

P13

INDUSTRIAL EXPORTS PROJECTED AT RO 10.7 BN BY 2040



P10

ARTETA RELIEVED AS ARSENAL THUMP CHELSEA



P19

ELEPHANT SANTAS SPREAD VIRUS AWARENESS AMONG THAI CHILDREN



All eyes on scraping of NOC rule

The government's decision to scrap the NOC (No Objection Certificate) rule from the New Year is one of the eagerly awaited labour reforms in the private sector. Speaking at a regional forum recently, Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, said that the abolition of the NOC system will be a significant development in labour policy of the Sultanate. **SEE P2**



MUSCAT

GCC SUMMIT IN RIYADH ON MARCH 5

The Sultanate on Sunday participated in the 146th session meeting of the GCC Ministerial Council, in preparation for the 41st session of the GCC Supreme Council.

The Sultanate was represented in the meeting, held via videoconferencing, by Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, in the presence of Dr Nayif Falah al Hajraf, GCC Secretary-General. The session comes in preparation for the upcoming GCC Summit, scheduled to be held in Riyadh on March 5. The meeting reviewed a range of topics in the economic, social and environmental areas. **SEE P2**

CAIRO

SYRIAN REFUGEE CAMP SET ON FIRE

Hundreds of Syrian refugees in Lebanon have been displaced after their camp was set on fire, Lebanese media and a watchdog reported on Sunday.

The incident took place on Saturday night in the area of Minieh in northern Lebanon following a fight between a local family and Syrian workers living in the tent camp, Lebanon's state news agency NNA said.

Three people were injured in the fight, NNA reported without specifying the cause of the dispute. Lebanese youth then torched dozens of tents at the site, forcing hundreds of residents to flee for safety, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said. **SEE P6**



INSIDE



FARMERS CLANG UTENSILS AS MODI DELIVERS ADDRESS

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TRUMP REFUSES TO BUDGE OVER PANDEMIC AID BILL

P8

OMAN MOUNTAINS ENCYCLOPEDIA LAUNCHED



His Highness Sayyid Shihab bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Defence Affairs, launches Oman Mountains Encyclopedia at the Royal Opera House Muscat on Sunday. **SEE ALSO P2**

Immunisation is prevention

ZAINAB AL NASSRI

@zainabalnasseri

Oman started coronavirus vaccinations on Sunday, two days ahead of plans to resume all flights and open borders that temporarily closed amid concerns over a new strain of the disease.

Health Minister Dr Ahmed al Saeedi, one of the first citizens to get a jab at the Al Seeb Polyclinic, said priority would be given to frontline health workers and people who are considered to be vulnerable. The National Campaign for Immunisation against COVID-19 is themed 'Immunisation Is Prevention'. The minister took the first dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech anti-virus vaccine to mark the start of the campaign followed by the Representative of the World Health Organization in Oman, Dr John Jabbour, as well as several healthcare workers and members from the community.

The first phase of the nation-



Health Minister Dr Ahmed al Saeedi takes the first jab at the Al Seeb Polyclinic on Sunday to kickstart the National Campaign for Immunisation against COVID-19 in the Sultanate.

wide vaccination campaign targets frontline workers, elderly people, and patients with chronic diseases. The doses have been distributed to all the Sultanate Governorates and shall be rolled out as per the priorities established by the technical team.

"We have a plan to vaccinate 60 per cent of citizens as well as residents according to controls and priorities as the rest of the countries. The Sultanate, however, has not and will not use any vaccine or medicine that has not been registered in the country

The effect of the vaccine begins 7 days after the second dose is taken. Before that period, the person is still susceptible to COVID-19 infection

of origin or if its safety has not been confirmed," the minister said. "The period spent to manufacture this vaccine did not shorten the usual steps to speed up the process, but efforts were combined from multiple parties to use the time, so we got it in months instead of years. More than 3 million people were vaccinated during clinical trials."

Al Saeedi pointed out that the Sultanate did not contract a single vaccination company and it is negotiating with several companies within the frame of the Gavi (the Global Vaccine Alliance). **TURN TO P3**

Pilot draws syringe in the sky to celebrate vaccine arrival

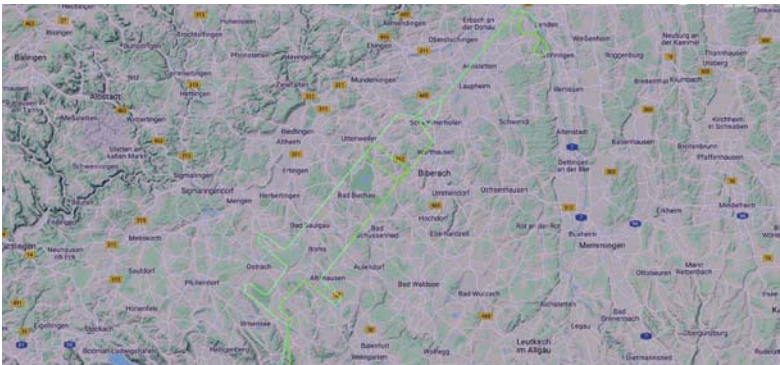
FRANKFURT: German pilot Samy Kramer has traced a giant syringe in the sky, flying 200 kilometres to remind people about the start of the COVID-19 vaccination campaign in Europe.

The 20-year-old pilot mapped out the route he would need to take on a GPS device before taking to the skies near Lake Constance in southern Germany. The syringe-shaped

route showed up on internet site flightradar24.

"There are still relatively many people opposing the vaccination and my action may be a reminder for them to think about the topic, to get things moving," Kramer told Reuters TV on Sunday, adding that his flight should not be understood as a direct call to be inoculated.

"Perhaps it was also a bit of a



The syringe-shaped route showed up on flightradar24. — Reuters

sign of joy, because the aviation industry has been hit pretty hard by the pandemic," Kramer said.

