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OMAN OBSERVER

www.omanobserver.om editor@omanobserver.om

Oman crude price at 13-month high

Oman oil price for April delivery on Wednesday reached $63.03, comprising a rise by 59 cents from the price of Tuesday, which was $62.44. The average price of Oman oil for March delivery has stabilised at $54.78, thus $4.79 per barrel higher than February delivery. Brent futures rose 1.9 per cent to $64.57 a barrel, their highest in 13 months, as crude prices were underpinned by a major supply disruption in the southern United States this week where a winter storm hit Texas. US crude futures also rose 1.9 per cent.

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FLOW OF PASSIONS AT ART EXPO

MUSCAT

HM GREETINGS TO GAMBIA PRESIDENT

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Adama Barrow of the Republic of Gambia, on the occasion of his country's Independence Anniversary. In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his sincere greetings and best wishes of good health and happiness to President Barrow, and the friendly people of Gambia further progress and prosperity. — **ONA**

OCCI'S SUPPORT TO PRIVATE SECTOR

The Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) reiterated support to the private sector companies in addressing their issues that have come up due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This is in continuation with the chamber's virtual meeting with the private sector representatives recently that focussed businesses related issues during the lockdown and possible solutions with the help of all the stakeholders.

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HM receives credentials of ambassadors

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik receives credentials of Vakhtang Jaoshvili, Ambassador of Georgia, accredited to the Sultanate.

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik received separately at Al Barakah Palace on Wednesday morning credentials of a number of ambassadors of friendly countries accredited to the Sultanate.

His Majesty received credentials of the following ambassadors: Vakhtang Jaoshvili, Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador of President Salome Zourabichvili of Georgia, accredited to the Sultanate; Orazmuhammet Charyyev, Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador of President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow of the Republic of Turkmenistan, accredited to the Sultanate; Vu Viet Dung, Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador of President Dr Nguyen Phu Trong of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, accredited to the Sultanate;

TURN TO P2

HM and Indian PM review bilateral ties

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik made a telephone call on Wednesday evening with Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India. They exchanged cordial conversations and stressed strong relations between the two friendly countries, as well as promoting them in various spheres.

During the telephonic conversation, His Majesty expressed his utmost thanks and appreciation to the leadership and people of the Republic of India for providing the Sultanate with Oxford-AstraZeneca Covid-19 vaccine, which is manufactured by Serum Institute of India.

On his turn, the Indian Prime Minister expressed his sincere thanks and appreciation for His Majesty's noble gesture, wishing His Majesty and the Omani people continuous progress and prosperity under the wise leadership of His Majesty.

— **ONA**

TRACKING DOWN THE TRAIL

Lot is heard about the Sifah-Qurayat trail because of its level of difficulty. Not a lot of people have attempted it but we had set our eyes on it because as it was one of the most beautiful coastal hikes. Sifah is one of the fishing villages with long beaches and because it's closest to Muscat, has become very famous as a camping escape. **DETAILS ON P20**

Sultanate reports five Covid deaths in a day

VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

After days of single or no Covid-19 related deaths in the country, the Ministry of Health (MoH) reported five casualties on Wednesday.

This coincided with the warning from Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Saeedi, Minister of Health, that there has been a worrying increase in the number of people in intensive care units (ICUs) of hospitals.

Twenty-seven patients were hospitalised in the past 24 hours, taking the total number of inpatients in hospitals to 147, including 46 in ICUs.

The ministry reported 277 new cases of Covid-19 on Wednesday.

VACCINES

Meanwhile, the ministry continued with vaccination of target segments with PfizerbioNTech and Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccines.

As many as 14,463 took Oxford-AstraZeneca, covering 20 per cent of the target segment for this vaccine as part of the first dose. The vaccine is being administered to people aged 65 and above.

3,000 arriving passengers in quarantine centres

A total of 110 institutional quarantine facilities have been set up so far in all governorates of the Sultanate with more than 3,000 arriving passengers received over the past two days.

The practice of institutional quarantine for all incoming passengers mandated by the Supreme Committee started on Monday. The committee decided on a 7-day mandatory institutional quarantine for all arrivals through land, sea and airports and the visitors have to bear the expenses as many did not comply with home quarantine and others violated the measures approved by the committee.

Hotline sought to report wildlife violations

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
@lakshmioman

A video on social media showing torture of a captured sand fox and burning of birds nests was disturbing for many viewers

Emotions were stirred as a videos of wildlife violations are being circulated on social media and requesting a hotline to report such actions.

A video on social media showed torture of a captured sand fox and burning of nests was disturbing for many. The Environment Authority stated that in cooperation with the Public Prosecution, the violators were identified and legal action is being taken.

According to Nazar al Fannah, Director of Environment in North Al Sharqiyah, four people were involved in the wildlife violation which saw the torture of the fox and burning of nests. "The fox is found both in North and South Al Sharqiyah. But sometimes people try to capture the wild hares, Arabian gazelles and birds for consumption and even for selling them. We are here to protect the wildlife as per the rules," said Al Fannah.

According to the director of the environment, the accused said the fox was not killed and was released in another area. "We cannot take that word without proof and it is best the court handles it," he said.

Environment Ranger at Environment Authority, Ahmed al Hajri's station is in North Al Sharqiyah and it is from there he patrols the mountains, plains and deserts to ensure safety to wildlife as well as trees during day and night. He dealt with this recent case.

TURN TO P3

WEATHER MUSCAT: Max 28°C Min 19°C SALALAH: Max 27°C Min 20°C NIZWA: Max 30°C Min 16°C

PRAYER TIMINGS SUNRISE: 06:38 FAJR: 05:22 DHUHR: 12:26 ASR: 15:43 MAGHRIB: 18:09 ISHA: 19:20

HM receives ambassadors' credentials

FROM PAGE 1

Sergei Terentiev, Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador of President Alexander Lukashenko of the Republic of Belarus, accredited to the Sultanate; Anibal Gomez-Toledo, Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador of President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador of the United Mexican States, accredited to the Sultanate;

Niclas Trouve, Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador of King Carl XVI Gustaf of Sweden, accredited to the Sultanate; Patrick Simont, Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador of Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, accredited to the Sultanate; and Luis Manuel Fernandez, Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador of President Dr Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa of the Portuguese Republic, accredited to the Sultanate.

During the side meetings with His Majesty the Sultan, the ambassadors conveyed greetings of their countries' leaders along with their best wishes of good health, happiness and long life to His Majesty the Sultan and the Omani people continuous progress and prosperity under the wise leadership of His Majesty.

They also expressed their great honour and utmost delight to present their credentials before His Majesty the Sultan. They affirmed to exert their sincere efforts to promote relations of their respective countries with the Sultanate in various domains in a manner that serves the joint interests of the Omani people and their countries' peoples.

His Majesty the Sultan welcomed the ambassadors, expressing his thanks for their leaders' greetings and best wishes. His Majesty affirmed to them that they would receive all support from His Majesty, the government and the Omani people to facilitate carrying out their duties.

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

Orazmuhammet Charyyev Ambassador of Turkmenistan

Vu Viet Dung Ambassador of Vietnam

Sergei Terentiev Ambassador of Belarus

Anibal Gomez-Toledo Ambassador of Mexico

Niclas Trouve Ambassador of Sweden

Patrick Simont Ambassador of the European Union

Luis Manuel Fernandez Ambassador of Portugal

Oman, Sri Lanka mark 40th anniversary of ties

MUSCAT: The Foreign Ministry, in cooperation with the Sri Lankan Embassy in Muscat, held a ceremony today marking the 40th anniversary of establishing diplomatic relations between the Sultanate and the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka.

The ceremony was attended by Shaikh Khalifa bin Ali al Harthy, Under-Secretary of the Foreign Ministry for Diplomatic Affairs and Omar Lebbe, Ambassador of Sri Lanka to the Sultanate.

During the ceremony, the two sides launched a commemorative logo symbolising the strong diplomatic relations between the two friendly countries. The two sides also exchanged greetings on behalf of the foreign ministers of the two countries.

An agreement on mutual exemption of visa for holders of diplomatic, special, service and official passports was signed during the ceremony. Since establishing the diplomatic relations between the Sultanate and Sri Lanka in 1981, the two countries consolidated pillars of fruitful cooperation in various political, diplomatic, economic and cultural spheres. This cooperation was characterised by mutual respect. — **ONA**

OCCI reiterates support for private sector

KABEER YOUSUF
kabeeryousef

The Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) reiterated support to the private sector companies in addressing their issues that have come up due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This is in continuation with the Chamber's virtual meeting with the private sector representatives recently that focused businesses related issues during the lockdown and possible solutions with the help of all the stakeholders.

The OCCI representatives took part in the meeting attended by ministers and officials to discuss the challenges and visions of the private sector. Sources at the OCCI said proposals were submitted to protect and support the private sector in light of the current economic scenario.

> The meeting reviewed the business situation emerging out of the Covid-19, especially with the emergence of new strains, which has directly affected the global economy. Some countries are taking more stringent measures and partial closure which has impacted the economic activities

"Mechanisms of constructive cooperation between government agencies and companies are under active consideration to support the private sector and organise the labour market," said the sources.

"Additionally, more announcements in support of the private sector companies are under way. It is important to develop and enhance the role of the private sector institutions to keep pace with the changed business scenario," said the source.

The meeting was attended by Ridha bin Juma al Saleh, Chairman of the OCCI; Sultan bin Salim bin Said al Habsi, Minister of Finance; Dr Said bin Mohammed bin Ahmed al Saqri, Minister of Economy; Qais bin Mohammed bin Moosa al Yousuf, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion and Dr Mahad bin Said bin Ali Baowain, Minister of Labour. Members of the Chamber's Board of Directors and a number of business owners also participated in the meeting.

The meeting also discussed the efforts made by the government agencies to support the private sector and empower national cadres in the light of the present economic and financial conditions.

The meeting reviewed the business situation emerging out of the Covid-19, especially with the emergence of new strains, which has directly affected the global economy. Some countries are taking more stringent measures and partial closure which has impacted the economic activities of various sectors and abilities of the private sector.

FROM PAGE 1

Hotline sought to report wildlife violations

"The white fox can be found in Bidiya, behind Jaalan, and other parts of South Al Sharqiyah Governorate. The white fox is found in the deserts and the red fox is found in the mountains," he said.

Social media users commented that there is a need to spread more awareness on nature conservation.

"Let us call on everyone to preserve wildlife so that they are safe and sustainable in their natural environment," said a tweet from the Environment Authority.

The public took to social media and requested urgent need for a hotline to report wildlife violations.

Animal owners, however, say that fox, in general, is a threat to their goats and hens. "Animals are part of their livelihood," they said.

"Persistent violations such as these can threaten wildlife and reduce wildlife diversity," tweeted Hilal al Briki and added, "it could lead to the extinction of certain species."

"Wildlife is national wealth that must be preserved and not be drawn into such irresponsible practices," he pointed out.

Environmentalist and an expert on plants of Oman, Salim al Rahbi said, "I see red fox very often close to my house in Ibra and at night they can be heard. In the desert, it is the white fox – the sand fox. Farmers do have their concerns, but that cannot be rectified by killing the wild animals. People should invest in good stockade fence instead."

"If there is a decrease in the number of wild animals, the ecological balance will be disturbed," he noted.

The Arabian red foxes live in burrows and become active at night, which is when they hunt. According to some of the twitter users, people also look out for them at night even in the mountains. Al Hajar Mountains and the mountains of Dhofar are considered ideal habitats for them but very often they are seen in cities too. Wildlife in Oman is protected. In 1999 the sand fox got featured in Oman's stamp. In 2021 it popped into the news due to wildlife violations but churned out immense support from people in general.

New job opportunities for nationals

SHAMSA AL RIYAMIYAH
MUSCAT, FEB 17

The Ministry of Labour has announced new job opportunities for nationals at the public and the private sectors mainly in the engineering, technical, legal, administrative, financial and healthcare sectors.

The new job opportunities are in the Capital Market Authority (CMA), Natural Shrimp Aquaculture, the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn), Dhofar Power Company, Vale Oman Pelletizing Company, Majan Electricity Company, LuLu Hypermarket, Aster Al Raffah Hospital, Bahwan Engineering Company, Zawawi Trading Company, Aujan Marketing Company, Airork Technical Services, Al Afia Healthcare Development and Investment Company, United Gulf Pipe Manufacturing UGPM, Arabian Industries Technical Support, Cactus Premier Drilling Services, Nesto Hypermarket, among others.

The Ministry of Labour has since the beginning of the year announced job opportunities of which 1,059 jobs were in the public sector and 1,683 in the private sector with the aim of providing employment for national job-seekers.

In addition, 32,000 jobs will be provided through replacement. The ministry issued a decision Omanizing jobs at private higher education institutions with the aim of replacing expatriate manpower with national job seekers. These include administrative positions, financial jobs, heads of departments, registration, student affairs, student services as well as all other professions related to student advisory, social counseling and professional orientation jobs.

The ministry has recently issued a decision for the nationalization of jobs in the private sector which included: financial and administrative professions in insurance companies and companies operating in insurance brokerage activities, selling, accounting, money exchange, management, and arranging goods in operating stores in malls, account auditing professions in auto agencies, all professions related to the selling of new and used vehicles and selling of spare parts for new vehicles belonging to auto agencies. According to the decision, expats with visas with these professions cannot have their visas renewed after their expiry.

India issues travel guidelines for incoming passengers

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 17

India's Ministry of Health and Family Welfare on Wednesday issued a new list of regulations for travellers who are flying from other countries to India.

All passengers must register on Air Suvidha portal after filling the self-reporting through the online portal, www.newdelhiairport.in/airsuvidha/aphoregistration at least 72 hours before the scheduled travel.

All passengers must complete e-submission of Self-Declaration Forms (SDF) at newdelhiairport.in/airsuvidha/apho-registration before check-in.

For seeking exemption from institutional quarantine, passengers must submit an exemption form through newdelhiairport.in/airsuvidha/apho-registration by submitting a negative RT-PCR test report at least 72 hours before boarding.

Passengers travelling to Mumbai would be subjected to mandatory institutional quarantine at their own cost, in the nearby hotels for seven days.

All passengers transiting to onward domestic flights in India should hold a valid negative Covid-19 test report for travel exemptions.

All international passengers arriving in Karnataka from any country shall have Covid-19 negative certificate (issued within 72 hours from the time of departure), otherwise, they will be mandatorily subjected to RT-PCR test for Covid-19 at the port of entry.

All passengers travelling to Tamil Nadu must carry a valid Negative Covid-19 test report, issued within 72 hours from the time of departure.

All passengers travelling to Tamil Nadu should carry auto-generated TN e-Pass (http://tnepass.tneag.org).

All passengers travelling to Kerala must register on the Covid-19 Jagratha portal before commencement of journey through covid19jagratha.kerala.nic.in/

CAMEL RACING

FROM THE STARTING GATES TO THE CATCHING PEN

RAY PETERSEN

High class, high quality camel racing, such as that seen at the Al Bashayer Camel Racing Festival this week is an engrossing experience, so for those of you who have never encountered the sport, here is an introduction as to how the racing takes place.

The starters for each round are checked against the start list produced by the host club, and the runners in each round then have their microchip read to verify their identity. That done, they are assembled adjacent to the starting area, and a few minutes before the start are checked for a third time and admitted to the start gates. The handlers take the camels forward and, themselves ducking under the barrier, connect their camels' headcollar to the starting barrier pegs by way of a short bungy.

When all the camels are secure, and as settled as the barrier attendants can get them, the field is ready. The starter, standing on a raised stand to the side, where he can see all the camels, starts the race by pushing his button, thereby quickly raising the barrier. As the barrier rises, the bungies release, and the camels are all free to run, at the same time. Because of their training, the encouragement of the barrier attendants, and their experience, the camels lunge forward, fighting their way clear of the pack, and the race is on!

The action and excitement doesn't end at the camel races when they lope past the Finish Line. In fact, the activity level skyrockets when the camels reach the catching pen, about 300 metres past the line. As the camels are slowing down, a horde of high-viz clad young men descend upon all those camels that have finished in prizewinning positions and take custody of them for post-race testing procedures. After those runners have been secured, all the other camel handlers charge in to catch their own charges. It looks incredibly chaotic, but incredibly, within a couple of minutes the catching pen is completely empty and ready for the next race.

A camel handler treasures his stable's 'jockey-bot,' clad in blue.

