

Higher education in for major transformation

Higher Education in Oman is in for a major transformation with a focus on quality, upgraded academic standards, and high standards of pass outs from the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Dr Bakhait bin Ahmed al Mahri, Under-Secretary for Higher Education in the Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research and Innovation (HESRI), elucidated upon the challenges, opportunities, and goals of the ministry. [SEE P2](#)



Established 1981. Editor-in-chief: Abdullah bin Salim al Shueili

OMAN OBSERVER

www.omanobserver.om editor@omanobserver.om

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IN 2021



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MUSCAT

UNESCO REGRETS ZANZIBAR COLLAPSE

UNESCO regretted the collapse of a part of the iconic House of Wonders (Bait Al Ajaib) in Stone Town in Zanzibar on Friday while Oman's Ministry of Heritage and Tourism strongly denied a fake news circulating about the partial collapse. In a statement issued on Saturday, the ministry denied reports that collapse took place after the restoration. "The restoration was not completed and stopped since the beginning of the year due to the coronavirus pandemic," the ministry tweeted. The House of Wonders on the World Heritage List since 2000. [SEE P5](#)

NO EXPAT LAWYERS FROM JANUARY

Starting on January 1, as many as 600 expatriate lawyers will not be able to represent cases in Omani courts at any level, in accordance with the government efforts to encourage more Omani lawyers to practise in the courts of law. Oman decided to allow only Omani lawyers to represent cases in front of the honourable judges at Primary, Appeal and Supreme Court as a result of constant requests made by the Omani Lawyers Association with the Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs. "From January 1, 2021, appearing and pleading before the courts of appeal and the Supreme Court will be restricted to Omani lawyers, as the time limit granted by the Council of Minister. [SEE P5](#)



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BRITISH COLD WAR DOUBLE AGENT GEORGE BLAKE DIES

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COVID-19 VACCINATION BEGINS TODAY

MUSCAT: The COVID-19 vaccination campaign in the Sultanate will begin on Sunday. The first phase of the nationwide vaccination campaign targets those who are more vulnerable to catching the virus including frontline workers, elderly people and patients with chronic diseases.

BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine, produced in collaboration between US pharma giant Pfizer and German's BioNTech, is designed to stimulate the immune system to make antibodies that protect against the virus. The vaccine will be given in two doses 21 days apart.

The first shipment of Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, which arrived in the Sultanate on Thursday, in-

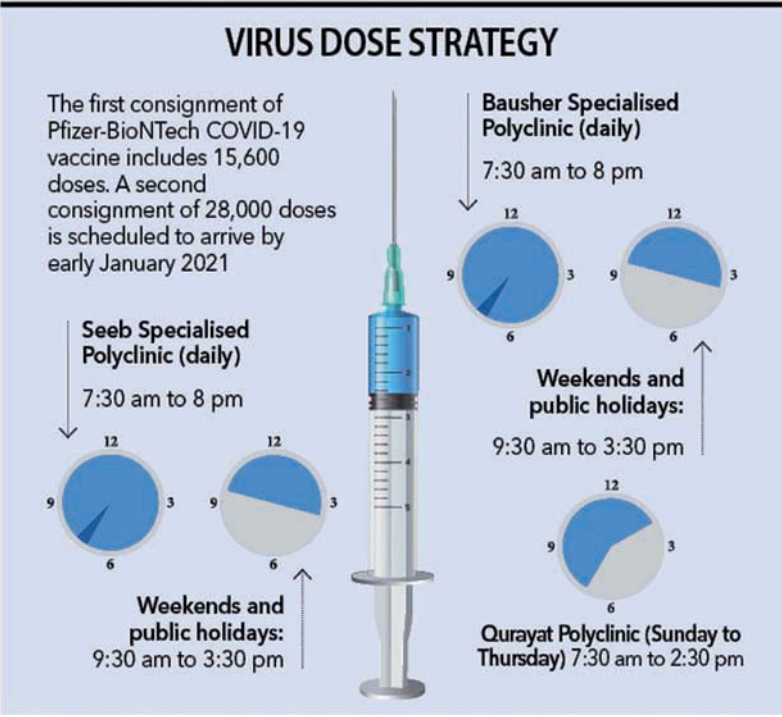
cludes 15,600 doses of the vaccine, with a second consignment containing 28,000 doses scheduled to arrive by early January.

The Ministry of Health announced that the vaccination campaign targets to cover 60 per cent of the population with 20 per cent targeted in the first stages due to limited vaccine supply during the current period.

NOT BY FORCE

The ministry said that the vaccine will not be administered by force but by conviction supported by the public awareness and responsibility about their national duty.

Within the framework of the Sultanate's efforts to contain the COVID-19 pandemic, it has been



the Ministry of Health's priority to secure the vaccine through several steps most importantly the formulation of a work team under the chairmanship of the under-secretary of the MoH for health affairs.

The arrival of the vaccine was preceded by a number of steps including a nationwide survey to measure the public opinion about the COVID-19 vaccine as well as the public attitudes and awareness regarding the vaccination.

Additionally, multiple meetings were held on various levels including the minister of health's meeting with the director-generals of health in the governorates to discuss the executive plan of the vaccination campaign. [TURN TO P5](#)

Ministry's working group submits steps to check hidden trade

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 26

A working group set up by the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion submitted its report to clamp down on unethical practices such as hidden trade and prevent companies from registering under multiple names.

It "worked over a period of two months to analyse a number of existing legislative frameworks, laws and procedures related to this, and proposed improvements in line with current requirements.

"This would help make illegal the practices of hidden trade and companies holding multiple commercial registrations," said MoCIIP in a statement on


This would help make illegal the practices of hidden trade and companies holding multiple commercial registrations

MoCIIP

Saturday. "In the spirit of working jointly with the private sector, a number of meetings with businessmen and companies were held, to help identify the challenges they face.

"A number of representatives from various public and private sector bodies were involved in these meetings, including the

Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Economy, the Ministry of Labour, the Ministry of Finance, the Royal Oman Police, Muscat Municipality, Dhofar Municipality, the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority.

"The tasks of the work team included reviewing the mechanisms and controls regulating multiple commercial registrations, monitoring private institutions to ensure correct business practices, and following up with companies to make sure they provide adequate housing for expatriate workers," said MoCIIP.

world, forcing some nations back into lockdown.

The impending inoculation campaigns have boosted hopes that 2021 could bring a respite from the pandemic. [SEE P8](#)

PARIS: Countries around Europe were on Saturday preparing to roll out their first coronavirus vaccines even as a reputedly more contagious variant spreads around the

EU readies vaccine rollout as new virus strain spreads

NADHIRA EYES HIMALAYAN PEAK



Omani mountaineer Nadhira al Harthy is making an attempt to reach the summit of Mount Ama Dablam (6,812 metres), which is one of the highest Himalayan peaks located in Nepal. "I chose to climb Mount Ama Dablam because it is one of the most difficult mountains to climb in many ways. The trekking on the first day lasted five and a half hours, walking through the mountains. We climbed more than 800 meters, to reach the village of Namche at an altitude of 3,445 meters. The roads, which are usually crowded with tourists, pedestrians, and climbers, were empty except for very few of them. The temperature at the time was -3 °C."

Higher education in Oman in for major transformation

KAUSHALENDRA SINGH
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Higher Education in Oman is in for a major transformation with a focus on quality, upgraded academic standards, and high standards of pass outs from the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

In an interview with the Observer, Dr Bakhait bin Ahmed al Mahri, Under-Secretary for Higher Education in the Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research and Innovation (HESRI), elucidated upon the challenges, opportunities, and goals of the ministry in light of the current changes that have been introduced to upgrade the academic standards of the HEIs. He put stress on the benefits of the merger of three wings — the higher education, scientific research and vocational institutions — under one umbrella.

He called the merger of certain HEIs a much-needed step to streamline the higher education system in the country. "After the merger, all the HEIs have come under one regulator called Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research and Innovation (HESRI). With this, it is easy to standardise, monitor, and regulate the system in the



Dr Bakhait bin Ahmed al Mahri

desired direction, which is Oman's Vision 2040."

The broad merger is the merger of higher education, scientific research, and vocational institutions under one umbrella, which is HESRI. Al Mahri feels this as a better arrangement in terms of coordination, planning, and implementation. "Earlier there were certain elements of research with the erstwhile ministry of higher education, as research is one of the core issues of the HEIs. With the merger of all the issues related to scientific research under one umbrella, it is easy for us to rule out duplications.

"Similar is the case with the vocational institutions. Since they

are also part of the HESRI, every higher education institution is going to benefit from any one of the policies taken for the whole sector," he said.

Out of this merger, a new university — the University of Technology and Applied Sciences — has been formed and all vocational institutions come under the purview of the HESRI. The total number of HEIs, both government and private, in Oman is 62. There are nine private universities and 19 private colleges in Oman. All others are government HEIs.

"Being one regulator for all the HEIs is the best in the interest of higher education. Apart from easy to regulate, the system can check if there is any duplication. There can be one policy for private-public partnership in which the gainers are the students and ultimately the country," Dr Al Mahri said.

The challenges, according to him, are in the areas of constant up-gradation of academic standards, tie-ups with international institutions and maximising the in-country physical and academic resources.

He exhorted the students to take advantage of higher education policies, which are directly inclined towards the welfare of the students.

Temperature likely to drop further over next three days

Masghoor beach overlooking Bander Al Khairan in Muscat Governorate.
PHOTO BY KHALFAN AL RUZAIQI



MUSCAT: The temperatures will drop in all regions of the Sultanate, especially the coastal regions on Sunday. According to an official at Oman Meteorology, the temperatures will drop by 4 to 5 degrees, to be below 20 degrees Celsius or less. In some places, temperatures will drop to 15 degrees Celsius or less in general, and below 10 degrees Celsius in the mountainous and desert regions. The situation is expected to last for three days. On Friday, places such as Saiq had 6.3 degrees Celsius, Yanqul 9.2, Thamrait 10.6, Al Sinaina 11, and Al Mazayouna 11.7 degrees Celsius.

Encouraging local 'green' farming initiative

RAY PETERSEN
NIZWA, DEC 26

Izki Wali, Shaikh Mohammed bin Abdullah bin Ali al Busaidy, visited one of the local agricultural properties farmed by local businessman, farmer, and entrepreneur Ishaq bin Yousuf Abdullah al Saqri on Wednesday. The local body official was keen to see for himself the progressive development of Al Saqri's farming operations in recent times as he continues to expand the range of his farming portfolio.

"We have diversified significantly in recent months," said Al Saqri as he explained to his guest, "still growing our primary crops of string beans, cucumbers, okra, eggplants, zucchinis, and maize, but have planted extensively on this new adjacent plot, with several thousand plantings of three different watermelon varieties, tomatoes, cabbages, more cucumbers and zucchinis." He did admit that this new ground required careful management, with soil analysis identifying some issues, "but we have a plan, and expect within some months to have restored this beautiful light soil to high productivity."

Shaikh Mohammed al Busaidy, for his part, expressed interest in the ecological and environmental aspects of the operation, and congratulated Al Saqri for his initiative.

The farmer himself admitted to being delighted by the interest shown in his ventures by local government, saying, "It very much justifies my desire, and my decision, to concentrate my activities here, in and around my



The 'green magic', of Al Saqri's farms in Izki is evident in this scene.



Izki farmer, Ishaq bin Yousuf Abdullah al Saqri is proud and happy to be farming in his hometown.

hometown. My thoughts were that bringing the farms closer to home would support the local community by reducing the price of fresh, healthy vegetables straight from harvest to the home, with both economical and health benefits for all. It means so much to know that what I am doing is working, it is valued by my community, and recognised by local government.

— PHOTOS BY LENA PETERSEN



A smiling Shaikh Mohammed bin Abdullah bin Ali al Busaidy, the Wali of Izki, enjoyed a fruitful visit to the Al Saqri farms in Izki.



ZAKAT AL-SEEB COMMITTEE
UNDER SUPERVISION OF MINISTRY
OF ENDOWMENTS & RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS





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With a ban on use of single-use plastic bags just around the corner, a lot of community initiatives became active to produce eco-friendly shopping bags to replace.

Single-use plastic ban in force from Friday

VINOD NAIR

@vinot_nair

With only a few days left for Oman to implement the decision to ban the use of single-consumption plastic shopping bags, all eyes are on its effectiveness at all levels.

As part of its awareness campaigns, the Environment Authority (EA) said that the multi-use (environmentally friendly) bags made of several materials such as cloth, paper and other organic materials are available at commercial stores.

While both citizens and residents have welcomed the decision, there is still some skepticism about the teething issues it will cause in the early days.

"Firstly, we have to wait and see whether supermarkets will implement this on January 1. This will be the biggest step for a better environment in Oman and let us hope for a good beginning of 2021," said a resident.

Another resident suggested that Oman like other countries should tell customers, "you either pay for a bag or you take your own reusable ones."

"Plastic bags contain high levels of lead, and when you throw them under the sun, they emit gases that are harmful to human health," the authority said.

A per the Ministerial Resolution 23/2020 issued on March 15 this year, single-use plastic shopping bags will be banned from January 1, 2021.

Article 1 prohibits companies and institutions from using single-use plastic shopping bags that are used and disposed of after single use to preserve the Omani environment.

Article 2 imposes an administrative fine of no less than RO 100, and no more than RO 2,000 for anyone who violates the provisions of this decision, and doubled in the case of repeated violations, without prejudice to any more severe penalty stipulated by the Environmental Protection and Pollution Control Law.

It is reported that this decision was made according



to the Law on Environmental Protection and Pollution Control issued by Royal Decree 114/2001, and Royal Decree 18/2008 defining the terms of reference of the Ministry of Environment and Climate Affairs and adapting its organisational structure.

Several countries have warned against distributing plastic bags in stores in many cities due to their harm to humans and the environment.

GDP growth slips by 4.3% to RO 29.3 billion in 2019

MUSCAT: The National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) has released the fourth issue of the Economic Outlook of Oman, highlighting the Sultanate's economic performance during 2019 and the prospective developments witnessed due to global economic impact.

The NCSI report highlights the Sultanate's economic performance in 2019, which recorded a decline in the growth of GDP at current prices by 4.3 per cent as a result of the decrease in the value added of oil activities by 8.4 per cent and a decrease in non-oil activities by 1.5 per cent. The GDP decreased to RO 29.3 billion in 2019, compared to RO 30.7 billion in 2018.

The report shows that the deficit in the Sultanate's general budget reached RO 2.62 billion, recording a decline in the total revenue by 3.3 per cent, while the total public spending decreased by 2.9 per cent, recording RO 13.2 billion.

The decrease in the Sultanate's public spending in 2019 was due to the decrease in investment expenditures by 7.4 per cent, compared to the previous year.

The report states that the domestic liquidity (M2) in Oman grew by 2 per cent in 2019, reaching RO 17.8 billion, compared to RO 17.4 billion in 2018. This increase in 2019 was due to the increase in the money supply in its narrow sense (M1) by 8.5 per cent in 2019, reaching RO 5.3 billion, compared to the previous year.

The Economic Outlook of Oman also shows that the total deposits in the Sultanate's commercial banks increased by 0.3 per cent in 2019, reaching RO 20.1 billion, compared to the previous year of 2018, where it reached RO 20 billion. This increase is attributed to an increase by 3.9 per cent in the total private sector and an increase by 0.7 per cent in the government sector deposits — ministries and other government agencies, while the deposit of other public establishment decreased by 27.5



The Sultanate's trade balance in 2019 recorded a surplus of RO 5.9 billion, down by 4.7 per cent from the surplus recorded in 2018

per cent in 2019, compared to the previous year.

The report points out that Muscat Securities Market index declined by 7.9 per cent in 2019, reaching 3,981 points, compared to the previous year of 2018. The Shariah Index also declined by 9.4 per cent in 2019, compared to 2018.