Germany officially kicked off its COVID-19 vaccination campaign on Sunday. The federal government is planning to distribute more than 1.3 million vaccine doses to local health authorities by the end of this year and about 700,000 per week from January. — Reuters

RO 61.5 m poultry farm set for launch in January

MUSCAT: Osool Poultry, a project conceived as part of the Omani government's strategy to develop and strengthen the country's food security, will formally come on stream around the middle of January next year. The plant, set up in Haima in central Oman, is dedicated to the production of hatching eggs — the source of baby chicks for poultry farms mushrooming around the Sultanate. Total investment in the project, which is spearheaded by Oman Food Investment Holding Company (OFIC) — a subsidiary of Oman Investment Authority (OIA) — is RO 61.5 million. **SEE P13**

Book on Oman’s majestic mountains unveiled



MUSCAT: His Highness Sayyid Shihab bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Defence Affairs, launched Oman Mountains Encyclopedia at the Royal Opera House Muscat on Sunday.

HH Sayyid Shihab described the encyclopedia as a “major, valuable project that has many scholarly benefits. The encyclopedia has been compiled under the directives of the late His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said bin Taimour.”

In this part of the world, the Sultanate boasts distinctive natural landscape that deserves to be studied and researched, notably its mountains, caves, fauna and flora, HH Sayyid Shihab said, adding that this encyclopedia will constitute rich repertoire for researchers from the Sultanate and abroad.

HH Sayyid Shihab thanked Mohammed al Zubair and the research team for the efforts they exerted towards the accomplishment of the project in record time.

Meanwhile, Dr Said bin Mohammed al Saqri, Minister of Economy, head of the encyclopedia’s team and its Editor-

“
A major, valuable project that has many scholarly benefits. The encyclopedia has been compiled under the directives of the late His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said bin Taimour

HH SAYYID SHIHAB

in-Chief, said, “In the beginning, we thought the project would not take more than one or two years, but, once we started to draft the outline of the book — which later developed into an encyclopedia, we discovered that the role of mountain chains in the Sultanate surpasses the pure geographical and geological dimension. Indeed, social and demographical aspects informed the layout of the encyclopedia.

The centuries-old Omani human settlements along different epochs enriched the features of the encyclopedia, which has yet to be researched and analysed in



a scholarly manner. Maps, charts and graphs have been drawn out and approved to offer credible and accurate information to researchers”.

He described the mountains’ vegetation as “unique” in the world, with some species found

exclusively in Oman mountains and not available anywhere in the globe. Therefore, Oman mountains are considered a significant part of the world ecosystem, coupled with the Sultanate’s cultural heritage. They are a biological reservoir and a

home for agrarian settlements that existed thousands of years ago.

Oman Mountains Encyclopedia is a basic step forward towards sustainable development of mountains and it will help protect biological diversity therein.

The project has been designed

as a reference that informs and guides planning and policy decision making in the country. This is in addition to the encyclopedia’s role in engendering the spirit of exploring the exotic mountainous environments of Oman. — ONA

GCC MEET DISCUSSES SUMMIT



The Sultanate on Sunday participated in the 146th session meeting of the GCC Ministerial Council, in preparation for the 41st session of the GCC Supreme Council. The Sultanate was represented in the meeting, held via videoconferencing, by Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, in the presence of Dr Nayif Falah al Hajraf, GCC Secretary-General. The session comes in preparation for the upcoming GCC Summit, scheduled to be held in Riyadh on March 5. The meeting reviewed a range of topics in the economic, social and environmental areas, as well as other topics in various fields of cooperation between the GCC countries and other blocs. These topics will be raised to the GCC Leaders, as the Supreme Council will take the appropriate decisions on their regard. The meeting was attended by Shaikh Khalifa Ali al Harthi, Under-Secretary of the Foreign Ministry for Diplomatic Affairs, Saud Ahmed al Barwani, Head of the GCC Department and some officials at the Foreign Ministry. — ONA

ROP warns against online fraud as seven held

SAMUEL KUTTY
@SAMKUTTYVP

The Royal Oman Police on Sunday reiterated its warning against online fraud as new cases have come to the fore following the arrests of some scammers who pretended as bank employees.

The Muscat Governorate Police Command, in cooperation with the General Department of Investigations and Criminal Investigations, arrested seven expatriates on charges of online fraud on Sunday.

According to a note posted in its twitter handle, the ROP said that the culprits, posing as bank employees, call up unsuspecting people and warn them about their credit card getting blocked if they don’t share personal details.

While asking citizens and residents not fall victims to such fraudulent calls, the ROP said, “do not respond to any such calls or messages received from anonymous numbers or people posing to be bank employees”.

The police urged bank account holders not to share any personal information about their bank accounts details to anyone.

Among steps to avoid being played by such fraudsters, consumers must immediately call the bank and freeze online transactions if they sense a scam. In the beginning of this month, Bank Muscat in a message asked its customers to be aware of online scams requesting for direct payment through links shared by emails or SMS.

“Those links might lead to fake payment pages. Make sure to verify the webpage first, and don’t share your card details, CVV number or OTP”, the message from the bank said.

All eyes on scraping of NOC rule

VINOD NAIR
@VINOT_NAIR

The government’s decision to scrap the NOC (No Objection Certificate) rule from the New Year is one of the eagerly awaited labour reforms in the private sector.

Speaking at a regional forum recently, Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, said that the abolition of the NOC system will be a significant development in labour policy of the Sultanate.

As per the decision, the expatriate on a resident visa may be transferred from one employer to another who has a licence to recruit workers provided the evidence of the expiry of the contract or termination of the employment contract is presented with proof.

There should be an approval of the competent government authority on the second employer’s contract with the expatriate, as per the rules.

With only a few days left for its implementation, several expatriates are just hoping that the entire process will be a smooth affair.

An employer will be allowed to have a legal (non-disclosure) agreement to keep the work secrets even after the worker has moved to work

The government stated that one of the main advantages is it will raise the level of competitiveness of the Omani worker compared to the expatriates by reducing the wage gap between them.

with another company or a business owner.

One expatriate who commented on the non-competition agreement said, “This seems counter-productive to removing the NOC and seems very vague. If I read this correctly, the employer can still prevent the employee from working for a competitive company. It kind of defeats the entire objective of removing the NOC.”

A domestic worker said, “Actions are necessary against the sponsors who violate the basic principles of the law for small monetary gains.”

Still the decision to scrap the NOC rule from January 2021 is termed as employee-friendly, but with enough protection to the employers.

An Omani HR manager of a leading business group said, “There is no point in holding

back an employee against his wish. It allows looking for a fresh face who can bring new ideas and energy to the institution.”