Saud bin Ali al Junaibi is the Manager of the Post-Race Retrieval Team for the Al Bashayer track, and has been so, in charge of his 22 handlers, for the last 7 years and loves his job, taking pride in his team's efficiency. "Here at Al Bashayer Camel Track, we have a vision to be the best, and the camel racing world is watching us via CCTV. Not only do we want to do the job, but to look the part, and be professional at all times," he said. Al Junaibi's staff are also responsible for retrieving the 'jockey-bots' of the first three runners for performance and mechanical testing. Finally, one member of the team is responsible for daubing the neck and head of the winner with Saffron, the yellow denoting to all that this camel is a winner!

For most of the last twenty years, camel racing has featured robot jockeys, initially scorned, but now totally embraced by the global camel racing community. Believe it or not, the first robots were built from a drill machine in a small frame! Initially though, developed mechanically by the Qatar Scientific Club, and enhanced by Swiss robotics engineers 'K-Team,' from 2003 to 2005, these robots have evolved from a basic 18 kg model, to today, being as light as 3 kg. The Jockey-bots are strapped to the camel's back, and can provide 'camel friendly,' measured and limited whip strokes, voice commands, and encouragement from their handlers, and speed information, while the most sophisticated, record physiological information such as heart rates and recovery data.

Because robots could be enhanced illegally to provide electric stimulation, the first three jockey-bots are inspected immediately after each event by a specialist team, to ensure compliance with animal welfare. The Al Bashayer inspectors; Rashid al Jabri, Saeed al Malki and Saeed al Junaibi, reflected that no issues have been identified to date in their events, confirmation surely of their post-race testing vigilance.

Camel racing is traditional, cultural and prominent in the Omani psyche, and from start to finish, from the starting gates to the catching pen, its tradition demands performance and excellence, all of which are on show at the Al Bashayer Camel Racing Festival till Saturday of this week.

— Photos by Lena Petersen

Programme to promote medical education

MUSCAT: Oman Medical Specialty Board (OMSB) on Wednesday signed cooperation programme with the World Health Organization (WHO).

The programme aims to promote fields of health, education and research in the Sultanate.

The programme, a strategic partnership between OMSB and WHO, also aims at sharing knowledge between the two parties in medical learning, conducting workshops and specialised training courses to upgrade medical learning in different OMSB medical specialties. The programme seeks to develop educational contents to cope with the international online learning.

The programme was signed by Dr Hilal bin Ali al Sabti, OMSB Executive President, and Dr John Jabbour, WHO Representative in Oman. — **ONA**

Pact to train pharmacy students

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 17

The Ministry of Health (MoH) represented by the Directorate-General for Human Resources Development, signed an agreement with the National University of Science and Technology on Wednesday to train pharmacy students of the NU.

Dr Ahmed al Abri, HRD Director General, signed the agreement on behalf of the ministry, while Dr Khalid al Balushi, College of Pharmacy's Dean signed on behalf of the NU.

The agreement permits the use of MoH health facilities to train the university's students who are enrolled in the College of Pharmacy.

The signing ceremony, held at the university headquarters in Bausher, was attended by Dr Ali al Bimani, NU Vice-Chancellor, and number of deans, in addition to some MoH officials.

This agreement is the third among similar pacts as part of the Ministry of Health facilitations for the private higher education institutions to provide the undergraduates at these institutions with the scientific and applied knowledge each in their academic fields of specialisation.

شركة الفجر العالمية ش.م.ع.ع
AL FAJAR AL ALAMIA CO. SAOG

PO BOX 78, QURUM CITY CENTRE, PC 102, SULTANATE OF OMAN

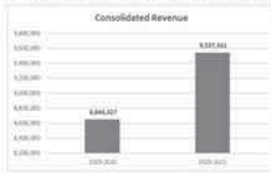
Group's Unaudited Financial Results for the six months ended 31 December 2020

Chairman's Report

On behalf of the Board of Directors, I am pleased to present to you the report on the activities, and unaudited financial results of the company for the 2nd quarter ended 31 December 2020.

1. Operating Results

The Group's total revenue for the six-months period ended 31 December 2020 was RO 9.537 million as against previous year revenue of RO. 8.646. The Parent Company made RO 0.312 Million profit after taxation compared to RO 0.003 million for the same period in the last financial year.

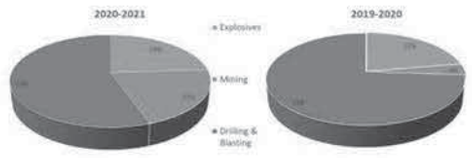


Despite COVDI-19 Pandemic situation, the Group recorded a consolidated profit after taxation of RO 0.425 million for the six-months period ended 31 December 2020 against the profit after taxation of RO 0.163 million achieved in the same period in the previous year. Net profit at Group level increased by 160% compared with the previous year due to increased revenue mainly from Explosives, Mining and UAE Drilling & Blasting.

2. Operations

The operations under all activities of the Group were carried out safely and with optimum efficiency.

Compared to the previous year, the Group revenue increased by 10% on account of better performance achieved in Explosives and Mining Segments. We could have achieved much better results but were under severe pressure from long overdue receivables that restricted us from taking up projects in order not to increase exposure in the Market. Your company will achieve better revenue in the coming period subject to improvement in COVID-19 pandemic situation impact and collection of receivables. Segment-wise revenue compared with the previous period is as follows:-



The drilling and blasting industry in Fujeirah (UAE) continue to perform well . Your company has been awarded sub-contract work for drilling and blasting works at Etihad Railway project with the JV partner.

The Management is focusing to increase the explosives sales in the UAE to an optimum level that will increase revenue and profitability of the Group.

3. Health, Safety and the Environment

Your Company is operated in a safe and efficient manner in strict compliance with the highest safety standards and in accordance with the prevailing Explosives Rules and Regulations.

No accidents or environmental incidents were reported during the period ended 31 December 2020.

Your Company was in compliance with the Code of Corporate Governance and other applicable rules and regulations during the 6 months ended 31 December 2020.

Consolidated Statement of Comprehensive Income

	GROUP		PARENT	
	31.12.2020 RO.	31.12.2019 RO.	31.12.2020 RO.	31.12.2019 RO.
Revenue	9,537,331	8,646,327	3,177,271	2,257,596
Cost of Sales	(8,106,336)	(7,272,957)	(2,337,228)	(1,610,668)
Gross Profit	1,430,995	1,373,370	840,043	646,928
Other Income	393,428	366,812	208,620	38,576
Administration & General expenses	(760,614)	(818,667)	(269,643)	(250,643)
Sales & Distribution expenses	(186,567)	(172,956)	(184,872)	(163,735)
Operating Profit	877,242	748,559	594,148	271,126
Finance charges	(449,376)	(619,619)	(249,339)	(265,423)
Profit before taxation	427,866	128,940	344,809	5,703
Taxation	(3,264)	34,334	(33,046)	(2,293)
Net Profit for the period	424,602	163,274	311,763	3,410
Other Comprehensive Income				
Profit on transfer of a subsidiary	-	-	-	-
Profit and total comprehensive income	424,602	163,274	311,763	3,410

Consolidated Statement of Financial Position

	GROUP		PARENT	
	As at 31.12.2020 RO.	As at 31.12.2019 RO.	As at 31.12.2020 RO.	As at 31.12.2019 RO.
Fixed Assets	7,214,121	6,199,570	823,376	853,905
Intangible Assets	3,702,308	126,857	1,950	2,396
Goodwill	22,228,249	22,228,249	579,717	579,717
Investment in Subsidiary	-	4,278,275	37,038,488	37,041,338
Investment in Associates	870,139	890,634	870,139	890,634
Right of Use of Assets	162,215	-	85,642	-
Deferred Tax	462,006	295,420	54,003	17,872
Current Assets	24,125,388	20,794,205	4,166,056	2,941,194
Total Assets	58,764,426	54,813,210	43,619,371	42,327,056
Non-current Liabilities	9,989,347	9,115,256	7,335,791	6,374,647
Current Liabilities	22,146,112	19,471,371	10,194,234	10,421,693
Total Liabilities	32,135,459	28,586,627	17,530,025	16,796,340
Net Assets	26,628,967	26,226,583	26,089,346	25,530,716
Sharesholders' Fund				
Share Capital	4,933,025	4,933,025	4,933,025	4,933,025
Legal Reserve	1,422,183	1,366,320	1,326,027	1,270,164
Special Reserve	579,717	579,717	579,717	579,717
Share premium account	13,550,576	13,550,576	13,550,576	13,550,576
Retained earnings	6,143,466	5,796,945	5,700,001	5,197,234
Total Shareholders' equity	26,628,967	26,226,583	26,089,346	25,530,716

4. Future Outlook

As part of the diversification plan, your company plans to invest more in the mining sector and increase the revenue base from Mining segment in the coming years. Details of the current mining projects are as follows:-

1. We are currently achieving the production of 80-90 Thousand Tons of aggregates per month and are confident of achieving targeted production levels of 125 Thousand Tons per month with certain minor design improvement to the Crusher. These improvement works are currently underway. The Management is confident that increase in production volume will increase revenue and profitability of the Group. Your company is currently exporting aggregates to Qatar and is also trying to find alternative markets like Bangladesh, Maldives and Kuwait in order to achieving better realization.
2. Ahjaar mining is currently installing 500 TPH crusher and expect to commence production by the end of first quarter 2021.
3. Your company commenced operations at the Al Awam Gypsum Quarry with 300 TPH crusher and existing infrastructure . Production will increase to 1,750 tons per annum with the implementation of additional crusher and related equipments. This operation, once fully online, will show increased profitability on the Mining segment.
4. In addition to the above, your company has plans to venture into mining other materials such as limestone, Chromite, etc as part of the diversification plan and is planning to expand its footprint in the African continent, Bangladesh, India and Nepal. We are in advanced stage of registration of JV company in Kenya for Drilling and Blasting business.

UAE explosives commercial operations started in September 2020 and supply volume increased to the optimum level. We are planning to increase volumes further with additional storage facility. Construction works for Phase 2 have commenced and are expected to complete within 12-14 months. Increase in the volume of UAE Explosives would enhance the overall revenue and profitability of the Group in the coming years.

5. Acknowledgements

The Members of the Board wish to record their gratitude to His Majesty Sultan Haithem bin Tariq bin Taimur and the Government of Oman for the successful efforts made to improve development and prosperity within the Country.

The Directors also wish to thank the Royal Oman Police, other Government bodies, our valued customers and Bankers in both the Sultanate and the UAE for their cooperation and support. The Board also appreciates the dedication and commitment of the Group's employees.

Saleem bin Qassim bin Ahmed Al Zawawi
Chairman

Note
The complete accounts shall be delivered to any shareholder or beneficiary upon request, in Arabic or English, within 7 days from receiving the application.

MUSCAT MUNICIPALITY

Advertisement No. 5/2021

Muscat Municipality invites interested companies to the following tenders:

S.N.	Tender No.	Tender Description	Document Fee	Deadline for inquires Submission	Deadline for Obtaining Tender Docs.	Deadline for Submission
1	48/2020/ MM/PA-10 - Recall-1	Production of Educational Breaks (TV and Radio)	25/-OMR	08/03/2021	29/03/2021	31/03/2021
2	66/2020/ MM/PA-16 - Recall-1	Supply of Tires	25/-OMR	08/03/2021	29/03/2021	31/03/2021
3	7/2021/ MM/PA-1	Supply and Fixing of Signboards	25/-OMR	08/03/2021	29/03/2021	31/03/2021
4	8/2021/ MM/PA-2	Hiring of Sewage Tanker (5000 GLN) for Labour Camp at Ghala	25/-OMR	08/03/2021	29/03/2021	31/03/2021
5	9/2021/ MM/PA-3	Insurance of Muscat Municipality Fleet	25/-OMR	25/02/2021	03/03/2021	07/03/2021

Specialized Companies with a valid registration certificate from Tender Board can obtain tender documents from the website through the following link: **https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om.** Starting from the date of this announcement until the end of deadline mentioned above.

Bidders shall submit their offers electronically through the link shown above accompanied with an electronic copy of a bond issued by any local bank in Oman addressed to Muscat Municipality. The details of bond (amount & validity) must be as per tender's terms and conditions in the etendering Website starting from the date of bids submission. The original copy of the bond shall be submitted as the table below:

Tender at The Serial	The box's location for Tender Bonds
1 , 3 , 4	Muscat Municipality Ruwi Building (Main Entrance), located on Capital Market Street
2 , 5	Third floor at The Directorate General of Quantity Surveying & Contracts in Muscat Municipality, Head Office, Darsait

Tender not accompanied by a tender bond will be rejected.

Note: 1. For any inquiries regarding tenders, please contact us through e-tendering website: **(https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om)**
2. For technical support of e-tendering system, please send an email to **(etenderhd@mtc.gov.om)** or call (+96824166670).

Website: www.mm.gov.om

سنيار Sinyar

إعلان مناقصات
Tenders Announcement

SINYAR is the new integrated commercial identity for Oman National Transport Company SAOC and National Ferries Company LLC leading land and Maritime public transport operator and the first mass transport operator in the Sultanate. SINYAR has more than 1,600 employees and operates more than 500 buses and 7 ferries across the country.

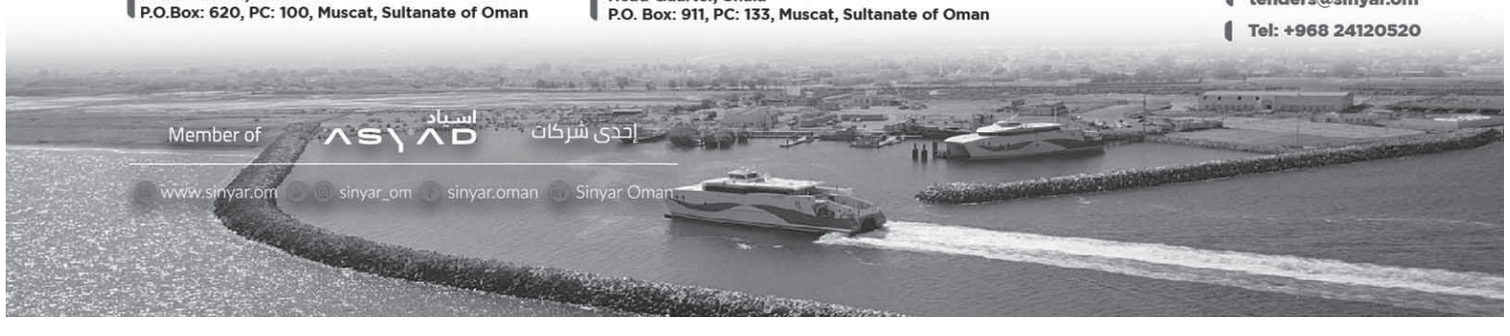
SINYAR announces the following tenders, to companies specialized in the related services.

	Tender Number T-03-2021	Tender Number RFI28012021	Tender Number T-24-2020
Tender Name	خدمات التنظيف لأسطول السفن والعوامات لشركة سنيار SINYAR Vessels and Pontoons underwater hull Cleaning Service	توفير الحلول التقنية لإدارة سلوك السائقين Fleet Safety Solution for Driver Behavior	اتفاقية توفير خدمات صيانة المراسي وأسطول السفن لشركة سنيار SLA - SINYAR Vessel Fleet & Docking Facilities Maintenance Services "Re-tender"
Project Summery	Framework Agreement to provide works of vessels underwater hull cleaning and bottom underwater survey for company fleet and pontoons.	To identify a fleet safety solution for up to 530 buses, providing a more comfortable ride for our passengers by improving the safety of our drivers and reducing accidents, while also reducing operational costs to the business.	Call-Off Agreement for specialized labourers for SINYAR Vessels and Land Facilities maintenance and repair Services.
Tender Fee	50/-	Nil	100/-
Grade & Specialty	Qualified & Specialized Companies in the Field	Qualified & Specialized Companies in the Field	Qualified & Specialized Companies in the Field
Start date for tender document distribution	Thursday, February 18, 2021	Thursday, February 18, 2021	Thursday, February 18, 2021
Last date for tender document distribution	Wednesday, March 10, 2021	Thursday, February 25, 2021	Thursday, February 25, 2021
Last date for submission	Tuesday, March 30, 2021	Sunday, March 7, 2021	Sunday, March 7, 2021

Oman National Transport Company S.A.O.C. "SINYAR"
Head Quarter, Ghala
P.O.Box: 620, PC: 100, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman

National Ferries Company L.L.C. "SINYAR"
Head Quarter, Ghala
P.O. Box: 911, PC: 133, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman

For more information, please send to:
tenders@sinyar.om
Tel: +968 24120520



Action, not words: Khamenei tells Biden

DUBAI: Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (pictured) demanded "action, not words" from the United States if it wants to revive Tehran's 2015 nuclear deal with world powers, the latest challenge to new President Joe Biden to take the first step towards a thaw.

