

Sultanate reaffirms support to King Abdullah II of Jordan

The Sultanate of Oman is following up the developments in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan with great concern and reaffirms its full backing to the Kingdom under the leadership of King Abdullah II. The Sultanate reiterates its solid support for all that guarantees the security, sovereignty and stability of Jordan. — ONA



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STAL GALLERY CONTINUES SUPPORT FOR YOUNG EMERGING ARTISTS



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IVANKOVIC TO SEEK ALTERNATIVE PLANS FOR NATIONAL TEAM



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533 MILLION FACEBOOK ACCOUNTS DATA POSTED ONLINE



MUSCAT

HM CONDOLENCES TO MADAGASCAR

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of condolences to President Andry Rajoelina of the Republic of Madagascar, on the death of Madagascar's ex-president Didier Ratsiraka. In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his sincere condolences sympathy to President Rajoelina, the bereaved's family and the friendly people of Madagascar. — ONA

TEMPERATURES TO RISE FURTHER

With temperatures soaring by the day and Covid-19 continues to pose a threat to life, medics have advised sufficient intake of liquids and avoid direct exposure to extreme heat. These precautions apply more on people who work outside or those on the move to safeguard from possible heat stroke these days. At the same time extreme precautions against the pandemic also need to be followed. A minimum of 1.5 to 2 litres of water per day should be taken to keep hydrated. Proper water intake helps prevent dehydration, sunburn and heatstroke. **DETAILS ON P3**

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AUTOMATIC APPROVAL OF LICENCES

EASE OF DOING BUSINESS IN THE SULTANATE

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The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion launched an automatic approval service for licences as an essential initiative to build an investment environment and 'Ease of Doing Business' in the Sultanate.

The initiative is part of the government's stimulus plan to allow local or foreign investors to practice economic activities by obtaining an automatic licence without waiting for manual approvals.

The stimulus plan got the approval of the Council of Ministers to support economic recovery efforts, enhance the performance of economic activities and attract investments. The plan is seen as an aid to medium-term fiscal balance measures (2020-2024) to improve the financial position, reduce public

debt and improve the Sultanate's credit ratings.

"Investors will benefit from this service through Invest Easy portal, as the system will provide several facilities, the most important of which is obtaining all kind of licences related to economic activities automatically to achieve the principles of transparency, speed, trust and commitment, as well as to facilitate registration and activate subsequent government control", the ministry said.

Dr Saleh bin Said Masan, Under-Secretary of the Ministry for Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion for Commerce and Industry, said: "Automatic approval is a quantum leap as all licences and approvals have been merged into one. The investor will be able to start work on his project directly once he obtains

This is a quantum leap as all licences and approvals have been merged into one. The investor will be able to start work on his project directly once he obtains the commercial register

DR SALEH BIN SAID MASAN
Under-Secretary

the commercial register within hours", he said.

The ministry, according to him, is preparing a feasibility study for '100 industrial ready-to-invest opportunities' that is to be launched soon.

"We aspire, during the next phase, to move from paper transactions to digital, as we seek to automate all services to provide quick and easy electronic services", Masan noted.

He further added that the most prominent industrial strategy features are the transition from industries based on natural resources (oil, gas and mining) to industries, based on knowledge and innovation such as the medical, environmental, electro-mechanical, transportation and communications industries.

ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES
As far as this stage is concerned, more than 1,500 economic activities have been approved, constituting about 88 per cent of all activities, which include agriculture, animal production, fishing, manufacturing, repair and installation of machinery, equipment and devices, electrical and water supplies, construction, vehicle maintenance and repair, wholesale and retail sales, commercial activities, transportation and storage.

As for the economic activities not included in the service in this preliminary stage, they constitute 12 per cent of the total economic activities and need prior approval by the government agencies. These activities are represented by mining, education, health, insurance and financial activities, hotel and accommodation and hotels, oil and gas, security, consulting and professional activities. **TURN TO P3**

Over 3,000 cases, 31 deaths in 3 days

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The Ministry of Health said that over 3,000 cases and 31 deaths were recorded in the last 72 hours.

The ministry has reported 3,139 new case, bringing the total number of cases registered in the Sultanate to 163,157, apart from 31 new Covid 19-related deaths, bringing the death toll to 1,712.

The total recovery cases reached 146,677, which is 90 per cent of the total cases reported.

Ninety-seven patients were hospitalised during the past 24 hours, taking the total number of inpatients in hospitals to 590, including 186 in Intensive Care Units (ICUs).



Meanwhile, as per the contract signed with the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation (GAVI), the Sultanate received the first batch of Covid-19 vaccines at Muscat International Airport on Saturday night.

"The first batch of Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine arrived in the Sultanate on Saturday at Muscat International Airport", the

Ministry of Health said. It added that the total number of people vaccinated in the Sultanate (both Pfizer and AstraZeneca) as of last Thursday stood at 139,522 people.

The ministry said the Sultanate has contracted with the International Federation of vaccines to obtain one million doses, which targets 10 per cent of the population.

Dr Mohammed bin Saif al Hosani, Under-Secretary for Health Affairs and Member of the Supreme Committee, recently said that the Sultanate will immunize 30 per cent of the population by the end of June and 70 per cent by the end of this year. **TURN TO P3**

Nasa's helicopter dropped on Mars' surface

WASHINGTON: Nasa's Ingenuity mini-helicopter has been dropped on the surface of Mars in preparation for its first flight, the US space agency said. The ultra-light aircraft had been fixed to the belly of the Perseverance rover, which touched down on the Red Planet on February 18.

"MarsHelicopter touchdown confirmed!" Nasa's Jet Propulsion Laboratory tweeted on Saturday.

"Its 293 million mile (471 million km) journey aboard @NASAPersevere ended with the final drop of 4 inches (10 centimetre) from the rover's belly to the surface of Mars today. Next milestone? Survive the night."

A photograph accompanying the tweet showed Perseverance



had driven clear of the helicopter and its "airfield" after dropping to the surface. Ingenuity had been feeding off the Perseverance's

power system but will now have to use its own battery to run a vital heater to protect its unshielded electrical components from

freezing and cracking during the bitter Martian night.

"This heater keeps the interior at about 7 degrees Celsius through the bitter cold of the Martian night, where temperatures can drop to as low as -90 degrees Celsius", Bob Balaram, Mars Helicopter Project chief engineer at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, wrote in an update.

Over the next couple of days, the Ingenuity team will check that the helicopter's solar panels are working properly and recharging its battery before testing its motors and sensors ahead of its first flight, Balaram said.

Ingenuity is expected to make its first flight attempt no earlier than April 11, the Jet Propulsion Laboratory tweeted. — AFP



DAGMAR CASTLE STILL VISIBLE BUT FADING

The Dagmar Castle is one of the ancient historical spots in the Wilayat of Qurayat. It dates back to pre-Islamic times. Historical research indicates that the castle was restored during the reign of Sultan Taimour bin Faisal in 1914 AD. The castle was used for military purposes, and entry to it was possible by ascending to the top of the rocky hill on which it is located. The castle still retains its beautiful architectural features. **DETAILS ON P2**

■ OMAN-IRAN JOINT COOPERATION



General Sultan bin Mohammed al Numani, Minister of the Royal Office, reviewed march of relations binding the Sultanate of Oman and the Islamic Republic of Iran when he received Ali Najafi, Ambassador of Iran to the Sultanate at his office. Cordial conversations were exchanged on several fields of the joint cooperation and means of promoting them to serve the mutual interests of the two friendly countries. A range of matters of common concern were also discussed during the meeting. – ONA

SQU Business Week explores students' aspirations of Oman Vision 2040

MUSCAT: The 17th Business Week of Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) explored the potential of students and their aspirations vis-à-vis the goals of Oman Vision 2040. This was stated during the sessions of the Business Week, which was held via videoconferencing.



The event saw the participation of Qais bin Mohammed bin Moosa al Yousuf, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion. In a speech on the occasion, Al Yousuf underscored the attention accorded by the government to Omani youth. He described this attention as “an investment in the future”. The minister pointed out that the government provided support to youth through education and training which, he said, constituted basic factors that enabled Omani youth to efficiently shoulder their responsibility in the nation building process.

Dr Al Mukhtar bin Saif al Abri, Dean of the College of Economy and Political Sciences, said that the Business Week forms a bridge of communication between the University and society. Within this theme, the students are tasked with researching major economic and social issues and portraying them through the use of innovative tools.

Al Abri explained that the 17th Business Week takes up Oman Vision 2040 from the perspective of students, who elaborate on their topics during discussion sessions with officials, academics and experts. The aim is to expand and enrich the cognitive and cultural repertory of students and deepening their understanding and social awareness about the roles of various segments of society within Oman Vision 2040.

The SQU Business Week offers an opportunity to exchange ideas, information and expertise and to highlight the potential of youth in different government and private establishments. — ONA

DAGMAR CASTLE

STILL VISIBLE BUT FADING



**TEXT & PHOTOS
BY YAHYA AL SALMANI**
The Dagmar Castle is one of the ancient historical spots in the Wilayat of Qurayat. It is dated back to pre-Islamic times. Historical research indicates that the castle

was restored during the reign of Sultan Taimour bin Faisal in 1914 AD. The castle was used for military purposes, and entry to it was possible by ascending to the top of the rocky hill on which it is located. The castle still retains its beautiful

architectural features. The castle can be viewed remotely from the main road. It is a testament to the Omani history full of challenges and humanitarian achievements. “It is disheartening to see the castle in its

current dilapidated condition. The historic edifice is gradually falling into ruins. We spoke with the competent authorities in this regard, but to no avail,” locals lamented. Dagmar village is famous for the production of natural salt, cultivation

of vegetables and fruits and fishing are the major sources for the locals. It is also worth mentioning that Dagmar was also known in the past for copper, and the villagers are proficient in manufacturing traditional boats.



Health precautions must as temperatures to rise further

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With temperatures soaring by the day and Covid-19 continues to pose a threat to life, medics have advised sufficient liquids intake and avoid direct exposure to extreme heat.

These precautions apply more to people who work outside or those on the move to safeguard from possible heat stroke these days. At the same time, extreme precautions against the pandemic also need to be followed.

A minimum of 1.5 to 2 litres of water per day should be taken to keep hydrated. Proper water intake helps prevent dehydration, sunburn and heatstroke. Any of the situations can lead to medical complications," says Dr Amira al Raidan, head of the Mental Health Department at the Non-Communicable Diseases Department at the Ministry of Health.

"Spicy foods should be avoided during summer because of the heat, especially when not taking enough fluids to prevent the risk



of hurt burn, acidity and urinary tract infection," Dr Raidan, also a psychiatrist at Al Masarrah Hospital said.

According to a National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) study, heatstroke is the most serious heat-related disorder. It occurs when the body can no longer

control its temperature.

The body temperature can rise up to 106 degrees Fahrenheit or higher within 10 to 15 minutes, and heatstroke can cause death or permanent disability if emergency treatment is not provided.

"One should keep hydrated by taking sufficient liquid from time to time, and avoid exposure to

extreme temperatures these days," said Dr Viresh Singhvi, Specialist — Internal Medicine at Apollo Hospital.

One should seek medical assistance should any symptoms such as dry, hot reddish skin and lack of sweating, high body temperature, rapid pulse, confusion, or slurred speech.

"High levels of temperature can trigger cardiovascular events while extreme cold waves are more correlated with more coronary events such as heart attacks and heart attacks generally peak in winter," says a doctor from a private hospital.

"Care is needed for those who take medicines for heart diseases or those who take water pills (diuretics to remove fluid retention).

The medical conditions like dehydration may lead to improper fluid balance resulting in complications if they are not monitoring and adjusting fluid intake," said the doctor, adding that generally they should remain indoors when temperatures are soaring.

Five vehicles gutted in fire mishap



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A fire broke out on Sunday afternoon in the parking area of Taif 2 apartment building in Bowsheer, destroying five cars parked there.

The Public Authority for Civil Defence and Ambulances (PACDA) controlled the fire and no casualty was reported.

"We were able to extinguish the fire very quickly and were able to control further damage. The cause of the fire is currently under investigation. We advise everyone to follow the safety instructions to avoid fire mishaps," said the official from PACDA.

One of the building tenants, Abdullah al Rashdi, said, "I was at work and came to the apartment some neighbours called. When I arrived, I saw the tenants on the street. They were allowed to go back into their houses after the fire was settled."

According to Al Rashdi, some people in the nearby barbershop noticed the fire and called the emergency line.

While they still do not know what triggered the fire, the concern always has been about leaving perfumes or sanitisers

in the vehicles. As the summer temperatures are on the rise, car safety is coming to the forefront.

According to experts, while collisions cause some car fires, they are more often caused by a problem occurring with the vehicles' electrical wiring or with the fuel system, so it is extremely important to have constant services and have the systems checked regularly. A fuel leak is considered to be the most common cause of automobile fires.

The Royal Oman Police has the checklist for vehicle safety and states that a filling station staff and motorist must be aware and careful to avoid mishaps.

"A vehicle should not be overloaded and driven for a long time without stopping. Vehicle fires may result from violent collisions or overturning.

It is even worse if the doors are jammed and the passengers unable to get out. Do not leave children alone in vehicles, especially if the engine is running. Ensure an appropriate fire extinguisher, preferably a carbon dioxide one, is fixed near the driver's seat. Change the engine oil regularly and always ensure the radiator is full."

Oman has covered most of its financing needs: Bloomberg

NEW YORK: Bloomberg News Network said that Oman is more than halfway toward meeting its total financing needs of RO 4.2 billion (\$10.9 billion) for the year.

Quoting the monthly fiscal report released by Oman's Ministry of Finance, Bloomberg said the government has RO 1.83 billion left to raise after so far borrowing RO 1.77

billion and withdrawing RO 600 million from the Oman Investment Authority — the country's wealth fund — as of end-March.

"This shows that Oman has successfully covered most of its financing needs," the ministry said in its monthly fiscal report. The remainder "will be raised during the current year," it said.

The nation's public debt is "within controllable limits," according to the report.

In its monthly fiscal report, the Ministry of Finance said that by end-February RO 144 million dues as debt service (loan interests) has been repaid in addition to RO 563 million repaid as part of the loan principal.

— ONA

Churches, temples closed as preventive measure



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Churches and temples in the Sultanate have been closed for worshippers following a decision issued by the Supreme Committee tackling the spread of coronavirus infection.

In a message to the custodians of the churches and temples on Saturday, the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs asked them to close these places of worship indefinitely.

In different statements, both temple and Christian managements said that they

have closed the gates to stop worshippers from entering the compounds.

"Pursuant to the new directives communicated to us from the Supreme Committee, to refrain from holding any public gatherings in line with national efforts to combat Covid-19. We the Catholic Churches, shall comply with the directives of the Government of Oman. The Church will remain closed beginning from April 3, 2021 till further notice," said a statement posted on its website by St Peter & Paul Catholic Church, Ruwi.

Easter, a festival celebrated

by Christians to mark the resurrection of Christ from death passed off without any community prayers on Sunday.

According to a notification by Hindu Temple Committee, temples in Ruwi and Muscat have been closed with effect from April till further notice.