The report also states out that the volume of foreign direct investment in the Sultanate till the end of the fourth quarter of 2019 reached RO 14.6 billion, compared to RO 12.7 billion in 2018, while the inflow volume of foreign direct investment till the end of the fourth quarter of 2019 reached RO 1.9 billion.

It shows that the tourism share in GDP increased from 2.2 per cent in 2018 to 2.5 per cent in 2019, while direct value added of the tourism sector increased by 4.1 per cent in 2019, recording RO 717.9 million, compared to RO 689.5 million in 2018. The tourism balance recorded a deficit of RO 256.4 million in 2019, down from the recorded deficit in 2018, reaching RO 19.7 million. The Sultanate's inflation for the base year (2012) rate was 0.1 per cent

in 2019, compared to 0.9 per cent in 2018.

The volume of trade exchange in the Sultanate decreased by 7.8 per cent in 2019, compared to the previous year, reaching about RO 23.9 billion, compared to RO 26 billion in 2018. This decrease was due to a drop in the value of commodity imports by 9.5 per cent, and the commodity exports which declined by 7.2 per cent in 2019, compared to 2018.

The Sultanate's trade balance in 2019 recorded a surplus of RO 5.9 billion, down by 4.7 per cent from the surplus recorded in 2018.

The report also points out that the labour market and employment recorded a decline by 2.5 per cent in 2019, while the total number of workers in the Sultanate in 2019 reached 2.16 million workers, compared to about 2.21 million workers in 2018. The percentage of workers in the private and family sector reached 89 per cent of the total number of workers, compared to only 11 per cent in the government sector.

The Economic Outlook of Oman report points out that, according to the expectations of the Arab Monetary Fund, the Sultanate's GDP growth may decrease by 3.8 per cent due to the impact of the performance of oil and non-oil activities, due to the repercussions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The fourth issue of the Economic Outlook of Oman is available on the website of NCSI: www.ncsi.gov.om.



DIABETES

ALARMING RISE IN NUMBER AT

RISK



SAMUEL KUTTY
@samkuttyvp

Oman is facing a rapidly rising diabetic cases and the number of people affected with it over the coming three decades will grow further.

According to a report published in the *Journal of Diabetes Investigation*, the rising number of people with diabetes will make it challenging for the country to control the ‘silent killer’ if no major preventive interventions are implemented now.

The report, based on a research done in collaboration between Oman’s Ministry of Health and Weill Cornell Medicine-Qatar, investigated and forecast diabetes burden and its associated economic costs up to 2050.

“The type 2 diabetes mellitus epidemic in Oman is expected to increase significantly over the next three decades, consuming nearly one-third of the national health expenditure. The type 2 diabetes mellitus burden is heavily influenced by obesity”, the report points out.

Interventions targeting this single risk factor should be a national priority to reduce and control the burden of type 2 diabetes mellitus in Oman, states the report.

Diabetes mellitus is one of the fastest growing global health challenges of the 21st century. Based on the 2019 International Diabetes Federation (IDF) Diabetes Atlas, 463 million adults aged 20-79 years are estimated to be living with diabetes mellitus today, worldwide, and 700 million are projected to be living with the

condition by 2045.

Specifically, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is estimated to have the highest diabetes mellitus prevalence of all regions in both 2019 and 2045.

The type 2 diabetes mellitus prevalence in Oman was projected to increase within the coming decade by 18.5 per cent, and further by 31.8 per cent between 2030 and 2050.

“Over 2020-2050, Oman will witness a nearly 200 per cent increase in the number of Omanis living with type 2 diabetes mellitus as a result of a growing and ageing population. This will result in type 2 diabetes mellitus consuming 29 per cent of the national health expenditure by the year 2050, which is \$1 out of every \$3 spent on health”, points out the study.

RISK FACTORS

The study titled, “Forecasting the type 2 diabetes mellitus epidemic and the role of key risk factors in Oman up to 2050: Mathematical modelling analyses”, used an age-structured mathematical model to characterize type 2 diabetes mellitus epidemiology and trends in the Sultanate between 1990 and 2050.

With diabetes mellitus being a main concern to policy-makers in Oman, four national and two regional population-based surveys were carried out to estimate the diabetes mellitus prevalence and associated cardiovascular risk factors between 1991 and 2017.

“Oman’s national surveys revealed that diabetes prevalence has been increasing in the past two decades”, said Dr Adhira al

Over 2020-2050, Oman will witness a nearly 200 per cent increase in the number of Omanis living with type 2 diabetes mellitus as a result of a growing and ageing population. This will result in type 2 diabetes mellitus consuming 29 per cent of the national health expenditure by the year 2050, which is \$1 out of every \$3 spent on health

JOURNAL OF
DIABETES
INVESTIGATION

Maawali, Director of the Research and Studies Centre at the Ministry of Health in Oman and co-investigator of the study.

While expressing his concern as the figures were alarming, he said, “We needed to conduct this forecasting study to assess future trends and costs of diabetes in Oman. The findings of the study confirmed our fears. Diabetes prevalence will continue to grow and will reach 24 per cent by 2050. One in every four Omanis will be suffering from diabetes if no major intervention is implemented”.

CASES INCREASED

According to the study, the number of Omanis living with type 2 diabetes mellitus was predicted to increase from 190,489 in 2020 to 282,585 in 2030 and to 570,227 in 2050, whereas the annual number of new type 2 diabetes mellitus cases increased from 17,230 to 25,432 and to 47,559 respectively.

The incidence rate per 1,000 person-years also increased from 8.3 in 2020 to 9.7 in 2030 and to 12.1 in 2050. The absolute number of type 2 diabetes mellitus prevalent and incident cases, as well as the incidence rate per 1,000 person-years was higher among Omani women compared with men.

Assuming continuation of the increasing trend in obesity prevalence as per the survey data, the study projects an increase in obesity prevalence from 35.9 per cent in 2020 to 69.1 per cent in 2050, with the increase most pronounced for women.

“Smoking and physical inactivity prevalence remained stable at 6.6 and 35 per cent, respectively, between 2020 and 2050.

Women had lower smoking prevalence of 0.3 per cent than men with 12.6 per cent between 2020 and 2050.

The less physical inactivity prevalence among women compared with men is higher than men, the report points out.

According to the Annual Report by Oman’s Ministry of Health, the total diabetic cases on its register at the national level stood at 105,317 cases in 2019.

Women constituted 54.3 per cent of a total of 6,430 new diabetes cases registered during 2019 in the Sultanate. About 31 per cent of the cases registered are in the age group between 45 and 49 years followed by those between 40 and 44 years.

The study did not include the expatriate population of Oman, as this analysis was intended for the permanent and stable population of this country.

“Expatriates residing in Oman are not permanent residents, they come to Oman for work through work visas and not immigrant visas, and most often stay for a limited number of years”, it states.

The study suggests that type 2 diabetes mellitus prevention should be implemented at both national and governorate levels with multi-sectorial, governmental and societal support, as it is an emerging threat to social and economic development.

In addition, aiming at reducing the modifiable risk factors for type 2 diabetes mellitus, existing public awareness campaigns and interventions need to be expanded by strengthening the implementation of Oman’s National Policy for Diet, Physical Activity and Health, and introducing legislation on foods and beverages.



UNESCO REGRETS COLLAPSE OF BAIT AL AJAIB

VINOD NAIR

@vinot_nair

UNESCO World Heritage Centre expressed regret and sadness over the collapse of parts of the iconic House of Wonders (Bait Al Ajaib) in Stone Town in Zanzibar on Friday while Oman's Ministry of Heritage and Tourism strongly denied a fake news circulating about the collapse of the iconic monument.

In a statement issued on Saturday, the ministry denied reports that collapse took place after the restoration. "The restoration was not completed and stopped since the beginning of the year due to the coronavirus pandemic," the ministry tweeted.

The ministry said the project is being handled by an Italian company "that bears what is happening at the site as per the



contract and the project has a comprehensive insurance coverage," the statement said.

The ministry also offered condolences to two of the workers

who lost their lives at the time when the building collapsed.

The House of Wonders is one of the outstanding monuments, a property inscribed on the

World Heritage List since 2000. A section of the House of Wonders that collapsed was undergoing renovations and the restoration was funded by Oman's Ministry of

The project is being handled by an Italian company "that bears what is happening at the site as per the contract and the project has a comprehensive insurance coverage"

Heritage and Tourism.

"We are in contact with the Stone Town Conservation and Development Authority (STCDA) which is currently carrying rescue operation and will soon be starting a preliminary assessment of the damage caused by the collapse," said Mechthild Rössler, Director of UNESCO World Heritage Centre in a statement on its website on Friday

"We have confidence that the authorities will carry out the necessary emergency actions and assessments to understand the causes of this damage and propose solutions for the safeguarding of this monument which is an essential component contributing to the Outstanding Universal Value of the site. UNESCO stands ready to support the ongoing efforts and we are with the United Republic of Tanzania in facing this disaster," she added.

Zanzibar's President Hussein Mwinyi arrived at the scene where he was briefed on the rescue mission which was under way at the historic building.

The House of Wonder, a large ceremonial palace built by Sultan Barghash, is one of the town's landmarks among other major buildings that date from the 18th and 19th centuries.

No expatriate lawyers from January 2021

KABEER YOUSUF

@kabeeryousuf

Starting January 1 as many as 600 expatriate lawyers will not be able to represent cases in Omani courts at any level, in accordance with the government efforts to encourage more Omani lawyers to practise in the courts of law.

Oman decided to allow only Omani lawyers to represent cases in front of the honourable judges at Primary, Appeal and Supreme Court as a result of constant requests made by the Omani Lawyers Association with the Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs.

"From January 1, 2021, appearing and pleading before the courts of appeal and



the Supreme Court will be restricted to Omani lawyers, as the time limit granted by the Council of Ministers to non-Omani lawyers to attend and plead before the courts of appeal and the Supreme Court ends on December 31, 2020," Dr Mohammed bin Ibrahim al Zadjali, Chairman, Omani Lawyers Association, told the *Observer*.

Non-Omani lawyers were

not allowed to pursue legal arguments in the various primary courts of Oman since 2009 but were allowed to represent at the Appeals and other higher courts including the Supreme Court.

There are around 600 expat lawyers in Oman courts. They can, however, function as legal advisers, solicitors or legal counsellors, legal sources, writers, clerks or the

like which doesn't require him or her to represent a case in the court, according to Article 67 of the Lawyers Law.

"We would like to thank all non-Omani lawyers for their contributions to the legal profession in the Sultanate since the issuance of the Lawyers Law No 108/1996, and we will continue to benefit from their services where the law permits them

to function."

There are more than 60 law firms, the majority of which are in Muscat Governorate, with 203 offices and 40 companies. North Batinah Governorate came second with 62 offices and 7 firms. Only 112 Omani lawyers are representing their clients at the Supreme Court while more than 254 non-Omani lawyers appear at the same court.

"We are thankful to non-Omani lawyers for their contributions and are expecting many Omani youngsters to become lawyers and enroll in the various upper courts of the Sultanate," Khalifa al Abri, Lawyer, Adviser to Omani Lawyers Association, said.

COVID-19 vaccination begins today

FROM PAGE 1

COLD CHAIN

Given the significance of the cold chain which is considered as one of the major

pillars for the management of the vaccine and ensuring its safety from the country of origin, special refrigerators to ensure that the vaccine is stored at an ultra-low temperature of -80 degrees Celsius in

accordance to the standard recommended by the vaccine manufacturer. Also, the preparedness of all governorates and relevant authorities for the provision of perquisite logistics to carry out the vaccination campaign, has been checked out.

TARASSUD PLUS

An online mechanism has been prepared through Tarassud Plus mobile app, an integrated and developed platform with international standards, to track those who take the vaccine at every location. It will also track vaccine side-effects, if there are any. The Ministry of Health's efforts in this regard included a number of training workshops for the training of the field teams through video conferencing. The workshops were attended by all partners and stockholders in charge of the implementation and follow-up of all vaccine-related processes in all governorates of the Sultanate

Also, the ministry has prepared an intensive media plan to raise public awareness about the vaccine and to refute false propaganda and rumours about the vaccine.

It is noteworthy that the Directorate General of Pharmaceutical affairs and Drug Control issued an approval this month to import Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine for emergency use and protection against the virus to be administered on the age group 16 years and above.

The vaccine was approved by the health authorities in the UK, Canada and the US Food and Drug Administration. — ONA






Tender Announcement

The Internal Tender committee of **Ministry of Social Development** hereby announces the following tender :-

Tender No.	Tender Subject	Grade	Last date for obtaining of tender document	Last date for tender submission	Tender Document Price (non-refundable)
17/2020	Provision of Tools & Equipments for two sensory halls for the Autism National Center building at Al Khoud	Excellent & One	Thursday 14-1-2021 02:00 PM	Thursday 4-2-2021 10:00 AM	R.O. 25/=

- ❖ Specialized Companies, registered with the **Tender Board** may obtain the Tender documents at the Tender Board e-tendering digital portal link (<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>), on **Sunday 27/12/20**.
- ❖ Tender shall be submitted in compliance with the technical specifications and terms along with a local bank warranty at (1%) of the tender value, valid ninety (90) days from the date of e-submission.
- ❖ The original (1%) bank warranty to be submitted at same day of submitting at tender box located in Directorate of Finance & Administration at MOSD HQ.
- ❖ For Inquiry, please contact through the e-tendering website (reg@tenderboard.gov.om) tel. (24402222 or 24166670)

"The lowest or any other tender shall not be binding to the Ministry"

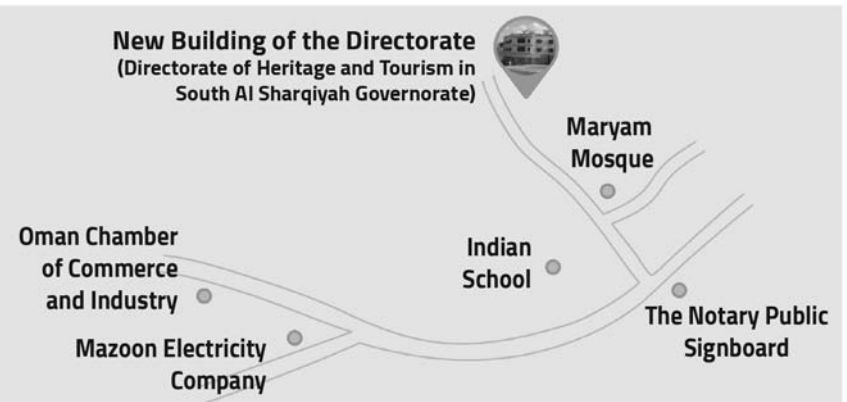
www.mosd.gov.om



Sultanate of Oman
Ministry of Heritage & Tourism

The Shifting of Heritage and Tourism Directorate in South Al Sharqiyah Governorate to a New Building

Ministry of Heritage and Tourism announces its Heritage and Tourism Directorate in South Al Sharqiyah Governorate has shifted to a new building in Skaikrah area in Wilayat Sur. Esteemed customers are requested to refer to the new location as per the following map.





Security forces loyal to the Southern Transitional Council stand next to vehicles as they are deployed in the southern port city of Aden. — Reuters file photo

Yemen’s new govt sworn in after deal

SANAA: Yemeni President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi on Saturday swore in a new government that was formed thanks to a power-sharing deal brokered by Saudi Arabia last year. The 24-strong government announced last week includes members of the separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC) as part of a bid to end a power struggle between loyalists to Hadi and secessionists.

Yemen has been locked in a devastating conflict since 2014. Members of the government were sworn in during a ceremony held in the Saudi capital Riyadh where Hadi is living.