Speaking to the *Observer*, a senior executive of a leading business firm in Oman said, “Ultimately, employment is a contract between two parties. If there are clauses/terms offered and accepted between both the parties, then that will hold well.”

He added that some safety clauses might be necessary if an employee in senior positions is moving to the competition. “Employment is a contract, and the terms have to be mutually agreed between both the parties.”

The government stated that one of the main advantages is it will raise the level of competitiveness of the Omani worker compared to the expatriates by reducing the wage gap between them.

“The decision will also contribute to reducing cases of non-Omani workers running away from employers, especially those under pressure from employers who have the right to issue a no-objection certificate and deprive a person to work in the Sultanate within two years of the end of his contract,” the statement said.

No serious side effects were recorded during trial

From page 1

On the vaccine side effects, Dr Saif al Abri, Director-General of Disease Control and Surveillance, clarified that symptoms associated with taking the vaccine range from pain, redness, and swelling at the injection site to fever, which are the same symptoms associated with taking any other vaccine. Some other side effects have been recorded in low proportions such as sore throat, nausea, joint pain, and general fatigue, which indicates that the body's immune system is beginning to respond to the vaccine. No serious side effects were recorded during the clinical trial phase.

Dr Lamia al Balushi, Head of Infectious Diseases Department at the General Directorate of Health Services, Muscat, said "The vaccination strategy will be in stages. We will initially cover 20 per cent of the total target population in all governorates. As for the Governorate of Muscat, a specialised team of health workers has been set up to identify the target groups using government and private hospitals databases. The team will then communicate with those people and set dates to take the vaccine."

Al Balushi noted that three centres were designated to get the vaccine in Muscat because the number of target groups is smaller there. "In the coming days, other institutions will be designated for vaccination, if needed," she said.

Dr Lamia explained that the vaccine effectiveness rate reaches 95 per cent, and hundreds of thousands have been vaccinated to date without significant side effects, emphasising that vaccination does not mean dispensing with adhering to preventive precautions. On the contrary, it is necessary to continue physical distancing, washing hands and avoiding gatherings.

Dr Saif also said that getting the vaccine would not cancel the need for other preventive measures. It will be complementary to other preventive measures as vaccines will not target all of the population at once. Hence, there will always be high-risk people around us who could get the infection unless we



comply with preventive measures. In addition, the vaccine will mitigate disease complications while preventive measures will continue to reduce the potential of infection transmission to the person.

With regard to the vaccination process, Dr Saif pointed out that a person should show a quick response and go to the health institution as soon as he/

she is notified to be among the vaccine target group along with committing to taking the second dose of the vaccine 21 days after the first dose, in order to obtain the desired efficacy, as a single dose of the vaccine is considered ineffective.

Further, the effect of the vaccine begins 7 days after the second dose is taken. Before that period, the person is still susceptible to

infection and should go to the health institution for evaluation if any symptoms of the disease appear.

As part of Oman's efforts to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, one of its top priorities was to ensure that Oman receives its share of the vaccine through following deliberate steps. Such steps are represented in the formation of a working group

headed MoH's Under-Secretary of Health Affairs, comprising Director-General of Disease Control and Surveillance, Director-General of Medical Supplies, Director-General of Primary Health Care and Director-General of Pharmaceutical Affairs and Drug Control and Director of Communicable Diseases of the DGDCS.

The Ministerial Decision

No 120/2020 stipulated that the working group specialises in following up global developments in the field of manufacturing and production of coronavirus vaccine, and developing mechanisms to obtain the appropriate vaccine in coordination with and following-up the GAVI, the World Health Organization (WHO), and the specialised companies. Experts and specialists may be involved in the work of the team, provided that the team leader submits a report on the recommendations that he concludes in relation to selecting the appropriate vaccine from among the vaccines produced globally.

Dr Saif pointed out that in order to ensure that Oman receives the required quantities, several negotiating channels have been initiated with the GAVI, and others through direct negotiations with several manufacturers of the vaccine. In addition, priority groups for immunisation were identified based on the recommendations of international organisations, considering some local studies that highlighted the prevalence of the disease in Oman and the most vulnerable groups to the disease. Efforts were further made in preparing the national distribution and vaccination plan for the COVID-19 vaccine, as well as developing the guidelines for the implementation of the national immunisation campaign against COVID-19, and emphasising the readiness of institutions and individuals to receive and distribute the vaccine to the target groups on the specified time.

Prior to receiving the vaccine, several steps were taken, such as conducting a survey to assess community awareness, attitudes and practices related to COVID-19 vaccine in Oman. In addition, apps like Tarrasud+ and Al Shifa were developed to follow up on the process of administering the vaccine and follow up the people receiving it afterwards in all the specified public and private health institutions. E-notification system was prepared to report any post-vaccination side effects if experienced.

4,983 staff retired in 2020

MUZNA AL FAHDIYAH
MUSCAT, DEC 27

The number of retirees from civil service in this year stood at 4,983 (67 per cent men against 33 per cent women) at the end of November, according to the Civil Service Employees Pension Fund (CSEPF). The CSEPF data indicates that the average age of employees at the end of service was 53 years while the average length of service stood at 29 years and the average

According to CSEPF, the statistical indicators of retirees by the end of November 2020 stood at 63,659 pensioners with an overall monthly pension of RO 34 million. The average retirement age was 50 years while the average length of service stood at 21 per cent and the average monthly pension stood at RO 531. The average change in retirees' number registered 6 per cent.

The total number of recipients of the monthly retirement pension

at the end of November reached 78,628 including 42,644 alive and 35,984 heirs of the deceased pensioners who are eligible to receive retirement benefits.

The number of subscribers with the Civil Service Employees

According to CSEPF, the statistical indicators of retirees by the end of November 2020 stood at 63,659 pensioners with an overall monthly pension of RO 34 million

Pension Fund by the end of November 2020 reached 167,566 (53 per cent males and 47 per cent females) with an average age of 39 years and 14 years of service.

The number of employees

subject to the Pension Law of the Sultanate stands at 162,904 (52 per cent males against 48 per cent females). The current average age is 39 years while the current average years of service stands at 14 years.

Additionally, the CSEPF revealed that the number of employees subject to extension of insurance coverage has reached 4,662 with an average age of 39 years and an average of 10 years of service.