Tehran has set a deadline of next week for Biden to begin reversing sanctions imposed by his predecessor Donald Trump, or Iran will take its biggest step yet to violate the nuclear deal — banning short-notice inspections by the UN nuclear watchdog.

"We have heard many nice words and promises which in practice have been broken and opposite actions have been taken. Words and promises are no good. This time (we want) only action from the other side, and we will also act," Khamenei said in a televised speech.

Biden aims to restore the pact under which Iran agreed to curbs on its nuclear programme in return for the lifting of sanctions, a major achievement of the Obama administration abandoned by Trump in 2018.

But while both Tehran and Washington now say they want to see the agreement revived, they are at odds over who should make the first move. Iran says the United States must first lift Trump's sanctions, while Washington says Tehran must first return to compliance with the deal, which it began violating after the sanctions were reimposed.

Iran says the United States must first lift Trump's sanctions, while Washington says Tehran must first return to compliance with the deal

Iran has accelerated its breaches of the deal's restrictions in recent months, culminating in an announcement that it will end snap inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on February 23.

"The inspections are required under a part of the agreement known as the "Additional Protocol."

European parties to the deal, which have called on Tehran not to halt the IAEA snap inspections, will discuss the issue with the United States on Thursday, the French foreign ministry said.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani played down the importance of the snap inspections, saying ending them would not be a "significant step", as Iran would still comply with obligations under a so-called Safeguards Agreement with the IAEA.

"We will end the implementation of the Additional Protocol on February 23 and what will be implemented will be based on the safeguards," Rouhani said at a televised cabinet meeting.

"The Additional Protocol is a step beyond safeguards." — **AFP**

A baker takes out bread baked in a wood-fired oven due to fuel shortages in Sanaa. – **AFP**

As fuel shortage worsens, Yemeni bakers return to firewood

SANAA: Bakers in the Yemeni capital Sanaa have swapped diesel and gas for firewood due to fuel shortages to keep making bread in a country where hunger is widespread after years of war.

Each day workers unload tonnes of wooden logs from trucks that have travelled hundreds of miles from Yemen's remote mountains to Sanaa's biggest wood market.

The growing firewood business is a stark reminder of Yemen's environmental problems which have been eclipsed by war and disease. It also puts more pressure on forests already damaged by the cultivation of the chewable stimulant qat.

"We used diesel before, then we moved to gas because of the blockade...then gas was cut off, so we moved to firewood," said Ali al-Shebeely, a bakery owner in Ansar Allah-controlled Sanaa.

The Ansar Allah movement accuses their Saudi-led coalition foe of waging economic warfare on the territories they hold by holding up commercial vessels in the Red Sea port of Hodeidah, including fuel tankers.

The group took over Sanaa and most major cities in 2014 after ousting the Saudi-backed government of Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi. The ensuing war has led to a major humanitarian crisis.

"Demand for firewood has increased sharply with fuel and gas shortages and the blockade imposed on Yemen," said Abdulrahman Yahya, a wood trader in Sanaa.

Both firewood and bread prices have risen.

Baker Tawfiq Abdulmughni said: "We used to buy a truckload for 130,000 riyals ($500). Now it's for 250,000 ($1,000)."

Under pressure from authorities, bakers have been reducing the size of bread instead of raising prices.

In al-Namri bakery in the Unesco-listed old neighbourhood of Sanaa, workers prepared famous Yemeni Kodam and Rotti breads, while feeding the wood-fired oven with oak logs. In the market, huge piles of firewood were stacked on the red brown soil, waiting for buyers. — **AFP**

Gunmen kidnap over 40 from school in Nigeria

KANO: Gunmen believed to members of a criminal gang stormed a school in central Nigeria, killing one student and kidnapping dozens of other pupils, teachers and relatives, a government official said on Wednesday.

President Muhammadu Buhari, responding to the latest abduction attack at a Nigerian school, ordered security forces to coordinate a rescue operation, his office said.

Forty-two people were seized when gunmen dressed in military uniforms raided the Government Science College (GSC) in the town of Kagara in Niger state before hauling the kidnap victims into a nearby forest.

The new tally came after initial reports from a government official and a security source that hundreds of students were snatched from the school, where they were staying in dormitories.

"They kidnapped 42 people from the school. They took away 27 students, along with three teachers. One student was killed. They also kidnapped 12 family members of the teachers," Muhammad Sani Idris, spokesman for Niger state's government, said.

President Buhari, 78, condemned the abduction and ordered security forces to coordinate an operation to rescue the students.

"The President has directed the Armed Forces and Police, to ensure immediate and safe return of all the captives," presidential spokesman Garba Shehu said. — **AFP**

Gaza Strip gets Covid-19 vaccines from Russia

Palestinian health workers unload the first arriving shipment of doses of Russia's Sputnik V vaccine for Covid-19 coronavirus disease, on the Palestinian side of the Kerem Shalom border crossing south of Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip on Wednesday. – **AFP**

GAZA CITY /Ramallah/Tel Aviv: The Gaza Strip received its first batch of vaccines against Covid-19 on Wednesday, health officials in Gaza said.

One thousand doses of the Sputnik V vaccine, donated by Russia, were transferred by the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank to the Hamas movement in Gaza, with Israel's approval, an Israeli security official confirmed.

The transfer was made via the Kerem Shalom crossing between the south-eastern Gaza Strip and Israel.

Majdi Dhair, director of health care in the Hamas-run Health Ministry said on Wednesday that the delivery came following international pressure on Israel, mainly by he World Health Organization (WHO).

Palestinian officials previously reported a delay in the transfer due to a hold-up with approval from Israel.

Medical teams, the elderly and people with chronic diseases are in the first priority group.

Abbas' Palestinian Authority (PA) launched its Covid-19 vaccination campaign earlier this month, using 2,000 doses of the Moderna vaccine delivered to the West Bank by Israel, which started its mass vaccination campaign six weeks earlier and was criticised for not including the Palestinians in the occupied territories.

Israel argued that under interim peace deals, the PA was responsible for health care in areas under its control.

The Palestinian government purchased 2 million doses of vaccines.

The West Bank, home to nearly 3 million Palestinians, has seen 1,404 Covid-19 related deaths, while the Gaza Strip, home to some 2 million Palestinians, has seen 526 Covid-19 related deaths.

— **dpa**

SHORT TAKES

KHARTOUM

Sudan recalls envoy to Ethiopia

Sudan on Wednesday recalled its ambassador to Ethiopia, the foreign ministry said, as tensions between the two countries run high over a border region and Addis Ababa's controversial Blue Nile dam.

"Sudan has recalled its ambassador to Addis Ababa for consultations over Sudanese-Ethiopian relations," foreign ministry spokesman Mansour Boulad said. He said the envoy would return to his post after the "completion of consultations",

without elaborating on the nature of the discussions.

Khartoum's move comes amid rising tensions with Addis Ababa over the Al Fashaqa border region.

MOSCOW

European Court says Russia should free Navalny

Judges at the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) have ruled that Russia should immediately release Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny. The Strasbourg-based ECHR said on Wednesday it had ruled on Feb. 16 to "indicate to the Government of Russia... to release the applicant".

Russian authorities did not immediately comment on the ruling by the international court of the Council of Europe, Europe's main human rights forum, of which Russia is a member.

But Russia passed a law last year giving its national legislation precedence over international treaties and rulings from international bodies in cases when they conflict with the Russian constitution.

BEIRUT

Syria hardliners release American

A hardline militant group running Syria's last major opposition bastion released on Wednesday an American self-described journalist accused of having ties to extremists, a war monitor said.

"The Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) alliance has released Bilal Abdul Kareem, who has American nationality," the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

HTS in August detained Abdul Kareem in Idlib province

after the self-styled journalist published an interview with a woman who accused the group of torturing her husband in detention, the Observatory said.

In brief

SEOUL

KIM'S WIFE APPEARS IN PUBLIC AFTER ONE YEAR

The wife of Kim Jong Un has made her first public appearance in more than a year, at a concert dedicated to the North Korean leader's deceased father, state media reported on Wednesday.

Pictures showed Ri Sol Ju at her husband's side during the concert in Pyongyang celebrating Kim Jong Il, who died in 2011, on his birthday on Tuesday. His birthday is celebrated as Day of the Shining Star.

The South Korean news agency Yonhap reported that Ri, who's estimated to be about 31 years old, was last seen in public at last year's celebration concert, which had taken place in January.

COLOMBO

SRI LANKA SAVES LAST LEGUME FROM AXE

Sri Lankan authorities on Wednesday agreed to save the world's only known wild specimen of a species of tree that was due to be chopped to clear the way for a four-lane expressway. The Sri Lanka Legume (Crudia zeylanica) — a flowering tree from the legume family whose pods are not known to be eaten by humans — was first classified in 1868 and last found in 1911. In 2012 it was declared extinct until the surprise discovery in 2019 of a lone tree near Colombo.

But the eight-metre (26-foot) plant was set to be felled this month to allow the construction of a motorway, sparking uproar from environmentalists as well as politicians and the country's influential Buddhist clergy.

PHNOM PENH

CAMBODIA SETS UP INTERNET FIREWALL

Cambodia's government moved to exert near-total control over the country's online life on Wednesday, setting up a national Internet gateway which activists say will stifle freedom of expression and block content via a China-style firewall.

Cambodia has seen a rapid increase in Internet use in recent years, and Premier Hun Sen's government has intensified a crackdown on online dissent.

A government spokesman dismissed concerns over the gateway (NIG), a system which will funnel all international Internet connections through a single entry point, saying it would prevent online crime and promote "national interests".

UN urges global Covid vaccine plan, warns of dangerous inequity

10 NATIONS GAVE 75% OF DOSES SO FAR — AND 130 COUNTRIES HAVE HAD NONE AT ALL

UNITED NATIONS: The United Nations on Wednesday led calls for a coordinated global effort to vaccinate against Covid-19, warning that gaping inequities in initial efforts put the whole planet at risk.

Foreign ministers met virtually for a first-ever UN Security Council session on vaccinations called by current chair Britain, which said the world had a "moral duty" to act together against the pandemic that has killed more than 2.4 million people.

Secretary-General Antonio Guterres voiced alarm that just 10 nations have administered 75 per cent of doses so far — and 130 countries have had none at all.

"The world urgently needs a global vaccination plan to bring together all those with the required power, scientific expertise and production and financial capacities," Guterres said.

He said the Group of 20 major economies was in the best position to set up a task force on financing and implementation of global vaccinations and offered full support of the United Nations.

"If the virus is allowed to spread like wildfire in the Global South, it will mutate again and again. New variants could become more transmissible, more deadly and, potentially, threaten the effectiveness of current vaccines and diagnostics," Guterres said.

"This can prolong the pandemic significantly, enabling the virus to come back to plague the Global North." Henrietta Fore, head of the UN children's agency Unicef, said: "The only way out of this pandemic for any of us is to ensure vaccinations are available for all of us."

Mexican Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard denounced the "injustice" of what he called a "deepening gap" as wealthy countries "monopolise the vaccines."

There is already a plan to help developing nations — Covax is an initiative funded by donors and governments that aims to procure two billion vaccine doses in 2021 with options for a further billion.

Covax will soon be able to start delivery of vaccines after the World Health Organization approved the shot developed by AstraZeneca, on which the initiative is almost entirely reliant in its first wave.

But aid groups say that many people still risk being left out due to a shortfall in Covax funding to arrange the administration and delicate transportation of vaccines as well as conflicts that make inoculation efforts impossible.

Britain, one of the largest contributors to Covax with a commitment of £548 million ($760 million), called for temporary ceasefires to allow vaccinations to more than 160 million people it feared were at risk in conflict zones.

"We have a moral duty to act, and a strategic necessity to come together to defeat this virus," Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said. **— AFP**

Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson (L) greets health worker Nicky Parfitt as he visits a vaccination centre at Cwmbran Stadium in Cwmbran, south Wales on Wednesday. **– AFP**

'Pfizer vaccine 95% effective against Covid-19'

TEL AVIV: An Israeli healthcare provider said on Wednesday that Pfizer Inc's Covid-19 vaccine was 95 per cent effective in a trial of 602,000 people, reinforcing the drugmaker's efficacy findings.

Israeli HMO Maccabi, which covers over a quarter of all Israelis, said in a statement that only 608 people had tested positive for Covid-19 more than a week after receiving the second of two required Pfizer doses.

The comparison was against a group of 528,000 Israelis with similar backgrounds who did not receive the vaccine, Maccabi said. Of those, 20,621 tested positive.

"By comparing the proportion of new cases between the vaccinated and yet-to-be vaccinated groups, efficacy of the vaccine in Israel is currently estimated at 95 per cent, seven or more days after receiving the second dose," Maccabi said. Most of the 608 infected vaccinees reported only mild symptoms, such as a headache or cough, it said. Some 21 required hospitalisation, seven of whom had severe symptoms. **— Reuters**

Women welcome, but don't talk: Japan's LDP

TOKYO: Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party, long seen as a homogeneous redoubt of elderly men, now wants more women at its key meetings — provided they don't do the talking.

The party, in power for most of the time since 1955, has proposed allowing five female lawmakers to join its board meetings as observers in a response to criticism that its board is dominated by men.

Two of the party's 12-member board are women, while only three of its 25-member general council are women.

The proposal comes after sexist comments from former Tokyo Olympics chief Yoshiro Mori **(pictured)**, himself an LDP member and a onetime prime minister, sparked a global outcry and renewed attention on gender disparity in the world's third-largest economy.

The move would allow more female LDP members to see how decisions were being made, said Toshihiro Nikai, the party's 82-year-old secretary general. He said he had heard criticism the party's elected board was dominated by men.

"It is important to fully understand what kind of discussions are happening," he told a news conference late on Tuesday.

"Take a look, is what it is about."

Those female observers would not be able to speak during the meetings, but could submit opinions separately to the secretariat office, the *Nikkei* newspaper reported.

Japan is ranked 121st out of 153 countries on the World Economic Forum's 2020 Global Gender Gap Index - the worst ranking gap among advanced countries - scoring poorly on women's economic participation and political empowerment.

Former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe championed a policy of "Womenomics" to increase women's participation in the economy, but activists and many ordinary women say more drastic change is still needed in the workplace, and in politics.

The problem was highlighted as Mori, the Olympics chief, resigned last week after comments that women spoke too much at meetings and caused them to go one for too long.

This week, a group of female LDP lawmakers asked Nikai to increase the ratio of women in key party posts.

— Reuters

$59 million Hong Kong flat sale sets new Asia record

HONG KONG: Hong Kong may be in its worst recession in years but its luxury property market is still thriving after a five-bedroom apartment broke records with its $59 million price tag.

While there have been more expensive properties sold in Hong Kong, the 3,378-square-foot penthouse in the affluent Mid-Levels neighbourhood set a new benchmark for price per square foot at $17,500.

The HK$ 459.4 million sale, reported by local media on Wednesday and recorded in the development's register of transactions, illustrates the stark inequality in Hong Kong.

Recent political instability coupled with the coronavirus has hammered the economy, which contracted a record of 6.1 per cent last year. Unemployment is currently at 6.6 per cent, the highest in 16 years.

But bellwether luxury property sales suggest the super rich are weathering the storm just fine.

The price paid by the unidentified buyer for the property at 21 Borrett Road — a newly built luxury apartment tower — beat the previous price per square foot record set in 2017.

And it comes a week after a consortium set a new record when it paid $935.2 million — or $6,450 per square foot — for a piece of land on The Peak, the mountain that dominates Hong Kong Island and remains the city's most exclusive neighbourhood.

Hong Kong is a city of stark contrasts — where impoverished elderly people can be seen collecting cardboard to recycle on streets filled with supercars and luxury goods stores.

The cramped financial hub regularly tops various rankings of cities with the least affordable housing in the world, with even the cheapest apartments far out of reach for most workers.

— AFP

A man walks past a construction site on a road in front of residential buildings at 21 Borrett Road (top) in Hong Kong, where a five-bedroom, 3,378 square-foot penthouse flat has sold for $59.3 million. **– AFP**

In world first, UK to infect volunteers with coronavirus

LONDON: A study which will expose volunteers to the coronavirus is to begin in Britain within a month after it gained approval from the country's clinical ethics body, the government said on Wednesday.

The study, the first of its kind in the world, will expose up to 90 volunteers between 18 and 30 years old to Covid-19 in a controlled environment, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy said.

The trial will look to establish the smallest amount of virus needed to cause infection, in order to help develop vaccines and treatments.

"While there has been very positive progress in vaccine development, we want to find the best and most effective vaccines for use over the longer term," Business Secretary Kwasi Kwarteng said.

The study will "help accelerate scientists' knowledge of how coronavirus affects people and could eventually further the rapid development of vaccines," he said.