The president called on the new government to act as one team and to prioritise addressing the country’s economic woes. The new government represents Yemen’s northern and southern areas with equal numbers of members from each region. “You are coming from different blocs and geographical areas, but let your main concern be first and foremost the country and its citizens,” Hadi told the members.

“We are in a new stage and depend on you to act as one team,” he added, according to Yemen’s state news agency Saba. The STC, formed in 2017, is backed by the UAE, while Hadi’s government is backed by Saudi Arabia. Both are part of a Saudi-led coalition formed in 2015 to fight the Ansar Allah fighters, who have taken control of Sanaa and other cities in northern Yemen since late 2014. — dpa

Iran extends traffic curfew to 330 cities to sustain virus decline

TEHRAN: Iran has extended a night-time traffic curfew to 330 lower-risk cities in an effort to sustain a recent fall in the number of new coronavirus infections and deaths, state television reported on Saturday.

Alireza Raisi, spokesman for the national coronavirus task force, said on state TV that a curfew running from 9 pm to 4 am, already in place in 108 so-called “orange” or medium-risk cities, will be extended to lower-risk “yellow” cities.

The curfew, during which there is a ban on the use of private cars to reduce the level of contacts between people, resulted in nearly 100,000 fines on one night in the past week.

The Health Ministry said 134 people had died of COVID-19 in the past 24 hours, the lowest since September 13, taking total deaths to 54,574 in the Middle East’s worst-affected country.

There were 5,760 new cases, the lowest since October 22, bringing the total to 1,194,964. Iran said on Thursday it had received approval from US authorities to buy coronavirus vaccines from the World Health Organization-led COVAX alliance. It did not say which vaccines it was buying.

The head of Iran’s Red Crescent Society told state TV that, separately from the government, it was planning to import an unnamed Chinese vaccine. Asked about possible concerns over the



People walk down a street in Tehran. Iran has extended a night-time traffic curfew to 330 lower-risk cities. — Reuters

A curfew running from 9 pm to 4 am, already in place in 108 so-called “orange” or medium-risk cities, will be extended to lower-risk “yellow” cities

drug’s safety, Karim Hemmati said: “All imported vaccines and medicines undergo controls by (Iran’s) Food and Drug Administration... So there is no problem there.”

In televised remarks on Saturday, President Hassan Rouhani reiterated Iran’s complaint that US sanctions had made it difficult to make payments for vaccines. “We arranged money from a bank

to buy vaccines from COVAX but they said you need (US) approval,” he said. Food and medicine are exempt from sanctions that Washington reimposed on Tehran, but the US measures have deterred some foreign banks from processing financial transactions for Iran deals.

TWO CLIMBERS KILLED

Two climbers were killed and two others injured on Friday on a mountain outside Tehran during heavy snowfall and a blizzard, the country’s emergency unit said. Mojtaba Khaledi, spokesman for the state emergency services, told state television the incident occurred on the summit of Kolakchal. One media report said the climbers fell to their deaths. — Reuters



A Palestinian man checks damage caused by an Israeli air strike on Gaza City, on Saturday. — AFP

Hamas says Israeli strike damaged children’s hospital

GAZA CITY: Hamas on Saturday denounced as “barbaric” overnight strikes it said damaged a Gaza children’s hospital, while the Israel army said it was responding to rocket fire from the enclave.

The Israel army said it struck three Hamas targets, including a rocket manufacturing site, underground infrastructure and a military post, after two rockets were fired from the Gaza Strip.

But Gaza’s ruling Hamas in a statement said a “barbaric” Israeli strike had damaged a children’s hospital and a centre for people with special needs.

Medical sources in Gaza said the strikes “lightly wounded” two civilians, including a child.

“Hamas will bear the consequences for all terror emanating from Gaza,” the Israeli army said in a tweet.

Sirens had sounded on

Friday night in the southern port city of Ashkelon and the area surrounding the Gaza Strip, according to an army statement.

“Two rockets were fired from the Gaza Strip towards Israeli territory,” the army statement said, adding that they were intercepted by the Iron Dome Aerial Defence System. There were no reports of damage as a result of the interceptions.

Israeli emergency medical services said several people were treated for shock.

The latest fire from the Palestinian enclave came over a month after one rocket was fired from the coastal strip into Israel.

Hamas seized control of Gaza from rival Palestinian movement Fatah in 2007 in a near civil war. Since then, Hamas has fought three devastating wars with Israel in the coastal territory, where about two million Palestinians live. — AFP

Cards from across Iraq bring cheer to Qaraqosh residents

QARAQOSH, Iraq: It wasn’t Santa on a sleigh, but it was close: just before dusk on Christmas Eve, a busload of volunteers pulled into the Iraqi Christian town of Qaraqosh to deliver holiday happiness.

Under a pinkish sky, they disembarked from their charter bus with cardboard boxes full of Christmas cards, bearing handwritten messages from across Iraq.

“A special greeting to our Christian brothers,” read one card, signed in the overwhelmingly

Muslim southern port city of Basra the previous day.

On foot, members of Iraq’s Tahawer (Dialogue) initiative and other volunteers delivered some 1,400 cards across the northern town, which was ravaged by militant rule after the IS group advanced east across the Nineveh Plains in 2014.

“It’s a beautiful initiative,” said Rand Khaled, after receiving a Christmas card outside the Syriac Catholic Church of the Immaculate Conception in Qaraqosh.



A volunteer delivers to residents of Qaraqosh gift packages on Christmas Eve on Thursday. — AFP

She was dressed in her Christmas Eve finest, with a chic chocolate-coloured coat shielding her from the cold.

“We need initiatives like this every once in a while, because people who don’t know these areas absolutely should get to know them,” Ranad said.

Iraq’s Christians number around 400,000 today, down from some 1.5 million before the US-led invasion toppled longtime dictator Saddam Hussein in 2003.

It is a tiny minority in a country

of 40 million people. The cards came from all over Iraq: from the capital Baghdad and the city of Najaf, from Salahaddin province in the west and the Kurdish city of Dohuk in the far north.

They were packed into dozens of boxes and transported up to 950 kilometres through military checkpoints before reaching Qaraqosh.

“I don’t know how to describe it,” said Nishwan Mohammad, Tahawer’s programme manager.

— AFP

SHORT TAKES

CAIRO

Hospital fire kills 7 coronavirus patients

A fire at a hospital north of Cairo on Saturday killed seven coronavirus patients, security and judicial sources said. The blaze in the intensive care unit of the hospital in Obour district, on the outskirts of Cairo, also injured five other people, the sources said.

It was not immediately clear what caused the fire, the sources said, adding prosecutors had launched an investigation into the incident. Firefighters were dispatched to the facility and stopped the blaze from spreading, local media re-



ported. Egypt has so far registered 130,126 COVID-19 cases, including 7,309 fatalities. Health facilities in the country, like elsewhere, have been strained by the mounting number of infections.

— AFP

ANKARA

Turkey to break economic woes with reforms

Turkey will bring in structural reforms to break the “triangle of evil” of interest rates, inflation and exchange rates, President Tayyip Erdogan said on Saturday, adding Ankara was determined to form a system based on production and employment.

Erdogan promised a slate of judicial and economic reforms last month, leading to expectations of the possible release of politicians, including Kurdish ones, and human rights advocates from jail. Speaking via videolink at a ceremony in Ankara, Erdogan said 2021 would be “the year of democratic and economic reforms” and that efforts to present the reforms to parliament would move “as soon as possible”.



— Reuters

ISTANBUL

Turkey minister in Libya to inspect troops

Turkey’s Defence Minister Hulusi Akar made a surprise trip to Libya on Saturday flanked by top military officers to inspect his country’s troops, the ministry said. Turkish forces backing the UN-recognised government are under strain after strongman Khalifa Haftar called on his fighters to “drive them out, as talks drag on to end a long-running war in the oil-rich nation.

Turkish support for the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli helped stave off an



April 2019 offensive by Haftar. The sides struck a ceasefire agreement in October, setting the stage for elections at the end of next year.

— AFP

In brief

■ SEOUL

SOUTH KOREA LOGS
SECOND-HIGHEST DAILY
TALLY OF COVID CASES

South Korea posted its second-highest daily number of coronavirus cases on Saturday as outbreaks at a prison, nursing homes and churches continued to grow, prompting authorities to plead for a halt to all year-end gatherings.

The Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency (KDCA) said there were 1,132 new coronavirus cases on Friday, not far off the record 1,241 logged a day earlier. "The virus is spreading whenever and wherever it wants", Health Minister Kwon Deok-Cheol told an intra-agency meeting, adding that people were also being infected at small gatherings with friends and acquaintances.

"As we stand at the crossroads of the third wave, how we stop the spread hinges on how we spend this year-end and New Year period." — **Reuters**

■ TOKYO

JAPAN TO HALT FOREIGN
ENTRIES AFTER NEW
VARIANT FOUND

Japan decided on Saturday to temporarily suspend the entry of foreign nationals, local media reported, after it confirmed a total of seven cases of a new coronavirus variant identified in Britain. The suspension will begin on Monday and run until the end of January, Kyodo News reported, citing government officials. Two more people were confirmed on Saturday to have been infected with a new coronavirus variant, while the country reported a national record of more than 3,870 new cases, marking the highest daily increase for the fourth day in a row. The two are a pilot who stayed in Britain and one of his family members, and they have been hospitalised in Tokyo, according to the Health Ministry. The ministry on Friday reported its first cases of a new coronavirus variant identified in Britain. — **dpa**

■ SRINAGAR

INDIA DETAINS 75 IN
KASHMIR AFTER
LOCAL ELECTION

India's government detained at least 75 Kashmiri political leaders and activists to forestall political unrest after an alliance of Kashmir's regional political parties won a local election, leaders and a police official said on Saturday. The District Council election, concluded early this week, was the first such exercise since Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government last year revoked the special status of the region. New Delhi then cracked down on the opposition and rounded up hundreds of people to preempt protests and violence.

The new detentions, including separatist leaders and members of the banned Jamat-e-Islami group, were for preventive custody, said a senior police official, who asked not to be identified in line with official policy. — **Reuters**

Taliban must participate, not overrun
the country: Afghan vice-president

KABUL: Afghanistan's Vice-President Amrullah Saleh has urged the militant Taliban to stop its violent acts against the country's leadership and institutions and participate in government instead. Saleh was speaking at the second meeting of the leadership assembly of the Afghan National Reconciliation Council on Saturday.

Saleh added that Afghanistan is a complicated country, where the dominance of one group was impossible and would only lead to its isolation. The Taliban has always said that the ongoing government in Afghanistan was not Islamic, vowed to establish what the militants call a "pure Islamic government."

Saleh added that the Taliban cannot win the ongoing war by killing tribal leaders, journalists or members of Afghan civil society, as this would further complicate the ongoing conflicts. The country has seen ongoing violence. Last week alone, a journalist, four health workers, the head of an election monitoring organisation and his driver, and a women's rights activist and her brother were assassinated in separate Taliban attacks.

Meanwhile, prominent warlord Marshal Abdul Rashid Dostum said in a statement that the Afghan negotiating team should tell the Taliban team in Doha to accept a democratic government and test its popularity among the people by nominating their candidates for government positions. A former vice-president, Younus Qanoni, criticised the government for its failure to ensure security and argued that something needed to be done about the high level of violence.

Municipal workers clean up debris at the site of a bomb attack in Kabul recently. — **AFP**TWO COPS KILLED
IN BLASTS

Two Afghan policemen were killed as three separate "sticky bombs" exploded in Kabul on Saturday, the latest violence to hit the Afghan capital.

The policemen were killed when a sticky bomb attached to their pick-up truck exploded in a central district of Kabul, police spokesman Ferdaws Faramarz told reporters. A civilian was also

wounded in the blast, he said.

Two security personnel were wounded in another similar bomb attack targeting a second police pick-up truck in a western district of Kabul, Faramarz said. He said a third bomb also exploded in the city but caused no casualties. In recent months, Kabul and several other provinces of Afghanistan have been rocked by deadly violence, including bombings, rocket attacks and targeted killings.



Vice-President Amrullah Saleh said Afghanistan is a complicated country, where the dominance of one group was impossible and would only lead to its isolation

Meanwhile, the Afghan government has expressed "great concern" over video footages released in which Taliban leaders are apparently meeting their wounded fighters and their training camps in cities in Pakistan. "The overt presence and activities of Afghan insurgent elements and their leaders in Pakistani territory clearly violate Afghanistan's national sovereignty", the Afghan Foreign Ministry said. — **dpa/AFP**

China leaders hail
anti-virus drive

BEIJING: China's ruling Communist Party leaders have congratulated themselves on their "extremely extraordinary" success in handling the COVID-19 outbreak domestically, ahead of a World Health Organization probe into the disease's origins.

China faced a barrage of criticism at home and abroad over its initial handling of the virus, which emerged in the central city of Wuhan last December.

China's Politburo, the top decision-making body of the Communist Party, said late on Friday that the party leadership "played a decisive role in leading... China in prevailing over the rare risks and challenges this year."

"At the critical moment... the Party Central Committee took a long-term view... achieving an extremely extraordinary glory in this extremely unusual year", state news agency Xinhua reported, citing a statement issued after the two-day meeting.

China has largely curbed the spread of the virus, and was one of the only major economies to report growth this year. But it has been accused of covering up the initial outbreak, and so contributing to the virus' spread internationally.

At home, Beijing has attempted to stifle criticism by punishing at least eight whistleblowers.

A Chinese citizen journalist who reported on Wuhan's outbreak, Zhang Zhan, has been detained since May and is expected to go on trial on Monday.

Zhang is a former lawyer who travelled to the city in February to report on the chaotic initial

20 new cases
reported

SHANGHAI: Mainland China recorded 20 new COVID-19 cases on Friday, compared with 14 cases the previous day, the country's health authority said on Saturday. The National Health Commission said in its daily bulletin that 12 of the new cases were imported. Of the eight locally transmitted cases, six came from the northeastern province of Liaoning and two from the capital Beijing. The new Beijing cases were from its Shunyi district, which has entered a "wartime state" requiring all residents to undergo testing, the state-owned *China Daily* reported on Saturday. The *People's Daily* reported five people had tested positive after nucleic acid tests were carried out across Beijing's districts of Chaoyang, Shunyi and Tianzhu on Saturday. Additionally, 19 asymptomatic cases were reported on December 25, up from 17 the previous day. — **Reuters**

stages of the outbreak, through livestreams and critical essays widely shared on social media platforms banned in China.

The two-day Politburo meeting comes shortly before an international team of WHO experts is expected to arrive in China to investigate the animal origins of COVID-19, during which trip they will visit Wuhan.

An expert from the team told AFP this week that the investigation was "not about finding a guilty country or a guilty authority", but about "about understanding what happened to avoid that in the future". — **AFP**

Civil society activists participate in a demonstration against the dissolution of the country's parliament, in Kathmandu. — **AFP**Protest against Nepal PM's sudden
dissolution of parliament

KATHMANDU: Nepal's Prime Minister K P Sharma Oli faced a fresh political challenge on Friday as hundreds of opponents protested against his sudden move to dissolve parliament and call elections more than a year ahead of the schedule.

Three former prime ministers joined hundreds of activists who sat on a road near Oli's office demanding he reverse the decisions announced on Sunday, which have triggered deep political unrest in the Himalayan nation just as it grapples with the COVID-19 pandemic. The ex-premiers said Oli had no power to dissolve parliament and that he had violated the constitution.

"We'll organise stronger protests against this dissolution

We'll organise stronger protests against this dissolution by an unrestrained prime minister

PRACHANDA
Former prime minister

by an unrestrained prime minister", said Prachanda, one former prime minister. Oli has rejected their demands and vowed to press ahead with parliamentary elections next year, on April 30 and May 10. It is not uncommon for Nepali polls

to take place over two days.

