where you go. Such is the poetry of our home, and with this abundance comes the very delicious food. Omani cuisine has no pretence, it plays havoc on

your senses with earthy flavours derived from the ingredients themselves. No gimmicks, just food you can share with family and friends any time of the day. Giving the same vibes is a little café tucked away in Ghubra — Dukanah. You walk in and you've entered another

era. The era that ruminates on our ancestors living a simple life. Packed mud walls, sturdy wooden furniture laid with colourful tapestry and artefacts from the past, Dukanah sets the mood for a hearty meal. We picked 2 appetisers, 2 mains and a dessert, all served with a whole lot of love.



HE SAID: Our appetisers included 3 different types of Samboosas that you can order by the piece. We loved the meat and chicken immensely; the cheese was great as well. These were served with a delectable Omani style tamarind sauce. On the other hand, the beetroot salad was delicious though it had simple ingredients such as Rocca leaves, shredded beetroot, baby tomato, pomegranate seeds and pomegranate molasses.

SHE SAID: The idea of Samboosas by the piece works wonderfully, you order more of what you like! Unfortunately, they ran out of the meat and chicken ones too soon. Mildly spiced stuffing of shredded meat and chicken, these were out of the world, not heavy, and the sour tamarind on the side only served to enhance the flavours. The beetroot salad we picked as our second starter was light, crisp and super fresh. The earthy ingredients laced with the molasses sauce cleansed our palates and made way for our mains.



HE SAID: Our mains were Harees and the Dukanah Meal. Harees is a dish made of wheat and chicken cooked with fragrant spices for a long period. It was served in a bowl and topped with a generous amount of ghee. While it had the authentic Omani essence, the dish was not beaten enough so that the wheat turns to a thick purée and the chicken turns to fine threads (harees means purée). The Dukanah Meal is the true meaning of celebrations — all the famous dishes, eaten on Eid, in one platter. The Mishkak and Qaliyah (Omani version of kebab skewers and meat stew) were cooked to perfection and served with honey, tamarind sauce, diced tomato, thin slices of onion and two types of Omani breads. Well done to the chef as she has mastered the true Omani taste.

SHE SAID: Harees — my one true love. They've elevated it to another level but adding actual chunks of chicken. He prefers it more mashed up but for me, it was an absolute delight. Served with fragrant Ghee, fried onions and date molasses, this dish is every bit flavourful yet not overpowering, filling but not killing! The Dukanah Meal on the other hand ticks every box is known to foodies. Three different types of meat — the meat and chicken Mishkak along with Qaliyah (fried meat) were super soft and the condiments really drove the point home. Do dip your Qaliyah in honey before you take a bite and see those tastebuds roll.



HE SAID: We had Khabisa (very similar to Porridge), a simple dessert made of flour, sugar and ghee, flavoured with saffron, cardamom and rose water. Dukanah had its own twist to the dish and made it extremely soft. It had a balance of sweetness and was not overpowered by saffron, cardamom and rose water. The addition of condensed milk was remarkable.

SHE SAID: I haven't had the pleasure of trying many Omani desserts, so this was a fun experience. We picked Khabisa — a flour-based dessert cooked with milk, honey, and butter. It felt like a cross between a rice pudding and custard with an almost caramelised aftertaste which was absolutely mind-blowing. I may have to sneak back when he's not looking!

WE SAID: Dukanah is a journey, an even more impressive one when you realise that the chef is from the Philippines and cooks with the heart of an Omani. A mid-range restaurant that has great ambience and awesome service. Would we go back? Oooh yes!

Ambience: 5/5
Taste of food: 5/5
Presentation: 4.5/5
Service: 5/5
Value for money: 4.5/5

DISCOVERY

Fossil reveals burrowing lifestyle of tiny dino



A FINGER-SIZED FOSSIL from 308 million years ago unearthed in the United States gives tantalising clues to the habits of tiny dinosaur-like creatures that may be the forerunners of reptiles, researchers revealed on Wednesday.

The new species is a micro-saur — small, lizard-like animals that roamed the Earth well before proper dinosaurs made their appearance.

The find sheds important light on the evolution of different animal groups, including amphibians and reptiles, scientists wrote in the journal *Royal Society Open Science*.

Microsaurs lived during the Carboniferous period, when the forebears of modern mammals and reptiles, called amniotes, first appeared.