The number of beneficiaries from retirement benefits by November 2020 was the highest in Muscat making up 22 per cent of the total number followed by Al Dakhiliyah Governorate with 15 per cent, North Al Batinah (13 per cent), South Al Batinah (12 per cent), Dhofar (11 per cent), South Al Sharqiyah (9 per cent), North Al Sharqiyah (8 per cent), Al Dhahirah (5 per cent), Musandam (2 per cent), Al Buraimi (2 per cent) while Al Wusta Governorate was the lowest with just 1 per cent.


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BLENDED LEARNING IS HERE TO STAY

KAUSHALENDRA SINGH
@patkaushal

The arrival of vaccines against COVID-19 is welcome news for one and all because the pandemic made everyone suffer in one way or the other. It changed people's way of living, ways of meeting, and greeting. You call it and every aspect of life got affected.

The most visible impact has been noticed on the global education system that has not yet been fully functional even as the governments in many countries have opened most of the activities. The full physical interaction in schools and colleges is yet to pick up.

No one can deny the benefits of the traditional model of education in which there is a classroom occupied by students and teachers, as both have the opportunity to interact face to face, raise questions and get answers.

COVID-19 pandemic has changed the pattern of education forever. Classrooms got shifted to homes and computer screens took the place of blackboards. The teachers have an extra burden of preparing slides and adapting to the delivery method which was totally different from the traditional mode of teaching.

For Sangita Rao, a college teacher, "remote learning reminded us that powerful learning can happen only when we are engaged, energetic, and focussed. If it becomes a question of filling in hours then we are missing the point."

Similarly, Dr Samskrati Gulvady, a mass communication faculty member at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences, tried to draw a balance between the challenges and opportunities and said, "Education definitely has unparalleled

opportunities to monitor and improve its own practices. We as academicians have new ways to communicate with our students."

"Teachers-learners have been using social media in the physical classroom for education or social purposes for quite some time now. As the usage of social media increased gradually, information overload happened parallelly with umpteen pop-ups appearing on the screen."

Now with the forced dependency on electronic devices, the information overload may turn into an information explosion that can affect people multi-dimensionally – seeking information, analysis, selection, and evaluation of relevant content. In this scenario, media educators need to equip their students with skills in media literacy, she said.

Media literacy, according to her, should also include educating the students on communication and social skills, social and ethical norms of conduct to be addressed in the new context of mediated social interaction. Thus, netiquette becomes an important eligibility criterion in an online environment.

Dr Samskrati cited, Marshal McLuhan, a Canadian philosopher on communication theory who is well known for his proverbial phrase 'Medium is the message'

"Medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium – that is, of any extension of ourselves – result from the new scale that is introduced in our efforts by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology".

When the world gets back to normal, the real challenge for educators would be not to get back to our old 'teacher-driven' ways, but to apply the learning of this phase to enrich our regular classes. So blended learning is going to be the 'new normal' in the days to come.

Education definitely has unparalleled opportunities to monitor and improve its own practices. We as academicians have new ways to communicate with our students

DR SAMSKRATI GULVADY



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Court ruling to bring in more competitiveness, investment

STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT, DEC 27

The Administrative Court has issued a court ruling declaring the invalidity of the decision to licence a foreign legal consulting firm operating here in Oman which is set to allow for greater competitiveness, investment and employment opportunities in the Sultanate.

Sources said that this ruling is an unprecedented one in the Sultanate against a foreign law firm and it paves the way for a radical correction in the way foreign law firms operate here — creating new employment opportunities and a healthy competitive environment that is attractive to potential investors.

The case relates to a lawsuit filed by an Omani law firm against a foreign law firm operating in the same field illegally, resulting in unlawful competition and a violation of Omani legislation.

The plaintiff based his case on the fact that foreign legal consulting firms operating in the Sultanate were given a stated period to correct their operative situation in accordance to the provisions of the law and its executive



regulations (70/99) whereby these firms were required to have at least one Omani lawyer as a partner within the stipulated grace period.

Unfortunately, some law firms did not abide by the provisions of this law and, in this regard. According to Muadh al Mukhaini, a leading lawyer, who spoke to a Arabic website on the case, “The law gave foreign legal consulting firms a deadline January 1, 2003 to correct their legal status. After this date, one of the partners of these foreign firms must be an Omani lawyer, so as to ensure that Omani legislation is properly understood

and applied and is consistent with public order. Despite the time granted to change the status, the sentenced foreign company remained free to practice without adhering to the law over the past several years resulting in unfair and illegal competition with other Omani law firms.” Al Mukhaini pointed out that “Omani law firms have suffered great damage as a result of this type of unfair competition, so we did not hesitate to seek justice from the judicial Administrative Court.

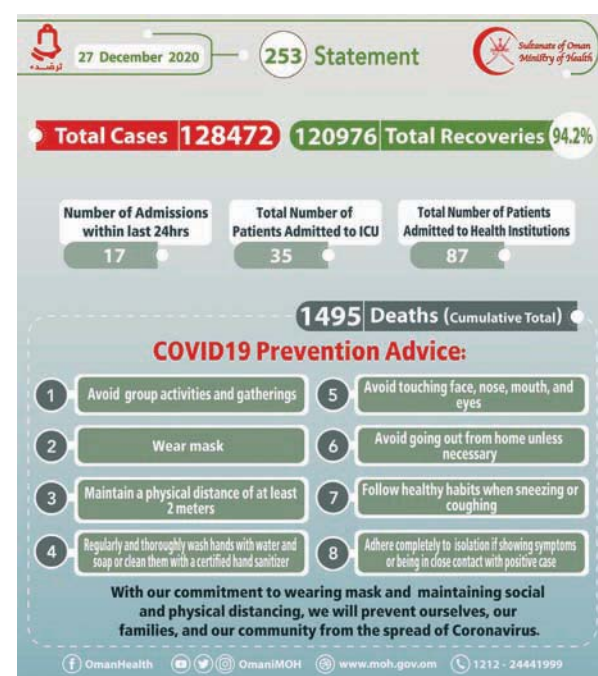
An administrative case was filed in February with the aim of cancelling official licensing for this company. The

This ruling is an unprecedented one in the Sultanate against a foreign law firm and it paves for new employment opportunities and a healthy competitive environment that is attractive to potential investors

final ruling of Administrative Court of the First Instance, Muscat, was that the decision to licence a foreign company to work within the Sultanate in the field of legal consultations was illegitimate — confirming the necessity of respecting the laws in Oman, which allows for equal opportunities and the uplifting of the Sultanate’s legal profession.