The prime minister has lost support within his ruling party this year, with some senior members accusing him of sidelining them in making decision and key appointments, and calling for him to step down.

Oli says internal squabbling and a lack of cooperation from his party has paralysed decision-making, forcing him to seek a fresh popular mandate. The Supreme Court is hearing more than a dozen petitions challenging Oli's dissolution of parliament and calling of early elections. It has given the government until January 3 to provide reasons for the dissolution, said court Bhadrakali Pokharel. — **Reuters**

EU readies vaccine rollout as new virus strain spreads

PARIS: Countries around Europe were on Saturday preparing to roll out their first coronavirus vaccines even as a reputedly more contagious variant spreads around the world, forcing some nations back into lockdown.

The impending inoculation campaigns have boosted hopes that 2021 could bring a respite from the pandemic, which has killed more than 1.7 million people since emerging in China late last year.

First doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine arrived in EU countries including hard-hit Italy, Spain and France early on Saturday, ready for distribution to retirement homes and care staff.

“We’ll get our freedom back, we’ll be able to embrace again,” Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio said as he urged his countrymen to get the shot.

But polls show only 57 per cent of Italians intend to get the jab whereas scientists estimate herd immunity can only be reached if 75 to 80 per cent have it.

Vaccinations in all 27 European Union countries are set to begin on Sunday, after regulators approved the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine on December 21.

But a new strain that emerged in Britain and spread rapidly has sent jitters through already overstretched health services as countries from Sweden to Japan have reported cases.

Austria began its third national lockdown on Saturday and



People walk amid lines of lorries queueing at the M20 motorway near Ashford amid COVID-19 outbreak, in Britain, on Saturday. — Reuters

millions also woke to tougher restrictions in Britain, where the vaccine rollout has already begun.

NEW VARIANT

France, Spain and Sweden are among the countries confirming that the new virus strain has reached their shores.

French officials said late on Friday that a Frenchman living in Britain had tested positive after arriving from London, adding that he was not showing symptoms and was isolating.

Four cases were confirmed in Madrid on Saturday, though the

patients were not seriously ill, the Madrid regional government’s deputy health chief Antonio Zapatero said, adding “there is no need for alarm”.

The new strain, which experts fear is more contagious, prompted more than 50 countries to impose travel restrictions on the UK.

Thousands of trucks backed up in southern England, but the bottleneck eased after France lifted a 48-hour entry ban for drivers with a negative coronavirus test.

South Africa has detected a virus mutation in some infected people but on Friday denied

British claims its strain was more infectious or dangerous than the one originating in the UK.

In Australia, there was little sign of the usual rush to the Boxing Day sales in Sydney, with residents largely heeding the state premier’s request they stay home faced with a new virus cluster.

“Even when we entered the store there were less than 10 people,” shopper Lia Gunawan told *The Sydney Morning Herald*.

Across the world, people are being urged to respect social distancing guidelines.

— AFP



Debris litters the road near the site of an explosion in the area of Second and Commerce in Nashville, Tennessee, on Friday. — Reuters

Police search for clues behind mysterious blast in Nashville

TENNESSEE, US: Police and federal agents in Nashville sought clues on Saturday to determine how and why a motor home was blown to pieces in an apparent bombing on Christmas Day that injured three people and damaged dozens of buildings in the heart of America’s country music capital.

The motor home, parked on a downtown street of Tennessee’s largest city, exploded at dawn on Friday moments after police responding to reports of gunfire in the area noticed the recreational vehicle and heard an automated message emanating from it warning of a bomb.

The means of detonation and whether anyone was inside the RV when it blew up were not immediately known, but investigators were examining what they believed might be human remains found in the

vicinity of the blast, police said. Police offered no possible motive, and there was no claim of responsibility, though Nashville Metropolitan Police Department officials called the blast an “intentional act” and vowed to determine its origin.

Agents of the FBI and the US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives were assisting in the probe. “All the windows came in from the living room into the bedroom. The front door became unhinged,” Buck McCoy, who lives on the block where the blast occurred, told local TV station WKRN. “I had blood coming from my face and on my side and on my legs and a little bit on my feet.”

McCoy told CNN that he and some neighbours were returning to the area on Saturday in search of pets they had been forced to leave behind. — Reuters

British Cold War double agent George Blake dies in Moscow

LONDON/MOSCOW: George Blake, who died in Russia on Saturday at the age of 98, was the last in a line of British spies whose secret work for the Soviet Union humiliated the intelligence establishment when it was discovered at the height of the Cold War.

Britain says he exposed the identities of hundreds of Western agents across Eastern Europe in the 1950s, some of whom were executed as a result of his treason. His case was among the most notorious of the Cold War, alongside those of a separate ring of British double agents known as the Cambridge Five.

Unmasked as a Soviet spy in 1961, Blake was sentenced to 42 years in London’s Wormwood

Unmasked as a Soviet spy in 1961, Blake was sentenced to 42 years in London’s Wormwood Scrubs prison

Scrubs prison. In a classic cloak-and-dagger story, he escaped in 1966 with the help of other inmates and two peace activists, and was smuggled out of Britain in a camper van. He made it through Western Europe undiscovered and crossed the Iron Curtain into East Berlin.

He spent the rest of his life in the Soviet Union and then Russia, where he was feted as



a hero. Reflecting on his life in an interview with Reuters in Moscow in 1991, Blake said he had believed the world was on the

eve of Communism. “It was an ideal which, if it could have been achieved, would have been well worth it,” he said.

“I thought it could be, and I did what I could to help it, to build such a society. It has not proved possible. But I think it is a noble idea and I think humanity will return to it.” In a condolence message published by the Kremlin, Russian President Vladimir Putin said Blake was a professional of particular vitality and courage who made an invaluable contribution to global strategic parity and peace. “The memory of this legendary person will be preserved forever in our hearts,” he wrote.

BECOMING A COMMITTED COMMUNIST

Blake was born in Rotterdam in the Netherlands on November 11, 1922, to a Dutch mother and

an Egyptian Jewish father who was a naturalised Briton. He escaped from the Netherlands in World War Two after joining the Dutch resistance as a courier and reached Britain in January 1943. After joining the British navy, he started working for the British Secret Intelligence Service, MI6, in 1944.

After the war, Blake served briefly in the German city of Hamburg and studied Russian at Cambridge University before being sent in 1948 to Seoul where he gathered intelligence on Communist North Korea, Communist China and the Soviet Far East. He was captured and imprisoned when North Korean troops took Seoul after the Korean War began in 1950. — Reuters

SHORT TAKES

BANGUI

Three UN peacekeepers killed in Central Africa

Three UN peacekeepers have been killed by unidentified combatants in the Central African Republic, the United Nations said, as the country prepares for a general election and fighting continues between rebels and government forces. The news came after a rebel coalition called off a ceasefire and said it would resume its march on the capital, as well as the arrival of troops from Russia and Rwanda to shore up the government of the resource-rich country.



“Three peacekeepers from Burundi were killed and two others were wounded” following attacks on UN troops and Central African national defence and security forces, the UN said in a statement on Friday. — AFP

ROME

Archaeologists uncover ancient street food shop

Archaeologists in Pompeii, the city buried in a volcanic eruption in 79 AD, have made the extraordinary find of a frescoed hot food and drinks shop that served up the ancient equivalent of street food to Roman passersby. Known as a *termpolium*, Latin for hot drinks counter, the shop was discovered in the archaeological park’s Regio V site, which is not yet open to the public, and unveiled on Saturday. Traces of nearly 2,000-year-old food were found in some of the deep terracotta jars containing hot food which the shop keeper lowered into a counter with circular holes. The front of the counter was decorated with brightly coloured frescoes, some depicting animals that were part of the ingredients in the food sold. — Reuters



WASHINGTON

Execution of woman on death row delayed

A US federal judge said that the Justice Department broke the law when it rescheduled the execution of the only woman on federal death row last month, potentially pushing her execution into Democratic President-elect Joe Biden’s new administration.

US District Judge Randolph Moss on Thursday vacated an order from the Federal Bureau of Prisons that had rescheduled convicted murderer Lisa Montgomery’s execution to January 12. Her execution had originally



been scheduled for December 8, but Moss agreed last month to delay after Montgomery’s attorneys fell ill due to COVID-19 and were unable to file a timely clemency petition on her behalf. — Reuters

Stinging rebuke delivered with a smile and a velvet glove?

You all know colloquialisms, and idiomatic expressions, even if you do not know or understand much of them. They can be, perhaps, defined as, “A word or phrase that has a figurative meaning, is not formal or literary, and is used in ordinary, familiar, informal, or conversational interaction.” A rep- rimand delivered only as a scolding, it is offered therefore casually, yet with subtlety, wit and measured intent they are linguistic and lexiconic examples of the most sophisticated understand- ing of one’s language, culture and sen- sitivities.

Most are regionally, or locality in- spired, adding colour and a casual perspective to a conversation that is often very much not, but allowing the speaker latitude and intent, where none may be offered if the language of the utterance was more direct, less hu- morous, and perhaps, more confronta- tional. In some societies and cultures, they are perhaps more widely known as ‘sayings’, which allow one to be a little less formal, using pithy, or com- mon language or expressions which will appear at face value to offer advice or guidance, but in fact are a critique or rebuke.

William Strunk wrote of the most effective colloquialisms that they should not call attention to themselves



Ray Petersen
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IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS LIKE “DON’T THROW OUT THE BABY WITH THE BATHWATER”, HINT AT AMUSEMENT, YET INVITE ONE TO THINK AGAIN BEFORE ACTING

by putting them in quotation marks as “To do so is to put on airs, as though you are inviting the reader to join you in a select society of those who know better.” An idiomatic expression, in fact, may be exactly that! When some- one looks at you, over the top of their glasses, with their brows raised quiz- zically, they are saying “You what?” or “Really?” without saying a word. It is so measured, yet so clear, so intimate, and so... comedic.

Personally, I love the verbal and societal gymnastics of a colloquialism laden exchange, common in satirical English comedy shows such as Black- adder, which starred comedy genius Rowan Atkinson, and was written by Ben Elton and Richard Curtis, with classic lines such as... “I lost closer friends than Georgie the last time I was deloused.” Or... “There hasn’t been a war run this badly since Olaf the hairy, King of all the Vikings, ordered 80,000 battle helmets with the horns on the inside.” Or this absolute stunner... “You wouldn’t recognize a subtle plan if it painted itself purple and danced naked on a harpsichord singing ‘subtle plans are here again.’”

These, though clever and witty, are created to entertain, to make us laugh, whereas everyday idioms tend towards greater subtlety and purpose, and will

be used a million times a year as a mild rebuke of some purpose or an- other. Their value lies in their impact often being delayed, eliciting an im- mediate banal response, but causing a hesitant reflection a short time later, as to whether there was indeed a barb attached to the prior conversation, and thereby achieving its objective of ‘striking home,’ and making the recip- ient think twice. Oh, how I love such delicacy.

Idiomatic expressions like “Don’t throw out the baby with the bath- water”, hint at amusement, yet invite one to think again before acting, as it will be too late for regrets afterwards. There is this inherent rebuke, yet de- livered intimately, seeking wise coun- sel. As H G Wells said, “He pressed a passing colloquialism into his service”, thus clearly understanding the absence of originality, while praising the pur- poseful nature of the conversational interaction.

An idiomatic expression then is a message in a bottle, often meant to be specific, to strike at the opponent as a rapier thrust, intended only for their understanding, and perhaps, not for others within hearing, or not within their realm of understanding, due to the specific nature and topicality, even the intent of the comment.

CUT TO SIZE

Regulators ground tycoon’s tech dreams

HELEN ROXBURGH

Jack Ma, the ebullient and unconventional bil- lionaire founder of tech giant Alibaba and the totem of China’s entrepreneurial brilliance, now finds himself up against a Communist leadership seemingly intent on hacking back his empire and issuing a lesson that no one is bigger than the party.

Ma, the most recognisable face in Asian busi- ness with a fortune estimated at around \$58 bil- lion, has already faced the ignominy of having the world’s biggest-ever IPO spiked by Chinese regulators days before its launch.

The November share sale was set to see his wealth bulge to more than \$70 billion in a record- breaking listing of the group’s Ant Group finan- cial arm in Hong Kong and Shanghai.

But Chinese regulators abruptly pulled the deal, over what initially appeared to be concerns about the company’s reach into the finances of hundreds of millions of Chinese people.

It was a brutal public rebuke to Ma, who was then called in for dressing down by regulators and has since evaporated from the spotlight he

normally so ably commands.

Now China’s poster boy for en- terprise finds him- self again caught in the glare of the Communist-run state, with Thurs- day’s announce- ment of an anti- monopoly probe into Alibaba, the tech giant he founded, and the summoning of Ant Group by reg- ulators.

It is another public relations catastrophe for Ma, a Communist Party member, whose rags- to-riches backstory has come to embody a self- confident generation of Chinese entrepreneurs ready to shake up the world.

Charismatic, diminutive and fast-talking, Ma was cash-strapped and working as an English teacher when someone showed him the Internet on a 1990s trip to the United States — and he was hooked.

He toyed with several Internet-related projects, before convincing a group of friends to give him \$60,000 to start a new business in 1999 in China, then still emerging as an economic giant.

Alibaba was the result, an e-commerce empire founded from his bedroom in Hangzhou and which started an online shopping revolution and grew into a fintech titan.

The company changed the shopping habits of hundreds of millions of Chinese people, and catapulted Ma into the global limelight.

“The first time I used the Internet, I touched on the keyboard and I find ‘well, this is some- thing I believe, it is something that is going to change the world and change China”, Ma once told CNN.

In 2014, Alibaba listed in New York in a world- record \$25 billion offering.

Ant Group, in which Ma is the largest share- holder, is now the world-largest digital payments platform, claiming 731 million monthly users on the Alipay app.

But there are fears it reaches too deeply into the pockets of ordinary Chinese with its micro- loans, investment and insurance products.

Ma long enjoyed an image as the benevolent and unconventional billionaire. — AFP

ELECTION ALLEGATION

Trump seeks to erase stain of Russia probe

PAUL HANDLEY

WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump’s pardons of five people from his 2016 election campaign caps his effort to bleach out the stain on his tenure of the Russia interference investigation.

The US leader never accepted the conclusions of US intelligence and special counsel Robert Mueller that Moscow intervened in the election four years ago to aid his upset victory, calling it a “hoax” and “fake news.”

He has also claimed that his predecessor Barack Obama and a so-called “deep state” of anti- Trump officials conspired with the investigation to destroy his presidency from the beginning.

Those pardoned in the past month — Michael Flynn, Paul Manafort, Roger Stone, George Papadopoulos and Alex Van Der Zwaan — pleaded guilty or were convicted at trial as a result of Mueller’s probe into whether the Trump campaign conspired with Moscow.

For Trump, the pardons delivered a rebuke to those alleging his election victory was tainted by Russian help.

Flynn, his former national security advisor who admitted lying to the FBI about secret contacts with Russians, was victim of a “relentless, partisan pursuit of an innocent man”, Trump said as he announced the pardon on November 25.

The probe into Flynn, he said, was part of “a coordinated attempt to subvert the election of 2016.”

On Tuesday Trump pardoned Papadopoulos — a campaign adviser who had tried to hide his contacts



THE US LEADER NEVER ACCEPTED THAT MOSCOW INTERVENED IN THE ELECTION FOUR YEARS AGO TO AID HIS UPSET VICTORY, CALLING IT A “HOAX” AND “FAKE NEWS”

with individuals linked to Russian intelligence — and Van Der Zwaan, who also lied to investigators.

And on Wednesday Trump announced the pardons of political consultant Stone and campaign chairman Manafort, both convicted of obstructing the investigations and lying. Manafort was also jailed over multiple financial fraud charges.

All, the White House said, had been victimized by Mueller.