"Many details of that transition aren't well known," study co-author Arjan Mann, a post-doctoral research fel-

low at the Smithsonian Institution, told AFP.

HEAD-FIRST BURROWER

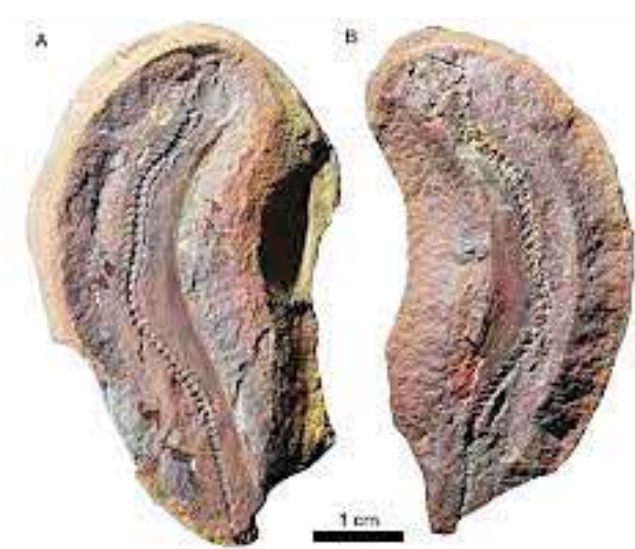
Contrary to previous ideas about microsaurs, which had been classed as amphibians, Mann and his team discovered that Joermungandr had scales.

"Modern amphibians... are soft and slimy things, this was not a soft and slimy thing," says Mann.

"This animal really had a reptile-like look to it."

Mann said the research suggests not only that microsaurs might be early relatives of reptiles, but also that the ability to burrow may have played a bigger role in the origin of amniotes than originally thought.

The researchers used a highly sensitive imaging technique called scanning electron microscopy (SEM) to get an up-close look at the nearly perfect fossil.



low at the Smithsonian Institution, told AFP.

"Microsaurs have recently become important in understanding the origins of amniotes," he said. "A lot of these microsaurs have been thought to be either ancestors of amphibians or ancestors of reptiles."

Encased in a bog in what is today the central United States, the specimen's serpent-like body measures about five centimetres (two inches).

The animals had four short, plump legs.

In deference to its tiny size, researchers dubbed the new species Joermungandr bolti after a giant sea serpent from Norse mythology who did battle with Thor.

Scientists were astonished to discover the fossil also contained the animal's skin.

"Areas of the skin had only been known from fragmentary fossils before," said Mann.

"This microsauro is the whole shebang... that's very

They discovered a pattern of ridges similar to those found on the scales of modern reptiles that dig into the ground. Along with other features like a robust skull and elongated body, the scale shape led researchers to hypothesise that Joermungandr burrowed as well.

"It would probably have been a head-first burrower, using its head to smack itself into the soil," said Mann.

"Its limbs were probably not very functional. It may have used them to stabilise itself as it was wobbling around. But its primary mode of movement would have been side winding like a snake."

The SEM imaging technique is now being applied to many other ancient fossils, Mann said.

"We plan to do a lot of SEM and also 3-D printing the scales at larger sizes," he added. "And some biomechanics to see how they interacted with things like dirt and water." — AFP