Britain, one of the hardest-hit countries in the world by the coronavirus with more than 118,000 deaths, was also the first Western nation to begin a Covid vaccination campaign.

The country passed a vaccine milestone at the weekend with 15 million people having received their first jabs.

A couple arrive with their luggage to the Holiday Inn Hotel near Heathrow Airport in west London on Wednesday where travellers are undertaking mandatory hotel quarantine because of the coronavirus pandemic. – AFP

The government is targeting another 17 million people by the end of April, including everyone aged 50 and above, plus starting on second doses.

The study, backed by £33.6 million ($46.6 million) in government funding, will work in partnership with London's Royal Free Hospital.

Its secure clinical research facilities are specifically designed to contain the virus, the government said.

> Our eventual aim is to establish which vaccines and treatments work best in beating this disease, but we need volunteers to support us in this work
>
> **CHRIS CHIU**
> *Imperial College London*

Once the initial phase of the study has concluded, vaccines proven to be safe in clinical trials could be given to small numbers of volunteers who are then exposed to the Covid-19 virus, helping to identify the most effective vaccines.

"Our eventual aim is to establish which vaccines and treatments work best in beating this disease, but we need volunteers to support us in this work," said chief investigator Chris Chiu from Imperial College London. — **AFP**

London street signs on sale at auction

LONDON: Anglophiles, collectors and Beatles fans began a bidding battle on Wednesday as a bevy of original London street signs, including one of the iconic Abbey Road, went on sale at auction.

The world-famous street, home to the studios where The Beatles recorded most of their albums, is the standout lot in the collection of around 270 used signs being offered at the two-week online sale.

Abbey Road itself featured on the cover of the *Fab Four* album of the same name and the sign could fetch more than £5,000 ($6,930, 5,750 euros), according to auctioneer Catherine Southon, who is handling the offering.

"Who knows? The sky's the limit," she said, describing it as "the real king of the road signs".

Bidding for the unique piece of signage reached £1,110 within hours of the auction getting under way.

Other notable names going under the virtual hammer include Prince's Gate, which overlooks Hyde Park in the upmarket Knightsbridge district, and Savoy Place near the River Thames in the West End.

Pimlico Road in the SW1 postcode — a key destination for antiques dealers and interior designers — Westbourne Park Road on the Notting Hill Carnival route and Belgrave Place in swanky Belgravia are also expected to prove popular.

Westminster City Council, responsible for local governance in most of central London, is selling the collection, pledging to invest the money raised "back into services for people in our city".

— **AFP**

Trial of *Hotel Rwanda* 'hero' on terror charges gets underway

KIGALI: Paul Rusesabagina, the polarising hero of the hit movie *Hotel Rwanda*, went on trial on Wednesday in a closely-watched case in Kigali where he stands accused of serious crimes including terrorism.

Rusesabagina, whose actions during Rwanda's 1994 genocide inspired the movie, had been living abroad for years before appearing in Kigali under arrest in mysterious circumstances in October. His family and lawyers say he was abducted overseas and brought back to Rwanda illegally. They say that as he is an outspoken government critic, he cannot receive a fair trial there and that he has not been allowed to meet with international lawyers.

The former hotelier, who was played by American actor Don Cheadle in the 2004 film, has been charged with 13 offences including terrorism for starting an armed group in recent years that is accused of staging deadly attacks within Rwanda.

He appeared in court alongside 20 others facing similar charges for supporting the banned outfit, the National Liberation Front (FLN). The accused all wore face masks and the pink standard-issue uniforms assigned to defendants in Rwanda.

Rusesabagina's legal team has argued he cannot be tried in Rwanda until it is established whether his extradition was legal.

"Let me say this again as I have said before many times. I am not a Rwandan. I am Belgian. The case file on me should reflect that," Rusesabagina told the court.

He said he had been required to apply for an entry visa when visiting Rwanda on two occasions in 2003 and 2004: "This is how foreigners are treated," he added.

Paul Rusesabagina at the Supreme Court in Kigali on Wednesday where he is facing charges related to their association with Mouvement Rwandais pour le changement democratique (MRCD) and its armed wing FLN. – AFP

But lead prosecutor Bonaventure Ruberwa said Rusesabagina's parents were Rwandans and he had never renounced his citizenship.

"He was reported as a Rwandan to the Belgian authorities, also holding dual citizenship as a Belgian, so the court should disregard his claim."

Ruberwa said Belgian authorities had "fully cooperated" with their investigation and assisted by sending documents about Rusesabagina to Rwandan authorities.

The 66-year-old had already been denied bail, which he sought on account of poor health.

Rusesabagina is credited with sheltering hundreds of Rwandans inside a hotel he managed during the 1994 genocide, in which 800,000 mostly Tutsis but also moderate Hutus were slaughtered.

But in the years after Hollywood made him an international celebrity, a more complex image emerged of the staunch government critic, whose tirades against the regime of long-serving Rwandan President Paul Kagame made him an enemy of the state.

Kagame has been in power since 1994 and is accused by critics of crushing opponents and ruling through fear.

In an earlier court hearing, Rusesabagina admitted to helping form the FLN, the armed movement of an opposition party he founded in exile, but denied any roles in its crimes.

Rwandan authorities blamed the FLN for a series of deadly attacks in 2018 in Nyungwe, a forested area which is popular among tourists coming to see endangered mountain gorillas.

The attacks prompted France, Germany, Canada and Australia to advise their nationals against travel to the area. — **AFP**

SHORT TAKES

LONDON

Captain Moore received online abuse

Britain's Captain Tom Moore, the World War Two veteran who raised millions of pounds for health service workers battling the coronavirus, received online abuse in the weeks before he died this month aged 100, his daughter said on Wednesday.

Hannah Ingram-Moore said the messages were kept a secret, saying the abuse from "a vile minority" would have broken his heart. Moore struck a chord with locked-down Britain by walking around his garden with the help of a frame to raise $54.04 million for the National Health Service. While he received tens of thousands of supportive messages, there were some that mocked and abused him.

CAPE TOWN

South Africa to administer first Covid-19 vaccine

South Africa will administer its first Covid-19 vaccine on Wednesday as it inoculates health workers with the Johnson & Johnson (J&J) shot as part of a research study.

The first shot will be given at Khayelitsha District Hospital in Cape Town, the government said.

President Cyril Ramaphosa said in a statement that 80,000 J&J doses were being prepared for distribution across the country.

"It is expected that most vaccination centres will be ready from today, 17 February 2021, to begin the vaccination programme," Ramaphosa said.

LONDON

Prince Philip, 99, admitted in hospital

Prince Philip, Queen Elizabeth's 99-year-old husband, was admitted to hospital on Tuesday evening as a precautionary measure with an ailment that is not Covid-19-related.

The prince, whose official title is the Duke of Edinburgh, walked into hospital unaided after feeling unwell for a short period, a royal source said.

"The Duke's admission is a precautionary measure, on the advice of His Royal Highness's doctor, after feeling unwell," Buckingham Palace said in a statement.

He is at the King Edward VII Hospital in London where he is expected to remain for a few days of observation and rest.

Embassies and their role in investment promotion...

Ali Al Matani
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During the last few years, I wrote several times about the role Oman's embassies are playing in the promotion of investment, introduction of the economic environment, rules and regulations of the country in various capitals around the world. These embassies represented the economic strength of the country. They also work as a link between the investors and businessmen around the world and the country.

The issue is that why there should not be optimum utilisation of these embassies to attract more investments, rather than limiting them to their traditional roles. It was heartening that the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion held virtual meetings with the representatives of the Sultanate in various Asian countries to apprise them of the investment environment in the country, available opportunities, as well as rules and regulations.

Currently there is a new approach that there should be more focus on investment promotion and utilisation of all means, including diplomatic apparatus. This is because the investment is also one of the means of international relations and its development and consolidation.

It is a matter of satisfaction that the work has been done in this area. Embassies are now very helpful in bringing foreign investment to the country. The commerce departments in all these embassies should be made more active and they should be provided by trained cadre who can help in achievement of the objective of bringing more and more investment in the country.

IT WAS HEARTENING THAT VIRTUAL MEETINGS WERE WITH THE REPRESENTATIVES OF THE SULTANATE IN VARIOUS ASIAN COUNTRIES

There is no doubt that the Sultanate has good political and diplomatic relations with all countries of the world. There is a sense of mutual trust and confidence between our country and the world.

This qualifies Oman to have a significant share from the global investments. These embassies can help the country in pursuit of this goal. This is required under Oman Vision 2040 which also talks about the vital role of the embassies in attracting foreign investment.

With the help of the Foreign Ministry, the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion has removed all obstacles in the way of smooth and swift investments in the country. For the purpose, it has made several laws, regulations and frameworks so that there are no hurdles in addressing the aspirations of the investors. There are also relaxations and waiver of taxes and duties. All governorates in the Sultanate are ready with their infrastructure to attract more and more investments.

Now, there is a realisation that conferences, meetings, exhibitions and fairs are not enough for investment promotion. Their importance is not being denied. But a permanent set up at embassies is also very important to build upon the achievements made by the investment-related events. Such establishments open wider horizons, encourage investors and create more confidence and trust among them.

The warm relations between embassies and investors and their friendship are important for bringing investment. Psychological factors are very important in bringing investments. When an investor feels satisfied and confident that he will be able to move his or her investment to the country, then s/he will come and invest.

The commerce attachés of the European, American and other embassies in the Sultanate organise elegant meetings with businessmen. This is the same role we want our embassies to play. Some of our embassies, including that in the Netherlands, have already started playing this role. It held a visual meeting to introduce investment opportunities in the agriculture sector of the Sultanate. More such efforts are required by other embassies.

It is a reality that in the process there are lot of challenges, particularly in the present circumstances. The coronavirus pandemic has also aggravated the situation. But there is no way out except increased efforts to achieve the goal. This is the key for success.

EXEMPLARY LEADERSHIP

Diplomatic strategy is the key to international politics...

Saadoun bin Hussein al Hamdani
saadon60@gmail.com

Crises are defined according to different countries' viewpoints and ideologies.

A crisis may be specific to one country with regional implications like the economic crisis in Greece, which posed serious threat to the Euro Zone or the Kuwait liberation war of 1991. Crises may be outside the control of the state due to natural disasters such as volcanoes and hurricanes.

Covid-19 is a global crisis of epic proportions which has engulfed all countries of the world without warning.

The crisis is defined as a period of tension and a turning point from one situation to another, and it needs a quick decision to stop this decline or collapse. The resolution of crises demands wise leadership and exemplary leaders.

Diplomatic strategy is the key to international politics. It involves goals set by the head of a state or senior officials to get results of a specific nature. They put in place tools to achieve such strategy.

Diplomatic strategy depends mainly on national interests and how to strengthen and sustain the internal fabric of the country, and develop it in the best way possible through its tools -- diplomatic missions of various degrees.

DIPLOMATIC STRATEGY DEPENDS MAINLY ON NATIONAL INTERESTS AND HOW TO STRENGTHEN AND SUSTAIN THE INTERNAL FABRIC OF THE COUNTRY AND DEVELOP IT IN THE BEST WAY

Recently, the Sultanate received 100,000 doses of Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine from India where it was produced by Serum Institute. Oman's Minister of Health thanked the Government of India for delivering the shots free of cost to help the country's vaccination drive. The vaccines underwent clinical trials to ensure they were safe to use on humans.

The deep historical ties between the Sultanate and India span thousands of years. Late Sultan Qaboos laid the foundations of a solid diplomatic strategy between. The two countries' foreign policies are based on quiet diplomacy and non-interference in sovereign matters of others. The first Indian ambassador to the Sultanate arrived in 1973 and the Sultanate opened an embassy in New Delhi in 1972.

It is well known that India is a country with an ancient history and civilization dating back to thousands of years. It is an advanced industrial country in all fields. There have been flourishing old trade and cultural relations hundreds of years ago linking the two friendly peoples long before international protocols and frameworks of diplomatic systems. In terms of diplomacy and politics, the Sultanate's government supported India's permanent membership in the UN Security Council.

Upon sworn in as the new leader of the Sultanate one year ago, His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik vowed to uphold the foreign policy of his predecessor late Sultan Qaboos.

The vaccines from India did not come out of a vacuum, but it is part of the distinguished bilateral partnership and friendship between both the countries spanning for centuries.

The Omani people and the government will record this generous gesture of India in golden letters. The gesture will remain in history as an example of love and respect between the two friendly countries and peoples. It also reflects the keenness of both countries to stand by and support each other to face challenges.

I hope that this initiative will be an example to be followed in resolving international crises. I hope this will deter unfriendly countries to stop weaving conspiracies here and there to serve causes that will harm peace and stability.

(The writer is a former diplomat)

WRITE FOR US

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DRAGHI'S BOX

A pandemic, a recession and a fragile coalition

ALEXANDRIA SAGE & ALVISE ARMELLINI

Italy's new Prime Minister Mario Draghi, installed in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic and a devastating recession, unveiled on Wednesday a strategy based on speedier vaccinations, structural reforms, and appeals to national unity.

Here are the main challenges the 73-year-old economist, known as "Super Mario" for helping save the euro as president of the European Central Bank (ECB), faces in his new mission.

Italy is currently in its worst recession since World War II, brought about by the pandemic. But growth was already moribund before the coronavirus crisis, exacerbated by the highest debt-to-GDP ratio in the euro zone after Greece.

"Today we have, as did the governments of the immediate post-war period, the possibility or rather the responsibility to start a new reconstruction," Draghi said in the Senate.

Last year, Italy's gross domestic product fell by a staggering 8.9 per cent, while almost 450,000 people lost their jobs, with disproportionately high numbers among women, young people and the self-employed.

To turn the economy around, Draghi can count on some 210 billion euros ($253 billion) in grants and loans from the European Union's virus recovery fund, but in return, he has to commit to an ambitious reform plan, subject to Brussels' approval.

> **Today we have, as did the governments of the immediate post-war period, the possibility or rather the responsibility to start a new reconstruction**
> **MARIO DRAGHI**
> *Prime Minister*

In parliament, he promised three flagship reforms on taxation, public administration and justice, as well as focus on education, promoting female employment and fighting climate change.

He signalled that the economy ministry — led by a technocrat ally — would have overall control of Italy's national reform plan, which needs to be submitted to the European Commission by the end of April.

The issue of control is particularly sensitive. Giuseppe Conte's previous government collapsed in a dispute over the issue, with conflicting demands for immediate stimulus measures and long-term structural reforms.

Draghi promised welfare support to "all workers" affected by the crisis, starting with those who "have paid the highest price", but he said "it would be a mistake" to extend subsidies across the board.

Draghi said fighting the coronavirus pandemic "with all means" would be his priority and promised a change of gear in a vaccination campaign that has struggled because of Europe-wide supply problems. — **AFP**

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sport

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Seeb to take on Dhofar, Al Suwaiq face Al Ittihad

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, FEB 17

Defending champions Dhofar will face Seeb in a blockbuster semifinal first leg of the 2020-21 His Majesty's Cup Football Championship. Three-time winners Al Suwaiq will take on Al Ittihad, who are chasing their first title, in the other semifinal first leg match.

The last-four stage draw of the prestigious championship was held on Wednesday at the Oman Football Association (OFA) headquarters in presence of Fahad bin Abdullah al Raisi, Secretary-General and Executive Director at OFA, Faisal al Tamimi, General Director of Qatar National Bank, OFA officials and the representatives of the qualified clubs.

The first leg of the semifinals will be held on February 26 as Seeb will host Dhofar at Seeb Stadium and Al Ittihad will take on Al Suwaiq at Al Saada Sports Complex.

In the return-leg matches, which will take place on March 2, Dhofar will meet Seeb at the Al Saada Sports Complex while al Suwaiq will face Al Ittihad at Al Rustaq Sports Complex.

Chairman of Dhofar club, Shaikh Ali bin Ahmed al Rawas, commented post the draw ceremony event and said the fixtures of the semifinals were balanced and expected. "My expectation was to meet Seeb in the stage and it came right. We have full confidence in our players to proceed further with the positive results and manage to defend the title," he said.

TOUGH WIN

Earlier on Tuesday, Al Suwaiq sailed into the semis after registering a tough win over unfancied Ibri in penalty shoot-out at the Al Rustaq Sports Complex.

The return match ended 1-0 in the regulation time and it is the same result which was completed in the first-leg match for the hosts at Ibri Sports Complex on February 5. Khalil al Alawi scored the all-important goal for the hosts in the dying minutes to revive Al Suwaiq chances in the top domestic competition and spoiled Ibri fans joy.

Later, both teams moved to the extra time and then to the penalty shoot-out in which Al Suwaiq won 6-5. In the penalties, Filip, Abdullah al Saadi, Esam al Subhi, Khalil al Alawi, Yousef al Malki and goalkeeper Mazin al Kasbi — all scored for Al Suwaiq.