"We are advised by the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs to suspend the events and activities in both the Temples from April 3, 2021 until further notice, to preserve the safety of those in charge and the visitors. Further please note that the gates of both the Temples will be closed," it said.

Four held for smuggling drugs

The police command in South Al Batinah Governorate in cooperation with the Directorate-General for Combating Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, arrested 4 people in connection

with smuggling drugs with the purpose of trafficking and entering the country illegally.

The police recovered 35 kg of crystal meth and 5 kg of morphine from the defendants.



■ FROM PAGE 1

Automatic approval of licences

All the authorities associated with issuing licences, have set requirements and conditions in the system. The investor is responsible for adhering to the terms and conditions of the licence he has obtained.

The government institutions have the responsibility to monitor the activities after licences are issued. Suppose the conditions and controls are not fully or partially adhered. In that case, these authorities shall take their usual control measures and follow up the progression in implanting the law (notifying — follow-up —

warning — violation).

SEVERAL BENEFITS

This service achieves several benefits, including stimulating the business environment in the Sultanate, strengthening the private sector as a partner in the development and leading the competitive Omani economy, enhancing domestic and foreign investment, encouraging entrepreneurship, small and medium enterprises, and enhancing the Sultanate's international indicators regarding ease of doing business.

The ministry also said

that an electronic integration has been activated to issue a municipal licence, such as those issued by Muscat Municipality, Musandam Municipality, and the municipalities of the Ministry of Interior in addition to the civil protection licence issued by the Public Authority for Civil Defence and Ambulance. All of these licences are merged into one issued from the Invest Easy portal. The local and foreign investor will obtain one licence for the project, including all concerned authorities' approvals.

Over 3,000 cases, 31 deaths in 3 days

"Millions of people have safely received Covid-19 vaccines and all of the approved vaccines have been carefully tested and continue to be monitored," the WHO has said.

Like all vaccines, Covid-19 vaccines go through a rigorous, multi-stage testing process, including large clinical trials involving tens of thousands of people. These trials are specifically

designed to identify any safety concerns.

"A panel convened by WHO analyses the results from clinical trials and recommends whether and how the vaccines should be used. Officials in individual countries decide whether to approve the vaccines for national use and develop policies for how to use the vaccines based on WHO recommendations," it added.

A HAND THAT BUILDS OMAN



The recent launch of “Individual Licensing” services is expected to go a long way in making the Omani youth fully skilled and shaping them to become capable of encountering any task as far as their employability is concerned

future skills and tap the expertise of human resources in various spheres. This will also end the malpractices adopted by private training institutes”, he said.

The transition from education to employment presents a significant challenge for young people who are central to a country’s development, so it is essential they learn the necessary skills required to be future leaders at all levels.

“When considering their education and training, one must look beyond job specific skills and foster individuals’ capabilities in a wide variety of settings”, he said. Individual licensing is designed to enable professionals

to offer quality training that will add value in upgrading cognitive economy.

According to a statement, the applicants can register through the platform and get their prospective training programmes endorsed prior to being presented to the public.

Fundamental to the Oman’s long-term development plans, education and training have long been a central focus both for government expenditure and private sector investment.

Oman Vision 2040 focuses on education as it is one of the national priorities with the aim of preparing the national workforce with competencies and skills to help them locally and internationally.

The ministry of higher education is responsible for regulating and licensing public and private colleges and universities, and ensuring that all institutions meet international standards and support government objectives. Technical colleges and vocational training institutes are overseen by the Ministry of Labour.

Linking the educational system to the requirements of the labour force is a dominant theme of the sector.

The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation in conjunction with the Ministry of Labour, are tasked with developing a competent local labour force to provide jobs for Omani citizens and address the country’s economic diversification objectives.

To address this challenge and to regulate labour market discrepancies, the 10th Five Year Development Plan endorses policies that contribute to modifying the structure of employment and introducing a new structure based on a wide base of skilled manpower through recruitment of skilled labour and by offering incentives.

The Plan is expected to create 135,000 jobs at the rate of 27,000 jobs annually in the public and private sectors, and it will work to find global markets for the small and medium enterprises.

SAMUEL KUTTY
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The nature of Oman’s demographic profile with a massive cohort of young people means that providing jobs is the biggest challenge for the government.

The recent launch of “Individual Licensing” services by the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation is expected to go a long way in making the Omani youth fully skilled and shaping them to become capable of encountering any task as far as their employability is concerned.

Codenamed “Training — A hand that builds Oman”, the electronic platform unveiled in line with the goals of Oman Vision 2040 will impart private training to the aspiring youth by experts in the respective fields.

According to Dr Rahma bint Ibrahim al Mahrouqiyah, Minister of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, training has brought about many achievements that contributed to meeting labour market needs.

“Education and training play a key role in Oman’s long-term development plans. Training has been accorded a great importance by the government since the dawn of the blessed renaissance”, she says.

The initiative seeks to simplify procedures and attract investments, particularly during exceptional conditions like the Covid-19 pandemic.

Experts expect the new initiative to streamline and expedite procedures related to private training, besides establishing a real database of private training, promotion and fair competition among private training institutions and furnishing a lucrative environment for investment in private training.

According to Hamed al Balushi, a human resource expert, the new endeavour will provide a legal and professional climate and eventually end non-professional and unethical training practices.

“This will not only help develop

Bulgarians vote for new parliament amid Covid fears

SOFIA: Bulgarians voted in a parliamentary election on Sunday that will decide whether long-serving Prime Minister Boyko Borissov wins a new four-year mandate despite persistent concerns about corruption in the European Union's poorest member state.

Opinion polls suggest Borissov's centre-right GERB will again be the largest party, with 28-29 per cent of the vote, but will fall short of a majority and may struggle to build a stable coalition in a more fractured parliament.

That could hamper Bulgaria's ability to effectively tap the EU's €750 billion (\$884 billion) Recovery Fund to help rebuild

PM Borissov likely to struggle to form a stable coalition

the bloc's economy after the coronavirus pandemic.

Borissov, 61, an ex-fireman in power almost without a break since 2009, sought to showcase his successes in modernising Bulgaria's creaking infrastructure in low-key campaign after massive anti-graft rallies last summer dented his popularity.

"We showed what we have achieved", Borissov said after casting his ballot.

Polls will close at 8 pm, with



Kornelia Ninova, Bulgarian Socialist Party leader, votes in a polling station during parliamentary elections in Sofia. — Reuters

exit polls due shortly afterwards. Partial results are due through the night into Monday, before final official results expected on Thursday. More than 6.7 million Bulgarians are eligible to vote, but pollsters expect a low turnout because of voters' concerns over Covid-19 and a slow vaccine rollout.

Borissov, who has come under fire over the rollout, thanked the European Commission for 1.3 million additional Covid-19 vaccine shots, which the country will receive in the second quarter.

Bulgaria has seen coronavirus cases surging in March and now has the second highest coronavirus-related death rate,

per million people on a 7 day rolling average, in the EU after Hungary, according to scientific online publication *Our World in Data*.

Although hospitals are full, the government eased some lockdown restrictions before the vote.

Borissov's government has presided over a 36 per cent increase in the average monthly salary to 1,468 leva (\$882), has kept public debt low, and secured entry to the "waiting room" for joining the euro currency.

But its failure to tackle endemic corruption and reform the judiciary brought thousands of protesters onto the streets for months during 2020. — Reuters

Two rockets hit near Iraq airbase hosting US contractors

BAGHDAD: Two rockets hit near an Iraqi airbase hosting US soldiers north of Baghdad on Sunday, three days ahead of a new "strategic dialogue" with Washington, a security source said.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the strike at Balad airbase, which caused no casualties or property damage, but the US routinely blames factions for such attacks on its troops and diplomats.

Sunday's was the 14th attack against American interests — including troops, the Baghdad Embassy or Iraqi supply convoys to foreign forces — since US President Joe Biden took office in January.

Two Americans and an Iraqi civilian have been killed in the attacks.

An Iraqi civilian working for a firm maintaining US fighter jets for the Iraq airforce was also wounded in one attack.

Qais al Khazali, a senior figure in the state-sponsored Hashed al Shaabi

paramilitary force, recently declared that the "resistance" was carrying out attacks and would step them up "unless the US withdraws all its combat forces from across Iraq".

The latest attack came as Washington prepares to launch a strategic dialogue with the government of Prime Minister Mustafa al Kadhemi, who has regularly received threats.

Washington on Wednesday extended by several months a sanctions exemption allowing Iraq to import electricity from Iran during the ferociously hot summers when air-conditioning sends demand spiking.

The US, which led a coalition from 2014 to oust the IS group from its self-declared "caliphate" in northern Iraq and Syria, still has some 2,500 troops in Iraq. Since the defeat of their shared enemy, Washington and opposite factions have exchanged both threats and fire. — AFP

■ EASTER FOR THE COVID-INFECTED



A patient infected with Covid-19 reacts as she receives a traditional Easter cake handed by a nurse at the Covid ward of the GVM Maria Pia Hospital in Turin, as staff visits patients infected with Covid-19 to offer them cakes for Easter. — AFP

Arctic mining takes centre stage in Greenland election

NUUK: Greenland votes on Tuesday in legislative elections largely seen as a referendum on a controversial mining project that would help diversify the Arctic island's economy as it plans for a future altered by global warming.

The autonomous Danish territory obtained ownership of its vast mineral reserves in 2009 when its self-rule powers were widened.

Those resources, its geopolitical relevance and easier access due to melting sea ice have made

Greenland increasingly attractive to the world's superpowers in recent years. Donald Trump, when he was US president, even offered to buy the island in 2019.

While Denmark and Greenland made it abundantly clear the territory was not for sale, Nuuk is nonetheless keen to attract foreign investments to help it cut its financial umbilical cord to Copenhagen someday.

A rare earth and uranium mining project proposed by an

Australian company and backed by Chinese investors in the south of the island in Kuannersuit could provide a massive windfall that would supplement Greenland's main industry, fishing.

But in February, a political crisis erupted when a junior party quit the coalition government over the project, leading to Tuesday's early elections for parliament's 31 seats.

Social democratic Siumut, Greenland's largest party, has dominated island politics since

autonomy in 1979. Currently trailing in the polls, it backs the mine project. The opposition left-green party Inuit Ataqatigiit (IA), leading in the polls, opposes any uranium mining, fearing the radioactive waste could harm the pristine environment.

"We have to say no to the mine and allow ourselves to develop our country our own way", Mariane Paviassen, an IA member of parliament and leader of the anti-mine charge, said. — AFP

Floods, landslides, kill dozens in Indonesia, East Timor

JAKARTA: Flash floods unleashed by torrential rains killed 41 people on the Indonesian island of Flores on Sunday, the disaster management agency BNPB said, and at least three more were reported killed in neighbouring East Timor.

At least 49 families were hit on Flores, in the east of Indonesia's sprawling archipelago, Raditya Jati, a BNPB spokesman said in a statement.

"Dozens of houses were buried in mud in Lamanele village... residents' houses washed away by the flood", Raditya said, referring to the eastern part of Flores.

On Adonara island to the east of Flores, a bridge collapsed and rescuers were battling heavy rain, strong wind and waves, he added.

In neighbouring East Timor, a two-year-old child was among at least three people killed in a



Debris left behind in the town of Adonara in East Flores after flash floods and landslides swept eastern Indonesia and neighbouring East Timor. — AFP

landslide on the outskirts of the capital, Dili, a Reuters witness said, although there was no official toll of casualties or deaths.

"Heavy rains and overflowing

water have drowned people's homes and have also claimed the lives of several victims", East Timor Deputy Prime Minister José Reis said in a statement.

"There are roads that have collapsed, trees have fallen, and made it difficult to access some areas", he said, calling the incident the worst in East Timor in 40

years.

Power supplies were cut and the presidential palace was flooded as heavy rain and strong winds have lashed Dili since late on Saturday.

Civil protection officials in East Timor could not immediately be reached for comment. Social media posts showed collapsed buildings and vehicles submerged by flash floods.

Indonesia's weather agency said a tropical cyclone was approaching the Savu Straits between the southern part of Nusa Tenggara province and East Timor's north coast, warning that it could bring yet more rain, waves and winds.

Photographs shared by the disaster mitigation agency showed powerful currents flowing through a village, while the roads were scattered with debris left behind by the flooding.

Jati said aid and relief efforts for the affected villages were hampered by the absence of transportation to the island. It can only be reached by sea, but links have been suspended due to high waves and the severe weather conditions.

"We are working on other ways to reach the island other than by the sea", Jati said.

The climatology and meteorological agency predicted that some parts of Indonesia could face extreme weather, with heavy and torrential rain, strong winds and large waves during the week ahead.

Disaster-prone Indonesia has recorded 968 disasters as of March 30 this year, most of which are wet hydro meteorological hazards with 870 occurrences, including 414 hazards caused by flooding.

— dpa/Reuters

Libyan PM hails Covid vaccine delivery as ‘first drop of rain’

TRIPOLI: More than 100,000 doses of Russia's Sputnik V Covid-19 vaccine arrived at Tripoli's Mitiga airport on Sunday, Libya's ministry of health said, the first shipment to reach the country.

Around 1,000 new infections are announced daily by the National Centre for Disease Control, posing a challenge to a health sector ravaged by years of conflict.

“It is the first drop of rain. Thank God, we are able to supply the first batch of corona vaccine,” interim Prime Minister Abdulhamid Dbeibeh said in a tweet.

No date has been given for when vaccinations will begin.

“The rest of the shipment will arrive in succession,” he added, without giving details of how many more doses were due.

A box of the vaccine was shown being unloaded from a cargo plane in a social media post by the health ministry, saying it would be moved to the ministry's warehouses before distribution.

In February, the disease control centre launched an electronic registration campaign for vaccinations for those aged over 18. No details on the numbers of those registering have been disclosed. Libya has a population of around 6.5 million.

Libya has recorded almost 200,000 infections since the outbreak of the pandemic and 2,684 deaths, according to the latest data from the diseases centre.



A worker unloads a shipment of Russia's Sputnik V vaccine against the coronavirus disease in Tripoli. — Reuters

Dbeibeh's new UN-backed unity government took office last month with a mandate to improve services and prepare for a national election in December.

Prime Minister Dbeibeh said that more vaccine shipments would follow and called on the public to register in order to receive a jab. So far, the Libyan health authorities have reported a total of 161,088 virus cases and 2,684 related deaths.

Last month, a transitional unity government took office in Libya, a major step towards re-establishing stability in the country that has



Libya's new Prime Minister Abdulhamid Dbeibeh

been roiled by conflict for a decade.

The interim government is

tasked with preparing for national elections, scheduled for December 24.

This government has replaced the UN-backed Government of National Accord, which has been in charge of Tripoli and western areas, alongside the competing eastern administration linked with warlord Khalifa Haftar.

Libya has been torn by division and violence for a decade

since the 2011 Nato-backed uprising against Muammar Gaddafi and split between warring western and eastern factions in 2014. — Reuters

Lebanon crisis robs pensioners of cash cushions

BEIRUT: Samir Merhi returned to Lebanon in 2009, hoping the fortune he made abroad would let him retire comfortably at home, but the country's economic crisis has upended his dreams and forced him to leave again.