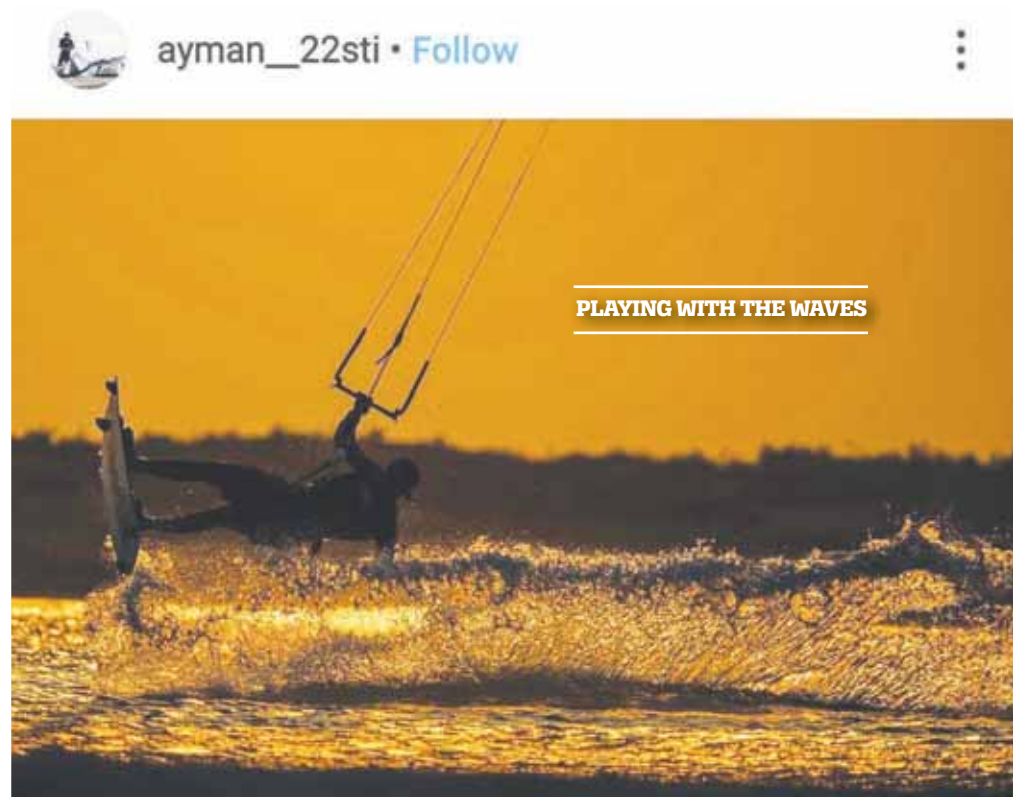


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FILM

New M. Night Shyamalan horror flick 'Old' tops North America box office



NEW M. NIGHT Shyamalan horror-thriller "Old" aged to perfection at the top of the North American box office in its debut weekend, taking in an estimated \$16.5 million, industry watcher Exhibitor Relations reported on Sunday.

The movie, about a family that becomes trapped on a beach where they begin to age precipitously, stars Gael Garcia Bernal and Vicky Krieps, and beat out the weekend's second-highest money-maker "Snake Eyes" by more than \$3 million.



Paramount's latest G I Joe instalment, also in its debut weekend, took in an estimated \$13.4 million, recounting the origin story of its titular character Snake Eyes' involvement with the famed squad.

In third place was Disney superhero flick "Black Widow" starring Scarlett Johansson, which earned an estimated \$11.6 million.

Last week's top earner, the Warner Bros live action/animated "Space Jam: A New Legacy," fell to fourth with \$9.6 million.

The movie sees NBA superstar LeBron James teaming up with Bugs Bunny and other Looney Tunes characters in a high-stakes basketball game against a rogue artificial-intelligence entity threatening his son.

And in fifth was Universal's "F9: The Fast Saga," at \$4.6 million, bringing the five-week domestic total of the Vin Diesel/John Cena action thriller to more than \$160 million.

ROUNDING OUT THE TOP 10 WERE:

"Escape Room: Tournament of Champions" (\$3.4 million)

"Boss Baby: Family Business" (\$2.7 million)

"The Forever Purge" (\$2.3 million)

"A Quiet Place: Part II" (\$1.3 million)

"Roadrunner: A Film About Anthony Bourdain" (\$830,000) — **AFP**

TRAVEL TALES



Moldova's lavender flourishes after post-Soviet decline

Young couples and families pose for glamour shots as the sun lowers over Alexei Cazac's sprawling field of lavender outside the capital of Moldova.

"Once, in the first year the lavender was blooming, we came and the entire field was just filled with people," the 40-year-old farmer says on a recent visit.

"It's like the set of a photo shoot. We didn't plan it this way," he says.

Cazac, who planted his first bushels in 2015, is among a growing cohort of farmers in Moldova fuelling a resurgence in the aromatic herb, whose cultivation collapsed along with the Soviet Union.

The comeback in the small country bordering Romania has garnered attention not just from locals hungry for likes on social media, but also from global cosmetic firms headquartered in western Europe.

"After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the industry was forgotten," says Alexandru Badarau, president of the Lavender Growers Association.

"It collapsed precisely because our connection was severed with Moscow, where most of the essential oils produced in Moldova were exported," he said.

"We're working hard to revive it."

Around five or six newcomers to the industry are planting rows of the herb every year, he says, a trend which saw Moldova's lavender oil production double in 2021 to 20 tonnes compared to twenty years ago.