For Ibri, Silva, Yaqoob al Ghafri, Ilyas, Mohammed al Battashi and Emerson converted the penalties. Ahmed al Mujaini's shot was saved by former national goalkeeper Mazin al Kasbi to put his team through to the semifinals.

AL ITTIHAD PREVAIL

In the late match on Tuesday, Al Ittihad knocked out Al Nahda with a 2-0 win at Al Saada Sports Complex. The Dhofar-based team benefited from the first-leg match in which they scored an away goal in their 2-1 defeat to Al Nahda at the Al Buraimi Sports Complex on February 6.

In the return match, Abdulmajeed Shimas and Junior scored the winning goals for the hosts.

Seeb and Dhofar have sealed their slots in the semifinals round as the defending champions edged Al Musannah 3-0 in the quarterfinal second leg at Al Rustaq Sports Complex on Monday night while the first match ended for Salalah giants 2-0 at Al Saada Sports Complex on February 6.

Seeb thrashed Saham 3-0 in the return match after the home match saw a 1-0 win for hosts at Seeb Stadium on February 5.

Royal win fires up Al Bashayer Camel Racing Festival

Al Dabi strides to an impressive Royal victory at the Al Bashayer Camel Racing Festival.

RAY PETERSEN
MUSCAT, FEB 17

A Royal victory, and locally trained camels performing well were the features of day three of the Al Bashayer Camel Racing Festival on Wednesday. None was more popular than that prepared by the Al Bashayer-based handler Abdullah bin Tawarish al Wahibi, whose Al Dabi, owned by His Highness Sayyid Asaad bin Tarik al Said, triumphed in the first of the afternoon rounds.

Al Dabi is one of more than 30 prepared by the trainer, and this victory follows a recent win in Al Fleej, in Al Batinah, though he had also raced well in the UAE.

"The expectations were high for this race," Al Wahibi told Ahmed al Junaibi, "and his preparation has been very much aimed at this festival, and I would dedicate the win to His Highness, and thank him for his support."

He added that, "Al Dabi's future racing will be focused on the bigger races and bigger events across the GCC region, but first comes the Golden Sword Final, and we now have a lot of confidence in our chances."

It seemed all the fans were cheering for the first win of the festival for the Al Bashayer Corps on their home track, and to see a Royal family victory. The popular local trainer 'doubled up' in the fourth round, when Salalah also won, albeit in a slower time.

"We also have other starters across the last two days of the festival, so it is an exciting time," said the trainer. Certainly, it seems the excitement level has stepped up a notch, and the local performances. Racing on Wednesday featured the Four-Year-Olds in the last of the juvenile/restricted age racedays of the festival, as Thursday features the 'war horses' of regional camel racing, the Five-Year-Olds and over.

AL BASHAYER CAMEL RACING FESTIVAL DAY THREE RESULTS

FOUR-YEAR-OLDS MORNING ROUND

Round 1: Al Shahinya, Owner: Adnan bin Suliman al Rashdi, Time: 9:37 min

Round 2: Mauwd, Owner: Hamed bin Mubarak al Amri, Time: 9:41 min

Round 3: Seham, Owner: Abdullah bin Gadheer al Wahibi, Time: 9:37 min

Round 4: El Nader, Owner: Suliman bin Said al Malki, Time: 9:40 min

Round 5: Al Shahinia, Owner: Hamed bin Ali al Hedawii, Time: 9:51 min

Round 6: Hams, Owner: Bader bin Khalifa al Nassri, Time: 9:39 min

Round 7: Mauwd, Owner: Mohammed bin Ali al Darei, Time: 9:38 min

FOUR-YEAR-OLDS AFTERNOON ROUND

Round 1: Al Dabi, Trainer: Abdullah bin Tawarish al Wahibi, Time: 9:07

Round 2: Mahba, Trainer: Faraj bin Mohammed al Dahari, Time: 9:27

Round 3: Tawaiq, Trainer: Mosa bin Abdulaziz al Mosa, Time: 9:20

Round 4: Salalah, Trainer: Abdullah bin Tawarish al Wahibi, Time: 9:26

In brief

HONG KONG

ASIA'S WORLD CUP QUALIFIERS SET TO BE POSTPONED UNTIL JUNE

The remaining matches in the second phase of Asia's qualifying campaign for the 2022 World Cup finals are set to be postponed until June due to the continuing impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The UAE Football Association announced on Wednesday that their qualifiers against Malaysia and Indonesia — scheduled for March 25 and 30 — would now be played in June on a centralised basis as part of a rescheduling of the competition.

With travel restrictions and strict quarantine regulations making travel to many Asian nations difficult, the AFC said they are still in discussions with the member associations.

LONDON

BALE 'TOWARDS END OF CAREER', ADMITS AGENT

Gareth Bale is not playing regularly at Tottenham because he is coming towards the end of his medal-strewn career, his agent Jonathan Barnett said on Wednesday.

Jose Mourinho's team have been involved in 22 Premier League matches following Bale's return to the north London club but the 31-year-old has started just two of those.

"He's towards the end of his career. Really, you have to ask Mourinho that," Barnett replied to a question at a private event.

Barnett defended Bale's record in the game — the Welshman has won two La Liga titles and four Champions Leagues at Real Madrid.

MUNICH

BAYERN'S ALABA TO LEAVE AFTER 13 YEARS

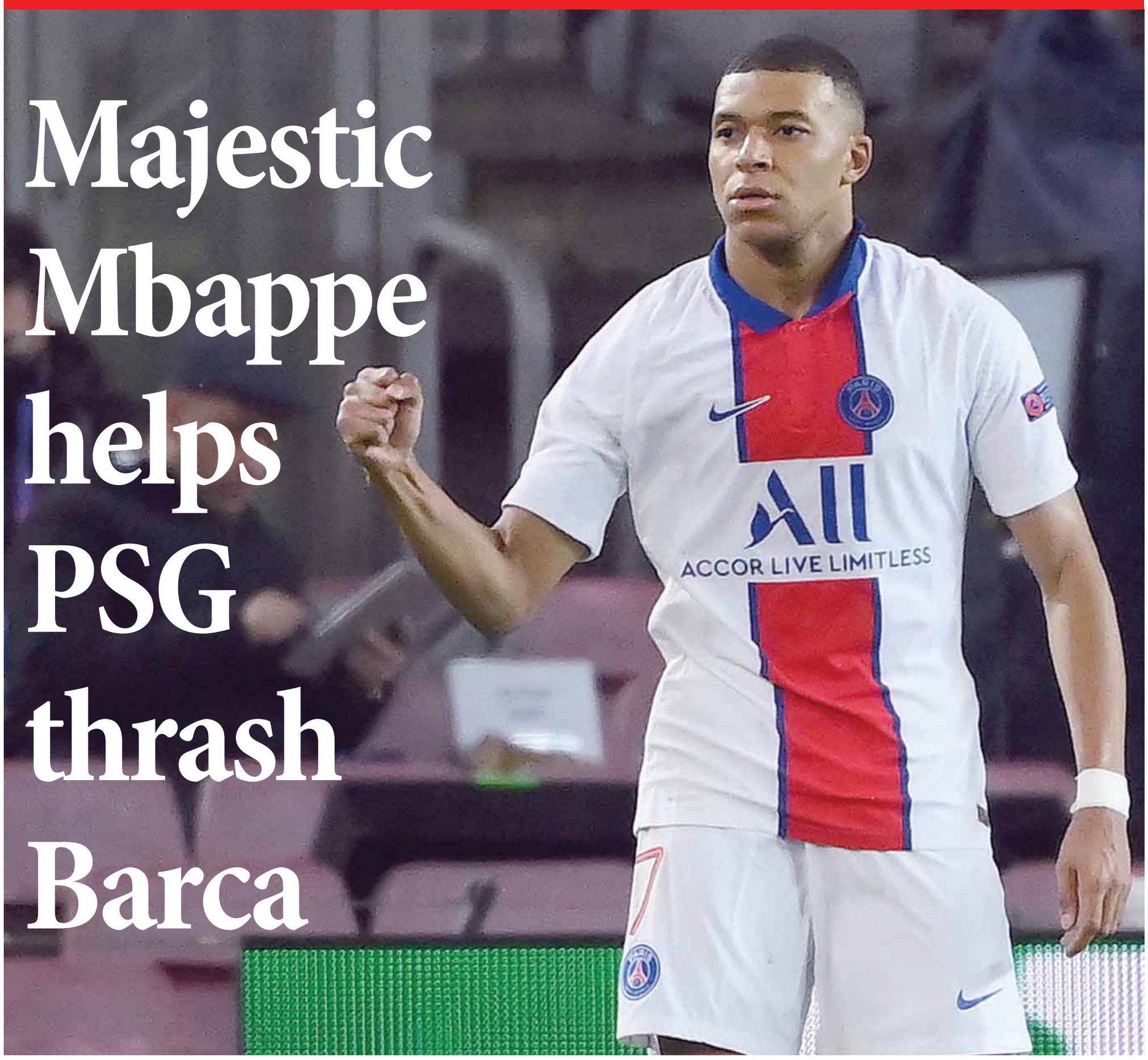
Bayern Munich defender David Alaba said on Tuesday that he will leave the club at the end of the season, parting ways after 13 years following the two sides' recent failure to agree on a new deal.

"I decided after this season (I want) to do something new, to leave the club," the 28-year-old told a news conference a day after their 3-3 draw against Arminia Bielefeld in the Bundesliga. "It was no easy decision because I have been here for 13 years and this club is close to my heart," he said, adding that he had not decided where he would go next.

The Austria international has been linked with several English Premier League clubs, while Real Madrid have also reportedly shown interest.

LIVERPOOL ON COURSE FOR QUARTERS AFTER BEATING LEIPZIG

Majestic Mbappe helps PSG thrash Barca



BERLIN: A sensational hat-trick from Kylian Mbappe helped Paris Saint-Germain hammer Barcelona 4-1 at the Camp Nou on Tuesday while Liverpool are also on course for the quarterfinals of the Champions League having won 2-0 away to RB Leipzig.

Barca hosted PSG behind closed doors while Leipzig welcomed Liverpool to Budapest as Germany is currently not allowing non-citizens/residents to enter the country from the UK.

Lionel Messi's penalty gave Barcelona the lead but Mbappe struck either side of half-time, Moise Kean added another and Mbappe completed his hat-trick with a superb finish as PSG took control of the tie that is a repeat of the sensational encounter at this stage in 2017.

On that occasion, Barcelona overturned a 4-0 first leg deficit 6-1 at home and must now launch a similar comeback attempt — this time in Paris on March 10.

That is when six-time champions Liverpool, last winners in 2019, will expect to finish the job against Leipzig at Anfield. Second-half goals from Mohamed Salah and Sadio Mane earned them a deserved win in the duel between German bosses Juergen Klopp and Julian Nagelsmann in the Hungarian capital.

Neymar was influential in turning the tie with PSG in Barcelona's favour four years ago but the Brazilian star missed the match with his former club due to injury though PSG — with 22-year-old Mbappe almost unplayable — scarcely missed him.

Mbappe's quick-feet in the box after a nice flick from Marco Verrati levelled the match and his clinical finish when Marc-Andre ter Stegen could only parry a 65th minute cross put PSG in front.

Ter Stegen had previously denied Mbappe on several occasions and did so again before Kean was given space at a free-kick to head home unchallenged with 20 minutes left. Barca tried to rally but left themselves exposed and Mbappe curled into the top corner after Julian Draxler raced clear on the counter to cap a glorious night for Maurico Pochettino.

QUESTION OF CONTINUITY

"It's a question of continuity," said Mbappe. "The coach has done a great job since he joined. But he's continued the work of (Thomas) Tuchel who started an extraordinary job, with the final (last season). "We're not yet in peak form, even if tonight was very good, but we'll continue to improve so we can repeat this type of match." — **dpa**

UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE RESULTS

ON TUESDAY
Last 16, first legs
At Barcelona, Spain
Barcelona (ESP) 1 (Messi 27-pen) Paris Saint-Germain (FRA) 4 (Mbappe 32, 65, 85, Kean 70)
At Budapest
RB Leipzig (GER) 0 Liverpool (ENG) 2 (Salah 53, Mane 58)

South Africa's Faf du Plessis retires from Tests

JOHANNESBURG: Faf du Plessis, the last survivor of South African cricket's golden age in Test cricket, announced on Wednesday that he had retired from Test matches with immediate effect.

Du Plessis, 36, said in a statement on his Instagram account that he would continue to be available for one-day and Twenty20 internationals. "The next two years are ICC T20 World Cup years. Because of this, my focus is shifting to this format and I want to play as much of it as possible around the world so that I can be the best player I can possibly be," he said.

"I strongly believe that I have a lot to offer to the Proteas in this format."

Du Plessis said he would be having discussions about his future with Cricket South Africa in the next few months.

"My heart is clear and the time is right to walk into a new chapter," he said.

"It has been an honour to play for my country in all the formats of the game, but the time has come for me to retire from Test cricket."

He captained South Africa in 36 of his 69 Test matches, winning 18 and losing 15.

South Africa were already ranked as the number one team in Test cricket when Du Plessis made his debut in the second Test against Australia in Adelaide in 2012.

He was playing alongside some of South Africa's greatest players, including Graeme Smith, Hashim Amla, Jacques Kallis, AB de Villiers, Dale Steyn and Morne Morkel.

But it was his man-of-the-match performance that set up a second successive series win in Australia for the Proteas.

After making 78 in the first innings, Du Plessis batted for more than seven-and-a-half hours and faced 376 balls in the second innings, scoring 110 not out and enabling South Africa to escape with a draw. He made another half-century as South Africa won the next Test in Perth to clinch the series.

Du Plessis went on to score 4,163 runs in Test matches at an average of 40.02.

He hit ten centuries and made his highest score of 199 against Sri Lanka on his home ground at Centurion Park last December.

TWENTY20 FOCUS

He succeeded AB de Villiers as Test captain in 2016, initially on a temporary basis, and enjoyed significant early success, leading South Africa to victory in seven of his first eight series in charge, including away and home series against Australia.

With a team weakened by retirements and natural attrition, the latter stages of his captaincy were less successful as South Africa lost away and at home against Sri Lanka and were well beaten in a home series against England.

He resigned as captain across all formats last February following the England series, but continued to be available as a player.

Despite stating his determination to be part of the next two Twenty20 World Cups, in India this year and Australia next year, Du Plessis will not be playing in a domestic Twenty20 tournament starting on Friday.

But his statement indicated that he will be seeking to play in some of the major Twenty20 leagues in the world, including the Pakistan Super League this month and the Indian Premier League in April. — **AFP**

Tsitsipas ends Nadal record bid

MUCHOVA KNOCKS OUT BARTY TO DASH AUSSIE HOPES

Greece's Stefanos Tsitsipas serves. – **Reuters**

Czech Republic's Karolina Muchova in action at Australian Open. – **Reuters**

MELBOURNE: Stefanos Tsitsipas ended Rafael Nadal's Grand Slam record bid in five gripping sets on Wednesday as home hopes were dashed when top-ranked Ashleigh Barty was knocked out in the Australian Open quarterfinals.

Greece's Tsitsipas looked down and out after losing the first two sets, but after edging the third he was a different player, taking the upper hand over a subdued Nadal to win 3-6, 2-6, 7-6 (7/4), 6-4, 7-5.

Tsitsipas, 22, stunned Roger Federer in the 2019 last 16 before being halted by Nadal in the semis, but he turned the tables to set up a last-four meeting with Russia's Daniil Medvedev.

Underlining the scale of the upset, it was only the second time Nadal has lost a Grand Slam five-setter from two sets to love after his defeat to Fabio Fognini at the 2015 US Open. "I don't know what happened after the third set — I fly like a little bird, everything was working for me," the fifth seed said.

"The emotions at the end were indescribable, they were something else."

The defeat will sting for Nadal, who was drawing closer to a 21st major title and sole ownership of the all-time men's record he currently shares with the injury-sidelined Federer. Tsitsipas's reward is a meeting on Friday with Medvedev, his third Grand Slam semi, with top-ranked Novak Djokovic or Russian qualifier Aslan Karatsev waiting in Sunday's final.

Local fans will no longer be able to see Barty, the world number one whose dreams of ending Australia's 43-year wait for a domestic winner were dashed by the unlikely figure of Karolina Muchova.

'MY HEAD WAS SPINNING'

In hot conditions, Barty raced through the first set but Muchova dominated after a medical timeout for dizziness, winning 1-6, 6-3, 6-2 to reach her first Grand Slam semifinal as the Australian crumbled.