For four decades, Merhi said he made “millions” working in the fashion and construction industries in Britain and the Gulf, but draconian controls imposed by Lebanese banks have trapped his life savings.

Speaking in a hotel in Beirut's commercial district of Hamra, Merhi said he was planning to fly to the US, where he will join family, even though he isn't keen on doing so.

“I have no choice,” said the 72-year-old former businessman wearing a neatly pressed suit. “I have to start over to secure my retirement. If my money was given back to me, I wouldn't need to go to the US,” he said.

“What will I do there? I don't want to die in America,” he said as he waited for a taxi to take him to the airport.

Lebanon is in the grips of its worst economic crisis since the 1975-1990 civil war, with more than half of its population mired in poverty.



Jean Assaf, a retired police officer who earns a monthly pension shows an old picture of him in uniform at his home in Beirut's Mar Mikhael district. — AFP

The Lebanese pound has lost more than 85 per cent of its value against the US dollar on the black market in a devaluation that has eaten away at pensions and salaries.

Lebanese banks have limited access to pound deposits and halted all dollar transactions since 2019 to stem a liquidity crunch and shore up dwindling foreign exchange reserves.

Like many in the country, Merhi blames the dire situation on politicians who he accused of being “corrupt from head to toe”.

“I'm the victim of the biggest financial scam in history,” he said. “May God curse them all.”

Unlike Merhi, who can live elsewhere, many Lebanese pensioners are caught in a bind. — AFP

CHILDREN WELCOME LIBYAN PREMIER



Children dressed in traditional uniforms pose at a rally attended by the Libyan Prime Minister in the city of Tawergha, some 200 kilometres east of Libya's capital close to the port city of Misrata. — AFP

Palestinians get Chinese Covid vaccine doses

RAMALLAH: The Palestinian Authority received 100,000 doses of the Chinese Sinopharm jab last week, the largest single batch of coronavirus vaccines yet to reach the Palestinian territories.

The PA's vaccination campaign was launched this month after the delivery of thousands of vaccines through the Covax programme which is meant to ensure an equitable access to Covid-19 jabs.

The Palestinian vaccine rollout has lagged well behind that of Israel, which has faced criticism for excluding most Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and the Gaza Strip from its world-beating vaccination drive.

The latest jabs “represent a



Staff members of the Palestinian Ministry of Health unload a shipment of the Sinopharm vaccines donated by the Chinese government in Ramallah, West Bank. — AFP

commitment to the promise China made to put vaccines at the service of the world,” Chinese ambassador to the PA, Guo Wei,

told reporters in Ramallah in the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

Palestinian health minister Mai al Kaila said the delivery would

“greatly contribute to accelerating the community vaccination campaign,” as the number of infections in the West Bank continues to rise. The PA announced it had started vaccinating the over-75s and some medical patients on March 21 after receiving 60,000 vaccine doses through Covax.

More than 20,000 of those doses have been transferred to Gaza, which Israel has blockaded since Hamas seized the coastal strip in 2007. An additional 60,000 doses of the Russian Sputnik V vaccine have been delivered to Gaza from the UAE, shipments brokered by a former top PA official currently exiled in Abu Dhabi, Mohammed Dahlan. — AFP

BAGHDAD

Iraq parliament approves 2021 budget

Iraq's parliament unveiled a 2021 budget that foresees a deficit of around \$20 billion, as it struggles with a financial and economic crisis exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic. The government forecasts revenues of \$69.9 billion based on oil exports of 3.25 million barrels per day. The budget set a barrel of oil at \$45, well below the market price of \$60.

Iraq last approved a budget in 2019, but the following year it failed to adopt a budget as it faced nationwide protests and a change



of government.

War-scarred Iraq is the second biggest crude producer in the OPEC oil cartel, but it has been wrestling with mounting financial and economic woes. —AFP

TUNIS

Tunisia, Greece hold joint naval exercises

Tunisia and Greece launched joint military exercises this week in the Mediterranean to boost their coordination against illegal maritime activity including smuggling and irregular migration, the Tunisian defence ministry.

“This exercise aims to develop cooperation between Tunisia and Greece in the fight against all dangers at sea, including illegal immigration (and) smuggling,” Defence Ministry spokesman Mohamed Zekri said.



Another goal was to develop maritime surveillance and search-and-rescue operations, he said, adding that the exercises were held in international waters near the Tunisian coast. — AFP

TELAVIV

Christians in Israel celebrate Easter

Christians in Israel celebrated Easter on Sunday, with coronavirus-related restrictions slightly looser than last year in light of the falling number of infections and large number of people who have been vaccinated.

The highest Catholic dignity in the Holy Land, Patriarch Pierbattista Pizzaballa led the traditional Easter Mass in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. Unlike last year, the faithful were allowed to participate again despite the coro-



navirus pandemic. Due to entry restrictions, however, neither pilgrims nor tourists were present.

Three-and-a-half months after the start of the vaccination campaign in Israel, the number of infections has dropped significantly. — dpa

In brief

■ COLOMBO



LANKA STEPS UP SECURITY FOR EASTER SERVICES

Security was stepped up at churches across Sri Lanka ahead of Easter Sunday services to guard against a repeat of the 2019 suicide bombings that killed 279. More than 12,500 armed constables were on duty outside close to 2,000 Sri Lankan churches and were backed by military personnel.

"We have also got the help the armed forces to patrol and reinforce police units across the country," police spokesman Deputy Inspector-General Ajith Rohana said. Sri Lanka was shaken on Easter Sunday in 2019 when three churches and three hotels were targeted by alleged local fighters in the largest single terror attack in the history of the country. — AFP

■ MANILA



PHILIPPINES EXTENDS LOCKDOWN IN CAPITAL, PROVINCES

The Philippine government extended the coronavirus lockdown in the country's capital region and four surrounding provinces amid a surge in Covid-19 cases. Presidential spokesman Harry Roque said the enhanced community quarantine in Metro Manila and the nearby provinces of Bulacan, Cavite, Laguna and Rizal would be in effect until April 11.

The extension came after the Department of Health announced a record 15,310 cases on Friday, the highest-ever single-day increase since the pandemic began. — dpa

■ DHAKA



BANGLADESH SET TO IMPOSE 7-DAY LOCKDOWN

The Bangladeshi government has decided to impose a seven-day nationwide lockdown from Monday to slow the spread of the Covid-19 cases, a senior minister. The decision follows a surge in the number of infections, Road Transport Minister Obaidul Qader told a news conference in Dhaka.

The emergency services will be excluded from the lockdown, State Minister for Public Administration Farhad Hossain said.

He added the mills and factories would be allowed to remain open, as long as the owners operating the units follow health guidelines. — dpa

South Korea to invite Chinese President when Covid stabilises

SEOUL: South Korea's foreign minister said on Saturday the government will prepare for a visit to South Korea by Chinese President Xi Jinping, local news outlet Yonhap reported.

"As soon as the novel coronavirus stabilises, we have decided to prepare for President Xi's visit to (South) Korea as early as possible," Chung Eui-yong told reporters after a meeting with State Councillor Wang Yi, the Chinese government's top diplomat, Yonhap reported.

Meanwhile, South Korea's foreign minister said on Saturday he expects China to play a role in peacemaking between South and North Korea, as the United States and its allies agreed to continue pushing Pyongyang to denuclearise.

"South Korea and China share a common goal toward complete denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula and toward permanent peacemaking policies," Chung Eui-yong was quoted as saying



South Korean Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong (left) met with State Councillor Wang Yi as part of the first visit of a South Korean foreign minister to China.

by South Korean news agency Yonhap.

Chung met on Saturday with State Councillor Wang Yi, the Chinese government's top diplomat, in the Chinese city of Xiamen, as part of the first visit of a South Korean foreign minister

to China since 2017.

Wang said China and South Korea had agreed "to promote the process to politically resolve issues surrounding the Korean Peninsula," Yonhap reported.

On Friday, national security officials from the United States,

‘South Korea, China share a common goal toward complete denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula’

CHUNG EUI-YONG
South Korea's foreign minister

Japan and China agreed to work together to keep up pressure on North Korea to give up its nuclear and ballistic missile programmes, and on the need to implement United Nations Security Council resolutions on North Korea.

Chung's visit comes as Seoul seeks to mend ties with its biggest trading partner.

A 2016 row over a US antimissile system placed in South Korea hit the country's tourism, cosmetics and entertainment industries. — Reuters

11 killed in China holiday weekend bus crash

BEIJING: At least 11 people were killed after a truck collided with a passenger bus in eastern China over a busy holiday weekend, state media reported on Sunday.

The truck drove through a barrier on a highway north of Shanghai in Jiangsu province and crashed into the bus around 1 a.m. local time Sunday (1700 GMT), the Xinhua news agency said.

As traffic piled up at the site of the crash, two other trucks were involved in a rear-end collision. Nineteen people were injured and sent to the hospital, according to Xinhua.

Footage broadcast by local media showed the passenger bus overturned amid debris from the barrier. — AFP

Protesters decorate Easter eggs in Myanmar

YANGON: Anti-coup demonstrators in Myanmar decorated boiled eggs on Easter Sunday in the latest protest against the country's military junta.

Myanmar has been gripped by turmoil since a February 1 coup ousted civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

Security forces have sought to quell a mass uprising with lethal force, with the death toll reaching 557 as of Saturday, according to the local monitoring group Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP).

To coincide with Easter Sunday, scores of Myanmar protesters decorated eggs with political messages and left them on neighbour's doorsteps and hanging in bags on front gates.

Pictures posted on social media showed eggs adorned with Suu Kyi's likeness and three-finger salutes — a symbol of the resistance — while others said "save our people" and "democracy".

"I am Buddhist but I have joined this campaign because it is easy to get hold of eggs. I



A person makes the three-finger salute beside a bowl of eggs, decorated with messages in support of protesters demonstrating against the military coup, in Yangon's Mingalar Taungnyunt township. — AFP

spent almost one hour decorating my eggs," one Yangon based egg decorator said.

"I am praying for Myanmar's current situation to get back to democracy."

One Facebook group promoting the egg protest urged people to be respectful of Christian traditions on Easter Sunday.

Myanmar's most senior

Catholic, Cardinal Charles Bo posted an Easter message on Twitter: "Jesus has risen: Hallelujah — Myanmar will rise again!"

Early bird protesters also hit the streets of Mandalay Sunday, some carrying flags and riding motorbikes. Their demonstration comes even after four protesters were killed Saturday in the cities of Bago and Monywa. — AFP

17 fishermen missing in Indonesia boats collision

People crowd along a dock as rescue efforts prepare to head out to search for 17 fishermen who went missing in waters off Indramayu, West Java. — AFP

JAKARTA: Rescuers were searching for 17 missing fishermen after two boats collided in waters off Indonesia's West Java province, officials said Sunday.

A fishing ship hit a larger cargo vessel on Saturday evening off Indramayu regency, flipping the wooden boat's 32 crew members into the water, said Bandung rescue agency spokeswoman Seni Wulandari.

"Some 15 survivors have been evacuated to the cargo vessel but the team is still searching for 17 other crew who went missing,"

Wulandari told AFP on Sunday.

Those rescued sustained minor injuries from the accident and would be taken to a nearby hospital, she added.

The Habco Pioneer cargo vessel was sailing through the port of Merak from the Indonesian island of Borneo when it was hit by a local fishing boat in Indramayu waters, said Wulandari.

Boat accidents are common in Indonesia, a Southeast Asian archipelago of around 17,000 islands, due to lax safety standards. — AFP

Taiwan minister accepts responsibility for train crash

HUALIEN: Taiwan's transport minister said on Sunday he would not shirk his responsibility for a deadly train crash even as his resignation offer was rejected amid growing questions over safety lapses that could have contributed to the disaster.

In the island's worst rail accident in seven decades, 51 people have been confirmed dead after a packed express train slammed into a truck near the eastern city of Hualien on Friday, causing it to derail and the front part to crumple.

Speaking at the crash site overlooking the ocean and backed by precipitous mountains, Lin Chia-lung said he would "not avoid" responsibility.

"I am also in charge of minimising the damage caused by the entire accident. After the whole



A member of the Tzu Chi Foundation helps a grieving woman as relatives of the victims mourn near the site a day after the deadly train derailment at a tunnel north of Hualien. — Reuters

rescue work is completed, I believe I will take the responsibility," he said. Premier Su Tseng-chang's office said Lin had made a verbal offer to resign on Saturday, but Su rejected it for the time being, saying efforts for now should focus on rescue and recovery.

The truck that the train hit had slid down a sloping road onto the track just outside a tunnel. Officials are investigating the manager of the construction site, Lee Yi-hsiang, whose truck is suspected of not having its brakes properly applied. Lee had been released on bail, though the high court's Hualien branch on Sunday rescinded that decision after the prosecutors appealed it, sending the case back to the lower court. Lee and his lawyer have declined to answer reporters' questions. — Reuters



A police officer walks behind a police vehicle with flames leaping up the rear after violence broke out in north of Belfast, Northern Ireland. – AFP

Disorder in Northern Ireland

30 PETROL BOMBS THROWN AT POLICE IN ‘ORCHESTRATED ATTACK’

LONDON: Some 30 petrol bombs were thrown at police in what has been termed an “orchestrated attack” during a further night of disorder in Northern Ireland. Police were attacked in Newtownabbey on the outskirts of Belfast on Saturday, after violent scenes in the Sandy Row area in the city as well as in London derry on Friday. Police said it was the fifth consecutive night of disorder in Derry on Friday, when 12 officers were injured by a large group throwing masonry, bottles, petrol bombs and fireworks. Some 27 police officers

were injured on Friday night across Belfast and Derry. North Area Commander Chief Superintendent Davy Beck said 30 petrol bombs were thrown at officers and three cars set alight in Newtownabbey on Saturday. He said from around 7.30 pm to 10.30 pm a crowd of 20 to 30 people, including young people and older men, some of whom were wearing masks, gathered in the O'Neill Road/Cloughfern area. “In total 30 petrol bombs were thrown at police and three vehicles were hijacked and set on

fire,” he said. “One man aged 47 was arrested and he currently remains in police custody.” Mr Beck said it was an “orchestrated attack on police.” “My officers put on their uniform every day and go out into the community they serve, not knowing what lies ahead of them,” he said. “However this does not deter them from turning up every day to do their duty.” “No-one, no matter what line of work they are in, deserves to be subjected to any kind of violence.” “The officers who serve the Newtownabbey area are fathers,

mothers, brothers and sisters, they have families who wait every day on their loved ones coming home, hoping they have not been injured, or worse.” He added: “We are living in unprecedented times, dealing with a global pandemic, no-one needs the added pressure of disorder in their community.” “I would appeal to those who are taking to the streets to stop immediately, their actions are causing nothing but harm and distress to the very communities they claim they are representing.” — dpa