But that is still a far cry from 1989, when the country produced 180 tonnes.

Badarau's association says members export 99 per cent of their oil to the European Union, specifically Germany, and to two other well-known producers: France and Bulgaria.

The oil is widely used in cosmetics and its aromas are hailed for their relaxing and soothing qualities that some believe counteract anxiety and insomnia.

Producers in Moldova say Bulgaria, which was also under the Iron Curtain, has benefitted greatly from the European Union after it became a member in 2007.

But where Bulgaria excels in quantity, Moldova trumps it in quality, they say.

- ROOM FOR GROWTH -

The local variety yields less oil, concedes Nicu Ulinici, who inherited his father's farm and harvested his first bushels in 2014.

"But it's higher quality," he says. Its aroma is "more pleasant, softer."

For Badarau, lavender has won over growers in Moldova owing to its success in dry climates. This, he believes, will help farmers mitigate "risks associated with climate change."

Indeed, multinational cosmetics firm Weleda, which began sourcing Moldovan lavender in 2005, has described the country as "perfect" for the herb.

French fragrance company Mane is another major brand in Moldova whose subsidiary works in cultivation and production of essential oils.

Still, recent experience shows the future isn't guaranteed to be rosy.

The United States Agency for International Development said in 2017

that Moldova was still exposed to climate risks, with likely "adverse effects" for growers.

It said the industry had fluctuating economic success in one of the poorest countries to emerge from the Soviet collapse, with Moldova's market share still trailing far behind essential oil majors like Turkey and China.

Pointing to climate threats, the United Nations Development Programme said Moldovan farmers last year harvested up to 50 per cent fewer bushels than in 2019, resulting from tepid spring temperatures and a summer drought.

The report also noted that demand for essential oils dipped during the coronavirus pandemic.

But producers in Moldova aren't fazed.

Badarau says his association has registered the brand Essential Oils of Moldova to promote products abroad, and that it was aiming for certification from an international agricultural quality assurance group.

This "is of great concern to the end consumer," he says.

In the meantime, there's money to be made from visitors drawn to the picturesque fields.

Cazac, who has over 60 acres of lavender, says he charges visitors the equivalent of about \$3 to meander through his purple bushels.

On the horizon, he sees plenty of room for expansion.

"Moldova is producing much less than it could," he says.

"But first we need to prove we're producing a quality product at international standards." — **AFP**

CONSERVATION

Ohrid Lake region avoids UNESCO 'in danger' list



THE LAKE OHRID region, shared by North Macedonia and Albania, avoided being listed as an endangered world heritage site by UN's culture agency Unesco on Sunday, despite concerns about urbanisation and pollution.

Unesco's World Heritage Committee gave the two Balkan nations two more years to implement recommendations to improve the region's conservation and welcomed efforts undertaken so far.

Albania and North Macedonia should by February 2023 submit a report on the "state of conservation of the property" as well as on the progress of implementation of Unesco's earlier recommendations, the committee said.

The Ohrid lake and its surroundings have been on the world heritage site list for years due to their unique animal and plant life, prehistoric ruins and Byzantine churches.



The UN's cultural agency first added the Macedonian side of the lake to its world heritage list in 1979, expanding the entry to include the Albanian side four decades later.

But, Unesco has said earlier that it would reclassify the Lake Ohrid region status due to "inappropriate conservation, reconstruction and development" as well as "conflicting priorities" in its management system. Local environmental activists have been for years warning over the issue and sought the site be added on Unesco's 'in danger' list.

The NGO Ohrid SOS slammed Unesco's decision on Sunday, saying that a similar one was reached two years ago, which led to "two more years of concrete onto the Lake Ohrid's coast and two more years of filth into its waters."

"In 2021, you have in all likelihood decided for the same," they said in a statement read to the World Heritage Committee by their representative. — **AFP**



Halima's tale makes its way to South Korea

By Titash Chakraborty



Every year, the Korean Embassy organises cultural events to introduce Korean culture to people in the Sultanate. Before the pandemic, these would be live events where people of both cultures were invited to experience the many festivities the two cultures had to showcase. With the shift into the online world and virtual events, "we wanted to do things a little differently. Give people a chance to share their countries cultures in a way that was enjoyable right from the safety of their homes. For the year 2021, the Korean Embassy is working to organise online events to introduce Korean and Omani cultures to peoples of both countries, under the theme of 'Yesterday and Today of Korea and Oman'. The shadow play is a part of the programme." Said Ms Jeongmin Kwon, Second Secretary.