This will help to attract greater investment into Oman, as it enhances the confidence of foreign litigants in the legal system of the country. It is also worth noting that the legal sector has witnessed many radical amendments, including several decisions issued by concerned authorities to Omanise the country’s legal profession.

182 new coronavirus cases, 4 deaths



MUSCAT: Oman’s Ministry of Health announced on Sunday 182 new coronavirus cases, bringing the total number of COVID-19 patients in the Sultanate to 128,472. The total death cases in the country has reached 1,495 after 4 people died in three days. A total of 120,976 out of the COVID-19 patients in the Sultanate have recovered, the ministry said.

The ministry also pointed out that 17 cases were hospitalised over the past 24 hours, adding that the total number of current hospitalised COVID-19-infected patients stands at 87, of them 35 are in intensive care units (ICU).

Oman Fencing Committee launches e-book

MUSCAT: Rashad bin Ahmed al Hinai, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth for Sports and Youth, launched the e-book of Oman Fencing Committee (OFC).

The e-book sheds light on the history of the Olympic fencing sport. It also documents the OFC achievements, as well as its strategy that targets international championships.

Further, the e-book features pictures for the coach, players and the OFC Board’s members. Launching the OFC e-book aims at highlighting the fencing sport in the Sultanate and popularising it at a wide scale. The e-book will be available at the OFC social media accounts @OmanFencing. — ONA

Warning against leaving animals roam in public

SAMUEL KUTTY

@SAMPLUTTYVP

While warning animal owners against leaving their pets to wander in the public, the Muscat Municipality said that violators will face a fine and will have to give compensation for any damage that the animals may cause.

“Animal owners leaving their

pets unrestrained in public areas and residential neighbourhood contravenes the cultural values and organisational efforts of municipalities to maintain an optimal urban environment”, a statement from the municipality said.

It also creates societal, economic and traffic safety risks as animals wander in the streets or residential

areas and graze on public landscapes.

Talal al Rahbi, head of operations at the Muscat Call Centre, said in the statement that as many as 102 communications relating to animals roaming around or kept in neighbourhood homes have so far been registered in 2020.

While there were 95 complaints in 2019, including 28 related to keeping animals in homes, the number was much higher in 2018 with 193 reports of the presence of stray animals, Talal is quoted in the statement.

“The total number of registered communications during the last three years reached 390”, he said.

According to the municipality, stray or neglected animals include horses, cows, goats and lambs or any animal left by its owner or the person responsible for its well-being to stray around without supervision.

“The responsibility of keeping them under control rests with the owners themselves”, states the civic order 24/91, which has a number of articles that regulate the animal husbandry within the prescribed scope and limits of Muscat Municipality.

This ordinance prohibits keeping animals in certain places in Muscat

Governorate, while allowing them to be kept in private farms and gardens or special places, provided that they are approved by the municipality, and meet the health conditions determined by them and issuing a licence to do so.

The local ordinance also states that animals are not to be left neglected in streets and squares, nor are they allowed to graze except without appropriate supervision, and only in places allocated for grazing.

The regulation also authorises any municipal employee or police officer who finds a stray animal to seize it and hand it over to the municipality corral.

“Anyone who violates any provision of this ordinance shall be punished with a fine, with the obligation of making appropriate compensation for any damage that the animal may cause to the property of others,” the statement said.

While expressing its appreciation for the cooperation of the community in reporting the presence of stray animals, the civic body asked animal owners to abide by its order to ensure that no damage is done to the property of others.



Sultan Qaboos Comprehensive Cancer Care & Research Center

Tenders Advertisement

The operational committee of Sultan Qaboos Comprehensive Cancer Care & Research Centre announces the following tender:

Tender No.	Tender Title	Last date for Collection of Tender Document	Bid Submission Closing	Tender Specification Fees
CCCCRC/T/164/2020	Supply of Mobile Storage Shelving System	07/01/2021	21/01/2021	OMR 70

Qualified companies interested in participating in this tender shall collect the tender specifications from the date of this advertisement from the following address:

Operational Committee of the Comprehensive Cancer Care and Research Centre Knowledge Oasis, Building No4 (KOM4) First Floor.

Biddings that meet the above requirement should be submitted in a sealed envelope by an Omani National from your company addressed to the head of Purchase Committee in the tender box located at:

Operational Committee of the Comprehensive Cancer Care and Research Center Knowledge Oasis Building No4 (KOM4), First Floor.

Please note:

- Bids received after the deadline indicated above, for whatever reason, will not be considered.
- Queries/ clarifications should be submitted immediately, but not later than one week before the date of tender submission.
- For Queries you may Contact on Tel: 22584133 or 22584132 or via e-mail: purchase@cccrc.gov.om
- The committee is not obliged to accept the lowest price of the bid or any other bid.

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شركة مطاحن صحار
SOHAR FLOUR MILLS

TENDER ANNOUNCEMENT

Sohar Flour Mill LLC, Sohar hereby announces the following tender:-

Tender No	Description of Works	Grade	Tender Fee	Date of Submission	Place of collection of tender and submission of tender documents
DGEC/8190388/SFM/CIVIL/2020/RO	CIVIL AND STRUCTURAL STEEL WORKS FOR SOHAR FLOUR MILLS GRAIN SILOS PROJECT AT SOHAR INDUSTRIAL PORT AREA, SOHAR, SULTANATE OF OMAN	Excellent and Grade -1 registered in OCCI and Tender Board	RO 150/each. (Non-Refundable)	21 st January 2021	Sohar Flour Mills LLC office Sohar Industrial Port, Sohar, Sultanate of Oman Tel: +968 2664 6800

- The electronic copy of tender documents will be available from Tuesday 29th December 2020.
- Qualified contractors are requested to contact “Design Group Engineering Consultants, Tel: +968 22522550, Fax: +968 24819487, GSM: +968 96219006 E-Mail: amrut@dgcon.com” to request the tender documents or for any further information.

SITUATION VACANT

SPANISH ECONOMIC AND TRADE OFFICE IN MUSCAT IS LOOKING FOR A SUITABLE CANDIDATE FOR AN ADMINISTRATIVE POSITION.