French tycoon Tapie attacked in burglary

PARIS: Former French minister and scandal-ridden tycoon Bernard Tapie, the former owner of Adidas, was attacked along with his wife during a night-time burglary of their home, police sources said on Sunday. The couple were asleep when four people broke into their house in Combs-la-Ville near Paris around 00:30 am on Sunday, beat them and tied them up before making off with their loot. Dominique Tapie was able to free herself and made her way to a neighbour's home from where she alerted police. Slightly injured, she was then taken to hospital. Tapie himself declined to be taken into medical care, the sources said. There was no immediate information about what goods the perpetrators took and what the loot is worth. Tapie is a former Socialist minister who rose from humble beginnings to build a sporting and media em-

pire, but later faced a string of legal problems. He made a fortune in the early part of his career by taking over failing companies, and often flaunted his wealth, including by buying a 72-metre yacht and a football club. One fraud case has dogged Tapie for more than a decade, involving a hugely controversial settlement worth €400 million (\$470 million at current rates) awarded to him by a government arbitration panel, the size of which sent shockwaves through France. The panel judged he had been the victim of fraud when he sold his stake in the Adidas sports apparel company in 1993 to state-run French bank Credit Lyonnais, which was found to have undervalued the sportswear brand. The case also ensnared then-finance minister Christine Lagarde who now runs the European Central Bank. — AFP



Police officers cordon off the area near the house of French businessman Bernard Tapie and his wife Dominique Tapie in southeastern suburbs of Paris. – AFP

Pope Francis urges vaccines for poor in Easter message

VATICAN CITY: Pope Francis urged Catholics to remain hopeful in his Easter Sunday address, calling vaccines an “essential tool” in ending the pandemic and urging their swift rollout to the world's poorest countries. On the holiest holiday for the world's 1.3 billion Catholics and the second under the shadow of the coronavirus crisis, the pope focused his message on the world's most vulnerable — the sick, migrants, people facing economic hardship, and those living in war zones like Syria, Yemen and Libya. “The pandemic is still spreading, while the social and economic

crisis remains severe, especially for the poor,” the 84-year-old Argentine said, speaking to a congregation of only around 100 people inside the vast St Peter's Basilica. “Vaccines are an essential tool in this fight,” he said, calling on the international community to overcome delays in distributing vaccines “especially in the poorest countries”. Francis, who has focused on the plight of vulnerable groups since becoming pope in 2013, had already warned rich nations against vaccine hoarding in an address to the UN General Assembly in September. The pope said it was “scandal-



Italian State Police stands guard at St Peter's Square in The Vatican, after the Pope's Easter Mass and Urbi et Orbi blessing during the coronavirus pandemic. – AFP

ous” that armed conflicts around the world had not ceased. He called for an end to the war in Syria, “where millions of people are presently living in inhumane conditions”, and in Yemen “whose situation has met with a deafening and scandalous silence”. He also expressed his closeness to Myanmar's youth — “committed to supporting democracy” — called for dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians, and urged an end to violence in Africa, citing Nigeria, the Sahel, Northern Ethiopia's Tigray region and Cabo Delgado in Mozambique. “There are still too many wars

and too much violence in the world,” Francis said, adding that April 4 marked an awareness day against landmines, “insidious and horrible devices”. The pope's Easter “Urbi et Orbi” (“To the city and the world”) message in the Vatican came as 60 million Italians spent the Easter holiday under lockdown. The whole of Italy — the first country in Europe to have been hit by the coronavirus — has been declared a high-risk “red zone” from Saturday through Monday, with restrictions on movement and restaurants closed along with non-essential retail. — AFP

CHHATTISGARH

22 Indian security members killed in attack

At least 22 members of Indian security forces were killed in a central Indian state by Maoist fighters, one of the bloodiest attacks by the extreme left-wing insurgent groups this year, officials said. Security personnel belonging to the Central Reserve Police Force's elite CoBRA unit, the District Reserve Guard, and the Special Task Force were attacked in the tribal-dominated Chhattisgarh state during an anti-insurgency operation.



“We can confirm that 22 of Indian force members have been killed by Maoist fighters,” said a senior government official in Raipur, the capital of mineral-rich Chhattisgarh. — Reuters

BERLIN

Germany to add Dutch to high-risk list

Germany will place the Netherlands among countries classified as high-risk zones due to elevated numbers of Covid-19 cases, Berlin's infectious disease agency announced. Beginning on Tuesday at midnight, travellers from the Netherlands will have to present a negative virus test to enter Germany, according to the Robert Koch Institute. A quarantine period of 10 days must also be observed with the possibility of halting it after five days on presentation of a negative



test. There will be exceptions for people commuting between the neighbouring countries for work. Germany has already classified neighbouring France, the Czech Republic and Poland as high-risk zones. — AFP

ATHENS

Attempt to contain bush fire on Greek island

Fire fighters and volunteers are fighting a bush fire on the Greek island of Andros in the Cyclades archipelago. It has spread rapidly since the early morning and is posing a threat to several villages, local media reported. Two villages were evacuated as a precaution. The work of putting out the fire was made more difficult by a strong southern wind in the region. It is the first major fire in Greece this year. Especially in the summer,



the country is often ravaged by large fires when it is hot, dry and there are strong winds. At the weekend, the temperatures rose to around 20 degrees Celsius in many places. — dpa

When reading becomes a culture...

The passion and love for reading is a gift which is not given to many people. Reading books, for instance, is not of an interest to many. However, reading from different sources of knowledge is becoming a habit for many people of different ages these days. Reading books, newspapers, magazines, novels or even reading e-books on mobiles or tabs is becoming a must-to-do daily activity for some people.

Although the addiction to modern technology and social media is increasing nowadays, there are people who sustain their reading habit. Newspapers, books and novels are most popular and widely read by people in offices, coffee shops or even at home, while as some regard the bedtime as the most preferred time for reading. To them, reading is the last thing to do to wrap up their day. They believe in feeding soul and mind is as important as feeding the body!

Are you among those reading lovers who marks reading as part of their daily life?! Mostly, they never skip a day without reading a few pages of a book; their passion is beyond imagination indeed. Their life is just meaningless without the being blessed by a book kept in their cars, bedrooms, offices. Always friend of books never go to bed alone, but with a book on their arms!



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THE
SIGNIFICANCE OF
BOOKS IN ONE'S
LIFE CANNOT
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Most likely books are the only thing that make their day. Possibly, they live by the saying, “Let books be your dining table, and you shall be full of delights. Let them be your mattress, and you shall sleep restful nights”. Generally, the biggest pleasure comes from what we read, not from on what we read. The real difference lies in our attitude towards reading. It has been said that there is a great difference between an eager man who wants to read a book and the tired man who wants a book to read.

The significance of books in one’s life cannot be denied of course! In fact, books are regarded as best friends at all times. A famous Chinese proverb says, “A book is like a garden carried in the pocket”. Though, it is impossible to carry a garden in one’s pocket, but this saying is metaphorically indicating the value of books. They are full of beauty, wonders, science and knowledge, which all cultivate the mind and spirit.

Anyhow, many people are in love of books; not only adults and elder, but kids too. Although sometimes they are fond of comic books or magazines, but this undoubtedly creates the reading culture among them. Gradually, reading becomes a habit for kids as browsing cartoon magazines and comic books will instill them to grab

real books. Reading then will be irresistible daily behaviour and part of their life.

Creating the culture of reading and eventually making it a habit for kids from their early ages will not happen overnight of course. It should be started since the early days of childhood, parents need to read for their kids every now and then to build their interest. Telling fairytales and reading short stories before their bedtime will be a good start of getting reading habit into their life. As they get younger, they will be reading on their own and reading will be a passion rather than a habit.

This is what people would love to see happening with kids today. Despite, with the intervention of the digital age and advanced technology, kids are being steadily diverted from the interest of reading. Although today they are being more attached to computer games and mobile technologies, reading shall never be missed from their day.

A few minutes of reading everyday would help getting them out of the addiction to technology. By the time this will bring up the love of reading and as they grow up with this habit, reading will definitely an essential part of their life. Reading will become then a culture rather than just a habit!

WRITE FOR US

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A DIFFERENT BATTLE

Vaccine tourists welcome as locals say ‘no’ to jabs

MIODRAG SOVILJ

While most of the world struggles to secure enough Covid-19 vaccines, Serbia faces a different battle — how to persuade its citizens to get the life-saving shot.

The small Balkan country has so many vaccines available it has even offered jabs to any foreigner who can get themself there, sparking an influx of thousands of “vaccine tourists” from neighbouring countries.

The situation is the result of a diplomatic juggle between East and West that saw Belgrade secure deals for nearly 15 million vaccine doses

for its population of seven million.

With around three million doses already in hand — a buffet of Pfizer, AstraZeneca, Sputnik V and Sinopharm — and two million of those already administered, one of Europe’s poorest corners has quickly found itself among the continent’s

fastest vaccinators. However, according to the government, little more than a quarter of those eligible to receive the precious shot applied for one.

After Serbia vaccinated most of those who came forward, the pace started to stall.

In the last two weeks of March, the number of people receiving their first dose dropped to around 12,000 daily, roughly half the number over the same period in February, according to data collected by AFP from official sources. With jabs in abundance, last week Serbia took the highly unusual step of offering foreign citizens the chance to apply to have the shot. Migrants have also been offered the vaccine.

The authorities also urged Serbian citizens who had still not been inoculated to simply show up without an appointment.

“I beg you, people, get a vaccine”, Serbian populist President Aleksandar Vucic pleaded.

“We have them and we will have more, I beg you, in the name of God, take them”, he said.

Serbian doctors fear that take-up of the jab has peaked. “It’s clear that there is not a sufficient number of people willing to get vaccinated”, president of a doctors’ union Rade Panic said.

According to Serbia’s leading epidemiologist Predrag Kon, lack of interest is “solely a consequence” of anti-vaccine misinformation being spread online by fearmongers.

“I’ve been doing this job for many decades and I have seen their power of persuasion”, Kon said, adding that “one or two per cent” of the anti-vaxxers “can easily affect up to 50 per cent of the undecided”.

“In these crazy times, I have serious doubts... mostly because of the lack of information from the relevant institutions”, Ivan, a 32-year-old restaurant owner said.

— AFP

TRYING A CRAFT

White House tries to craft gun executive orders that can’t be undone

TREVOR HUNNICUTT

The White House is trying to craft a series of executive actions for President Joe Biden to sign to try to limit gun violence, hoping they cannot be quickly dismantled in court, according to aides and gun safety groups.

Among the measures being considered — and strongly encouraged by activists — is one directing the Department of Justice (DOJ) to reinterpret existing law on untraceable “ghost guns.”

So-called “ghost gun” kits are self-assembled from parts purchased online or at gun shows and are increasingly associated with crimes. But they are not classified as firearms and so can be legally sold without serial numbers or background checks.

The US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives has said more than 30 per cent of the illegal weapons it has confiscated in some areas of California are ghost guns.

Changing the designation of such weapons would likely set off an instant legal challenge, as have other attempts to limit gun ownership in recent years, for instance former president Donald Trump’s December 2018 ban on “bump stocks.” Two top White House aides, Cedric Richmond and Susan Rice, held a series of meetings early in the Biden administration to begin soliciting views on gun violence policy from safety activists and community leaders. Justice Department officials have met with the gun industry.

Among the topics discussed, according to attendees, were “ghost



US President Joe Biden speaks about the March jobs report in the State Dining Room of the White House in Washington, DC, last Friday. — AFP

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guns”, pushing the DOJ to bring more cases against firearms dealers and manufacturers, limiting exemptions for private sales from background check rules, and alerting local law enforcement when someone fails a federal background check.

Mass shootings last month in Georgia and Colorado have put pressure on the White House to act, as swift legislation is not likely through Congress. Press secretary Jen Psaki reiterated on Thursday that the administration is looking at executive orders. Police say the deadly

shootings at spas in the Atlanta area and a supermarket in Boulder were carried out by suspects using legally-purchased firearms.

Biden has said the administration is exploring whether he has the authority to take action on firearms made using 3D printers as well as on imported guns.

“We stand ready and all options are on the table”, said Amy Hunter, a spokeswoman for the pro-gun National Rifle Association, when asked about the possibility of presidential executive orders.

— Reuters

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Ivankovic to seek alternative plans for national team

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, APRIL 4

Oman head coach Branko Ivankovic said he is looking for alternative plans for the training of the national team after suspension of the sporting activities by the Supreme Committee and cancellation of 2020-21 domestic season by the Oman Football Association (OFA).

The Croatian coach added in his exclusive remarks to *Oman Daily Observer* that he cannot comment in any decision made by the government and the OFA but his duty is to find any other possible proposals that will ensure smooth preparation of the national team for the forthcoming assignments including the joint World Cup and AFC Asian Cup qualifiers.

“It is really difficult and terrible for any player to be without any training sessions and official matches for long period. We had lost five to six months last year due to the ongoing pandemic and a similar scenario is repeating once again. However, there are different plans and solutions to be taken to face this tough condition. I will meet the chairman of OFA, Shaikh Salim al Wahaibi, this week. From this meeting, I will draw up the plan for the next phase of the national team’s preparation,” he said.

Commenting on having an overseas camp as a proposal for the national team to prevent any negative impact and delay in the team’s plan, the 67-year-old responded that this is one of the available solutions.

“An external warm-up camp is one of the alternative solutions that will be raised to

the national teams committee and then discussed with the chairman,” he added.

The ‘Red Warriors’ completed the external camp in Dubai successfully on March 25. The two weeks camp featured two friendly games against Jordan and India. Both matches ended in draws with Jordan game finishing goalless and India match 1-1.

Coach Ivankovic expressed his full satisfaction on Dubai camp as he described that it was went in an excellent condition.

“Thanks to the Emirates Football Association for the whole organisation. The team had played two warm-up matches after a long break and it was a golden opportunity to stand on performance of different players. Many top technical outcomes were obtained from both the friendlies. We have missed some players in Muscat due to their positive cases of Covid-19, while some players got injured. In addition, we had utilised all the camp days as the training schedules were occupied daily,” he ended.

A significant assignment is awaiting the national football team in the remaining rounds of the joint 2022 Fifa World Cup and 2023 AFC Asian Cup qualifiers. Qatar will host the remaining matches of the group from May 31 to June 15.

Oman are currently positioned second in Group E with 12 points while Asian champions Qatar are topping the group with 13 points from five games. Afghanistan are placed third with four points. India (3 points) and Bangladesh (1 point) are in the third and fourth positions respectively.



“An external warm-up camp is one of the alternative solutions that will be raised to the national teams committee and then discussed with the chairman

BRANKO IVANKOVIC
Oman head coach



OHA postpones first division league matches

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, APRIL 4

The Oman Handball Association (OHA) on Sunday postponed the first division league. The resumption of the league will take place before the new season, 2021-22 and OHA will circulate the new schedule to all the teams in advance.

The decision was taken by the OHA board directors after postponement of many league matches on March 29 due to some positive cases. Also, the OHA resolution followed the decision by the Supreme Committee to suspend all the official and private sports activities with effect from April 1 until further notice due to the sharp increase in cases of



infection with Covid-19 virus in different governorates of the Sultanate.