The production presents the story of Halima, a young girl fighting the odds to finally get what she truly deserves. Halima and the Snake is a tale that has been passed down through generations, slowly getting lost without any physical existence other than tales told by the older generations to the new, teaching the morals to the growing generations.

Oman's folk tales are part of a rich cultural heritage in which women played an integral role. Culture can be conceived as a set of beliefs, values and attitudes shared by society. Beliefs are, by definition, standards by which members of the community identify. The elements of culture reflect the values and virtues implied in culture and the social behaviour in favour of ethical foundations.

Children love stories. They fabricate interesting images in their minds when listening to a story. Teaching by storytelling, therefore, is one method of teaching values, ethics and citizenship. Teachers employ narration in any lesson presentation to enhance knowledge construction and knowledge processing.

Folktales in children's literature are valued for sharing indigenous and local cultures, which can easily vanish amid urbanisation and globalisation. Traditionally a primary reason for publishing folktales stemmed from ethnographic, multicultural and nation-building studies. It was noted that folktales need to be preserved as historical artefacts for their importance in enduring and employing ethical, moral and social-cultural values, as well as cultural tolerance and accepting the "Other."

"Intrigued by local folk tales and surprised by their absence in print. "Most of these stories, like the more globally known fables and fairytales, and regional tales have only survived through word of mouth. Completely absent from the world of print, these stories are slowly losing their ground and getting lost amongst modern-day cartoons and storybooks" says Debjani Debjani Bhardwaj.

Interested in finding parallels in the contemporary human condition in these epic stories. She re-searched the folklore of Oman and UAE in her Telling Tales exhibition funded by Tashkeel gallery in 2018 and showcased in Tashkeel gallery in 2018 and Stal Gallery in 2019. We see

not only innocent, benevolent characters in these folktales; evil, jealous and sadistic minds too assert themselves in the stories. The stories are interesting because of their psychological and cultural undercurrents," she added.

Although a folk tale is a verbal medium transmitted by the oral tradition of storytelling while art is a visual medium Debjani married the two and made exquisitely crafted papercut artwork interactive toys and detailed pen and ink drawings, light and shadows to make folktales more memorable and to encourage people to ask more questions, to explore more. She had designed and hand-cut the 7 different sets and has designed the 7 characters of the puppets. It was interesting for her to animate this folktale in the traditional technique of shadow puppetry. She was fascinated and inspired by the shadow puppet animation by Lotte Reiniger — a German artist, a world-famous pioneer and maker of animated films. Lotte's work belongs to the tradition of the delicate, hand-cut silhouettes and lantern-lit shadow puppets which became fashionable in Western Europe in the 18th century both as portraiture and the "Ombres Chinoises."

Along with the puppets, keeping with the verbal medium, the story of Halima was told by Sultan Qaboos University professor, Anna Fancett who wrote the screenplay. Besides being an academician, she is a traditional storyteller who has told stories around the world including at international festivals, heritage sites, schools, universities, and private businesses. She was trained by the Grampian Association of Storytellers in Scotland and started telling stories professionally in 2005. She is now a member of the Society for Storytelling (England) and the Federation of Asian Storytellers. She loves the way that listening to stories opens a gate to the past.

A production no less, Debjani formed a team for the performance. Halima was played by Aoife Beniston, Stepmother by Mahboubeh Sadaat Ataee, an academic researcher. The Prince and the Snake were brought to life by Ghazaleh Beirami an art academician and Jessica Beniston and Mahmonir Sadat Ataee played the Mermaid and Father respectively.

Although the arts in the Sultanate have been always held in high esteem in the Sultanate, Why did they choose shadow puppets? Ms Kwon explained, "We wanted the events to allow us to exchange cultural experiences of both countries. Meanwhile, the embassy wanted to offer artists of both countries to collaborate. Due to Covid-19, inviting Korean artists didn't work out and instead, we decided to involve artists in Oman in our programme. Under the theme of Yesterday and Today of Korea and Oman, the sub-theme was introducing folktales of Korea and Oman. Debjani's shadow play was the perfect way to tell stories and she also had a collection of Omani folktales. We will also work with another Omani artist to tell the Korean side of the story, our national founding story with beautiful Arabic calligraphy".