Ideal candidate should be fluent in Spanish and English. Knowledge in Arabic is a plus.

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mascate@comercio.mineco.es along with

any other enquiry, from **Tuesday, 29th**

December to the 11th January 2021.

Next round of Afghan peace talks to take place in Doha

KABUL: The next round of negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government will be held in Qatar from next month, a top official said on Sunday, despite President Ashraf Ghani's recent calls for them to be moved home.

Peace talks began on September 12 at a luxury hotel in Doha, but negotiations are currently on a break until January 5.

"The second round of talks will begin on January 5 in Doha," said Faraidoon Khwazoon, spokesman for Afghanistan's High Council for National Reconciliation, which is leading the overall peace process in the country.

"The leadership committee of the council ... decided to hold the talks in Doha," he tweeted, adding that many of the countries that had earlier volunteered to host the talks withdrew their offers because of COVID-19.

In a separate statement, the presidency tweeted that Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, who heads the council, held a meeting on Sunday.

Syrian refugee camp set on fire

CAIRO/DAMASCUS: Hundreds of Syrian refugees in Lebanon have been displaced after their camp was set on fire, Lebanese media and a watchdog reported on Sunday.

The incident took place on Saturday night in the area of Minieh in northern Lebanon following a fight between a local family and Syrian workers living in the tent camp, Lebanon's state news agency NNA said.

Three people were injured in the fight, NNA reported without specifying the cause of the dispute. Lebanese youth then torched dozens of tents at the site, forcing hundreds of residents to flee for safety, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said. Gas cylinders were heard exploding at the camp, Lebanese newspaper *Annahar* reported.

It took firefighters about four hours to put out the blaze, Lebanon's civil defence said. One person was hospitalised after suffering breathing problems as a result of the heavy smoke caused by the fire, it tweeted.

The Lebanese army said it had arrested an unspecified number of Lebanese citizens and six Syrians in connection with the incident. It



Syrian refugees salvage belongings from the wreckage after their shelters at a camp were set on fire. – AFP

started with a "personal dispute" between a group of young Lebanese and Syrian workers, the army added in a statement.

The Lebanese then began shooting weapons into the air and set the camp alight, according to the statement. Images carried by Lebanese media showed the site

widely scarred by the fire. Some refugees gathered there to inspect their belongings. The attack drew condemnation in Lebanon.

The country's top cleric, Mufti Abdel-Latif Derian, called the torching a "heinous crime." He called on authorities to bring the perpetrators to justice. "The Syrian

refugees in Lebanon are guests. We have to assist them until they return to their homeland," Derian added, according to NNA.

A Syrian government official voiced "extreme regret" over the arson and called on Syrian refugees to return home. "Syria expresses extreme regret over the

fire to which the Syrian refugee camp was subjected, and urges the Lebanese judiciary and other Lebanese agencies to shoulder their responsibilities in handling the incident and ensuring protection for the refugees," an unnamed official at the Foreign Ministry said. — **dpa**

Turkey warns east Libyan strongman

ANKARA: Turkish Defence Minister Hulusi Akar warned on Sunday that the forces of Khalifa Haftar and their supporters based in eastern Libya would be viewed as "legitimate targets" if they attempted to attack Turkish forces in the region.

Turkey is the main foreign backer of Libya's internationally recognised Government of National Accord (GNA) based in Tripoli, which for years has been fighting Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA).

In October, the GNA and LNA signed a ceasefire agreement and the United Nations has been pushing a political dialogue aimed at elections next year as a solution.

Russia on Wednesday called for international efforts toward a peace settlement in Libya to be intensified. Speaking during a visit to Turkish troops in Tripoli, Akar said Haftar had recently started making calls targeting foreign forces in Libya and also called on all parties to support political talks instead.

"This war criminal, Haftar, and his forces will be viewed as legitimate targets everywhere," Akar said. "They should get this in



Libyan cadets attend a graduation ceremony for new batches of students from the Military College in the Libyan capital Tripoli. – AFP

their heads. If they do something like this, they will have nowhere to run," he said. "Everyone should contribute to reaching a political solution here. Any move other than this is wrong."

Turkey has sent military personnel and equipment to the GNA, helping to turn the tide of the war in Libya, while engaging in talks with Moscow for a

solution to the conflict between the GNA and LNA.

Both sides have stopped short of withdrawing forces from the frontline, as demanded by the truce. A panel of UN experts has cited the foreign supporters of both sides as breaching an arms embargo on Libya.

Last month, Turkey and Germany traded barbs over the

search of a Turkish freight ship by a European Union military mission in the Mediterranean aimed at enforcing the Libyan arms embargo, in a move Ankara called illegal. This month, the LNA also intercepted a Turkish ship, under a Jamaican flag, heading to the port of Misrata, prompting an angry rebuke from Ankara. The ship was later released. — **Reuters**

Iraq at risk of power shortages after Iran slashes gas supply

BAGHDAD: Iraq's capital Baghdad and other cities are at risk of serious power shortages after Iran slashed gas exports, the electricity ministry said on Sunday, potentially placing further pressure on the government of Prime Minister Mustafa al Kadhimi. Iran has reduced gas exports to Iraq to five million cubic metres from 50 million cubic metres two weeks ago citing unpaid bills, a ministry spokesman said.

It also officially informed Iraq's electricity ministry on Sunday that it plans to cut shipments further to three million cubic metres, the spokesman said. Iraq has lost around 6,550 megawatts of electricity, spokesman Ahmed Moussa said.

Iraq's daily consumption during peak hours of winter reaches around 19,000 megawatts while the



The US has repeatedly extended by 90 or 120 days a sanctions exemption to allow Baghdad to import Iranian energy, but in November it granted only a 45-day extension. – AFP

country generates around 11,000 megawatts, relying on imports to fill the gap, he said.

Iran's Energy Minister Reza Ardakanian is scheduled to visit Baghdad on Tuesday to discuss the unpaid bills with his Iraqi counterpart, Moussa said. "We strongly encourage Iraq's finance ministry to resolve the unpaid bills with Iran to avoid critical shortages of power supplies in Baghdad and other cities," Moussa said. — **Reuters**

SHORT TAKES

DUBAI

2021 budget to be cut to \$15.5 billion

Dubai said on Sunday it expects to cut its budget to \$15.5 billion in 2021 after its economy was impacted by a plunge in tourism and other sectors amid the novel coronavirus pandemic.