"I was a bit lost on the court and my head was spinning so I took a break," said Muchova, while Barty, a semifinalist last year, called her latest near-miss "heartbreaking".

But the top seed added: "Will it deter me, will it ruin the fact we've had a really successful start to our season? Absolutely not."

Muchova will face Jennifer Brady in the last four after the 22nd seed beat her fellow American and close friend Jessica Pegula 4-6, 6-2, 6-1.

Brady's achievement is notable, as she is the last woman standing among those who served a hard 14-day quarantine after arriving in Australia — unlike other players, who were allowed out of their hotels for five hours a day to train.

"I felt the pressure from her. She's such an aggressive player," said Brady. — **AFP**

AUSTRALIAN OPEN RESULTS

MEN (QUARTERFINALS)
Daniil Medvedev (RUS x4) bt Andrey Rublev (RUS x7) 7-5, 6-3, 6-2; Stefanos Tsitsipas (GRE x5) bt Rafael Nadal (ESP x2) 3-6, 2-6, 7-6 (7/4), 6-4, 7-5

WOMEN (QUARTERFINALS)
Karolina Muchova (CZE x25) bt Ashleigh Barty (AUS x1) 1-6, 6-3, 6-2; Jennifer Brady (USA x22) bt Jessica Pegula (USA) 4-6, 6-2, 6-1

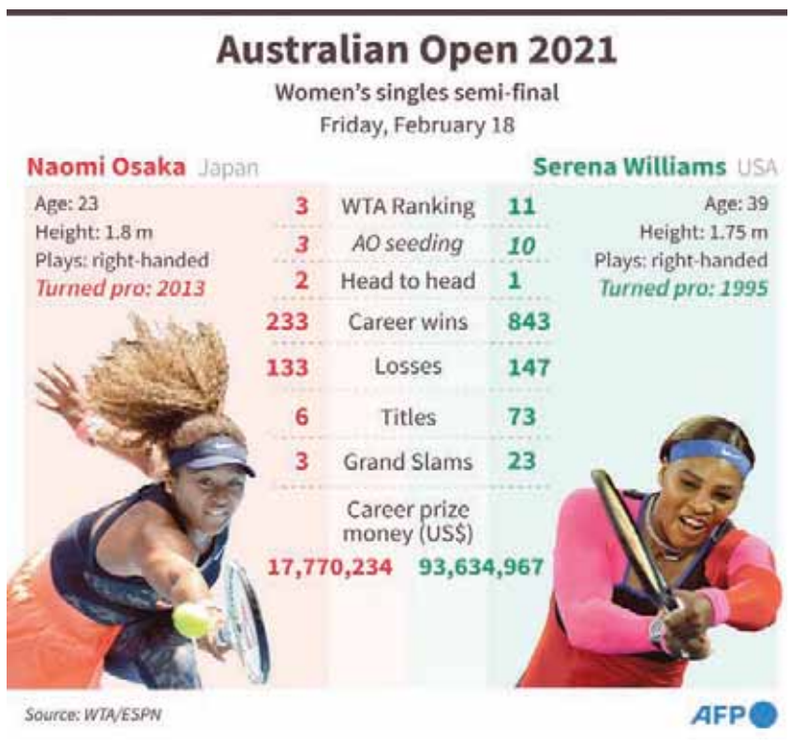
Record-chasing Serena wary of 'cool cat' Osaka

MELBOURNE: Serena Williams and Naomi Osaka have long moved on from their tempestuous 2018 US Open title match but that will do nothing to dampen the suspense ahead of their blockbuster Australian Open semifinal on Thursday.

Williams was handed three code violations, the last of which resulted in a game penalty, in a straight sets defeat to Osaka, who was booed throughout the final game and trophy ceremony by an angry Flushing Meadows crowd.

The American, who later wrote an apology letter to Osaka, is bidding for a record-equalling 24th Grand Slam title and said she was looking forward to facing the Japanese third seed again.

> **Well, I think we both have had closure, and we have reached out to each other. I have definitely reached out. I think she's a great competitor and a cool cat.**
>
> **SERENA WILLIAMS**



"Well, I think we both have had closure, and we have reached out to each other. I have definitely reached out," the 39-year-old said.

"I think she's a great competitor and a cool cat."

World number three Osaka has won three Grand Slams and last year surpassed her childhood idol Williams as the world's highest paid female athlete, according to Forbes.

The 23-year-old has won two of her three previous Tour encounters with Williams, although the American triumphed the last time they met in a WTA event in Toronto in 2019.

When asked if she would be watching film of Williams to prepare herself for the match, Osaka said she never stops watching her.

"For me, I grew up watching Serena... It's just more of a habit than anything," she added. "But I feel like everyone in the tournament watches her."

In the other semifinal, surprise package Karolina Muchova will take on US Open semifinalist Jennifer Brady, with both players looking to earn a spot in their maiden major final.

"I think I will have to bring my A-game to play with (Brady) because she is playing amazing matches," said Muchova, who has won all eight of her eight matches this season.

"I will try to play my best," the Czech player said. — **Reuters**

business

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CMA publishes draft of Dhamani contract for public consultation

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 17

The Capital Market Authority (CMA), which also regulates the insurance sector, has published for consultation the draft standard contract regulating the relationship between insurance companies, health service providers and third party health insurance administrators on its website.

It aims to elicit feedback from the various stakeholders, as well as other experts, ahead of the full-fledged roll-out of the Mandatory Health Insurance Scheme, called 'Dhamani'.

"CMA endeavours to regulate the relationship between the parties of the health insurance transaction to limit the differences and to speed and standardise the operations for better financial flows and enhanced services for the benefit of all the stakeholders in addition to rendering quality service through specific terms and conditions related to operational aspects," said the Authority in a statement.

The contract wording focuses on several areas covering the rights of the insured, defining the relationship between the parties to ease payment for the covered service and to urge the service providers to render best quality service as per the specified standards and practices and to ensure sound payment beside highlighting the procedures to be followed in the events of fraud or misuse as well as termination and dispute resolution clauses, it stated.

The general public can submit their opinions on the draft standard contract by email at: med.insurance@cma.gov.om

Oman Broadband to implement 'Fibre Over Electric Poles' project

Cost optimisation: A number of contractors are bidding for the company's contract to design and install overhead fibre optic cables on electricity poles in designated areas of the Sultanate

CONRAD PRABHU
@conradprabhu

In a first for Oman's telecom sector, wholly government-owned Oman Broadband Company, which is playing a pivotal role in implementing the National Broadband Strategy, plans to install fibre optic cable (FOC) across existing power lines, as a cost-competitive alternative to trench-laid cables.

A number of contractors are bidding for the company's contract to design and install overhead fibre optic cables on electricity poles in designated areas of the Sultanate.

The objective of the 'Fibre Over Electricity Poles' project is to "utilise the existing electricity poles to lay Oman Broadband's FOC (fibre optic cable) for providing broadband services by backhauling mobile sites," said the state-owned telecom infrastructure services provider.

New poles may be installed where required and new trenches dug depending upon conditions at site, it noted.

> The objective of the Fibre Over Electricity Poles project is to 'utilise the existing electricity poles to lay Oman Broadband's FOC (fibre optic cable) for providing broadband services by backhauling mobile sites'

As many as 37 mobile sites currently operated by the company will be covered through the 'Fibre Over Electricity Poles' project, utilising existing electricity poles and potentially constructing new ones in various governorates.

Trenching for a distance of around 360 kilometres will be required as well. Oman Broadband — part of Oman ICT Group — has already been collaborating with utilities of Nama Group (formerly The Electricity Holding Company) to benefit from the massive electricity networks and associated optical fibre cables already installed by the latter.

Last October, Oman Broadband signed a strategic partnership agreement with Nama Group to utilise the latter's nationwide fibre optic infrastructure that currently extends around 74,000 kilometres across the length and breadth of the Sultanate.

Utilisation of Nama Group's fibre optic network will contribute towards avoiding double investments on similar projects as well as positively increase the pace of projects and achieves better financial returns and cost cutting, said Oman Broadband.

Oman Broadband is currently focused on the roll-out of a passive fibre network infrastructure that seeks to provide equal and open access to telecommunication service providers, on a wholesale basis, and owners and operators of private networks, on a retail basis, thereby enabling end users to efficiently leverage high speed fibre in Oman.

Sohar Port plans to construct new container terminal to handle mega vessels

STRONG GROWTH POTENTIAL: Sohar Port, Hutchison Ports to jointly study expansion of maritime gateway

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 17

An agreement signed by Sohar Port and Freezone with Hutchison Ports Sohar envisions the expansion of Sohar Port, alongside plans for the construction of a new container terminal capable of handling a new generation of containerships. A joint study will be conducted by the two sides as part of the Development Agreement signed recently.

The study, set to commence this year, will assess the social, environmental, logistical, In-Country Value and economic impacts of any future expansion.

Moreover, it will provide a clear roadmap for future expansion to meet the needs of the growing local and regional economy.

Apart from enhancing the competitiveness of Sohar Port, at the regional and global levels, especially in containers and cargo handling, it will further contribute towards the generation of more local job opportunities.

Sohar Port is currently witnessing a growing occupancy rate and efforts should be enhanced to increase its capacity, to enable it to keep pace with future development.

The addition of new areas will increase the attractiveness of the Port and comprise the necessary infrastructure to attract important international shipping lines.

The successful implementation of the project is set to bring in sustainable economic and social benefits for the Sultanate as a whole, and in particular the Governorate of North Al Batinah.

Hutchison Ports Sohar is a joint venture between Hutchison Ports, the Government of the Sultanate of Oman and a number of well-established Omani and overseas investors.

Hutchison Ports Sohar is a modern container-handling facility capable of accommodating the latest generation of mega-vessels.

Hutchison Ports Sohar is a member of Hutchison Ports, the port and related services division of CK Hutchison Holdings Limited (CK Hutchison). In 2019, Hutchison Ports handled a combined throughput of 86.0 million TEU.

Spain's 2020 public debt rose to 117.1 per cent of GDP

MADRID: Spain's public debt ended 2020 at 117.1 per cent of gross domestic product as the coronavirus pandemic and the measures imposed to curb it lifted borrowing and led to a deep economic contraction, the Bank of Spain said on Wednesday.

Debt as a percentage of GDP increased by more than 20 percentage points in 2020 from the 95.5 per cent recorded in December 2019.

The debt's total value rose 122 billion euros in 2020 to 1.31 trillion euros, mainly as a result of increased government spending on direct aid to people and companies affected by the pandemic, the economy ministry said. — **Reuters**

Importance of training, competency in business success

HAIDER AL LAWATI
haiderdawood@hotmail.com

Training and competency development are key imperatives for businesses and organisations, whether in the public or private sector.

Despite the restrictions and lockdowns triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic nearly a year ago, organisations continue to support the training of Omani cadres based on their organisational or corporate goals.

Productivity and work efficiency, along with proper management of time, are pivotal factors for the success of any organisation.

Innovation and technology have made it possible for people to perform their work remotely away from their offices.

Thanks to the Internet, social media and other technologies, they can work seamlessly and effectively with their colleagues wherever they are located.

Indeed, many successful organisations depend on digitalisation to enable their employees to perform their daily work remotely, regardless of whether the latter at sitting at home, in their garden, the middle of the desert or out at sea.

Technology has made it possible for individuals to continue to be productive while working at their own pace and in their own environment.

PRODUCTIVITY AND WORK EFFICIENCY, ALONG WITH PROPER MANAGEMENT OF TIME, ARE PIVOTAL FACTORS FOR THE SUCCESS OF ANY ORGANISATION

While some people face challenges in managing their time properly, it is imperative that they deliver as per deadlines allotted to them.

Experts advise that we should be prudent in utilising our valuable time in, for example, needlessly browsing through e-mails for many hours while leaving our main work pending.

It is also important for the employee not to postpone their daily work; they should remain focused and resolved to complete their work regardless of their circumstances and distractions.

Employees should manage their time carefully and strictly, which will reflect on their productivity and sense of responsibility.

Those who have risen up the ranks in their organisations owe their success to their ability to better manage their time, prioritise their work and keep less important tasks for later.

High productivity is not achieved as a result of leisureliness, relaxation, fun and sleep, but through diligence and eagerness to complete your tasks efficiency. Such people eventually become leaders in their organisations.

We are now living in a complex era, thanks in part to the pandemic that has disrupted they we live and work.

It is important, therefore, that businesses and organisations appoint managers who have the skills and experience to handle challenges; that they have the ability to keep their staff well-motivated; that they can recognise and reward creativity and innovative, and are able to combine leadership and management in nurturing the growth of a high-performing workforce.

NBC signs incubation pacts with two companies

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 17

The National Business Centre (NBC), which falls under the umbrella of the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn), signed incubation agreements with Pharmaceutical Consulting Office and Rumoz Company. NBC will provide a stimulating environment for the two incubated companies with a wide range of services that will contribute to their growth.

Pharmaceutical Consulting Office is specialised in providing logistical services in the pharmaceutical field and offering advice to health institutions in determining the quality of services and ways to improve and evaluate them.

Moreover, the Pharmaceutical Consulting Office directs pharmacists and healthcare providers to improve and develop functional and scientific skills and involve them in scientific research and innovation.

Specialised in the industrial technical marketing field and driven by youth with innovative ideas, Rumoz Company aims at supplying the Omani market and local products with unique brands and innovative packaging solutions that enhance product reliability.

Rumoz works as an integrated business chain to develop and establish the visual identity of the project, and devise solutions for packaging and marketing the product with innovative digital videos. It should be noted that Rumoz is the marketing arm of the Industrial Innovation Centre.

NBC is an initiative launched by Madayn at the Knowledge Oasis Muscat (KOM) to offer promising Omani entrepreneurs a platform to develop their business ideas and advance them into growing ventures.

The centre offers a premier platform for Omani entrepreneurs by providing business development support and guidance, training and mentoring, access to markets and industry experts, and state-of-the-art and fully equipped office space, meeting rooms and presentation facilities.

Datamount to provide cloud services for OPAL

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 17

Oman Society for Petroleum Services (OPAL) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Jabal Akhdhar Data Centre (Datamount), a leading data centre for hosting services company in Oman, to create OPAL Cloud.

The MoU establishes a framework for closer collaboration between OPAL and Datamount, leveraging innovative networking, data centre and security infrastructure solutions, cloud hardware and managed services for cloud and collaboration.

The scope of this MoU agreement enables Datamount to create 'OPAL Cloud' to the customers and OPAL. OPAL Cloud will consist of highly secure cloud services, platform as a service, industry software, disaster recovery services, backup services, IVMS, IOT and other required technology.

The services provided by Datamount will be in collaboration with various other third party service providers for engagements such as software as services, co-location, managed services IOT platform, backup solutions, private/public cloud compute services, manage security virtualisation, storage solutions, firewall and load balancers, needed for customer information technology environment in this industry.

PRESS RELEASE

KNOW YOUR NISSAN WITH AUGMENTED REALITY-BASED NISSAN DRIVER'S GUIDE & MOBILE APP

Nissan Oman, from the house of Suhail Bahwan Automobiles (SBA), has launched Nissan Driver's Guide ME, a mobile app based on Augmented Reality technology.

This is also an electronic version of the printed Quick Reference Guide that one finds in the glove box of every new Nissan vehicle.

With the new Nissan Driver's Guide app, owners can get to know more about Nissan's new car features, controls, buttons and much more. They can also have easy access to the quick user guide, dealer network and accessories guide.

The mobile app is now available on iOS and Android in Oman too. While using the Nissan Driver's Guide ME, owners can get detailed information about a particular button or switch, by simply pointing the camera of their smartphone at that object or area containing the object.

An interactive pop-up appears on the screen of their phone and with a simple touch they will be quickly provided with the information they require.

DON'T MISS THE OPPORTUNITY TO SAVE WITH KIA

Customers looking forward to owning their dream Kia have a good opportunity to both save and also make the most of their favourite Kia vehicle. Kia enthusiasts purchasing a new Kia have a choice of two options.

1) Flexible option: With service 3 years/30,000 kms and cash gift RO 1,050 up to RO 3,000.

2) Bundle option: With service 8 years/80,000 kms, Insurance, registration and cash gift RO 1,250 up to RO 3,800. The campaign is valid until April 11, 2021. (Conditions apply. Please visit Kia showroom for details).

In Oman, Kia's range offers a wide variety of models. From the Picanto to Telluride and to the latest introductions – the first-ever Kia Seltos SUV & K5 sedan.

Now enthusiasts can own their favourite Kia models and enjoy surprising moments.

The Kia Rio is a popular city sedan that is packed with dynamism and power.

Perfect to move around the city, the Kia Rio is a great value-for-money option especially for first time car-buyers or owners. Accelerating your demand for exciting drives is a 1.4-litre MPI (multi-point injection), 99 hp gasoline engine.