“Mr Manafort has endured years of unfair treatment and is one of the most prominent victims of what

has been revealed to be perhaps the greatest witch hunt in American history”, the White House said.

Trump has fought hard since coming to office, attacking his own Justice Department and threatening officials’ jobs, to convince the public that the allegations about Russian interference were groundless and politically motivated.

That was seen as the main reason why, in November 2018, he fired attorney general Jeff Sessions, who supported Mueller, and replaced him with Bill Barr. — AFP



Shihab to lead technical coaching staff of Al Salam volleyball team from early 2021

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DEC 26

The Northern Batinah team, Al Salam, appointed the experienced volleyball coach and International lecturer, Shihab al Din Ahmed al Riyami as the head of the technical coaching staff. The newly appointed head of technical staff will begin his career in January as the domestic volleyball 2020-2021 season will start. Oman's international volleyball lecturer will provide the detailed technical programme to the head coach Tunisian Haitham al Waslati, planning the strategies for the team, supervising the team's appointment of the

national and professional players and assistance to the coaching staff in all the technical aspects. Al Salam is the defending champion of the Oman volleyball first division league as they had beat Al Kamil W'al Wafi 3-2 in the final match in last March. One of the top assignments given to the recently appointed head of technical staff is to defend the title. The league will start in January with participation of seven teams including Seeb, Al Salam, Masirah, Bahla, Suhar, Al Kamil W'al Wafi and Ahli Sidab. The league will be played in one round only with 25 matches. The top two teams in the table order will clash in the concluding

match to lift the league shield. The board of Al Salam strengthen the squad for the new season as they renewed the contract of many top players including Raed al Hashmi, Ahmed al Shizawi, Khalid al Maqbali, Ali al Resi, Ahmed al Hosni, Falah al Jaradi and Ibrahim al Mazayni. The appointment of the professional players will be announced later. Speaking after being appointed as head of technical staff, Shihab al Din Ahmed al Riyami said: "I am pleased to be back at the domestic league and to lead Al Salam club in a new challenge. This return to the national clubs after an absence of eight months due to my other duties in regional

The newly appointed head of technical staff will begin his career in January as the domestic 2020-2021 season will start by then



and international associations and federations. I thanked Al Salam club's board for their confidence and trust to lead the coaching staff of the team and I am looking forward for a bright season for Al Salam." Commenting on the team's preparation for the new season, he responded: "The team started the technical and tactical preparation for all the local and foreign tournaments. "Our top domestic assignments are focused on defending our title for the league and to win the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth Cup. Also, the team is working hard to impress in the overseas participation including the GCC and Arabian

championships," he added. The international volleyball lecturer concluded his statement on affirming that the domestic teams requested to do the right development for the national volleyball. "I am keen to provide all my technical experience towards the development of the domestic volleyball through the right improvement in the players technical performance as they will represent the national teams in the external events. Also, working to improve the development of the volleyball infrastructure at the clubs as they are the venues to prepare the future generations for Oman's volleyball future," he ended.



Sanuth Ebrahim of Arm Alpha

Ubaid, Sanuth star in Alpha victory

MUSCAT: Arm Alpha rode on young Ubaid Ullah's fabulous 4 for 26 and Sanuth Ebrahim's solid 56 to beat Renaissance by 6 wickets in a Premier Division 50-over League clash at OC Turf 1 in Al Amerat on Friday. Renaissance failed to capitalise on its decision to bat first, getting dismissed for a meagre 131 in the 41st over due largely to brilliant bowling by Ubaid and Ahmed Fayyaz Butt who picked up 3 for 21. Oman all-rounder Sufyan Mahmood top scored with a fighting 51.

Brief Scores (Premier Division 50 overs): Renaissance 131 all out in 40.1 overs (Sufyan Mahmood 51 - 7x4, Fawad Ali 25 - 1x4, Ubaid Ullah 4-26, Ahmed Fayyaz Butt 3-21) lost to Arm Alpha 132 for 4 in 30.4 overs (Sanuth Mohamed 56 - 5x4, 1x6, Rafi Ullah 2-36) by 6 wickets. **Murad bats Sarco to victory** Murad Khan's magnificent 88 off 59 powered Sarco to a comfortable 76-run win over Ernst & Young in a 50-over A Division League game at OC Turf 2 on Friday. **Brief Scores (A Division 50 overs):** Sarco 281 for 7 in 50 overs (Murad Khan 88 - 7x4, 5x6, Shahbaz Khan 28 - 2x4, 2x6, Zahid Hafiz 27 - 3x4, 1x6,

Amir Hussain 2-48, Sultan Ahmed 2-47) beat Ernst & Young 205 all out in 44.4 overs (Sultan Ahmed 51 - 5x4, Farhan Afzal 41 - 2x4, 2x6, Ajay Menon 3-25, Guru Kotian 3-41, Dileepa Srilal 2-25, Sandip Patel 2-47) by 76 runs. **Arif, Ihsan help Orient to big win** Yet another splendid hundred by Arif Hussain and Ihsan Khan's superb 6 for 41 helped Orient Travels/Gitacs to a big 134-run victory against LC Tech in a 30-over B Division match at Muscat Municipality ground 1 on Friday. Apart from Arif's 100 off 65, Orient Travel's 239 for 7 included

Rafique al Balushi's vital 48 off 55. Rajesh Shetty and Noushad Haneefa took two wickets each. **Brief Scores (B Division):** Orient Travels/Gitacs 239 for 7 in 30 overs (Arif Hussain 100 - 15x4, Rafique al Balushi 48 - 4x4, Rajesh Shetty 2-39, Noushad Haneefa 2-49) beat LC Tech 105 all out in 17.3 overs (Abdul Rauf 21 - 2x4, Rahul Rajeev 20 - 2x4, 1x6, Ihsan Khan 6-41, Gurvir Singh 2-14, Arif Hussain 2-27) by 134 runs. **Suhaib's ton lifts OCT Al Hail to victory** In another B Division game, a splendid 104 by Suhaib Abdul Ghani steered OCT Al Hail A to an

exciting 5-wicket victory against PDO RC at Muscat Municipality ground 2. OCT Al Hail rode on Suhaib's terrific knock to chase the total down in the 29th over, scoring 188 for 5. Abdul Ghani batted well too for his 31 off 35. **Brief Scores (B Division):** PDO RC 184 for 9 in 30 overs (Aditya Sapra 49 - 4x4, Asadullah Asghar 42 - 3x4, 1x6, Nadeem Ahmed 41 - 5x4, Nadhir Ghulam 2-26, Abdul Ghani al Balushi 2-30, Hisham Shafi 2-35, Ismail Al Balushi 2-50) lost to OCT Al Hail 'A' 188 for 5 in 28.4 overs (Suhaib Abdul Ghani 104 - 13x4, Nadeem Ahmed Karamat Ali 2-31) by 5 wickets.

Gritty Williamson lifts NZ after early Pakistan strike



You expect that on a day one wicket. It definitely flattened out and it's probably a little bit two-paced at times and I'm sure it's only going to get more uneven over the next couple of days

ROSS TAYLOR
New Zealand batsman

New Zealand's Kane Williamson bats during the first day of the first Test against Pakistan at the Bay Oval in Mount Maunganui. — AFP

MOUNT MAUNGANUI, NZ: An unbeaten 94 by a gritty Kane Williamson had New Zealand at 222 for three in the face of a concerted Pakistan attack at stumps on day one of the first Test in Mount Maunganui on Saturday.

Henry Nicholls was the other not out batsman on 42 as New Zealand recovered from being 13 for two after Pakistan's baby-faced destroyer Shaheen Afridi removed openers Tom Latham and Tom Blundell cheaply on a green, seaming wicket.

In a 120-run stand, filled with determination and concentration in difficult conditions, Williamson and Ross Taylor pulled New Zealand back into the game.

Taylor hit 10 fours and a six as he attacked the bowling while Williamson took a more conservative approach.

"Obviously we're happy with where we're at", Taylor said.

"You had to try and take them on or just try and get through it.

"You expect that on a day one wicket. It definitely flattened out and it's probably a little bit two-paced at times and I'm sure it's only going to get more uneven over the next couple of days."

After Afridi split the pair with a masterful piece of bowling to remove Taylor for 70, Williamson



Pakistan captain Mohammad Rizwan (left) and New Zealand captain Kane Williamson hold the trophy prior to the start of the first day of the first Test at the Bay Oval in Mount Maunganui. — AFP

and Henry Nicholls added a further 89.

Taylor was set up to fall by Afridi who bowled full, short then a bouncer in successive deliveries and followed with a good-length, rising ball that Taylor could not resist slashing at.

But he succeeded only in feathering the ball to Mohammad Rizwan behind the stumps.

The 20-year-old Afridi, standing 1.99 metres (6ft 6in) tall, also removed Latham for four and Blundell for five to end the day with three for 55.

Mohammad Abbas, while not taking a wicket, kept the batsmen

pinned down and conceded only 25 runs off his 21 overs.

Taylor, in his 104th Test, could not help but be impressed with Afridi playing his 12th.

"When the ball was 50 overs old it was still swinging and he could pick and choose when he used it and he's got a slippery bumper. He's only going to get better and Pakistan are going to see a very good bowler in years to come", Taylor said.

Afridi's opening onslaught had New Zealand at two for 13 before Williamson and Taylor combined in a century partnership, their 10th together.

SCOREBOARD	
NEW ZEALAND FIRST INNINGS	
T Latham	4
T Blundell	5
K Williamson (not out)	94
R Taylor c Rizwan b Afridi	70
H Nicholls (not out)	42
Extras: (LB-3, NB-4)	7
Total: (For 3 wks, 87 overs)	222
Fall of wickets: 1-4, 2-13, 3-133.	
Bowling: Afridi 20-5-55-3, Abbas 21-11-25-0, Ashraf 13-5-30-0, N Shah 15-1-51-0, Y Shah 16-2-56-0, S Masood 2-1-2-0	

By stumps, Williamson had faced 243 deliveries after being in the middle for all but the first three balls before Latham was dismissed.

The closest Pakistan came to dismissing the New Zealand captain came before lunch with Williamson on 18 when Shan Masood spilled a difficult one-handed chance low to his left.

Naseem Shah was the unfortunate bowler and the teenaged quick was to suffer again when he tempted Nicholls, on six, to hook a short ball only for Mohammad Abbas, waiting for the catch at long leg, to drop the regulation chance.

It was a continuation of the good fortune going Nicholls' way after he was dropped five times on his way to 174 in his last innings against the West Indies. — AFP



Pakistan's Shadab Khan bowls during the third T20I against New Zealand at McLean Park in Napier. — AFP FILE PHOTO

Pakistan's Shadab out of NZ, SA tours with injury

WELLINGTON: Pakistan all-rounder Shadab Khan will miss the ongoing Test series in New Zealand, as well as the home series against South Africa beginning next month, due to a thigh injury, the team said on Saturday.

The 22-year-old spin bowling all-rounder sustained the injury during Tuesday's final Twenty20 match in Napier and was initially ruled out of the opening Test against New Zealand, which got underway at Mount Maunganui earlier on Saturday.

Scans showed he would be sidelined for several weeks.

"The MRI reports have

confirmed it is a fresh injury and not the one that had sidelined him from the Zimbabwe series last month", team doctor Sohail Saleem said in a statement.

"Shadab will undergo a six-week rehabilitation programme during which he will have weekly ultrasound scans.

"After the competition of the six-week period, the medical panel will access and evaluate the injury before making a call on Shadab's return to competitive cricket."

South Africa will tour Pakistan next month for the first time in 13 years to play two tests and three Twenty20 Internationals. — Reuters

De Silva injured after leading Sri Lankan revival against SA

CENTURION, South Africa: Dhananjaya de Silva led a Sri Lankan batting revival before being forced to retire hurt on the first day of the first Test match against South Africa at SuperSport Park in Centurion on Saturday.

Sri Lanka were 212 for three at tea.

De Silva made 79 off 105 balls before pulling up clutching his left hip as he completed a run. He had treatment on the field before being taken off on a motorised stretcher.

De Silva and Dinesh Chandimal (50 not out) stabilised the Sri Lankan innings after a helter-skelter start in which they lost their first three wickets for 54 runs inside 11 overs. The pair added 131 runs before De Silva's injury.

De Silva played some flowing strokes in hitting 11 fours and a six, while Chandimal played an anchor role, reaching his half-century off 116 balls in the last over before tea.

Sri Lankan captain Dimuth Karunaratne capitalised on

some loose bowling from South African debutant Lutho Sipamla to score 22 off 20 balls before he was bowled off an inside edge by Lungi Ngidi with the total on 28 in the fifth over.

Kusal Mendis mistimed a pull shot and was caught at mid-on off Anrich Nortje before Kusal Perera played a wild slash at Wiaan Mulder and was caught behind in the next over.

South Africa were fielding their most inexperienced fast bowling attack since 1993, with Ngidi, Nortje, Sipamla and all-rounder Mulder having just 12 caps and 35 wickets between them.

On a pitch which offered bounce and early movement, the bowlers struggled to find consistency, with Sipamla leaking 28 runs in three overs with the new ball. Sipamla was playing ahead of the uncapped Glenton Stuurman, who had been expected to play but was judged not to have recovered fully from a thigh injury.

— AFP



Sri Lanka's Dhananjaya de Silva (right) plays a shot as South Africa's captain and wicketkeeper Quinton de Kock (left) looks on during the first day of the first Test against South Africa at SuperSport Park in Centurion. — AFP

Gutsy India bounce back to skittle Australia

MELBOURNE: A resilient India bounced back from their embarrassing first Test exploits to bundle out Australia for just 195 and take a grip on the second Test in Melbourne after a riveting opening day on Saturday.

After their horror show in Adelaide last week, where they lost by eight wickets and were skittled for 36 in their second innings, the tourists were desperate to start well.

And they delivered after Australian captain Tim Paine won the toss and chose to bat in front of 27,615 socially-distanced fans, just short of the maximum allowed under coronavirus restrictions at the Melbourne Cricket Ground.

On a pitch offering turn and bounce, the hosts found it hard going against a high-quality attack led by Jasprit Bumrah (4-56), Ravi Ashwin (3-35) and the impressive Mohammed Siraj (2-40), making his debut for the injured Mohammed Shami.

Marnus Labuschagne top-scored with 48 but that was as good as it got.

It left Indian openers Shubman Gill, also on debut, and Mayank Agarwal needing to negotiate 40 minutes at the end of the day.

Agarwal was not up to the task, trapped lbw by a Mitchell Starc in-swinging in the first over.

Gill was dropped on five by Labuschagne but otherwise looked comfortable, smacking five boundaries to reach 28 and help steer India to 36 for one at close with the experienced Cheteshwar Pujara unbeaten on seven.

“In the first session we were just trying to bowl in the rights areas,” said Bumrah, who praised Siraj for “bowling his heart out”.

He added that the plan on Sunday was for the batsmen to be positive, rather than conservative.

“We’re just looking to control the controllables, not being reckless but being confident.”

With Ajinkya Rahane captaining the side in place of Virat Kohli, who has returned home for the birth of his first child, India got off to a perfect start, getting Burns (0), Matthew Wade (30) and Smith (0) before lunch.

SCOREBOARD

Australia first innings

J Burns c Pant b Bumrah	0
M Wade c Jadeja b Ashwin	30
M Labuschagne c Gill b Siraj	48
S Smith c Pujara b Ashwin	0
T Head c Rahane b Bumrah	38
C Green lbw Siraj	12
T Paine c Vihari b Ashwin	13
M Starc c Siraj b Bumrah	7
P Cummins c Siraj b Jadeja	9
N Lyon lbw Bumrah	20
J Hazlewood (not out)	4
Extras (B-10, NB-3, W-1)	14
Total (all out, 72.3 overs)	195
Fall of wickets: 1-10, 2-35, 3-38, 4-124, 5-134, 6-155, 7-155, 8-164, 9-191.	
Bowling: Bumrah 16-4-56-4, Yadav 12-2-39-0, Ashwin 24-7-35-3, Jadeja 5.3-1-15-1, Siraj 15-4-40-2.	