The emirate, one of the seven that make up the United Arab Emirates, had posted a record \$18.1 billion budget for 2020.

"The newly-announced budget takes into account the exceptional economic conditions of the fiscal year 2020 and the repercussions of the COVID-19



pandemic on the global economy," said a statement by the Dubai Media Office.

Dubai foresees a deficit for the fifth year in a row, of \$1.3 billion in 2021. In 2019, it had forecast a \$700 million deficit for this year.

CAIRO

Deadly fire hits hospital treating COVID patients

A fire killed at least seven people and injured several others on Saturday at a private hospital that was treating coronavirus patients on the outskirts of the Egyptian capital Cairo, local sources and media said.

The fire broke out at about at Misr Al Amal Hospital in El Obour, some 30 km northeast of central Cairo, and according to initial investigations was caused by an electrical fault, security and medical sources said.

The hospital was evacuated



and closed and patients were transferred to a public hospital in Cairo, the sources said.

Egypt has seen a sharp increase in the number of officially confirmed coronavirus cases over the past week.

TEL AVIV

3rd lockdown takes effect, vaccinations pick up speed

Israelis entered a third lockdown on Sunday, with their prime minister pledging that it, alongside a vaccination campaign unequalled in its speed, would free them of the coronavirus pandemic earlier than any other nation.

Some 6,000 police officers are to enforce the nationwide lockdown, which came into effect at 5 pm. They man roadblocks to enforce a ban on people leaving their homes beyond a radius of 1 kilometre unless for essential



reasons, including buying groceries or seeking medical care. It is also forbidden to visit the homes of people who aren't immediate family.

Shopping centres are closed and restaurants can only offer delivery services. Schools remain open on a limited basis. — **dpa**

In brief

■ PANIKUI

**MOTHER, SON SHOT DEAD BY OFF-DUTY COP LAID TO REST**

Hundreds attended the funeral on Sunday of a woman and her son shot dead by an off-duty policeman in the Philippines, a week after a video of the incident went viral on social media, sparking public outrage over police brutality.

Members of the public joined as relatives and friends in Tarlac province, north of Manila, paid their final respects to Sonya Gregorio, 52, and her 25-year old son Frank Gregorio, who were shot in the head after a row over noise. The shooting triggered accusations from rights activists that President Rodrigo Duterte's war on drugs had created a culture of police impunity.

■ ISLAMABAD

**SEVEN SOLDIERS KILLED IN MILITANT ATTACK**

At least seven soldiers were killed in an attack by militants in south-western Pakistan, the military said on Sunday. The terrorists attacked a security post in Balochistan's Harnaidistrict, the military's media wing, the Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR), said in a statement.

The attack, which took place late on Saturday, targeted the paramilitary Frontier Corps (FC), the military said, adding that a search operation for the attackers was under way. No group has so far claimed responsibility for the attack.

Balochistan, which shares a border with both Afghanistan and Iran, is Pakistan's largest and most volatile province.

■ DHAKA

**GOVERNMENT TO CUT DUTY ON RICE IMPORTS**

Bangladesh will slash the duty on rice imports in an effort to bolster reserves and cool record prices of the staple grain in the country, the food minister said on Sunday.

The import duty on rice will be lowered to 25 per cent from 62.5 per cent, Food Minister Sadhan Chandra Majumdar told reporters. Bangladesh, traditionally the world's third-biggest rice producer, has emerged as a big importer of the grain lately due to depleted stocks and record local prices after repeated flooding ravaged its crop. The country produces around 35 million tonnes of rice annually.

Farmers clang utensils as Modi delivers address

NEW DELHI: Angry farmers in India clanged plates and utensils and raised slogans in a new protest against contentious farm laws as Prime Minister Narendra Modi delivered his monthly address on Sunday.

The "Thali Bajao" (Beat Plates in Hindi) protest during Modi's radio address was initiated by Yogendra Yadav, leader of political party, Swaraj India, who has been campaigning alongside farmers.

The protests were heard from the borders of national capital New Delhi, where tens of thousands of farmers have been camping demanding the repeal of the three agricultural laws.

Similar protests were reported from towns and cities in the northern states of Punjab and Haryana, known as the grain bowls of India.

"When the prime minister gives his Mann ki Baat (Talking from the Heart) address, the farmers will say we are tired of listening to you, when will you listen to our point of view? So we will bang utensils so that the noise of his address does not reach us," Yadav explained.

The idea of clanging plates



Indian farmers bang utensils as Prime Minister Narendra Modi addresses the nation on the monthly radio programme 'Mann Ki Baat'. — AFP

and clapping was floated by Modi earlier this year as a gesture to show appreciation for the frontline workers battling the coronavirus pandemic as the nationwide lockdown began.

On Saturday, leaders of farmers' unions have agreed to meet ministers on Tuesday, possibly paving the way for a seventh round of talks with the government.

Worried over farmers' round-the-clock sit-ins on the outskirts of New Delhi, the government had on Thursday invited protest leaders to further talks.

Farmers' unions still insist they want the laws repealed, a coalition of unions called Samyukta Kisan Morcha said on Saturday in a letter to the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare.

The government says the laws, which came into force in September, will unshackle farmers from having to sell their produce only at regulated wholesale markets.

It argues farmers will gain if large traders, retailers and food processors can buy directly from producers, bypassing antiquated wholesale markets. — dpa/Reuters

China sends top official to Nepal amid political crisis

KATHMANDU: A senior Chinese official arrived in Kathmandu on Sunday to assess the political situation, local party officials said, a first diplomatic step by the neighbouring power after Nepal's Prime Minister dissolved parliament a week ago.

China has poured millions of dollars into Nepal in recent years in the form of aid and infrastructure investment as it incorporates the country in President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative project, which is seen as a new Silk Road.

Guo Yezhou, vice minister in the international department of the Communist Party of China, is the most senior foreign official to

visit Nepal since Prime Minister K P Sharma Oli decided to dissolve the country's parliament last Sunday and call for an early parliamentary election.

The move triggered deep political unrest and street protests in the Himalayan nation as it grapples with the COVID-19 pandemic, and left the ruling Nepal Communist Party (NCP) on the verge of a split.