DDoS attacks decline as cryptomining is on the rise

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 17

The number of DDoS attacks in Q4 2020 increased slightly in comparison to the same period of 2019. However, it is 31 per cent less compared to Q3 2020.

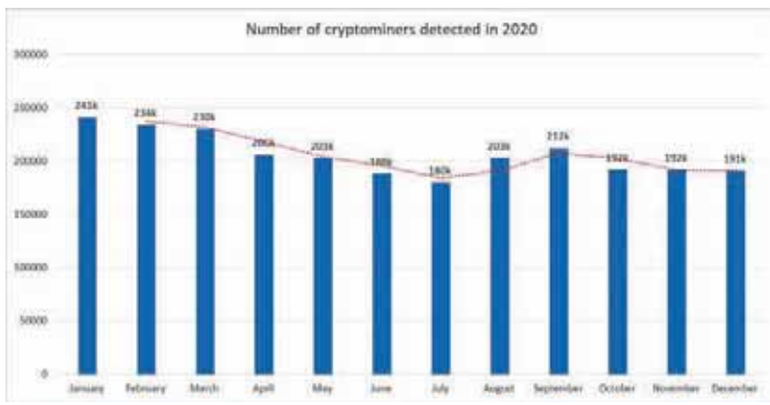
This drop can be connected to the growing interest in cryptocurrency mining, according to global cyber-security company Kaspersky. As people began to spend more time online in 2020, it resulted in a boom of DDoS attacks.

And in the fourth quarter, attacks on educational institutions continued: several schools in Massachusetts and Laurentian University in Canada experienced such incidents. Online gaming services also suffered DDoS attacks, it said in a report.

However, in Q4 2020 there were only 10 per cent more attacks than in Q4 2019

However, in Q4 2020 there were only 10 per cent more attacks than in Q4 2019. And compared to Q3 2020, the number of attacks in Q4 2020 fell by 31 per cent, while Q3 2020 also saw a drop compared to Q2.

Experts suggest that this can be caused by a surge in cryptocurrency costs. As a result, cybercriminals may have had to 're-profile' some botnets so that C&C servers, that are typically used in DDoS attacks, could repurpose infected devices and use their computing power to mine cryptocurrencies instead.



Throughout 2019, as well as in the beginning of 2020, the number of cryptominers was dropping.

However, from August 2020 the trend changed, with the amount of this form of malware increasing slightly and reaching a plateau in Q4.

"The DDoS attack market is currently affected by two opposite trends. On the one hand, people still highly rely on stable work of online resources, which can make DDoS attacks a common choice for malefactors.

However, with a spike in cryptocurrency prices, it may be more profitable for them to infect some devices with miners.

As a result, we see that the total number of DDoS attacks in Q4 remained quite stable. And we can predict that this trend will continue in 2021," comments Alexey Kiselev, Business Development Manager on the Kaspersky DDoS Protection team.

To stay protected against DDoS attacks, experts offer the following recommendations:

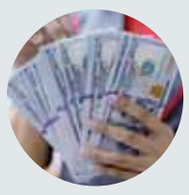
- Maintain web resource operations by assigning specialists who understand how to respond to DDoS attacks
- Validate third-party agreements and contact information, including those made with Internet service providers. This helps teams quickly access agreements in case of an attack
- Implement professional solutions to safeguard your organisation against DDoS attacks.

Congo averts recession in 2020

Democratic Republic of Congo's economy averted an expected pandemic-induced recession in 2020 to grow 0.8 per cent on the back of strong mining activity. — **Reuters**

Palantir reports rise in revenue

US data analytics firm Palantir Tech Inc reported a 40 per cent rise in sales in its second quarter. Its revenue rose to $322.1 million in the fourth quarter ended December 31. — **Reuters**



Dollar stuck at 3-week lows

The US dollar held at 3-week lows on Tuesday. Against its rivals, the greenback weakened 0.2 per cent to 90.13. It has fallen 1.5 per cent over the past eight trading sessions. — **Reuters**

US Treasury's Yellen vows to boost transatlantic cooperation

WASHINGTON: US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen stressed the importance of cooperation with the European Union in a call with the European Commission's vice president for the economy, Valdis Dombrovskis, on Tuesday, the US Treasury Department said.

Yellen in a conversation with European Central Bank President Christine Lagarde had also underscored ways to deepen transatlantic cooperation on economic and financial issues.

In her discussion with the EU executive, Yellen emphasised the importance of the transatlantic partnership and said she aimed to work more closely with Brussels on key challenges, including "ending the pandemic, supporting a strong global economic recovery, fighting income inequality, and forcefully addressing the threat of climate change," the Treasury said.

Yellen committed to re-engaging in discussions on international taxation to forge a timely international accord, and to seek solutions to key bilateral trade issues, it said.

The Biden administration is seeking to rebuild ties with European allies on all fronts after the deep rifts that characterised Donald Trump's presidency, and want to work together to counter what Yellen has called China's "abusive, unfair and illegal practices."

While Trump repeatedly took aim at European allies, threatening and imposing tariffs on a range of goods, the administration of Democratic President Joe Biden has sent far more positive signals on issues ranging from trade to taxes.

EU officials welcomed Washington's decision to refrain from imposing additional tariffs on EU goods in a dispute over aircraft tariffs, and said they were ready to work to resolve trade disputes.

— **Reuters**

Texas deep freeze hits energy sector, Houston ship channel shut

HOUSTON: A deep freeze that hit Texas over the weekend wrought more havoc on the US energy sector on Tuesday, curbing output in the largest US oil field, knocking out a fifth of the nation's refining capacity, and shutting a key shipping channel in Houston.

Historic cold has knocked out roughly 4 million barrels per day of refining capacity, more than one-fifth of national capacity.

About 500,000 to 1.2 million bpd of crude production has also been affected, and it could be weeks before it is fully restored, industry analysts said.

Around 5.3 million customers were without power nationwide due to winter storms. Texas was hardest hit with around 4.4 million customers affected, according to local power companies, as the state's electrical grid operates largely independent of other states and therefore cannot draw power from nearby operators.

"The entire Texas system from the wellhead to the electric meter on a home is more designed to deal with multiple 100 degree days than multiple single-digit days," said Todd Staples, president of the Texas Oil & Gas Association.

Many refiners, including the biggest in the United States, have shut down due to the freeze. Around 4m bpd, or 21 per cent per cent of US refining capacity, is shut, the biggest weather-related hit since Hurricane Harvey rumbled through the Gulf in 2017.

"We're talking about a major portion of the US Gulf Coast refining capacity currently being offline, in all likelihood, above 4,000,000 barrels a day," said Marc Amons, senior research analyst with Wood Mackenzie.

A woman in an umbrella walks in a heavy snow-covered road in Houston, Texas. – **Reuters**

> **Historic cold has knocked out roughly 4 million barrels per day of refining capacity, more than one-fifth of national capacity**

The cold snap sent US oil prices to near 13-month highs, while front-month gas futures jumped to an over three-month high.

In the spot market, next-day power at the ERCOT North hub jumped to a record high of $1,489.75 per megawatt hour (MWh).

The largest US refinery, Motiva Enterprises' 600,000 bpd facility at Port Arthur, was shut. Elsewhere, freezing temperatures shut other refineries and chemical plants in the state owned by Royal Dutch Shell Valero Energy Corp, Exxon Mobil Corp and Total SE .

Cold weather primarily impacts instrumentation that monitors and operates refinery units. The cold has shut natural gas production and pipelines, which refineries use in power generation.

Widespread power outages or instability of external power supply can force shutdowns. "The vast majority of their equipment will be inoperable once the weather warms up, so while we don't feel that we're looking at a hurricane-like scenario," it would probably take about a couple weeks for the refineries to return to pre-storm operations, Amons said.

The Houston Ship Channel, a 53-mile (85 km) waterway crucial to oil and fuel exports, had opened for some vessel traffic during Tuesday but was expected to shut again due to an impending cold blast in the evening.

JJ Plunkett, port agent for Houston Pilots, said ship pilots were moving at least five vessels along the Houston Ship Channel on Tuesday. Whether they will be able to do so through the night will depend on the weather, Plunkett said.

— **Reuters**

Europe pulls ahead in race for hydrogen, as global project pipeline grows

BRUSSELS: Most of the world's planned hydrogen projects and the biggest chunk of related investments this decade are expected to be in Europe, an industry report said on Wednesday, as the continent races to scale up the low-carbon fuel to meet climate goals.

The EU has made hydrogen a key plank in its aim to eliminate its greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, with plans to install 40GW of electrolysers this decade — equipment to produce emissions-free hydrogen using water and renewable power.

The EU currently has less than 0.1GW of electrolysers, and is betting on a rapid scale-up to decarbonise steel, heavy transport and chemicals, the latter of which already uses hydrogen produced from fossil fuels. — **Reuters**

A hydrogen bus is seen before a presentation in Pau, France. – **AFP**

Thailand economic outlook highly uncertain

Employees are seen working inside a garment factory in Bangkok. – **Reuters**

BANGKOK: Thailand's economic outlook remained highly uncertain with large downside risks, so limited monetary policy room should be preserved to be used at the most effective time, minutes from the central bank's last policy meeting showed on Wednesday.

The public sector should implement sufficient targeted and front-loaded measures to support an economic recovery after a recent coronavirus outbreak, the minutes said.

On February 3, the Bank of Thailand (BOT)'s committee members voted unanimously to keep the one-day repurchase rate unchanged at 0.50 per cent for a sixth straight meeting, after three cuts in the first half of 2020 to mitigate the impact of the pandemic.

"The problem facing the Thai economy was less about the level of the policy interest rate as lending rates and bond yields were already at a record low," the minutes said, adding that banking system liquidity remained ample.

> **The problem facing the Thai economy was less about the level of the policy interest rate as lending rates and bond yields were already at a record low**
>
> **BANK OF THAILAND**

Southeast Asia's second-largest economy could expand this year at a slower pace than the 3.2 per cent previously projected and the recovery among sectors would be uneven and increase labour market vulnerability, the minutes said.

"In the near term, the economic recovery would depend on the resolution of the recent outbreak and the contemporaneous fiscal support," the minutes said.

The BoT next reviews monetary policy on March 24, when it will also offer updated economic projections. Bank of Thailand Governor Sethaput Suthiwartnarueput told TNN News that the economy is now likely to return to pre-pandemic levels in the third quarter of 2022.

He said the economy could grow at the upper 2 per cent levels this year, but this would largely depend on a recovery in tourism.

The committee felt the recovery could be impacted by rapid rises in the baht and would consider measures as necessary to ensure "exchange rate movements would not hinder the economic recovery".

Thailand largely contained its Covid-19 outbreak by mid-2020, but new infections had slowed domestic activity as the key tourist sector founders. The economy contracted 6.1 per cent last year, the deepest fall in 22 years, prompting the government to cut its growth outlook this year to 2.5-3.5 per cent from 3.5-4.5 per cent. — **Reuters**

Classifieds

THURSDAY | FEBRUARY 18, 2021 | RAJAB 6, 1442 AH

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

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I **Venkatesh Geddada** (holder of Indian Passport No. **S3095767**) S/o **Morali Krishna G** having permanent residence in **3-2-504, Chappal Bazar, Khchiguda, Hyderabad, Tflangana, India** (complete postal address in India) and presently residing at **Ruwi,** Post Box No **2734,** Postal Code **112**, Sultanate of Oman (Complete postal address in Sultanate of Oman), intend to marry **Ms Anosjra Sharma** (Holder of Indian Passport bearing No **M2296624, D/o Surinder Sharma** having permanent residence in **H NO- 455, Adarsh Nagar, Nawan Shahar, Punjab** (complete permanent address) at Embassy of India, Muscat. I swear that I am marrying him/her at my own free will and not under any duress and intimidation. Any objection towards this marriage may please be communicated to Embassy of India, Muscat, Diplomatic Quarters, Al Khuwair, P. O. Box No. 1727, Postal Code No. 112, Ruwi, Sultanate of Oman within 30 (thirty) days of publication of this newspaper advertisement.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Announcement of Capital Reduction

IN accordance with the provisions of Article 150 of the Commercial Companies Law. The company **As'sariya Al Beydha projects for Trade and Contracting** (Limited Partnership), which is registered with the Commercial Registration No **1194311**, hereby announces that it is going to reduce its capital from RO **250,000.000** to **15,000.000**. Whoever has any objection to the foregoing shall present the reasons for such objection to the Secretariat of Commercial Registry at the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion within 30 days from the date hereof.

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features

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Tracking down the Sifah-Qurayat trail

Sifah and Qurayat are far apart but if one takes the coastal trail, it can be shortened to 21 km and can be ventured by hiking. In December, when the Covid-19 regulations are still more relaxed, these hikers track down the trail to see some of the most beautiful hidden beaches... **P20**

INSIDE STORIES

SCIENCE

SCIENTISTS DISCOVER 'STRANGE CREATURES' UNDER ANTARCTIC ICE SHELVES

A group of scientists have discovered "strange creatures" under a 900-metres thick ice shelf of the Antarctic,according to a an article published on Monday in the journal *Frontiers in Marine Science*... **Story on Page 20**

CHANGING WORLD

FACTFILE: THE DESERT LOCUST

The name alone is enough to stir biblical fears of devastation and famine — an insect foe that breeds prolifically and eats its own weight in food every day... **Story on Page 19**

READ

THE FOUR WINDS

BY KRISTIN HANNAH

As dust storms roll during the Great Depression, Elsa must choose between saving the family and farm or heading West.

TRAVEL TALES

STONEHENGE LIKELY MADE WITH STONES FROM OLDER MONUMENT: STUDY

With his black sports jacket, Remains of an ancient monument in west Wales indicate stones that stood at the site may have been dismantled and used to build the Neolithic standing circle Stonehenge, a new study suggested on Friday... **Story on Page 19**

DISCOVERY

EGYPT UNEARTHS 'WORLD'S OLDEST' MASS-PRODUCTION BREWERY

A high-production brewery believed to be more than 5,000 years old has been uncovered by a team of archaeologists at a funerary site in southern Egypt, the tourism ministry said on Saturday.

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Flow of passions at art expo

BY KAUSHALENDRA SINGH

Amazing works of art were on display with crafts, paintings and other works that attracted huge interest from the visitors even though the gallery, which organised the exhibition, took all possible pandemic precautions as per the directives of the Supreme Committee on Covid-19.

Most of the works displayed at the exhibition were done either by the teachers or parents of the ABA Oman International School. The Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) of the school in association with Art & Soul Art Gallery took part in the expo titled 'ART-E-FFECT: By ABA Artists'.

The seven-day expo that concluded on Tuesday evoked huge interest from artists, collectors and casual visitors.

Inaugurating the presentation of artworks to a limited audience, Head of School Craig Williamson aptly said "Art is an interesting thing that we cannot really explain. Twelve people can walk through a piece of art and it touches each one differently. It reaches your heart and pulls you out."

Part of the school's annual activity the event aimed at sharing amazing works of artists from within the community who have followed their heart, to showcase it to students and encourage all to follow their passions.

"An event generally been exclusive to the ABA community for viewing, was for the first time opened to a larger audience to showcase the ABA talents, which is hosted by Gallery," said the event organisers.

Commenting on the quality of works on display at the exhibition, Nandita Shukla, PTA Chair, said "You will be amazed to see the varied spectrum of techniques housed in this one space!"

A visitor at the exhibition called some of the works "treat to the eyes" and "thought-provoking". "Some of the works were so good that it made me think, the same lot of artists, who are mostly casual artists, can do wonders if they choose to give more time to their passion and take part in art exhibitions more frequently," she said.

Another visitor, Lacey was impressed with the exhibition themes and variety being offered under one roof.

"I find each artist who took part in the exhibition can take part in a solo exhibition. I also appreciate Art & Soul Art Gallery for offering a platform to such artists," she said.

CHANGING WORLD

3D-printed homes build hope for US affordable housing

AFTER YEARS of homelessness and hard living, Tim Shea has swapped the sharp corners in his life for the round, flowing design of his new 3D-printed home in Austin, Texas.

In August, Shea became the first person in the United States to move into a 3D-printed home, according to Austin-based developer ICON, in what advocates say is a milestone in efforts to boost the national supply of affordable housing.

This month New York-based firm SQ4D listed what is purported to be the country's first 3D-printed house to go up for sale, while ICON completed the largest 3D-printed structure in North America — a military barracks.

Shea, 70, said his new house — which he moved into for free and is located in a community of formerly homeless people - has saved his life.

"It's just phenomenally beautiful ... it just wraps around and gives me a feeling of life security," Shea told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by phone from his 400-sq-ft (46-sq-m) home.