India first innings

M Agarwal lbw Starc	0
S Gill (not out)	28
C Pujara (not out)	7
Extras (NB-1)	1
Total (For 1 wkt, 11 overs)	36
Fall of wickets: 0-1.	
Bowling: Starc 4-2-14-1, Cummins 4-1-14-0, Hazlewood 2-0-2-0, Lyon 1-0-6-0.	

It left Australia in trouble but Labuschagne rode his luck, surviving two review decisions, to lead a recovery, putting on 86 with Travis Head (38).

Head had a nervous start but grew in confidence before Bumrah enticed an edge which carried to Rahane at gully, sparking a collapse.

Labuschagne looked set for a ninth half-century but a brilliant catch by Gill ended his vigil and handed Siraj his first Test wicket.

All-rounder Cameron Green ground out 12 before he too fell to Siraj, then an excellent catch by Hanuma Vihari off Ashwin accounted for Paine (13).

Nathan Lyon hit a cameo 20 but Australia’s tail otherwise failed to wag.

STILL IN GAME

“We had probably three innocuous dismissals that we probably didn’t need to, frustrating dismissals and they were guys who were set and in,” said Labuschagne.

“Just need to be better there... that whoever gets in on the day, whether myself or anyone else in the top order, we make sure we get big scores.”

But he added: “I think we’re (still) in the game.”

With David Warner still injured, the hosts went into the clash unchanged, with Burns opening alongside Wade. — AFP



India's Jasprit Bumrah celebrates after dismissing Nathan Lyon of Australia during day one of the second Test against Australia at The MCG. – Reuters

Bereaved India paceman Siraj savours emotional Test debut

MELBOURNE: India paceman Mohammed Siraj was urged by his captain Virat Kohli and his mother to stay in Australia and push for selection in the Test side rather than head home to grieve with his family following the death of his father last month.

On Saturday, at a sun-bathed Melbourne Cricket Ground, Siraj was rewarded for his tough decision as he took two wickets on an emotional debut to help India bowl Australia out for 195 on day one of the Boxing Day Test.

Prior to Mohammed Shami’s injury, Hyderabad native Siraj had no assurances he would feature at all in the four-Test

series but he hit the pitch hard in the tour matches to put himself at the front of the queue.

The door opened when Shami suffered an arm fracture in the series opener, and Siraj found himself thrust into a much-changed team needing to respond to the eight-wicket humiliation within three days at Adelaide Oval.

Siraj had to bide his time on Saturday, as stand-in skipper Rahane Ajinkya opted for spinner Ravichandran Ashwin as first change bowler on a moist wicket in the morning.

The captain’s call proved a sound one, as Ashwin took two wickets to leave Australia shaky



India's Mohammed Siraj celebrates with Ajinkya Rahane after dismissing Australia's Marnus Labuschagne during day one of the second Test at The MCG. – Reuters

at 65 for three at lunch.

Siraj was finally thrown the ball after lunch and made his presence felt with a bouncer that struck Marnus Labuschagne on the helmet.

Though wicketless from his first spell, Siraj returned to remove danger man Labuschagne for 48, helped by fellow debutant Shubman Gill’s fine catch at backward square leg.

Siraj then trapped Cameron Green lbw for 12 with a ball that nipped back in after lulling the young all-rounder with a number of deliveries that moved away.

With Ishant Sharma and Shami sidelined, there were fears in India that pacemen Jasprit

Bumrah and Umesh Yadav would have to shoulder too big a burden over the remainder of the series but Siraj’s special day renewed hope the tourists might have the resources to claw their way back in Melbourne.

After India went to stumps at 36 for one, Bumrah, who led India’s bowling with four wickets, praised Siraj for his impressive support role.

“Playing his first international (test) match, he bowled really well and he showed confidence of using all his skills,” he said. “That’s a very heartening sign for us and hopefully he continues to play like this.”

— Reuters





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Port of Duqm set for full-fledged operations in 2021

NEW PHASE: Starting in 2021, Port of Duqm will ramp up its cargo handling capabilities to cater to new service sectors, as well as develop its existing portfolio

MUSCAT: Port of Duqm Company (PDC) is working in conjunction with the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones to tender out a new set of construction packages that when implemented will enable the maritime hub to operate at full capacity.

Starting in 2021, Port of Duqm will ramp up its cargo handling capabilities to cater to new service sectors, as well as develop its existing portfolio. In addition to full-fledged containerised operations and fishing vessel handling capabilities, the maritime gateway is also poised to boost mineral exports, according to a top official of the port.

Reggy Vermeulen, CEO, said the port is set to receive a pair of Ship to Shore (STS) cranes as part of investments in a modern Container Terminal suitably equipped to handle mega ships.

Port of Duqm tower.

Subsequently arrivals of new cranes will help boost the port's handling capability to 35 container moves per hour, which equates to a capacity of one million containers

per annum.

Vermeulen said the port is working closely with the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ)

to offer an integrated package to potential international investors aimed at positioning Duqm as an industrial and logistics hub — a move that will spark job creation

and economic benefits.

By the end of the third quarter of 2020, Duqm Port had achieved steady growth in cargo throughput, reaching RO 379

million in value, compared to RO 174 million for the same period in 2019.

As many as 607 ships had called at the port during the first nine months of the year, versus 498 ships in 2019.

Of the commercial berth's total length of 2,250 metres, around 1,600 metres are earmarked for two Container Terminals offering a combined capacity of 3.5 million TEUs per annum.

Also planned is a 300-metre-long dry bulk terminal with a capacity of about 5 million metric tonnes per year, and a 425-metre-long multipurpose terminal for cargoes totalling 800,000 metric tonnes per year.

Future capacity additions will boost container handling volumes to over 20 million TEUs per year, he noted.

Also included in the port area is an Oil Terminal which is designed and equipped to provide services to refining and petrochemical investments at the SEZ. Separately, a 980-metre-long government berth currently housing offices and buildings serving Royal Oman Yachts, the Sultan's Special Force and the Royal Navy of Oman (RNO). The port also offers 2,000 hectares of land for logistics and industrial related investments. — ONA

Work on Sur boatyard, labour township to start early next year

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 26

Construction work is set to commence on a number of industrial, economic and infrastructure projects at Sur Industrial City early in 2021.

The private sector led investments include a boatyard complex, a residential township for the industrial park's labour force, and a new sewage treatment plant.

"More investment opportunities will be announced in 2021 for the private sector in health and hotel support services, and vehicle/truck maintenance centre," said Eng Abdulqadir bin Salim al Balushi, Director General of Sur Industrial City.

Investments in Sur Industrial City now total RO 2.045 billion, up 0.67 per cent compared to the same period in 2019. The number of workforce at the industrial city increased to 4,111 individuals with Omanisation at 49 per cent. The total number of localised projects reached 127 by mid-2020, and the total area of Sur Industrial City reached 36.1 million sqm, which makes it the largest industrial city in terms of area, he said.

The Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn) also plans to support industrial innovation projects and business incubators, the official said.

"An initiative will be launched by Sur Industrial City in cooperation with a private company in the industrial city to establish a business incubator and offer the services of Industrial Innovation Centre at Sur Industrial City," Al Balushi noted.

The official was speaking during the conclusion of an initiative to explore small-scale investment opportunities linked to major industries operating in the industrial city. Supported by Oman LNG, Oman India Fertiliser Company (OMIFCO) and Phoenix Power Company, this initiative aims at creating value added projects targeted at major factories with a view to promoting a circular economy and boosting supply chain efficiency.

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

The Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Duqm was the focus of a high-profile visit led by Abdulsalam Mohammed al Murshidi, President — Oman Investment Authority (OIA) last week, which underscored the emerging hub's increasing importance as a key pillar in the Authority's vision to support the Omani government's economic diversification goals.

The tour covered a slew of projects — some already operational, others in various stages of development — that embody the Authority's efforts to drive economic development in a number of non-oil sectors.

Set up in June this year following the merger of sovereign wealth funds — the State General Reserve Fund (SGRF) and Oman Investment Fund (OIF) — the restructured Oman Investment Authority (OIA) has the mandate to, among other things, spearhead Oman's economic recovery amid a slowdown wrought by low international oil prices and compounded by the coronavirus pandemic. The Authority owns and manages all of the government's public assets (with the exception of Petroleum Development Oman) worth an estimated \$18 billion.

Among the many stops on

the OIA President's tour of the SEZ was Karwa Motors, which is developing a first of its kind bus assembly plant at the SEZ. Karwa Motors is a strategic partnership between Qatar Transport, the national transport company in Qatar with a 70 per cent stake, and Oman Investment Authority, owning the balance 30 per cent.

Construction work is well under way on the plant facility, with investment envisaged at \$90 million in Phase 1, rising to \$270 million over the second and third phases. The facility will assemble primarily coach buses, city buses and school buses tailored for the local and regional markets. Production is initially envisioned at 1,000 units per annum of coach buses, city buses and school buses. This will be progressively ramped up to 3,000 units in stages in line with market demand.

Also on Al Murshidi's itinerary was the ship repair yard of Oman

Drydock Company (ODC) within the Port of Duqm. A subsidiary of Asyad Group, the government's end-to-end shipping and logistics arm, ODC is preparing to evolve from a dry docking and maintenance facility into a full-fledged shipbuilding yard, starting with the construction of small and medium sized vessels. In its sights are orders for fishing vessels, tugboats and related crafts of up to 100 metres length for private and government sector parties.

In recent years, ODC has diversified its offerings to include, among other services, industrial and modular fabrication and conversions into Floating Production Storage & Offloading (FPSO) vessels and Floating Storage & Offloading (FSO) units.

It has also added the fabrication and installation of scrubbers to its capabilities. Earlier this year, the government announced the formal integration of Oman

Shipping Company with Oman Drydock Company as part of a vision to provide global markets with end-to-end logistics solutions

The highlight of the tour was Duqm Fisheries Port, the biggest of its kind in the Sultanate. But far from just handling fishing vessels, the port will also anchor a fisheries industrial cluster that seeks to position Oman as a regional hub for fish processing and related food industries.

Fisheries Development Oman (FDO), the fisheries and aquaculture investment arm of OIA, is heading a multinational consortium that recently signed a deal with Oman's authorities to develop, operate and manage the port. FDO and its alliance partners will also support the development of the adjoining Fisheries Industrial Complex, which will target investment in the entire value chain spanning fish processing and related food activities.

Before wrapping up the tour of the SEZ, the high-level delegation also visited Port of Duqm which, after sustained investments in its infrastructure and support facilities, is now ready to move into full-fledged commercial operations. OIA, through Asyad Group, represents the government's 50 per cent equity in Port of Duqm.

The truth behind ROI in art investment

After my latest column on art investment. I received a few emails from some of the *Oman Daily Observer* readers asking me to be more specific with numbers about the profitability of investing in art pieces.

For simplicity I will limit my analysis to paintings, although art investment would traditionally encompass sculpture, and more arguably, jewellery or other forms of art.

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, art achieved an average 10.6 per cent return of investment in 2018 based on Art Market Research's Art 100 Index. This sounds like a really exciting

number, but one must consider that in calculating the average return, not all transactions are kept in account, and multi-million dollar auctions can skew the statistics significantly.

For instance, it is unrealistic to factor in the computation every single painting bought or sold in a year. Tens of thousands if not hundreds of thousands of paintings are sold around the world at little value behind closed doors and not in the spotlight of an auction.

This long tail of the market might represent a numerically important slice of the pie, but none of these transactions would make it into the headlines of international media.

Whereas a record-breaking



STEFANO VIRGILLI
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TOO OFTEN WE TEND TO REACT WITH EXCITEMENT TO STORIES OF FROM-RAGS-TO-RICHES AND WE DREAM TO BE THE NEXT TALENT SCOUT ABLE TO MAKE A LUCKY PURCHASE OF AN UNDERVALUED FUTURE PICASSO

auction is usually heavily publicised, like the Mayers of Chicago, who by sheer luck bought Robert Rauschenberg's Buffalo II from Leo Castelli in 1964 for \$16,900, and sold it more than 50 years later for \$88.8 million (including fees).

Other recent record-breaking art transactions are David Hockney's Portrait of an Artist (Pool with Two Figures) (1972) and Jeff Koons's Rabbit (1986) — both of which were auctioned at \$80 million. It is important to note that some of these acquisitions are not generated by an extravagant billionaire who "fell in love" with a one-of-a-kind piece of art.

Imagine for a moment the tax return filed by a hyper-

wealthy individual generating billions of dollars in capital gain annually. What could be more appealing? Paying taxes straight away or rather performing some philanthropy with tax benefits attached? The latter sounds more credible, when making a generous donation to an art museum can potentially write off millions of dollars in taxes, in exchange for some glorified generosity recognition.

There is also another aspect of the profit evaluation bias.

According to the Blouin Art Sales Index, of the 2.3 million paintings sold between 1960 and 2010, a small sample of 32,928 paintings had a total of 69,103 transactions, indicating that they were sold at least once.

That represents less than 2 per cent of all auctions executed in a 50-year period. The other 98 per cent is still part of a private collection, sitting in a museum, or were sold privately outside of any statistics or news headlines.

So not all that glitters is gold in the art investment sphere. Too often we tend to react with excitement to stories of from-rags-to-riches and we dream to be the next talent scout able to make a lucky purchase of an undervalued future Picasso.

But it is probably as likely as striking the lottery once in a lifetime, which as we know, is certainly not a viable long term investment strategy.

[The writer is a member of the International Press Association]

Russia backs Opec+ 500,000 bpd oil output hike from Feb

MOSCOW: Russia expects to support an increase in oil production by the group, known as Opec+, of another 500,000 barrels per day (bpd) from February at next month's summit of the leading global oil producers, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said.

Oil prices are trading above \$50 per barrel, after coming under pressure this week from concerns new fast-spreading variants of the coronavirus will lead to reduced fuel demand.

In comments, cleared for publication on Friday, Novak also said that Moscow views an oil price between \$45 and \$55 per barrel as the optimum level to allow for recovery of its oil production, which has been significantly reduced as part of the Opec+ supply deal.

Russia, other leading oil producers and the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, a group known as Opec+, agreed to reduce output to support the global oil market as the COVID-19 pandemic has weakened fuel demand.

Since the agreement on a record global supply cut in April, Opec+ has progressively reduced the cuts and is expected in January to release an extra 500,000 bpd into the market.

The group holds its next online summit on January 4, when it is expected to discuss whether to release another 500,000 bpd in February.

"If the situation stays normal and stable, we will support this position (increase by 500,000 bpd)", Novak told reporters at a briefing held in



the government's headquarters.

He said Russia supported a gradual production rise to avoid jolting the market. Opec+ had initially agreed to increase its production by 2 million bpd starting from January, but decided on a smaller increase at its meeting earlier this month.

Novak said earlier this month the cumulative output increase by the Opec+ group will reach a planned 2 million bpd by April, barring any unforeseen events.

Opec+ agreed to cut its combined output by an unprecedented almost 10 million bpd, or 10 per cent of global pre-crisis demand, in April. Of that, Russia pledged to cut more than 2 million bpd. — Reuters

PRESS RELEASES

BANKMUSCAT ANNOUNCES COMPLETION OF GREEN SPORTS FIELDS IN AL DAKHILIYAH



Samayil (Al Najd Team)



Bahla (Al Husn Team)



Samayil (Al Rasheed Team)

MUSCAT: BankMuscat recently inaugurated 3 football fields as part of its Green Sports programme to teams in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate. In line with the bank's commitment to community development and promoting Oman as a sporting nation, the official opening of the Al Najd Team's Green Sports Field in the Wilayat of Samayil. The event was held in the presence of Humood Salim al Hashami, Team Manager and Hamdan Humood al Bimani, Regional Manager — Dakhiliyah South, BankMuscat.