The competitions panel at the OHA studied and reviewed

the possibility of resumption the first division league matches few days ago. However and due to the unstable conditions of the pandemic and to avoid

more spread of the virus in the society during this tough time, the association announced the postponement of the competition. Also, OHA considered the financial



impact on clubs due to the long break of the sporting activities.

The 2020-21 second division handball league championship was completed in mid of March.

Al Oruba had lifted the title after beating Al Suwaiq 27-21 in the concluding match. Al Shabab ended as runners-up while Al Ittihad finished in third place.

The first division handball league championship matches were stopped on March 17 after registering many positive cases of Covid-19.

Muscat are topping the league table with 12 points, while the closest opponents are Ahli Sidab in second position with nine points. In the last rounds, Muscat beat Seeb 37-27 while Ahli Sidab defeated Seeb 29-23. Muscat registered a tough win over Majees 25-24. The league was supposed to resume from March 30 but the new schedules were affected by the suspension of sporting activities.

In brief

PARIS



NEYMAR SENT OFF AS PSG LOSE TO LILLE

Neymar was sent off late on as a limping Jonathan David scored the only goal to give Lille a 1-0 win over Paris Saint-Germain in their Ligue 1 title showdown on Saturday, a result that moves them three points clear at the top. Canadian striker David was struggling with an ankle injury when he fired home in the 20th minute. He was forced off soon after and emerged on crutches to watch the second half with heavy strapping where he had been caught by Idrissa Gana Gueye.

Without him, Lille held on to beat PSG in a league game in the capital for the first time in a quarter of a century, with a frustrating afternoon for the hosts summed up when Neymar was dismissed.

MILAN



LUKAKU PULLS INTER EIGHT POINTS CLEAR

Romelu Lukaku fired Inter Milan eight points clear at the top of Serie A on Saturday with the only goal in a 1-0 win at Bologna as title rivals Juventus and AC Milan were both held. Second-placed Milan's challenge faltered in a 1-1 draw with 10-man Sampdoria while champions Juventus were held 2-2 at city rivals Torino.

Antonio Conte's side stretched their winning run to nine league games as they chase a first 'Scudetto' since 2010, having finished runners-up last season. Lukaku got his head to an Alessandro Bastoni cross after half an hour and bundled the ball over the line for his 20th league goal this season later.

PARIS



FRENCH OPEN COULD BE POSTPONED

French Sports Minister Roxana Maracineanu said it was possible the French Open could be postponed for the second year amid the Covid-19 crisis.

France entered a third nationwide lockdown on Saturday to contain the coronavirus spread, although professional sports have largely been spared. An exception is cycling's Paris-Roubaix one-day race, which has been postponed from its original April 11 slot.

The French Open, which last year was postponed by four months and took place in front of limited crowds, is due to start this year on May 23. "We are in discussion with them (the French Tennis Federation) to see if we should change the date," to coincide with a possible resumption of all sports."



Musannah Open sailing begins

MUSANNAH: Sailors from across Africa, Asia and Europe have convened at the Millennium Resort Musannah for the start of the Musannah Open Championship. Over the next week, 102 sailors from 17 countries will compete in 49er, 49er FX, Laser, Laser Radial and RS:X classes where the African and Asian sailors will be looking to secure their place at this year's long-awaited Tokyo 2020 Olympics at the final qualification event before the Games.

International race management officials selected by the Asian Sailing Federation (ASAF) joined their counterparts from Oman Sail, organisers of the event, on April 3 for the first day of competitive sailing with clear skies expected and an average temperature of 31c with wind of 12 knots providing perfect conditions on the first day.

Rashid al Kindi, Director of

Sailing at Oman Sail, said, "We are delighted to welcome a strong fleet to sail in Oman and we're confident of a very high level of competition. Conditions in Musannah are great and with such high stakes, we know the sailors will be able to perform at their peak. The competitors in each class are evenly matched, so it will be all about small gains on each day and fine margins will decide who qualifies for Tokyo 2020."

Two of Oman's own national teams are also competing this week. The 49er Olympic team of Musab al Hadi, Waleed al Kindi, Abdul Rahman al Mashari and Ahmed al Hasni are chasing Olympic qualification for the first time, and Abdul Majeed al Hadrami, Faisal al Qutaiti and Al Mukhtar al Mujaini will be eager to perform well in the RS:X class on home waters.

The Musannah Open Championship was allocated

OLYMPIC HOPEFULS LOOK TO BOOK THEIR PLACE IN TOKYO



Olympic qualification status by World Sailing to substitute for postponed events throughout 2020 and allow sailors the opportunity to confirm their spot in a safe and competitive environment. Everyone involved has been tested upon arrival and regularly throughout to create a secure bubble and allow the event to go ahead.

Ajay Narang, Chair of the ASAF Events Committee, said, "It has been very challenging for everybody to organise an event during this period but the organisation has put systems in place to make sure that sailors are safe and able to compete to qualify for the Olympics. Despite the challenges everybody has gone through, there has been thorough testing at every stage to ensure the safety of the sailors, coaches and officials so that the event can happen. We are very grateful to Oman Sail for organising this

event in such a short timeframe and making sure the event is successful."

All sailors, coaches and onsite management staff have passed rigorous Covid-19 safety procedures in order to enter Oman and will remain within race partners Millennium Resort Musannah for the duration of the event. Also supporting the event is the International Maritime College Oman (IMCO), Salsabeel water from National mineral water company, Carrefour Oman and OHI Telecommunications.

The first day offered sailors an opportunity to warm up with an official practice race in preparation for the start of official racing the following day.

Racing will then take place each day through until April 8 where the winners will receive their prizes and the closing ceremony will bring the extended qualification period to an end.

Loeb helps Hamilton's X44 team top Extreme E qualifying

AL ULA, Saudi Arabia: Lewis Hamilton's X44 team on Saturday set the fastest qualifying time for the inaugural race of the Extreme E championship, which features electric SUVs racing in remote parts of the world.

X44, led by nine-time world rally champion Sebastien Loeb and Cristina Gutierrez — the second woman to win a Dakar Rally stage — came ahead of triple Dakar winner Carlos Sainz and Laia Sanz in the deserts of Saudi Arabia after the two qualifying runs.

"We couldn't have hoped for better. It was a great battle and we realise that it's not going to be easy," Loeb said.

Former Australian rally champion Molly Taylor and Swede Johan Kristoffersson, a three-time world rallycross winner, took third place for 2016 F1 champion Nico Rosberg ahead of the semifinals and final on Sunday.

"We had some wild moments



in qualifying 1, but we managed to keep it pinned to go fastest and have a strong run in qualifying 2 to make it through to the semifinals

tomorrow," said Taylor.

Former F1 champion Jenson Button's team finished in sixth while three of the nine teams were

unable to take part in the second qualifying session — Veloce and Cupra following two spectacular accidents and Chip Ganassi due

to a technical problem.

Stephane Sarrazin, a former Le Mans 24 Hour race winner, emerged unscathed despite a frightening barrel roll for the Veloce team.

"The cars are not easy to drive, as soon as you lose it, they roll," said Loeb.

The brainchild of Spanish entrepreneur Alejandro Agag, Extreme E will attempt to highlight the environmental dangers posed to some of the world's most remote regions.

After this weekend's Al Ula round, the competition will switch to Senegal's Lac Rose, Greenland, the Amazon in Brazil and the glaciers of Tierra del Fuego in Argentina.

As well as setting up environmental legacy projects in the five areas, the series also insists it is promoting gender equality with each team dividing up duties behind the wheel for their male and female drivers. — AFP

BARTY RETAINS MIAMI OPEN CROWN

INJURED ANDREESCU LIMPS OUT OF FINAL

MIAMI: World number one Ashleigh Barty retained her Miami Open title on Saturday as Bianca Andreescu's injury curse struck again.

Australia's Barty completed a 6-3, 4-0 victory after Andreescu was forced to retire in tears with an injury to her right ankle in the second set at the Hard Rock Stadium.

Barty had dominated the Canadian world number nine throughout the contest behind a powerful service game and accurate forehand.

The end came soon after the third game of the second set, when Andreescu collapsed to the court after rolling her right ankle during her service game.

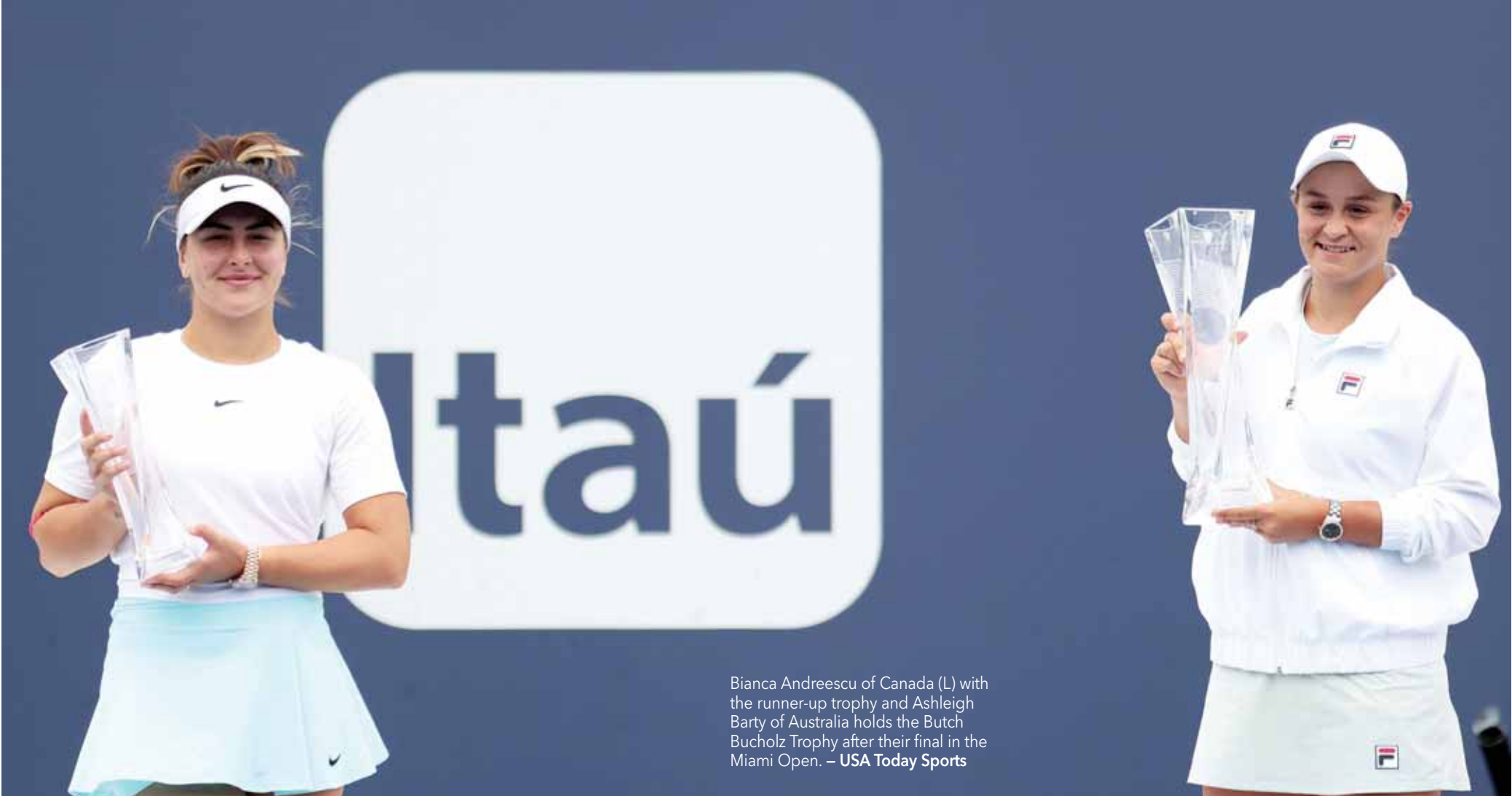
Barty broke for a 3-0 lead as Andreescu, clearly struggling to move properly battled on. Despite being heavily strapped on her ankle, Andreescu retired soon afterwards, unable to continue.

It was a bitterly disappointing end for Andreescu, the 2019 US Open champion who missed the first few months of the 2020 season with a knee injury before last year's pandemic shutdown.

"Definitely not the way I wanted to end the tournament, but I'm super-grateful nonetheless," Andreescu, 20, said in comments on court after her defeat.

"I got to the final in one of my first tournaments in a while and I couldn't be more happy."

Andreescu revealed that she had initially wanted to play through the pain until being told to retire by her trainer. "I really didn't want to stop but my fitness trainer, he basically saved me from myself," Andreescu said.



Bianca Andreescu of Canada (L) with the runner-up trophy and Ashleigh Barty of Australia holds the Butch Bucholz Trophy after their final in the Miami Open. — USA Today Sports

"I have been through that, just continuously pushing myself to the point where I'd make it worse. I trusted him. I knew it was the best decision."

Barty, meanwhile, was left to reflect on a clinical victory in what was her first overseas appearance since the WTA Tour resumed after the shutdown.

'PERFECT START'

"It's been the perfect start for us," said Barty, who arrived in Florida last month after a gruelling 50-hour journey from Australia.

"I did say to my coach when we got here 'It can only get better from here.' The fact that we've had a really successful couple of weeks, I felt like with each match I got better and better. And to have a title at the end of it is a bonus."

"Hopefully, it's going to be a long and successful season. It's a brilliant start," added Barty, who now heads to next week's Charleston event as she prepares for the clay court season.

The 24-year-old from Queensland controlled the game from the outset, moving Andreescu

“
Definitely not the way I wanted to end the tournament, but I’m super-grateful nonetheless
BIANCA ANDREESCU
Canadian World No 9

around the court relentlessly with accurate first serves and heavy groundstrokes.

After opening with a convincing hold of serve, Barty broke Andreescu in the second game, taking a 2-0 lead with a bludgeoning forehand that gave the Canadian no chance.

Another hold of serve put Barty 3-0 up, and although Andreescu took advantage of an erratic service game from the Australian to break back and close the deficit to 3-2, it was only a temporary reprieve.

Barty broke back immediately to go 4-2 ahead and then held easily for a 5-2 lead. Andreescu held for 5-3 but was unable to find a way through Barty's serve as the world number one took the first set in the next game.

Andreescu was soon under pressure in the second set, suffering an early break to go 2-0 down.

She then appeared to roll an ankle while serving in the third game and crumpled to the court. She managed to continue but Barty broke again for 3-0 lead and the end followed soon afterwards when the youngster retired. — AFP

City close in on Premier League title after clinical win



Manchester City's Gabriel Jesus scores their second goal against Leicester. — Reuters



Manchester City's Gabriel Jesus celebrates scoring their second goal with Raheem Sterling and team-mates. — Reuters

ANDY JALIL
LEICESTER, APRIL 4

It increasingly seems a mere formality now for Manchester City to claim the Premier League title after their 2-0 win over Leicester. They remain unbeaten in their last 18 away games in all competitions, 15 of which have seen them victorious. With seven matches remaining they require just 11 points and their delighted manager, Pep Guardiola said: "I'll never forget this season. Liverpool have the crown but we are close to taking and what

we've done so far is incredible."