The house's high ceilings, large windows and skylights make it feel larger than it looks from the outside, he added.

Shea got to watch his home being built on site by a large new "printer", developed and operated by ICON, a process which the company said took about 48 hours and is being reduced further as the technology improves.

Large-scale 3D printing is gaining steam around the world as a quicker, cheaper and more efficient way of building housing, with some projects producing a home in 24 hours of printing time for just a few thousand dollars.

ICON constructed the first permitted 3D-printed building in the United States in 2018 and is one of the few 3D construction firms focusing specifically on affordable housing.

Last year, Habitat for Humanity's Terwilliger Center for Innovation in Shelter helped an Indian company called Tvasta build India's first 3D-printed home, which brought construction times down by more than a third and reduced waste by about 65 per cent.

"3D printing technology has huge potential to boost the affordable housing sector," said Patrick Kelley, the centre's vice president, in e-mailed comments.

AFFORDABLE AND SUSTAINABLE

Using 3D printing, also known as additive manufacturing, for construction goes back to at least 2004, when a University of South Carolina professor tried to print a wall.

Unlike other uses of 3D printing — such as medical devices or complex modeling — the process typically uses some form of quick-drying concrete laid precisely by a computer-controlled extruder.

The approach has been used for niche projects in recent years - such as the world's first 3D-printed bridge, which opened to the public in Madrid in 2016. But it is now at the cusp of a major expansion, according to market analysts.

While the global market for 3D-printed construction stood at $3 million in 2019, it is projected to grow to more than $1.5 billion by 2024, according to a study from consultancy Research and Markets.

Last year, the global industry publication 3D natives listed a dozen companies working on 3D-printed houses globally.

Ballard, who spent a decade working in housing and homelessness before helping form ICON four years ago, said he came to 3D printing seeking a construction method that was affordable, sustainable and climate-resilient.

"For me it was always about housing," he said, suggesting the technology should eventually be the "predominant paradigm" for home construction.

This week a developer is putting the country's first series of 3D-printed homes up for sale for the mass market, with printing completed by ICON and move-ins expected this summer, the firm says.

Ballard points not only to savings in cost and time but also labor, since homes can be printed off of a tablet or phone.

The structures are also more resilient to disasters such as hurricanes, more energy-efficient and easily adaptable to unique design needs, he added.

"You could imagine hundreds or thousands of these printers - ending homelessness and the affordability crisis," Ballard said.

ICON built its first homes in an anti-homelessness "village" in Austin, overseen by the nonprofit Mobile Loaves and Fishes.

The site, called the Community First! Village, is currently expanding to offer homes to about 500 individuals at the village, including tiny homes, recreational vehicles and six 3D-printed homes, said the organisation's president, Amber Fogarty.

"What attracted us is the promise of this technology," said Fogarty.

"A lot of the time, innovation becomes available only for people with resources, so for this to be available to our neighbours is really special." — **Reuters**

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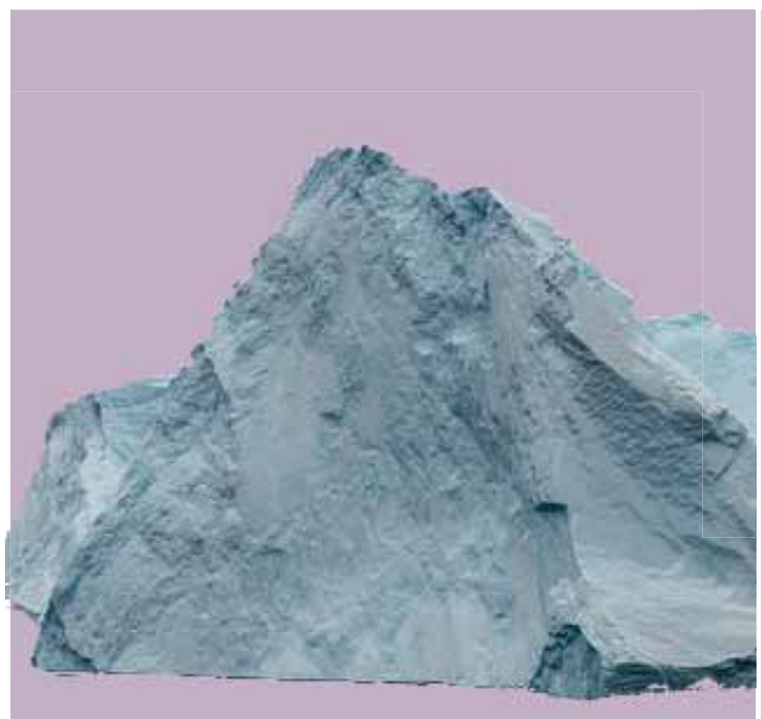

Scientists discover 'strange creatures' under Antarctic ice shelves

A group of scientists have discovered "strange creatures" under a 900-metres thick ice shelf of the Antarctic, according to a an article published on Monday in the journal *Frontiers in Marine Science*.

By drilling through ice of the Filchner-Ronne shelf, the scientists accidentally discovered animals looking like sponges and possibly other unknown species attached to a boulder on the sea floor.

"We were expecting to retrieve a sediment core from under the ice shelf, so it came as a bit of a surprise when we hit the boulder and saw from the video footage that there were animals living on it", said James Smith, a geologist at the British Antarctic Survey (BAS).

According to a statement by the BAS, this was the first study to find stationary animals in such conditions, as very few other species had been observed at a distance of 260 kilometres from the open ocean, incomplete darkness and temperatures of minus 2.2 degrees Celsius.

"This discovery is one of those fortunate accidents that pushes ideas in a different direction and shows us that Antarctic marine life is incredibly special and amazingly adapted to a frozen world," said Huw Griffiths, BAS bio geographer can co-author of the study.

The scientists said the animals were 1,500 kilometres away from a source of photosynthesis.

"Our discovery raises so many more questions than it answers, such as how did they get there? What are they eating?" Griffiths said.

"And what would happen to these communities if the ice shelf collapsed?" Griffiths added, with regard to the consequences of climate change. **— dpa**

FACTFILE: THE DESERT LOCUST

THE NAME alone is enough to stir biblical fears of devastation and famine — an insect foe that breeds prolifically and eats its own weight in food everyday.

Here are key facts about the desert locust, which has infested eastern Africa.

CHANGING BEHAVIOUR

Desert locusts — Latin name Schistocerca gregaria — are typically a solitary species of grasshopper which lives alone and does not cause much damage, and can be found in a semi-arid and desert band stretching from Mauritania to India.

But when abundant rains lead to mass breeding, they become gregarious, forming huge swarms which can travel vast distances, devouring crops and grazing land.

In 2018, cyclones led to uncontrolled breeding in the Arabian Peninsula, and the following year swarms began moving into Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Iran, multiplying every three months, before moving into the Horn of Africa by mid-2019.

The region was experiencing its wettest year in decades, with a record eight cyclones off East Africa, providing excellent conditions for the locusts, which shift with the wind.

The UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) says the current invasion is known as an "upsurge" — when an entire region is affected. It would be a "plague" if it affected up to 60 countries.

There were six major desert locust plagues in the 1900s, the last of which was in 1987-89. The last major upsurge was in 2003-05.

SWARMS THE SIZE OF A CITY

In 2020, one swarm in Kenya was estimated by the FAO at around 2,400 square kilometres (about 930 square miles) — an area almost the size of Moscow — meaning it could contain up to 200 billion locusts, each of which consume their own weight in food everyday.

Even a small swarm can devour the same amount of food in a day as approximately 35,000 people.

Last year the locusts reached Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea, Djibouti, Kenya, South Sudan, Uganda, Tanzania and Sudan, before a lull of a few months.

In December 2020, new swarms emerged in Somalia and Ethiopia, spreading to Kenya, however they are far smaller, with the largest only measuring a few square kilometres.

Swarms have also been reported in Djibouti, Eritrea, Tanzania and Sudan.

The FAO estimated that in 2020 the infestation affected the food supply and livelihoods of some 2.5 million people, and was expected to impact 3.5 million in 2021.

However control operations prevented even worse damage.

"We have prevented already last year a major disaster, we stopped locusts in Kenya, they didn't move to the Sahel region," said FAO east Africa expert Cyril Ferrand.

TOUGH TO CONTROL

The main method to deal with locusts is a variety of pesticides in very low doses, either by air, or via ground operations.

They can take several hours, to several days, to act. The toxicity on the environment generally wears off after a day.

Bees, butterflies and other insects are killed, however spray operations are extremely targeted, and post-spray assessments carried out, says the FAO.

Locusts are fiendishly difficult to control, moving up to 150 kilometres (90 miles) daily, and the only time to target them is when they roost for the evening as the air cools down. **— AFP**

Stonehenge likely made with stones from older monument: Study

REMAINS of an ancient monument in west Wales indicate stones that stood at the site may have been dismantled and used to build the Neolithic standing circle Stonehenge, a new study suggested Friday.

Researchers believe some stones used at Stonehenge, near Salisbury in southwest England, were used in an earlier monument 175 miles (280 kilometres) away in southwest Wales.

The team behind the discovery from University College London (UCL) said there were key elements linking Stonehenge, built in 3000 BC, with the earlier stone circle named Waun Mawn.

They suggest bluestones — distinct blue and grey stones that originated in Wales — may have been moved by the ancient builders of Stonehenge as their society migrated.

The findings, due to be published in the journal *Antiquity*, would explain why the monoliths were moved so far when most similar standing circles from the time were built close to their quarries.

Waun Mawn is one of the oldest stone circles in Britain and the country's third largest.

Its surrounding region was an important and densely settled area until 3000 BC when activity seems to have abruptly ended.

"It's as if they just vanished. Maybe most of the people migrated, taking their stones — their ancestral identities — with them," archaeologist Mike Parker Pearson, from UCL, said.

With an estimated 80 bluestones erected on Salisbury Plain, it is likely that Waun Mawn, in the Preseli Hills in Pembrokeshire, was not the only monument recycled at Stonehenge, he added.

"Maybe there are more in Preseli waiting to be found. Who knows? Someone will be lucky enough to find them," he said.

Scientific dating of charcoal and sediment from the holes where stones stood at the Welsh site, reveal it was erected roughly 400 years before Stonehenge, a Unesco World Heritage site.

There are also indications the builders of Stonehenge copied the monument in Wales.

Waun Mawn has a diameter of 360 feet (110 metres) — the same as the ditch that encloses Stonehenge — and both are aligned on the mid-summer solstice sunrise. — **Reuters**

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Tracking down the Sifah-Qurayat trail

By Rumpa Mitra

The year 2020 was not normal, and without a doubt has disappointed a lot of travel enthusiasts. We were all confined to our homes due to the pandemic. But towards the end of the year when the restrictions were relaxed, I finally had the time to accomplish some of the hiking trails that were on my checklist.

I'd been hearing for sometime about the Sifah-Qurayat trail. Because of its level of difficulty, not a lot of people have attempted it but I had set my eyes on it because I was told it was one of the most beautiful coastal hikes.

Sifah is one of the fishing villages with long beaches and because it's closest to Muscat, has become very famous as a camping escape. On the other hand, Qurayat is another small fishing town located 83 km southwest of Muscat by car. It is adjacent to the town of Sur, Dima W'attayeen and Al Amerat and has also been known for amazing landscapes and great terrains.

Both the villages can actually be explored by taking the hiking trails along the coast. The hike is 21 km one way route. We planned to start from Sifah beach and end at Qurayat. It is not a loop trail so you need to work out the logistics well. At the end point at Qurayat, we had arranged a boat in which we can come back to Sifah beach where our car was parked. Our guide Munther al Jaabri (@Hola_Oman on Instagram) is well-experienced in this trail and had taken care of all arrangements meticulously.

Initial part of the hike was quite easy, 3-4 kms walk in the pebble beach. Then came the coastal mountains which were about 100-150 mts in elevation. Since this trail is not thoroughly explored, there are no markers or indicators. One needs to stay focused and look for the pathways.

Since it is an unfrequented path, we noticed several wildlife along the way. From meeting mountain goats to snakes, there are also reports of sightings of foxes among other wild animals in the area.

Since it is quite a long hike, we started the hike early at 6:30 am. This is to make sure that we have a kinder temperature and since it's still winter, the conditions were favourable. Earlier reports indicated that the hike can be more challenging in the summer because there are barely any place for shade.

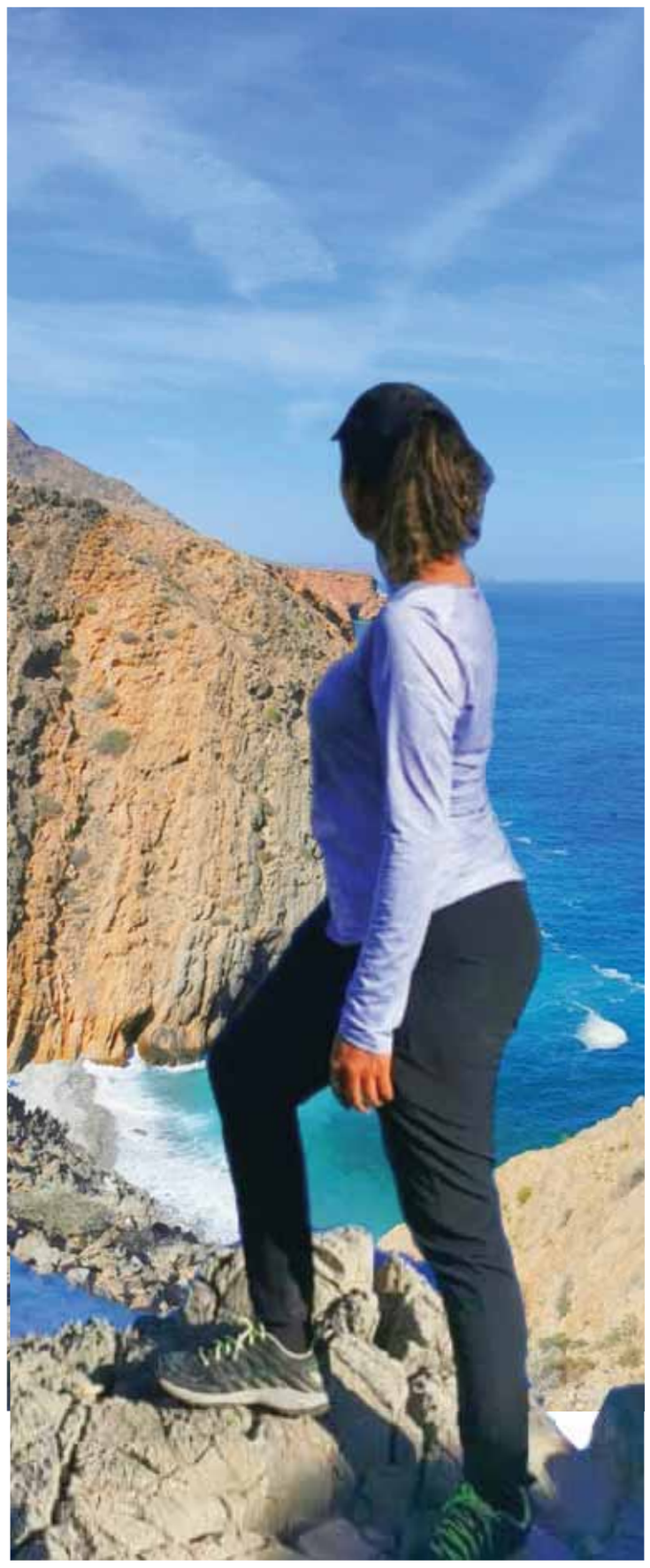
The hike took us on top of mountains, in between coves and canyons and some of the most beautiful hidden beaches. Most of the hidden beaches on this side have crystal clear waters fading into a beautiful turquoise the farther it goes.

At the base of each mountain is a completely unexplored breathtaking beach. Even from the high mountains one can see the turtles in the water. Twice we took the much needed breaks in these serene beaches.

Suffice to say, it is a trip that definitely needs a high level of athletism and would not recommend for newbie hikers as you have to develop the stamina to conquer the challenging trail.

While we started the hike at 6:30, we covered the 21 km pathway by 1:30 pm. The 45-minute walk on flatland somehow helped us conquer the last kilometres. We were all overjoyed to complete this challenging trail in less than 7 hours.

By the time we reached Qurayat, our boat man was already waiting for us with the mouthwatering biryani lunch. After the sumptuous lunch, we took a 20-minute boat ride back to Sifah.

This hike will give you ample photo opportunities and our guide Majid was kind enough to be our photographer.

For those experience hikers looking for new trails to explore, these is definitely a must-try but make sure that you have all the preparations and do it when the weather is still colder.