BankMuscat is continuing to hand over more Green Sports fields to teams across the country as part of its efforts to support Omani youth and local communities.

The Al Rasheed Team's stadium in the Wilayat of Samayil was inaugurated in the presence of

Sami Saud al Jabri, Team Manager, and bank officials. Another field was handed over recently to the Al Husn Sports Team at an event attended by Humood Bakhit al Attabi, Team Manager, and Abdullah Said al Roshdi, Regional Manager — Dakhiliyah North, BankMuscat.

The bank's representatives handed over project completion certificates to the respective teams at the events, which were organised in full compliance with social distancing norms

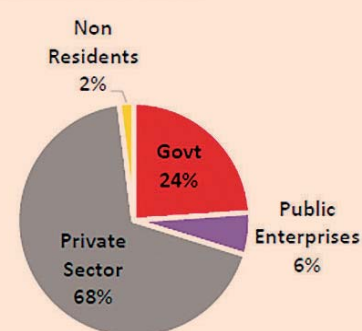
Hamdan Humood al Bimani, Regional Manager — Dakhiliyah South, BankMuscat congratulated the teams for their excellent partnership in successfully completing the respective fields. The Green Sports programme has been a flagship of the bank's CSR programmes are playing an excellent role in enhancing the capabilities of team members.



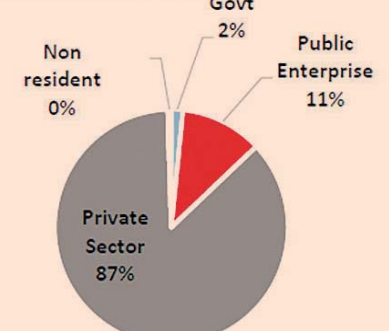
MSM WEEKLY REVIEW

MSM posts decline despite improved trading activity

Total Deposit Concentration, Oct'20



Total Credit Concentration, Oct'20



The MSM30 Index ended the week down by 0.36 per cent. The Financial Index dropped 0.56 per cent and the Services Index dropped 0.81 per cent. The Industrial Index ended the week higher by 1.55 per cent. The MSM Shariah Index rose by 0.45 per cent. The value of traded securities was higher by 29.12 per cent w-o-w.

BankMuscat updated during the week on SICO's offer for majority stake in Muscat Capital (Saudi). Muscat Capital has a book value of approx. SAR 80 million (RO 8.04 million) as at June 20-end.

SICO will acquire 72.71 per cent stake in Muscat Capital through transfer of all its treasury shares to BankMuscat. This would result in BankMuscat owning approx. 9 per cent shareholding in SICO upon completion of the transaction. The transaction is subject to regulatory approvals in Oman, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. SICO BSC had assets worth BHD 187.9 million as at the end of 9M20, and a share capital of BHD 56.61 million. Carried worth of treasury shares is BHD 5.32 million as at 9M'20-end.

Oman Telecommunication Co is evaluating a number of offers for its tower network, which the state-owned firm expects could raise more than USD 500 million.

Bids from "specialised companies" are undergoing tech-

nical, commercial and legal evaluation, Omantel said in a statement on Monday. The transaction is still at an evaluation stage, and it is not yet possible to ascertain its full financial impact on the company, the nation's largest phone firm said.

As part of the initiatives to shore up government revenues, the Sultanate is all set to overhaul the subsidy on public service system in a phased manner during the next five-year period from January 2021 till 2025.

Accordingly, the government has approved the removal of subsidies for electricity and water, which will eventually see prices gradually rising for all including citizens, expatriates, and large companies in the industrial sector.

Oman's Tax Authority has announced the imminent expiry of taxation incentives offered to private sector establishments for taxes due during 2020.

The incentives were announced earlier by the Supreme Committee tasked with tackling developments resulting from coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic with a view to handling the economic impacts of the pandemic and the resumption of business activities.

In a statement received by Oman News Agency (ONA), the Tax Authority urged all tax payers to submit their declarations and disclosure accounts of the fiscal year ending December 31, 2019 and any other

accounting period or fiscal year ending after this date.

Foreign direct investment (FDI) in the Sultanate reached RO 15.06 billion at the end of the first quarter of 2020, according to the data of the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

Praising the efforts made by the Sultanate in promoting world trade, officials of the World Trade Organization (WTO) said that Oman is a supportive partner in the activities of the WTO, with a long history in global trade.

The Sultanate's global trade legacy is being employed with high efficiency through its membership and role as a supportive partner in the WTO and its pivotal role in the organisation at all levels

Latest CBO statistics reveal that Oman banking sector's total credit stood at RO 26.44 billion (+0.1 per cent MoM and +2.2 per cent YoY).

Total deposits declined by 1.2 per cent MoM and stood at RO 24.02 billion (+3.4 per cent YoY).

Total private sector credit stood at RO 22.88 billion, (+0.4 per cent MoM and +0.4 per cent YoY). Loan-to-deposit ratio rose to 110.1 per cent in October 20 vs. 108.6 per cent in September 20 and 109.4 per cent in August 20, due to a relatively faster growth in credit while deposits declined. The ratio is still below 111.4 per cent recorded in October 19.

(Courtesy: U-Capital)



In brief

■ WASHINGTON

SUSPECTED RUSSIAN
HACKERS USED
MICROSOFT VENDORS

The suspected Russian hackers behind the worst US cyberattack in years leveraged reseller access to Microsoft Corp services to penetrate targets that had no compromised network software from SolarWinds Corp.

While updates to SolarWinds' Orion software was previously the only known point of entry, security company CrowdStrike Holdings Inc said hackers had won access to the vendor that sold it Office licenses and used that to try to read CrowdStrike's email. It did not specifically identify the hackers as being the ones that compromised SolarWinds, but two people familiar with CrowdStrike's investigation. — Reuters

■ HONG KONG/BEIJING

CHINA LAUNCHES
ANTITRUST PROBE INTO
TECH GIANT ALIBABA

China has launched an antitrust investigation into Alibaba Group and will summon the tech giant's Ant Group affiliate to meet in coming days, regulators said on Thursday, in the latest blow for Jack Ma's e-commerce and fintech empire.

The probe is part of an accelerating crackdown on anti-competitive behaviour in China's booming Internet space, and the latest setback for Ma, the 56-year-old former school teacher who founded Alibaba and became China's most famous entrepreneur.

It follows China's dramatic suspension last month of Ant's planned \$37 billion initial public offering. — Reuters

■ WASHINGTON

MILLIONS OF
AMERICANS LOSE
JOBLESS BENEFITS

Millions of Americans saw their jobless benefits expire after US President Donald Trump refused to sign into law a \$2.3 trillion pandemic aid and spending package, protesting that it did not do enough to help everyday people.

Trump stunned Republicans and Democrats alike when he said this week he was unhappy with the massive bill, which provides \$892 billion in badly needed coronavirus relief, including extending special unemployment benefits expiring on December 26, and \$1.4 trillion for normal government spending. Without Trump's signature, about 14 million people could lose those extra benefits, according to Labour Department data. — Reuters

Britain faces major Brexit challenges after last-minute deal

LONDON: Britain is set for a new chapter after securing a hard-fought post-Brexit trade deal with the European Union as EU envoys gave the accord, reached only after months of tortuous negotiations, a sober welcome.

"There was no great joy because a divorce is not really good news," one EU diplomat said.

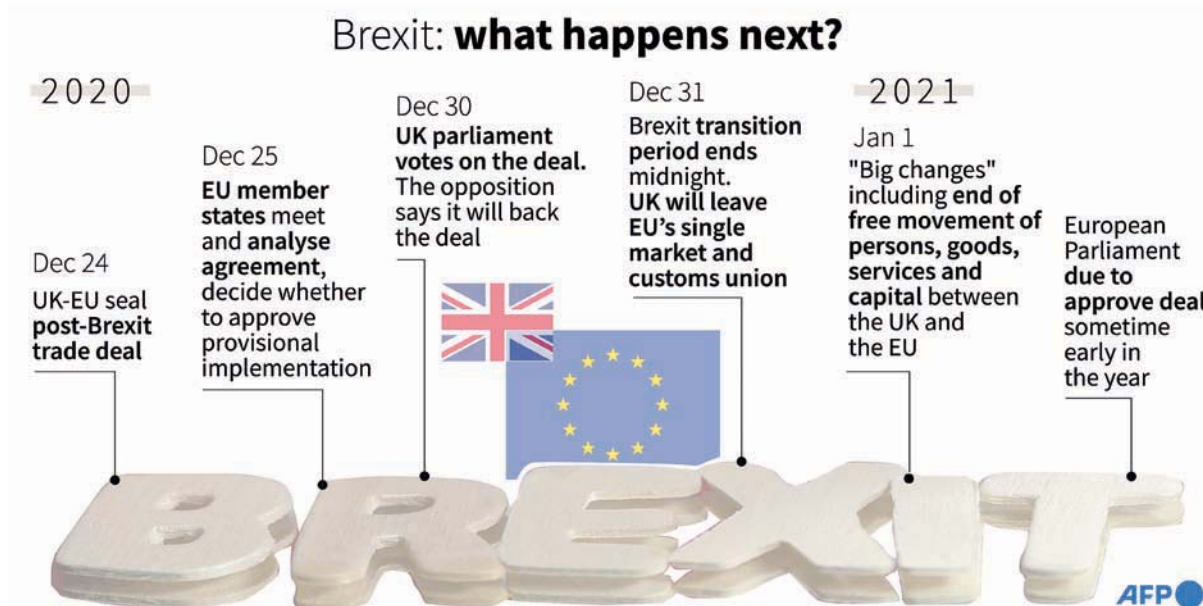
Member state envoys to the EU were "sober enough" in their response, the diplomat said, and the text — all 1,200 pages and in English — "will now be examined to make sure there are no hidden details which could cause a problem".

The envoys are expected to meet again on Monday to get the ratification process started, the diplomat added.

As for Britain, the accord means the country will now not tumble off a trade "cliff-edge" come January 1, avoiding a mountain of harmful tariffs and quotas.

But major changes are inevitable as London definitively quits the EU single market and free movement with the bloc comes to an end after nearly half a century of integration.

"We shouldn't underestimate the economic shock Britain will



experience", another European diplomat said.

Britain has been in a standstill transition period still subject to the bloc's rules since formally leaving the EU on January 31.

Standing in front of a Downing Street Christmas tree in a video message late on Thursday, Prime Minister Boris Johnson vaunted the hundreds of pages of text as "a 'good deal for the whole of Europe' and a 'present' for Britain.

The address was "a victory speech", Anand Menon, Director of the UK in a Changing Europe

think-tank, said.

"Boris Johnson was elected Prime minister to get Brexit done, he has now definitively got Brexit done", Menon said.

Johnson has come under fierce criticism for his management of the country's coronavirus outbreak, which has so far left almost 70,000 dead, the heaviest toll in Europe.

In recent days, thousands of trucks have been backed up at Channel ports, after France and other European partners blocked crossings over rising cases of a new virus variant believed to

spread faster.

With ferry and tunnel crossings unusually staying open on Christmas Day and British soldiers carrying out virus tests, there were signs of the logjam clearing on Friday.

Some had pointed out that the transport chaos, which raised fears of shortages of fresh produce, could be a glimpse of what awaited the country if it crashed out of the EU single market without a deal.

The EU has offered Britain unprecedented tariff- and quota-free access to its single market of 450 million consumers. — AFP

French fishermen voice relief at Brexit deal

LILLE, France: French fishing officials on Friday welcomed a post-Brexit trade accord that will allow them to continue plying British waters after January 1, avoiding a "no deal" that could have threatened the livelihoods of thousands.

"It's a huge relief for fishermen — It's a win-win deal", Olivier Lepretre, President of the fishing committee for the northern Hauts-de-France region, said.

"We're going to lose some of our quotas, which is annoying but it's not a death knell", he said.

Access to Britain's rich fishing waters was a major sticking point in the post-Brexit talks, and the agreement struck on Thursday will require EU fishing vessels to relinquish 25 per cent of their



Fishing boats are moored adjacent to the South Pier of Bridlington Harbour fishing port in Bridlington, north east England. — AFP

current quotas over the next five and a half years.

After that, there will be annual negotiations on the amount of

fish that EU vessels can take from British waters.

Reaching an accord was seen as vital for Boulogne-sur-Mer,

France's largest fishing port, where some 5,000 jobs depend on an industry that generated revenues of 80 million euros (\$97 million) last year.

"The biggest worry for fishermen in Hauts-de-France, as well as the entire sector, was that we would no longer have access to British waters. That is no longer the case", Lepretre's Vice President, Stephane Pinto, told France 3 television.

Jean-Luc Hall, head of the national CNPMM fisheries association, said French boats capture 30 to 70 per cent of their hauls in British territory.

"Even if it isn't perfect, it seems we'll still be able to work — this gives us a little bit of visibility", he said. — AFP

European businesses hopeful of China-EU deal

BEIJING: European businesses in China are hopeful of an EU-China investment deal by end of the year, the head of the European Chamber of Commerce in China said on Saturday, although Beijing has declined to commit to a deadline.

The China-EU Comprehensive Agreement on Investment has been in the works for seven years, and is expected to pave the way for European businesses to invest in financial services, telecommunications, electric vehicles and other sectors that are gradually being opened up for foreign investment in China.

But the deal is facing opposition from some European members of parliament and the incoming US administration of President-elect Joe Biden, who say it does not address concerns about the use of forced labour by Chinese manufacturers, especially in the

restive northwestern region of Xinjiang.

"The next few days will be interesting. My sense is that there is a serious push to get this past the finishing line", Joerg Wuttke, head of the European Chamber of Commerce in China, said.

"It's not a perfect deal, far from it, but it's a big step forward." China's commerce ministry has refrained from committing to a year-end deadline and appears prepared for an extension of discussions.

"In order to preserve its security and development interests, China will conduct the negotiations at its own pace and strive to reach a comprehensive, balanced and ambitious investment agreement with the EU", it said in a statement late on Thursday.

"The China-EU investment agreement is aimed at providing more investment opportunities



and sound institutional guarantees for the two sides, but to reach it requires joint efforts and to meet each other halfway", it added.

In an interview with *Le Monde* on Wednesday, France's Junior Trade Minister Franck Riester said Beijing needed to address the issue of forced labour if Paris was to agree to the deal.

Human rights organisations

have raised concerns about labour practices in Xinjiang where Uighurs and members of other Muslim-minority ethnic groups have reportedly been forced to pick cotton under a coercive state-run scheme. Beijing rejects the accusations.

Other critics of the deal say it might undermine Biden's efforts to mend bridges with European



Employees working on photovoltaic products at the workshop of a renewable energy company in Tonglu, in eastern China's Zhejiang province. — AFP

China to leapfrog US as world's biggest economy by 2028

LONDON: China will overtake the United States to become the world's biggest economy in 2028, five years earlier than previously estimated due to the contrasting recoveries of the two countries from the COVID-19 pandemic, a think-tank said.

"For some time, an overarching theme of global economics has been the economic and soft power struggle between the United States and China", the Centre for Economics and Business Research said in an annual report published on Saturday.

"The COVID-19 pandemic and corresponding economic fallout have certainly tipped this rivalry in China's favour." The CEBR said China's "skilful management of the pandemic", with its strict early lockdown, and hits to long-term growth in the West meant China's relative economic performance had improved.