"The Premier League is the nicest competition to win, it is 11 months and it is so tough but we are now so close. This was a great victory I think three more wins and two draws and we are there. When you have a team with 26 victories from 27 games, then you have to trust them. That's why I used players who maybe don't play too often, but I want to play them all because I trust them."

Guardiola added: "We can play good or bad but we cannot deny these players run and fight

every single game. That is one of the things I'm proud of most. There is good solidarity between the players."

Leicester seemed intent on remaining defensive particularly in the first half while City looked for openings as they kept attacking. An early effort from Fernandinho was ruled out with Sergio Aguero off-side and then they came close to breaking the deadlock when a dipping free-kick from 25 yards by Kevin De Bruyne rattled the crossbar. City missed two further chances when Riyad Mahrez's drive was saved

ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE RESULTS
On Saturday
Chelsea 2 (Pulisic 27, Mount 71) West Brom 5 (Pereira 45+2, 45+5, Robinson 63, 90, Diagne 68)
Leeds 2 (Harrison 12, Jagielka 49-og) Sheffield United 1 (Osborn 45+2)
Leicester 0 Manchester City 2 (Mendy 59, Jesus 74)
Arsenal 0 Liverpool 3 (Jota 64, 82, Salah 68)

By Kasper Schmeichel and Jamie Vardy's effort was ruled off-side.

Thirteen minutes into the second half City went ahead Gabriel Jesus attempted to volley

a cross from the right by Rodri but the ball went to Mendy who beat the challenge from Marc Albrighton and curled a shot into the far corner, to the left of Kasper Schmeichel, with his weaker right foot.

City kept the pressure on and while Leicester opened up a bit more from their defensive mode, City doubled their lead with 16 minutes remaining. It was a sublime move from De Bruyne whose brilliant through pass took out three defenders. The ball went to Jesus who found substitute Raheem Sterling and

on receiving a return pass from him placed his shot into the net.

Leicester manager, Brendan Rodgers said: "We're disappointed with the two goals, we could have been better organised. We can have no complaints. We have lost to the best team in the league this season. We have no excuses. If you concede against a team with that much quality, they can just hide the ball from you."

He added: "If you gave me £500 million maybe we won't be too far off them. Pep is an incredible operator but he does have world-class players."

features



Stal Gallery continues support for young emerging artists

The 5th Annual Young Emerging Artist Prize is the curatorial work of Hassan al Meer — Stal Gallery’s Art Director and Curator. This year, despite the pandemic, they continue supporting a new generation of rising artists... **P14**



INSIDE STORIES

LOCAL SCENE



AL NAJD FARMS PRODUCES AMPLE CROPS SUPPORTING LOCAL NEEDS

Al Najd located in the deserts of Dhofar Governorate has been lauded for its natural resources and fertile lands. It is considered one of the most promising agricultural areas in the Sultanate and an outstanding source of crops throughout the year... **Story on P15**

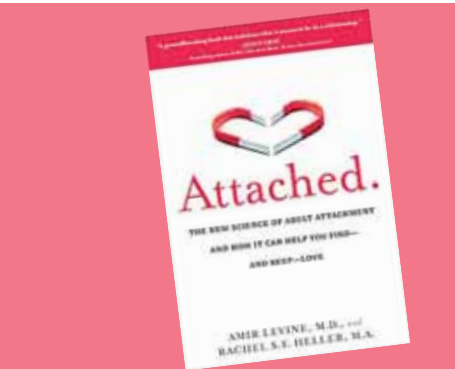
CONSERVATION



ESO, PARTNER CONCLUDE FRANKINCENSE TREE PLANTING AND AWARENESS CAMPAIGN

The Environment Society of Oman (ESO) and Neal's Yard Remedies, have concluded a campaign to promote awareness and preservation of frankincense trees in Dhofar... **Story on P15**

READ



ATTACHED
BY AMIR LEVINE

The book teaches readers that being attached to our partners is a basic human need and, to be happy and fulfilled in life, we must find someone to be attached to.

TRAVEL TALES



‘GOLDEN PARADE’ CARRIES PHaraohs TO NEW HOME IN EGYPTIAN CAPITAL

A procession of floats carried the mummified remains of 22 pharaohs, including Egypt's most powerful ancient queen, through Cairo on Saturday evening, in an eye-catching parade to a new resting place... **Story on P16**

ENTERTAINMENT



CHADWICK BOSEMAN UP FOR SCREEN ACTORS GUILD HONOURS

The late Chadwick Boseman and Korean-language family drama "Minari" could be in for a big night on Sunday at the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) awards, one of the last major ceremonies before the Oscars. In a scaled-down event because of the coronavirus pandemic, Boseman is considered the front-runner for another posthumous accolade for his final film role as an ambitious trumpet player in jazz period movie "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom." — Reuters



Stal Gallery continues support for young emerging artists

Stal Gallery's Young Emerging Artist's Prize (YEAP), initiated and mentored by the world-renown Omani artist Hassan al Meer, has become a unique platform for art-making since 2015. This programme has been the first of its kind in Oman supporting a new generation of rising artists.

"For our 5th Annual Young Emerging Artist Prize, Stal Gallery is especially proud to continue to support and to be at the forefront of this initiative for the Omani youth," Stal Gallery said in a statement.

They added, "Throughout this programme, they are mentored by artists with invaluable experiences and with reputable international recognition."

The three months-long programmes provide access to professional skills development, online profiling, usage of multimedia technology and displaying a wider presentation of the visual arts. This contest has grown to become the most anticipated art program of Oman at a nonprofit art gallery Stal – the Alserkal Group's first cultural project in the Sultanate of Oman.

The 5th Annual Young Emerging Artist Prize is the curatorial work of Hassan al Meer – Stal Gallery's Art Director and Curator. The featured works represent conceptual art by Omani artists: Farah Mubarak, Said al Jahdhami, Arwa al Jahwari, Hadiya al Qasimi, Farah Asqul, Mahmood al Zadjali, Bashayer al Naaimi, Majeda al Hinai and Mujahid al Malki.

"This year was not ordinary because of the pandemic and the social distancing. The 5th edition of YEAP started at the beginning of 2020 by selecting the best applications and preparing them for the competition. It was an opportunity for both established and emerging artists to engage in the thought process and the conceptualisation of new ideas towards effectively communi-

cating the concepts presented therein both aesthetically and philosophically. This programme holds very exciting promise for the future of contemporary art in Oman. The juries were from different institutions and backgrounds having an opportunity to come together via Zoom conference meeting to discuss the merits of each entry ensuring a fair, thorough and robust process," said Hassan al Meer, Art Curator for YEAP 2020.

The juried panel of the 5th Annual Young Emerging Artist Prize has brought together the diverse group of art professionals: David Drake - Director of Ffotogallery, UK; Marta Michalowska – Director of The Wapping Project, UK; Riham Noor al Zadjali – Artist, Co-founder of "Art with Refugees", Oman; Karen Drake - Scientist, Art director and

Creative producer, UK.

"All nine artists show a willingness to experiment with different media and presentational styles, which is very impressive for emerging young artists. I can't wait to see what they do next and I'm sure they will go on to achieve wider international exposure," said David Drake, Ffotogallery, UK.

"I'm delighted to be part of the judging panel for the YEAP 2020. I look forward to seeing the work by the early career artists taking part in this year's programme. The prize has the reputation for spotting brilliant, young artists in Oman and helping them develop their creative practice. I had a great pleasure to work with the artists short-listed for YEAP 2015 – Rawan al Mahrouqi, Safa Baluchi, Ruqaiya Mazar, and Riham Noor al Zadjali – on a series of new commissions for the exhibition Resonance at Stal Gallery in March 2020," remarked Marta Michalowska, Director of The Wapping Project, UK.

"The artists demonstrated bold intentions and delivered high quality and innovative work. It was a privilege to work with Stal Gallery and partners on this year's art prize," added Karen Drake, Creative Producer, UK.

"Stal's YEAP is about innovation, trying to deliver artworks in ways that haven't been delivered before whether it's in concept, materials or presentation. It is nice to see that many of this year's artists managed to use the challenge of working during this pandemic by looking more inwards and delivering works that are more original to themselves," noted Riham Noor al Zadjali, Artist, co-founder of "Art with Refugees", Oman.

Winners for the 5th Annual Young Emerging Artist Prize: GRAND PRIZE – Majeda al Hinai; BEST CONCEPT – Farah Asqul; BEST PRESENTATION – Farah Mubarak al Balushi; and BEST USE OF MATERIALS – Mahmood al Zadjali.

An exclusive collection of contemporary art will be on display at Stal Gallery through March – April 2021. The 5th Annual Young Emerging Artist Prize is supported by Jotun paints – a world-leading supplier of interior and exterior decorative paints.

The three months-long programmes provide access to professional skills development, online profiling, usage of multimedia technology and displaying a wider presentation of the visual arts



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INSTAGRAM TOP PICKS



ahmedrawahiii



UNDERWATER SOLDIER



msm_141
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LOCAL SCENE

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Al Najd farms produces ample crops supporting local needs

Al Najd located in the deserts of Dhofar Governorate has been lauded for its natural resources and fertile lands. It is considered one of the most promising agricultural areas in the Sultanate and an outstanding source of crops throughout the year.

In the summer, Al Najd farms produce a large variety of crops, the most important of which are wheat, watermelons, dates, weeds and some vegetables. This is possible through the smart use of greenhouses.

Ghanem Jaddad, the owner of a farm in Wadi Dawka, says that he has more than 500 palm trees, and in the summer they produce different

types of dates, such as Khalas, Khenaizi and Naghal.

He added that after the success of cultivating dates in farms, "we have tended to grow several other types of fruits, and with the development of agricultural equipment and the use of modern irrigation systems, we planted weeds and some types of vegetables such as tomatoes, potatoes, as well as wheat, which is grown annually."

He said that the most important crop that he cultivates in the summer is watermelons, which is among the most popular and desired fruits in this period, and they are produced in large quantities in Al Najd, as their crops contribute to covering the

needs of the governorate's markets and the Sultanate in general.

"We began planting watermelons at the beginning of last February, and the harvest will start in mid-April, indicating that the production of melons may reach approximately 200 tons", he shared.

He also cultivates weeds, which are in demand as animal feeds and grow significantly in the summer. He said that demand for weeds grow in the summer as lands are usually drier and it is harder for camels to forage for food. During the Khareef season, he explained, the demand for weeds may decrease due to the increase in pastoral areas during this season.

He explained that agricultural products in Al Najd farms are very popular in the market for their quality and speed of access to the local market. The main obstacle lies in the lack of outlets receiving these crops that help increase agricultural production and ensure its continuity as these crops should support self-sufficiency for some important and necessary agricultural products.

The products of Al Najd farms cover the areas of Al Shasr, Hailat Al Raka, Hanfai, Dawka, and Wadi Bin Khawtar, as these lands are flat with fertile soil, in addition to the availability of arable groundwater.



CONSERVATION

ESO, partner conclude frankincense tree planting and awareness campaign



THE ENVIRONMENT Society of Oman (ESO) and Neal's Yard Remedies, have concluded a campaign to promote awareness and preservation of frankincense trees in Dhofar.

Since the start of the Frankincense Community Outreach and Tree Planting Campaign in August 2019, 2,600 frankincense seedlings have been planted, 200 flyers were distributed, illustrating appropriate frankincense planting and irrigation instructions in English and Arabic, and communi-

through this campaign, have helped us secure this sacred legacy for future generations."

Susan Curtis, Director of Natural Health at Neal's Yard Remedies, added, "We believe that our mission to enhance and protect people's health and well-being starts with the very first seed. That's why we work with communities around the world supporting low-impact farming practices. Frankincense is known for its many health and wellness giving properties and



ties across the governorate have been provided with information on sustainable harvesting techniques.

The campaign was conducted in eight different areas across the governorate, including 12 schools, as well as among women's associations, farmers and local community members.

Suaad al Harthi, Executive Director at ESO, said, "We are extremely pleased with what this project has achieved in the past 18 months. Frankincense has been around for centuries and remains one of the world's most treasured commodities, as well as being integral to the Omani identity."

He added, "Yet, due to several factors putting the tree at risk, it has become increasingly important for us to bring back awareness to its ecological and cultural value, and the adoption of sustainable harvesting techniques. We would like to thank our friends at Neal's Yard Remedies, who,

we are delighted to see that Oman plays an active role in its preservation. We're thrilled to have been part of this project with ESO, and helping them protect this very special part of our beautiful planet."

Frankincense trees, or Boswellia sacra, are unique to Oman, South Yemen and North Somalia and play an important role in the Sultanate's heritage, economy, and culture. Yet harsh methods of tapping, over-harvesting, and climate change, have had a negative impact on their growth.

ESO has been addressing this concern since 2010 when it launched 'Sustainable Harvesting of Frankincense Trees', an initiative that has made valuable scientific contributions on the correct frequency of tapping and generating a sustainable yield without adversely harming the trees.

For more information on ESO's activities and how you can help, visit www.eso.org.om.



'Golden Parade' carries pharaohs to new home in Egyptian capital

A procession of floats carried the mummified remains of 22 pharaohs, including Egypt's most powerful ancient queen, through Cairo on Saturday evening, in an eye-catching parade to a new resting place.

Under hefty security, the mummies were driven on floats seven kilometres (four miles) across the capital from the iconic Egyptian Museum to the new National Museum of Egyptian Civilisation.

Dubbed the "Pharaohs' Golden Parade", the 18 kings and four queens travelled in order, oldest first, each aboard a separate vehicle decorated in ancient Egyptian style.

Both pedestrians and vehicles were barred from Tahrir Square, site of the current museum, and other sections of the route.

Images of the slick parade and an equally carefully choreographed opening ceremony were broadcast live on state television, to rousing music.

The mummies entered the grounds of the new museum to a 21-gun salute, after a slightly shorter than expected journey time of around half an hour.

"This grandiose spectacle is further proof of the greatness... of a unique civilisation that extends into the depths of history," said President Abdel Fattah al Sisi just ahead of proceedings.

Sequenre Tao II, "the Brave", who reigned over southern Egypt some 1,600 years before Christ, was on the first chariot, while Ramses IX, who reigned in the 12th century BC, brought up the rear.

Another great warrior, Ramses II, who ruled for 67 years, and Queen Hatshepsut, the most powerful female pharaoh, were also on the short voyage.

Emblazoned with the name of their allocated sovereign, the gold and black coloured carriages were fitted with shock absorbers for the trip, to ensure none of the precious cargos were accidentally disturbed by uneven surfaces.

'UPGRADED CASES'

Discovered near Luxor from 1881 onwards, fascinating new details of the pharaohs' lives — and deaths — are still emerging.

A high-tech study of Sequenre Tao II, involving CT scans and 3D images of his hands and long-studied skull fractures, indicate he was likely killed in an execution ceremony, after being captured in battle.

For their procession through Cairo's streets, the mummies were placed in special containers filled with nitrogen, under conditions similar to their regular display cases.

The new resting place, the National Museum of Egyptian Civilisation in the Fustat district of Old Cairo, consists of sleek, low-rise buildings topped with a pyramid amid expansive grounds.