China looked set for average economic growth of 5.7 per cent a year from 2021-25 before slowing to 4.5 per cent a year from 2026-30. While the United States was likely to have a strong post-pandemic rebound in 2021, its growth would slow to 1.9 per cent a year between 2022 and 2024, and then to 1.6 per cent after that.

Japan would remain the world's third-biggest economy, in dollar terms, until the early 2030s when it would be overtaken by India, pushing Germany down from fourth to fifth. — Reuters

allies, following Donald Trump's divisive tenure.

"There is nothing in the agreement that would be at the disadvantage of the US", Wuttke insisted. But Biden's camp has been nervous about Brussels moving closer to Beijing.

Jake Sullivan, who has been tipped as National Security Adviser, tweeted on Tuesday that: "The Biden-Harris administration would welcome early consultations with our European partners on our common concerns about China's economic practices." The investment deal aims to create an equal playing field for European businesses in China that have long complained about preferential terms enjoyed by domestic firms.

The treaty will also strengthen intellectual property protections for European companies and ban forced technology transfers.

— AFP

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Be Pampered, Omani Style: **THE PACKAGE** Delivers to Mind, Body and Soul



The Package,' recently founded in Muscat, Oman, is owned and managed online by two ambitious young Omani women, who went to school together **P18**

INSIDE STORIES

LIFESTYLE

IN EGYPT, PANDEMIC INSPIRES PASSION FOR OUD

While he waits for his lesson at an Egyptian music school, Maissara Mohammed plays his oud, its soothing tones dissolving the stress of daily life during the coronavirus pandemic... **Story on Page 20**

COVID-19 IMPACT

SWISS SKI RESORT FEELS CHILL FROM BRITISH STAYAWAY

When hiker Kim Kang-eun found the slopes of Mount Jiri, South Korea's largest national park, littered with rubbish during a two-day trip in 2018, she decided it was time to send out a message about taking better care of nature... **Story on Page 19**

READ

THE BOOK THIEF

The Book Thief is a historical novel by Australian author Markus Zusak, and is his most popular work. Published in 2005, The Book Thief became an international bestseller and was translated into 63 languages and sold 16 million copies. It was adapted into a 2013 feature film of the same name.

FASHION

LIGHTS! MODELS! GARBAGE! TAIWAN DESIGNER TURNS WASTE INTO FASHION

Inspiration for high fashion can come from strange places. For one Taiwanese designer, it's upcycling old wires and bolts from the power industry. Wang Li-ling, 36, scours dumps, picking up old bits of metal and wires from Taiwan's main... **Story on Page 19**

COVID-19 IMPACT

VENICE'S FAMED CAFFE FLORIAN APPEALS FOR HELP

Caffe Florian, the oldest watering hole in Venice and a mecca for writers, artists and politicians, had hoped to spend December planning its 300th birthday party – but instead faces ruin. The coronavirus pandemic has turned the world-famous Italian city into a ghost town.



BE PAMPERED, OMANI STYLE: THE PACKAGE

Delivers to Mind, Body and Soul

Shurooq Naeem Qamar Sultan and Sara Hamood Hilal al Busaidy offer people of Oman a taste of subscription-based marketing that allows them to discover premier local and international products and services

RAY PETERSEN

You desire to indulge yourself, but rarely have the time. You, quite rightly, love to be pampered, and to enjoy the best of good things. You may be a greatly appreciated Mom, a young mother, juggling responsibilities, a graduate in their first job, a student, or a busy young upwardly mobile executive, male or female. You enjoy a surprise now and again. After all... who doesn't? Imagine coming home to find a package waiting, just for you, full of exciting Omani products, the very things you had thought of trying, but had not 'got around to it.' Two young Omanis are launching a product in 2021 to 'deliver' feelgood, to transform your day, to pamper you, ... mind, body, and soul.

'The Package,' recently founded in Muscat, Oman, is owned and managed online by two ambitious young Omani women, who went to school together. Entrepreneurs Shurooq Naeem Qamar Sultan, a keen writer whose family has a business background, has earned a bachelor's degree in International Business as well as graduating with her Master's in Management. Sara Hamood Hilal al Busaidy is 'outdoorsy,' a walker and hiker, and her family have real estate interests though her father is a civil servant. Sara graduated with a degree in Accounting and Finance and then started a career and has a full-time job. "We are the perfect partners," said Al Busaidy, "as we support and encourage each other at every step, as do our families and friends."

The two recall a light-hearted discussion back in 2018 but prioritised studies and pressed pause. "A light-hearted discussion that defined a unique market opportunity was not just one moment of revelation or clarity, but many, and the concept was never far from our thoughts," The two continued to consult widely in the interim, achieving clarity with their business model, with significant market research, and as they explained further, "2020 hasn't been easy, but it offered us time, so ironically COVID-19 became the catalyst for further development. We felt like this was the right time and we could focus on it, so we took the leap, and 'The Package' has become a reality."

The concept of subscription-based marketing is a major



growth sector in Europe, particularly in fresh food, but much diversified the two identified more unique opportunities, initially in health and beauty products, and the concept has grown from there. "We offer our clients a unique 'fun' experience, full of surprise, that allows them to discover the new products and services among premier Omani and international suppliers through a subscription box they will receive every month. We will promote quality products, support new and established brands, including the finest products in Oman. This concept of 'touch marketing' allows our clients to try products instead of reading about or seeing them, while products and services are introduced to customers through us."

"Initially we will focus on Health & Beauty, Kids, and Home," said Al Busaidy, explaining their client demographic includes those who are aware that good health, grooming, appearance, and presentation make them feel appreciated. "We can deliver that feelgood factor direct to the door. Also, fashions and trends being at the heart of our business, we can decorate their home, private space, or office from a bland 'space' to a reflection of themselves. We cater too to babies, or children and can tailor their packages to support their interests and individual development."

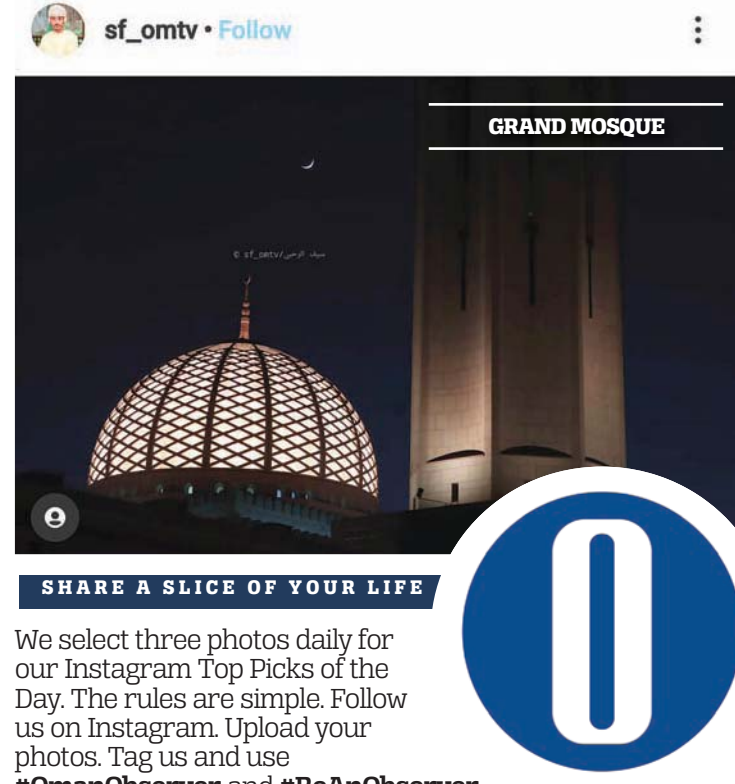
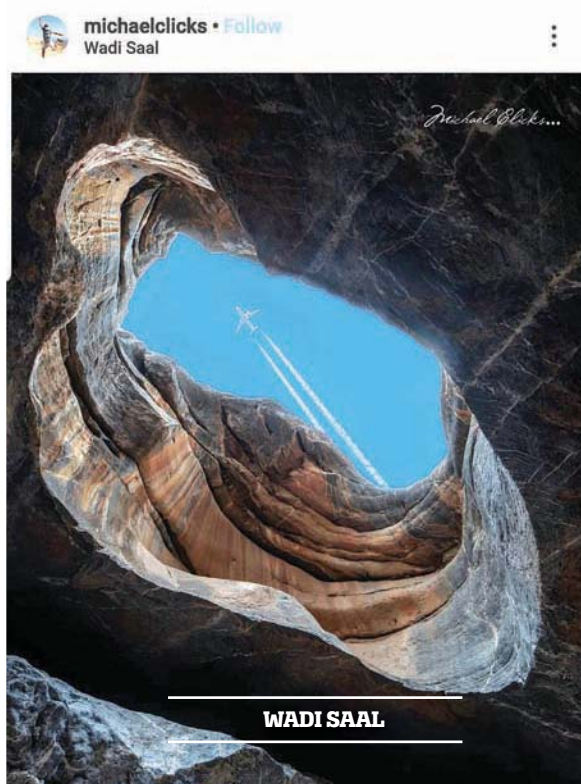
"We can be a showcase an amazing diversity of Omani products, services, and talent," say the two, "where local brands will stand alongside premium international brands in 'The Package' and be appreciated on merit rather than opportunity. We will be marketing their wares with a feminine touch, lightly, pleasantly, intimately, yet remarkably effectively, as part of a surprise package. This part of the concept has not always proven easy, but the initial frustrations are now behind us and we are focused on a growing number of supplier collaborations we are forming with Omani brands."

Sara and Shurooq, inspired by the process of the growth of their venture, from the logo to the box design, touching it, and seeing it, have a vision of thousands of happy customers enjoying a burgeoning selection of monthly packages, and are excitedly anticipating the launch of 'The Package' in January 2021.



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COVID-19 IMPACT

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Swiss ski resort feels chill from British stayaway

Switzerland's ski resorts were set to boom with snow-seeking British winter tourists — but the flight ban because of the new COVID-19 variant raging in England has put those Christmas plans on ice.

In plush Verbier, 1,500 metres up in the Alps, hoteliers were left struggling to deal with Monday's ruling by the Swiss government — which also included a 10-day retroactive quarantine for anyone who arrived from Britain since December 14.

Meanwhile, Britons working in the luxury mountain resort who had been preparing to welcome friends and family to the chalets and ski slopes were facing a festive season filled with

video calls instead.

Busloads of skiers arrived in the town — but the few Britons among them, queuing for the cable cars to the snow-capped mountain tops, were ski instructors and seasonal workers.

"I've been coming here 15 years working as a ski instructor; I have never seen the Christmas week as quiet as this," said Briton Trevor Dean, 68, of Performance Ski School.

"Bookings are way, way down. There's very few British people coming for lessons this year. My hours are about a fifth of what they would normally be.

"It's an expensive place to go into quarantine", he said, adding that the mountain air and spectacular views would be little consolation.



HOTELS HIT

Voted Switzerland's best ski resort for the past two years, Verbier markets itself as offering "adrenaline-packed thrills, simple pleasures and a chic lifestyle". Glistening fresh snow melted from the chalet rooftops in the bright sunshine on Tuesday.

At the Hotel La Rotonde, a group of British tourists decided to leave immediately rather than go into quarantine from Tuesday — though one decided to tough it out in his room.

"He cannot come out, we cannot go in", said Vincent Theo, Director of the

27-room hotel.

"We bring him his breakfast, lunch and dinner and try to provide a certain level of comfort, and try to keep things convivial during his quarantine so he doesn't feel quite so isolated."

Theo said the pandemic and its oft-changing restrictions were having an impact.

"We're trying to keep our bookings up with Swiss tourists", he said.

"We hope February and March can save the season." British tourists normally make up 21 per cent of the Verbier clientele, and most start pouring in just after Christmas.

FASHION

Lights! Models! Garbage! Taiwan designer turns waste into fashion



INSPIRATION FOR HIGH fashion can come from strange places. For one Taiwanese designer, it's upcycling old wires and bolts from the power industry. Wang Li-ling, 36, scours dumps, picking up old bits of metal and wires from Taiwan's main electricity supplier to add extra flair to her clothes. "For example, there's quite a lot of material from Taipower that they have phased out",

first time seeing a Taiwan fashion designer turning recycled things into new ideas", said Taiwanese lifestyle influencer Andrew Chen, who was at the show.

"Everyone knows the fashion industry is about fast fashion. And it is wasteful. It expanded my horizons today that I saw how to use old materials to create something new, and then present it with creativity." A popular des-



Wang told Reuters in her studio.

"These materials have been used for more than 20 or 30 years. At least more than 10 years. So their colour or the mottled feeling they give you is different from new material." The wires and other materials are stitched onto dresses and other items of clothing, giving them a futuristic feeling and drawing a warm reception at a fashion show in Taipei on Friday. "Actually, it is my

ination for trendy tourists in pre-coronavirus times, Taiwan has an up-and-coming fashion scene, whose designers are starting to make an impact on the world stage. With many global events shuttered or moved online due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Taiwan put on Taipei Fashion Week in October featuring live shows, a testament to the island's successful efforts to control the spread of the illness. — **Reuters**



In Egypt, pandemic inspires passion for oud

While he waits for his lesson at an Egyptian music school, Maissara Mohammed plays his oud, its soothing tones dissolving the stress of daily life during the coronavirus pandemic. "I play four instruments, but the oud is certainly my favourite," the 27-year-old Sudanese engineer says, hunched over the pear-shaped body of his instrument.

The oud, a stringed instrument popular in the Middle East whose origins date back thousands of years, is a key element of classical Arabic music.

Its tuning and practice is based on a complex system of Oriental melodic modes known as maqamat.

Long an instrument of accompaniment, it has slowly come out of the shadows since the end of the 19th century.

Mohammed arrived from Khartoum in September to learn the oud at the Kipa music school in Giza, west of the Egyptian capital.

While he could have studied elsewhere, he said he chose Egypt because it was renowned for oud players like Mohammed al Qasabgi, who composed and performed some of Egyptian diva Umm Kulthum's greatest hits.

The oud "is an instrument that has its own sentiments and is capable of translating everything inside you," he said.

Coronavirus lockdown measures in Sudan helped him focus on practising, he added.

Kipa opened earlier this year, despite the COVID-19 pandemic, and has attracted music lovers from all walks of life, according to founder Romani Armis.

Students can learn instruments including the guitar, the violin and percussion, he said, but the oud has been the most popular, with 25 enrolments.

Though the oud has long been dominated by men, teacher Hagar Aboul Kassem said her students included several young women.

Lessons are also held online, and group classes at the school are limited to two students per room, Armis said.

"Playing music has helped students channel their worries to overcome" this difficult period, he said.

UNPRECEDENTED INTEREST

In the Al Marg area north of Cairo, Khaled Azzouz, a veteran oud-maker, bustled around his workshop.

"The problem with the oud is that it requires long hours of practise and people usually don't have time," he said.

Azzouz heads the biggest oud workshop in Egypt, producing 750 instruments monthly.

Occasionally, children from the neighbourhood earn pocket money by doing odd jobs at the workshop, such as removing staples from the unfinished oud bodies, Azzouz said.

It supplies the Cairo branch of Beit al Oud, a specialised school with branches across the Arab world, and exports to 12 countries, from Sweden and the United States to Saudi Arabia and Tunisia.

Azzouz, who has been crafting the musical instruments for 25 years, said he had observed "unprecedented interest" in the oud during the global health crisis.

But he said a pandemic-related disruption earlier this year of wood imports — including rosewood from India and ebony, mahogany and beech from elsewhere — had slowed down production. "We make the oud from A to Z... but Egypt has no forests, so all the wood here is imported," he said.

Egypt has officially recorded around 125,000 cases of COVID-19 and over 7,000 deaths.

Azzouz said an upside of the virus-related restrictions was that it had helped people find time to practise.

"With the coronavirus, everyone is bored at home," he said.

"People are contacting me online for orders." — AFP