The mummies will undergo 15 days of laboratory restoration before they are showcased individually in their new home, in an environment redolent of underground tombs.

They will be accompanied by a brief biography.

In their new home, they will occupy "slightly upgraded cases", said Salima Ikram, professor of

Egyptology at the American University in Cairo.

Temperature and humidity control will also be enhanced.

The "museum has what it takes to preserve (mummies), the best laboratories... it is one of the best museums we have," Waleed el-Batoutti, adviser to the tourism and antiquities ministry, told state television.

Dubbed the "Pharaohs' Golden Parade", the 18 kings and four queens travelled in order, oldest first, each aboard a separate vehicle decorated in ancient Egyptian style.

'CURSE OF THE PHARAOH'

The National Museum of Egyptian Civilisation opened its doors to limited exhibits from 2017 and will open fully on Sunday, before the mummies go on display to the general public two weeks later.

In the coming months, the country is due to inaugurate another new showcase, the Grand Egyptian Museum, near the Giza pyramids.

It too will house pharaonic collections, including the celebrated treasure of Tutankhamun.

Discovered in 1922, the tomb of the young ruler, who took the throne briefly in the 14th century BC, contained treasures including gold and ivory.

A so-called "curse of the pharaoh" emerged in the wake of Tutankhamun's unearthing in 1922-23.

A key funder of the dig, Lord Carnarvon, died of blood poisoning months after the tomb was opened, while an early visitor likewise died abruptly in 1923.

With the parade coming only days after several disasters struck Egypt, some inevitably speculated on social media about a new curse provoked by the latest move.

The past days have seen a deadly rail collision and a building collapse in Cairo, while global headlines were dominated by the struggle to refloat the giant container ship *MV Ever Given* which blocked the Suez Canal for almost a week.

The mummies' re-housing "marks the end of much work to improve their conservation and exhibition," said UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay, who was in Cairo for the parade.

"This raises emotions that go much further than the mere relocation of a collection — we will see the history of Egyptian civilisation unfold before our eyes." — AFP



Total foreign trade tops RO 14 billion last year

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 4

The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) unveiled a number of initiatives related to commercial, industrial and investment sectors, competition protection and monopoly prevention, as well as those for investment promotion.

It said that its next action plan, which is in line with Oman's vision 2040, was for economic diversification, growth, job creation, and raising the Sultanate of Oman's rating in international indicators, local value adding, promotion of foreign direct investment, balanced development in all the governorates, and the promotion and diversification of exports.

The ministry has said that the contribution of the commerce sector to the GDP during the year 2020 made through service activities was RO 9,285.4 million, wholesale and retail trade RO 1,066.5 million, and real estate activities RO 882.3 million. The industrial sector's contribution to the GDP through manufacturing industries was RO 1,589.2 million last year.

Total foreign trade during 2020, according to geographical distribution (international groups), which includes Africa, the Gulf countries, America, Oceania, Asia, northern Europe and western Europe, was RO 14.889 billion against total imports of RO 9.38 billion.

The total trade volume reached RO 23.927 billion, while the trade balance reached RO 5.851 billion.



- MoCIIP launches a number of commercial and industrial initiatives, plans to protect competition, prevent monopoly, and promote investment
- More than RO 15.64 billion total volume of foreign direct investment in Oman till the end of Q1 of last year
- 5 per cent increase in the number of transactions done through "Invest Easy" portal last year compared with 2019
- 14,632 total companies registered last year
- 14,000 companies registered under foreign investment law with a total capital of RO 5.5 billion last year
- 850 companies were registered under the Foreign Capital Investment Law through "Invest Easy" between January 7 and the beginning of September 2020
- 4,900 licenses issued through "Invest Easy" portal for 12 government organisations and more than 430 system improvements done
- 67,000 companies obtained their tax number through "Invest Easy" portal since its launch
- Projects in the area of manufacturing, tourism, health industries, energy, mining, agricultural, fisheries, retail trade, technology and real estate development supported by the Investment Services Centre
- Investment Services Centre supports and follows-up the oxygen production plant with an investment of \$25 million and a chocolate factory with an investment value of RO 5 million

This is according to the statistics released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

The ministry said that the total volume of foreign direct investment in the Sultanate from

important countries till the end of the first quarter of 2020 was RO 15,64,10,000. It was from the United Kingdom, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, China, Qatar, India, Bahrain, the Netherlands and Switzerland.

Oman got rankings in the Ease of Doing Business Index 2020 report. It is one of the international economic indicators released by the World Bank annually in cooperation with the International Finance Corporation, which



covers ten areas of business or basic indicators: starting a business, obtaining building permits, getting electricity, protecting investors, paying taxes, trading across borders, enforcing contracts, electricity supply, and resolving insolvency cases witnessed as from 2019.

In this, the Sultanate got 68th position among 190 countries in the rankings of 2020 which meant its advancement of 10 points from 2019 in the Ease of Doing Business Index. The Sultanate's ranking advanced in 8 areas out of 10 areas in the 2020 report.

The Sultanate has also made improvements in 4 indicators: getting electricity, registering property, protecting investors, and trading across borders.

The Sultanate has also achieved global best practice in one criterion only, which is minimum required capital within the index of starting a business. The total number of companies

registered last year reached 14,632.

The total transactions done through the InvestEasy portal reached 566 which is an increase of 5 per cent from the transactions done in 2019. The number of transactions related to permits and certificates of origin reached 61,000.

The total capitals of 15 closed Omani joint stock companies was RO 66.5. Last year, the total capital of 14,000 companies registered under the Foreign Investment Law reached to RO 5.5 billion.

The 1400 companies subject to the investment law registered with total capital amounting to RO 188 million. There were 2,400 transactions related to services of commercial agencies were recorded. The number of patent applications which were registered last year reached 529, including 90 applications from Omani inventors, and 160 complaints related to e-commerce.

TURN TO PAGE 18

NBO completes capital securities issuance



BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 4

National Bank of Oman (NBO) has successfully concluded the issuance of a \$300 million additional tier 1 Basel III compliant capital securities to certain shareholders of NBO (and / or their nominees).

NBO mandated Citigroup Global Markets Limited, The Commercial Bank PSQC and NBO as joint lead managers for the issuance.

The capital securities will carry an initial coupon rate determined by reference to US Treasuries with a maturity of five years plus a margin of 7.144 per cent and are listed on Euronext Dublin.

Oman's public debt within controllable limit: MoF

Key trends: Total financing obtained for the first three months of this year, ending March 31, 2021, amounted to RO 2.37 billion, of which RO 1.77 billion represents total loans (including RO 600 million from OIA)

CONRAD PRABHU
@conradprabhu

The Sultanate's budget deficit, which amounted to RO 456.6 million by the end of February 2021, is within "controllable limits", the Ministry of Finance (MoF) noted here on Sunday.

In its latest monthly bulletin, the Ministry pointed out that the 2021 Budget earmarks a sizable RO 1.2 billion for public debt servicing, which will be settled per an approved payment schedule.

"Oman has set within its

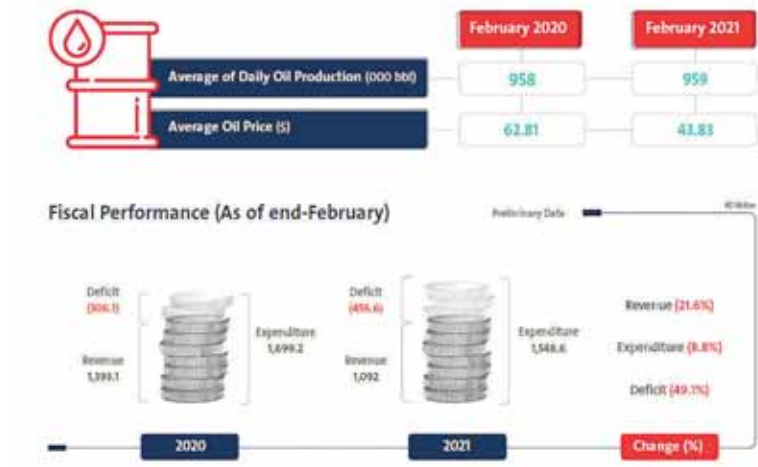
financing plan to cover a budget deficit of RO 2.2 billion and repay principal of a loan of RO 2 billion.

Consequently, the total required financing for this year amount to RO 4.2 billion, which is planned to be obtained through various financing instruments, in addition to an amount of RO 600 million withdrawn from Oman Investment Authority (OIA)," the Ministry noted in its newsletter, titled 'Fiscal Performance'.

Total financing obtained for the first three months of this year, ending March 31, 2021, amounted to RO 2.37 billion, of which RO 1.77 billion represents total loans (including RO 600 million from OIA).

"This shows that Oman has successfully covered most of its financing needs. The remaining amount of RO 1.83 billion will be raised during the current year. By the end of February, an amount of RO 144 million paid for public debt servicing, and an amount of RO 563 million repaid for principal of some loans," the Ministry explained.

The update comes as total



public revenue slumped 21.6 per cent to RO 1.092 billion by the end of February 2021, the Ministry said.

The decline was primarily attributable to a 35 per cent drop in oil export revenue to RO 603.4 million (after deducting partners' shares as per Exploration and Production Sharing Agreements (EPSA) during this period, down from RO 928.7 million for the corresponding period of last year.

Gas revenue also fell two per cent to RO 235.3 million this year,

down from RO 240.3 million last year. On the other hand, current revenue increased 8.1 per cent to RO 240.5 million this year, up from RO 222.4 million for the corresponding period of last year.

Significantly, public spending was pared 8.8 per cent to RO 1.548 billion during the January – February 2021 period, down from RO 1.699 billion last year. "This is as a result of several factors, including a reduction in spending of various government units," the Ministry said.

Also boding well for improvement in the momentum of economic recovery is the Economic Stimulus Plan endorsed by the government last month. The Plan, approved by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, aims to accelerate economic recovery and enhance economic activities performance affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and continued low oil prices, the Ministry said.

"In light of the current unfavourable conditions, the Government seeks, through the plan, to mitigate the implications of the pandemic on the national economy, notably the small and medium enterprises (SMEs) by providing an incentive package. Such package limits Government purchasing contracts worth less than RO 10,000 to SMEs only.

In addition, the Government has made some decisions within the plan to reduce some fees and tax rates in order to encourage the private sector to invest more in the economic diversification sectors," the Ministry noted in the newsletter.

The Residences at The St. Regis Al Mouj Muscat appoints exclusive agency

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 4

The Residences at The St. Regis Al Mouj Muscat has announced the appointment of Oman Sotheby's International Realty (OSIR) as its exclusive sales agency for its branded luxury apartments resting on the shores of Oman.

Recently launched by Alfardan Group, OSIR falls under the umbrella of leading high-end property international brokerage firms around the globe, Sotheby's International Realty. The OSIR office is located on the 2nd floor at Finaa Alfardan and will be headed by Faisal al Shanfari as the Country Manager.

Boasting an exclusive and robust portfolio of luxury real



estate properties across the world's most premium addresses and locations, the realty will manage the portfolio for The Residences at St. Regis Al Mouj Muscat marking a key milestone towards the launch of the exclusive property.

Commenting on its appointment, Omar Hussain Alfardan, President and Chief Executive Officer of Alfardan Group, stated: "Marking our latest foray into the real estate market, Alfardan Group is delighted to take on The Residences at The

St. Regis Al Mouj Muscat with Oman Sotheby's International Realty.

The international realtor brings world-class services and extensive agency experience that leads globally with a proven track record in luxury real estate to connect local and international investors with the rich Omani real estate market. Backed by a network of experts, the brokerage firm opens up The Residences at The St. Regis Al Mouj Muscat to a global clientele of luxury connoisseurs seeking an exceptional home, exclusive privileges, and unparalleled luxury living."

The Residences at The St. Regis Al Mouj Muscat feature 170 luxury abodes spanning an

array of one-, two-, three- and four-bedroom apartments, as an ideal real estate investment opportunity in Oman. The project will entitle its residents to a freehold title deed upon purchase.

A beachfront address running along an incredible 360-metre-long coastline enters its occupants into a world of new experiences at The St. Regis branded residences that have arrived for the first time in Oman.

Under the signature brand, residents have access to The St. Regis signature lifestyle and first-class amenities ranging from private butler service, 24-hour concierge and à la carte services at distinct hotel apartments.

Muriya's Sifah Farms sells out Phase I, launches Phase II



MUSCAT: Within weeks from the launch and remarkable successful selling out of Sifah Farms Phase I, Muriya, Oman's largest and most diversified real estate developer, has announced the launch of Phase II of the project. Presenting the ultimate outdoor privacy, and set in Jabal Sifah, Muscat's lowest density destination, the project offers a first-of-its-kind opportunity of owning a farmhouse within close proximity to an established community.

Continuing on Jabal Sifah's development approach to open spaces, Sifah Farms offers two, three- and four-bedroom single-storey farmhouses, each with a spacious garden, private pool, outdoor Majlis and family BBQ area. Inspired by the traditional Mazra'a country homes found across Oman, the properties combine rustic charm that blends with the natural surroundings.

Palmore invests in new industries in Oman and GCC



MUSCAT: Palmore International is growing its business in Oman and GCC, entering and investing into new industries such as FMCG and packaging, IT and digital services and E-commerce by opening its first showroom at Sandan industrial city.

Their initial phase of business services commenced with representing new brands and products to Oman's market and the neighbouring countries by providing wholesale for vendors and hypermarkets.

With the aim of delivering sustainable values to their partners and clients, consulting and maintaining a competitive price and quality for domestic and international companies has always been a priority at Palmore.



Lexus Electrified: LF-Z electrified concept unveiled

MUSCAT: With an eye firmly fixed on the future, Lexus recently announced initiatives for the transformation of the Lexus brand through its "Lexus Concept Reveal Show". With an unyielding spirit of innovation and support from buyers around the world, Lexus has continued to evolve as a luxury lifestyle brand.

Since the launch of the RX 400h – the world's first luxury electrified model – in 2005, Lexus customers have purchased nearly two million electrified vehicles, as of the end of 2020 and currently, offers nine models of hybrid electric vehicles (HEVs) and battery electric vehicles (BEVs) in approximately 90 countries and regions around the world. Lexus has always pursued both performance and environmental friendliness.

Total foreign trade tops RO 14 billion last year

FROM PAGE 17

The Ministry said that during January and February this year, 78 industrial permits were issued for industrial establishments. In 2020, the industrial sector saw the registration of 465 establishments for which customs exemptions were given and an initiative for 100 industrial opportunities were launched in cooperation with partners.

This was done in two phases of 50 each. For this, a feasibility study was prepared as the first stage in various sectors such as mining, chemicals, plastics, food etc.

The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion said that the Investment Services Centre supported and pursued eight projects of the manufacturing industries sector, with a value of RO 515 million, and six projects worth RO 510 million in the energy sector, five projects of mining sector worth RO 5 billion, three projects of agricultural and fisheries sector worth RO 51 million, and two projects of retail trade sector worth RO 79 million, and four projects in technology and real estate development with a value of RO 40 million.

This information was revealed during the first virtual media conference held at the Diplomatic Club. Qais bin Mohammad al Yousuf, Minister of Commerce and Industry and Investment Promotion, Dr Saleh bin Said Masan, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Commerce and Industry and Investment

Promotion for Commerce and Industry, and Asila bint Salim al Samsamiyah, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Commerce and Industry and Investment Promotion for investment promotion, officials of the ministry were also present there along with a number of journalists and media professionals.

Qais bin Muhammad al Yousuf, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, said: "These initiatives and plans are aimed at facilitating procedures and helping in promotion of investment opportunities, bringing quality investments in sectors of economic diversification, creating appropriate environment for the success and development of all investments, empowering private sector and motivating it to invest, transfer investments to them, further develop industrial sectors, strengthen in-country value-added programs in partnership with the private sector, improving trade balance, enhancing market share of the Omani products, ensuring achievement of free competition rules, enhancing principle of decentralization, developing a competitive business environment, in addition to integrating technology in improvement of institutional performance, providing services, and empowering projects by solving the challenges faced by the commerce and industry while making contribution to the GDP."

He further noted: "Recently, many facilities were made available for the trade sector. They

are linked with the tax authority to get tax number, consumer protection for commercial permits, with some government agencies for automatic approval. There are many other facilities and relaxations made available by the ministry to promote commercial activities and investments.

Most of such facilities are online and automatic and match with the best in the world. They are to get more and more investment and make the commercial and industrial work smooth."

Dr Saleh bin Said Masan, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Commerce and Industry and Investment Promotion for Commerce and Industry, talked about the facilities which were made available for import and export activities.

He particularly mentioned the work being done in coordination with the Oman Aviation Group and Asyad.

He said that several initiatives were made which are related to the commerce sector. They are particularly regarding the rules and regulations governing commercial activities.

The main objective of this legislative process was to curb illegal practices and safeguard the rights and interests of those who are fairly involved in commerce and trade.

Saleh bin Said Masan said that in the initiatives and plans industry sector was also the major focal point. Apart from making rules and regulations, lots of facilities were announced to set up industrial projects as part of

industrial strategy 2040.

He said that during all initiatives taken to promote trade and industry in the country locally made products were given priority.

He said that due to the 'Made in Oman' campaign the sale of Omani products have spiralled by 100 per cent. In all such activities, it is ensured that standard specifications are never ignored.

Speaking at the occasion, Aseela bint Salem al Samsamieh, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Investment Promotion for Investment Promotion, said that the number of countries which have applied for investment through the "Invest in Oman" platform has reached 137 who have made a total investment of \$26 billion. She said that this platform linked the aspiring investor with the relevant institutions of various economic sectors. It also shows investment opportunities in the Sultanate of Oman.

Companies can display their projects and commercial opportunities on it. The platform is an integrated guide for investors which has data on the investment opportunities offered by the Sultanate in Various sectors, along with other benefits. She said that the promotion of the 'Invest in Oman' platform was part of the promotion of investment opportunities in the country.

She said that the "Invest Easy" portal was still very popular among investors. It saves money and time for the users who want to make transactions.

PRESS RELEASE

MERCEDES-BENZ OMAN PRIORITIZES SAFETY, OFFERS UP TO 60% OFF ON BRAKE PADS

Ensuring cars are at their very best this Ramadhan, Mercedes-Benz Oman has announced its latest offer on Brake Pads which includes up to 60% off on changes. Available from April 11 until May 13, 2021 at the Authorized Service Centers customers can put their car in the safe hands of Mercedes-Benz certified technicians, who will also carry out an inspection of the vehicle braking system.

"At Mercedes-Benz, we want our customers to enjoy their cars to the fullest and that's why our commitment to after-sales care



is second-to-none. Our Brake Pads campaign makes sure that vehicles stay in the best possible condition and because we use Mercedes-Benz Genuine Parts, it means our customers are not only getting the value they deserve but are protecting their well-being," said Shaun Michael, CEO at Mercedes-Benz Oman.

SOHAR INTERNATIONAL INTRODUCES INVESTOR RELATIONS PORTAL

Continuing its efforts to enhance its digital presence, Sohar International announced the launch of a dedicated portal for investor relations as part of its corporate website. The new portal cements Sohar International's firm belief in establishing and retaining meaningful relations with its shareholders and investors whether locally, regionally, or internationally.

Commenting on the announcement, Ahmed al



Musalmi (pictured), Chief Executive Officer, Sohar International, said, "We are delighted to announce the launch of a dedicated portal in our corporate website as a step towards implementing the bank's digital transformation strategy. As we evolve to take on new challenges in 2021 and strive to be a partner of choice for enabling winning journeys, digitalization will underscore all our efforts and approaches across businesses."

MCBS REPRESENTS OMAN AT COSIMENA DIGITAL WINTER SCHOOL ON ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Modern College of Business and Science (MCBS), Oman and King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals, Saudi Arabia represented the GCC region in the session titled "The Supporting Role of Higher Education Institutions for Entrepreneurship" on 29th March 2021 at COSIMENA Digital Winter School on Entrepreneurship, organized under the patronage of DAAD

(Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst / German Academic Exchange Service), Egypt. The team from MCBS comprised of Dr Hesham Magd, Associate Dean and Head – Faculty of Business & Economics, Raihan Taqui Syed, Founding Director – Center for Entrepreneurship & Business Incubation (CEBI) and Muthla al Busaidi, Supervisor – Entrepreneurship Club.



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FLAT for rent in Maabela 3 master rooms. 96088926.

WAREHOUSE for rent in Ghala, area 540sqm. 93205690.

1BHK & 2 bhk flats for rent at Ruwi and Al Khoudh. 93994402, 93994403, 24834644.

2 BEDROOM flat Al Khuwair. 99322344.

3 BHK Flat & studio flat in central Ruwi & 2 BHK in Medinat Al Ilam. Call 99238012/ 24704994.

■ SIT. WANTED

INDIAN male B.Com, 33 years experience in Oman, worked as an office manager, executive personal assistant, accountant, steno-secretary, seeks job, NOC & D/L available. Contact: 92558734.

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

CIVIL engineer/QS engineer, 11 years in UAE, freelance & Oman driving licence available, looking for full-time or part-time job 97299165.

FINANCE Manager/ CFO. Indian Chartered Accountant and Cost Accountant with 25 years of experience in Trade Finance, MIS, Budget, Planning, Strategy, Projects, Procurement, Admin, seeks suitable placement. Contact: 99884291 / 99741875 Email vipul70@gmail.com

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

■ MECHANICAL

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

■ SMART Indian,

excellent English, Arabic speaker, 17 years Oman experience in Airport, Hospital, Media EPC seeks Admin/ Hr/ Project coordinator/ Operations. 99283938.

THREE years experienced in administration / sales and marketing seeking placement. Omani D/L, and NOC available. Gsm- 98270993

INDIAN male, 24 years of total experience in which 16 years in a Multinational Freight Forwarding and Logstic Co., worked under the capacity of Senior Operation Executive/ Senior Accountant having thorough knowledge in Ocean Freight, Air Freight, Land Transport, Warehouse Operations and Finance & Accounting. NOC available. Contact 93587605

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

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

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■ BUYING

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■ FOR SALE/RENT

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

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

■ FOR SALE

INSTITUTION Licence contact 95595512.

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ORIENT Trading llc, Shampooing, sofa, carpet, floor polishing. Old house repairing. 99834373.

AL SUMRI AC maintenance. We are ready to repair and install all types of Air-Conditioner within Muscat Governorate. 94301888.

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France cuts economic growth forecast to 5 per cent amid lockdown



PARIS: The French economy will expand by 5 per cent in 2021, Economy Minister Bruno Le Maire (pictured) said in a newspaper interview, as a third lockdown to tackle the coronavirus pandemic has prompted a downward revision in the previous government forecast for 6 per cent growth.

The new forecast was prudent, Le Maire said in comments published on Sunday in *Le Journal Du Dimanche* (JDD).

“Our fundamentals are sound; we will be able to bounce back”, Le Maire said. French schools and non-essential stores such as clothing chains will now be shut for four weeks, after Covid-19 cases surged in recent weeks, edging up the number of patients in intensive care units.

Bars and restaurants have already been closed for months, while tourist travel is at a standstill, although unlike when France entered its first national lockdown a year ago, construction work and manufacturing are among business areas still ticking over.

Like many countries in Europe, France has ploughed billions of euros into propping up struggling companies with state-backed loans, help with rents and partial unemployment schemes. — **Reuters**

High-flying market to take cues from infrastructure plans, upcoming earnings

WALL STREET
WEEK AHEAD

NEW YORK: US President Joe Biden’s massive infrastructure proposal and the upcoming corporate earnings season could offer investors fresh insight on the sustainability of a rally that has taken stocks to all-time highs.

The S&P 500 scaled 4,000 for the first time on Thursday and closed up 1.18 per cent at 4,019.87, extending the benchmark index’s gain to nearly 80 per cent from lows in March 2020. The rally has been driven by unprecedented US stimulus measures and expectations that widespread vaccinations against Covid-19 will spur an economic rebound.

Evidence of strengthening economic and corporate growth could support investor confidence after a quarter that saw solid stock gains but also a worrying surge in bond yields and pockets of market volatility, including the wild ride in GameStop shares and the meltdown of highly leveraged family office Archegos Capital.

Investors also are set to get a snapshot of how companies are performing a year after the onset of the pandemic when corporate earnings kick off in earnest in mid-April.



US President Joe Biden speaks about his \$2 trillion infrastructure plan at Carpenters Pittsburgh Training Center in Pittsburgh last week. — **Reuters**

“We’ve been seeing the volatility over the past few months”, said Matt Hanna, Portfolio Manager at Summit Global Investments.

“There’s always a doubt that perhaps the rug can get pulled out, but now that we’re hitting 4,000 I’m sure that renews confidence in a lot of traders’ minds that this bull cycle is not over.”

Recent history suggests stocks could keep rolling this month,

Investors also are set to get a snapshot of how companies are performing a year after the onset of the pandemic when corporate earnings kick off in earnest in mid-April

with the S&P 500 tallying its highest average gain in April out of any month over the past 20

years, according to Ryan Detrick, market strategist at LPL Financial.

One near-term market focus is likely to be whether Congress will pass the infrastructure plan Biden formally introduced. It includes \$2 trillion in spending but also higher corporate taxes that investors fear could undermine profits.

Coupled with Biden’s recently enacted \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package, the infrastructure

initiative would give the federal government a bigger role in the US economy than it has had in generations.

The initial plan calls for spending on everything from roads and bridges to broadband and elderly care, and he may unveil another spending package in April. Economists at Jefferies estimate Biden’s infrastructure plan overall could add 0.5 to 1 percentage points to their estimate of 5.2 per cent growth in US gross domestic product in 2022.

With any spending set to come over time, the market impact could be blunted compared to the recent relief package that sent \$1,400 cheques directly to Americans, investors said.

But more infrastructure spending could fuel shares of companies in the industrials and materials sectors, which have already been among the groups benefiting in recent months from bets on an economic rebound.

“From a market perspective, that cyclical/value area that has been working should have another leg in the second quarter as we see things like this infrastructure package maybe add some more fuel”, said Anthony Saglimbene, global market strategist at Ameriprise. — **Reuters**

ByteDance says India’s freeze on bank accounts is harassment

MUMBAI: China’s ByteDance has told an Indian court that a government freeze on its bank accounts in a probe of possible tax evasion amounts to harassment and was done illegally.

ByteDance in January reduced its Indian workforce after New Delhi maintained a ban on its popular video app TikTok, imposed last year after a border clash between India and China. Beijing has repeatedly criticised India over that ban and those of other Chinese apps.

An Indian tax intelligence unit in mid-March ordered HSBC and Citibank in Mumbai to freeze bank accounts of ByteDance India as it probed some of the unit’s financial dealings.

ByteDance has challenged the freeze on the four



People walk past a logo of Bytedance at its office in Beijing. — **Reuters**

accounts in a Mumbai court. None of ByteDance India’s employees have been paid their March salaries due to the account freeze, said two people familiar

with the matter. The company told the court it has a workforce of 1,335, including outsourced personnel.

In the 209-page court filing

The authorities acted against the company without any material evidence and gave no prior notice, as required by Indian law, before such ‘drastic action’

BYTEDANCE

lodged on March 25, ByteDance told the High Court in Mumbai the authorities acted against the company without any material evidence and gave no prior notice, as required by Indian

law, before such “drastic action”. Blocking accounts “during the process of investigation amounts (to) applying undue coercion”, ByteDance argued. It is “intended, improperly, to harass the petitioner”.

India’s Directorate General of Goods & Services Tax Intelligence, and the finance ministry which oversees it, did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

The details of the tax investigation have not previously been reported. The tax agency told ByteDance last year it had reasons to believe the company suppressed certain transactions and claimed excessive tax credits, the filing shows. The court declined to grant ByteDance immediate relief in a brief hearing. — **Reuters**

US factories desperate for workers



Engines assembled as they make their way through the assembly line at the General Motors manufacturing plant in Spring Hill, Tennessee. — **Reuters**

WASHINGTON: Matt Arnold just spent \$5,000 to run help-wanted ads for his company’s five trailer factories scattered

from Pennsylvania to Utah. “We hired two from the ads”, said Arnold, just a fraction of the 125 he needs to

get back to full strength of 673 workers.

Half the welding jobs at his Texas plant are open, for instance, creating a bottleneck in an operation that builds trailers on metal frames.

US manufacturers have long grumbled about labour shortages, but the past year has proven particularly frustrating.

As the pandemic pushed millions out of work, most from service industries such as hotels and restaurants, many factories were pushed into overdrive by surging demand for everything from pick-up trucks to plastic bags.

And yet high jobless rates have not translated into workers

flocking to open positions on assembly lines.

On Friday, the Labour Department said 916,000 jobs were created last month, the most since last August, including 53,000 manufacturing positions. That was the highest number of new factory jobs in six months.

The report’s manufacturing diffusion index, a measure of the breadth of hiring across some 75 goods-producing industries, registered one of its highest readings ever.

Manufacturing employment suffered a much less severe blow than service sector jobs last spring when Covid-19 first brought the economy effectively to a standstill.

— **Reuters**

533 million Facebook accounts data posted online

WASHINGTON: Data affecting more than 500 million Facebook users that was originally leaked in 2019, including email addresses and phone numbers, has been posted on an online hackers forum, according to media reports and a cybercrime expert.

All 533,000,000 Facebook records were just leaked for free”, Alon Gal, Chief Technology Officer at the Hudson Rock cybercrime intelligence firm, said on Saturday on Twitter.

He denounced what he called the “absolute negligence” of Facebook.

Some of the data appeared to be current, according to a report in *Business Insider*.

It said some of the leaked phone numbers still belong to the owners of Facebook accounts.

“This means that if you have a Facebook account, it is extremely likely the phone number used for the account was leaked”, Gal said. But Facebook said the reports were old news. “This is old data that was previously reported on in 2019”, a company spokesperson said. “We found and fixed this issue in August 2019.” — **AFP**