"I think the Chinese have come to assess the overall situation after the dissolution of parliament and virtual break-up of the Nepal Communist Party," said Narayan Khadka, a senior leader of the opposition Nepali Congress party. — Reuters



Dissident leaders of the Nepal Communist Party Pushpa Kamal Dahal march toward the Election Commission during a demonstration against the dissolution of the country's House of Representatives in Kathmandu. — AFP

Thai hospital banned from selling COVID-19 vaccines

BANGKOK: A private Thai hospital was ordered on Sunday to stop advertising COVID-19 vaccinations for sale in advance on the grounds that no vaccine is yet approved in Thailand.

Vibhavadi Hospital said its online offer for 1,000 initial reservations for the two-dose Moderna vaccine had been the result of a misunderstanding. With reservations priced at 4,000 baht, the total cost of getting vaccinated would have been 10,000 baht (\$330).

As the first governments begin vaccine rollouts around the world, questions have been raised over how the limited supplies are prioritised and whether people will be able to pay to jump the queue.

The Ministry of Health said in a statement that no COVID-19 vaccine had been approved for use



People queue to be tested for the COVID-19 in Samut Sakhon. — AFP

in Thailand yet and that advertising one violated hospital regulations.

"The removal of the advertisement was ordered," it said. Chaisit Kupwiwat, a director

at Vibhavadi Hospital, said: "There was a misunderstanding and so we've stopped the programme... We planned to order the vaccines, but now we've stopped."

The hospital had sought reservations by January 31 for vaccinations later in 2021.

Moderna did not respond immediately to an e-mailed request

for comment on any such sale. Thailand has signed an advance deal for AstraZeneca's potential COVID-19 vaccine, but has not set rollout plans for any vaccine yet.

Moderna's vaccine this month became the second to get emergency use authorisation from the US Food and Drug Administration after the Pfizer and BioNTech vaccine.

Moderna has said it will deliver approximately 20 million doses to the US government this year and is expected to have between 100 million and 125 million delivered globally in the first quarter of 2021. In August, Moderna said it was pricing its vaccine at \$32 to \$37 per dose for smaller deals. Thailand is a major hub for medical tourism, drawing patients from Asia, the Middle East and beyond. — Reuters

Bangladesh to move 2nd batch of Rohingya to remote island

DHAKA: Bangladesh is set to move a second batch of Rohingya refugees from neighbouring Myanmar to the remote island of Bhasan Char in the Bay of Bengal this month, officials said on Sunday, despite calls by rights groups not to carry out further relocations.

Around 1,000 Rohingya refugees, members of minority who have fled Myanmar, will be moved to the island in the next few days after Bangladesh relocated more than 1,600 early this month, two officials with the direct knowledge of the matter said.

"They will be moved to Chittagong first and then to Bhasan Char, depending on the high tide," one of the officials said.



Rohingya refugees are seen aboard a ship as they are moved to Bhasan Char island in Chattogram. — Reuters

The officials declined to be named as the issue had not been made public.

Mohammed Shamsud Douza, the deputy Bangladesh government official in charge of refugees, said the relocation was voluntary. "They will not be sent

against their will."

The United Nations has said it has not been allowed to carry out a technical and safety assessment of Bhasan Char, a flood-prone island in the Bay of Bengal, and was not involved in the transfer of refugees there. — Reuters

Japan to halt all new entries from abroad

TOKYO: Japan will halt all new non-resident foreign arrivals coming from overseas from Monday until late January, Tokyo said on Saturday, as the country reported its first cases of a new strain of the coronavirus.

Japan currently restricts entry for foreigners from most countries over fears of the virus, requiring all visitors to undergo mandatory quarantine upon arrival.

Tokyo now plans to strengthen those requirements: Japanese travellers and foreign residents from countries where the new coronavirus strain has been reported must take tests within 72 hours ahead of their departure for the country and



A passenger at Tokyo's Haneda airport. — AFP

again upon arrival at Japanese airports.

It will also strengthen quarantine requirements on all travellers returning to Japan.

Citing the Japanese government, the Jiji Press and Kyodo agencies said the move was part of efforts to stave off the spread of a new Covid-19 variant, which is believed to be up to 70 per cent more infectious. — AFP

‘V-Day’: Europe launches Covid vaccination campaign

BERLIN: Across Europe, health workers and members of high-risk groups such as care home residents were receiving the continent's first batch of vaccinations against the coronavirus on Sunday.

In what European Union leaders dubbed “V-Day,” the bloc officially embarked on a mass vaccination programme for its most vulnerable people.

From Sweden to Cyprus, Lithuania to Italy, the push to get people their first shots was under way, 11 months after the first cases were reported in Europe.

For EU residents, the virus has imposed months of restrictions on travel, commerce and social life. And in recent weeks, countries that had been spared in the pandemic's early days have seen their caseloads surge and health systems strained.

The Czech Republic is one such country. Prime Minister Andrej Babis received his shot on live TV on Sunday, as did 95-year-old World War II veteran Emilie Repikova. “It pricked a little bit — that was all,” Repikova said.

In neighbouring Germany, the EU's most populous country, mobile teams were leading the vaccination effort by going to care homes to give doses to those over the age of 80. The country has more than 400 vaccination centres in the works, but many will not be up and running for several days.

Leif Hasselberg, a 79-year-old care home resident in the city of Odense, was reported to be the first in Denmark to receive the vaccination.

The physician who gave the



A nurse prepares a Pfizer/BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine at the Niguarda hospital in Milan, Italy. — Reuters

shot said, “Let’s hope it works.”

“If it doesn’t, I’ll come and haunt you,” Hasselberg quipped, public broadcaster DR reported.

Italy, the country with the highest coronavirus death toll in Europe, also began administering vaccines. “This date will live with us forever,” Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte tweeted.

The first vaccine shipments reached countries across the European Union on Saturday, when a few individuals received their jab early.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen called the launch “a touching moment of unity” for the 450 million people living in the EU’s 27 member states.

The EU has approved the two-dose vaccine jointly developed by the small German firm BioNTech and US pharma giant Pfizer, which a large-scale clinical trial showed has an efficacy of 95 per cent in preventing COVID-19.

But politicians and health experts warn that it will be months until vaccines will be widely enough available to provide shots to everyone who wants to be vaccinated.

The Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine was shipped across the region from Pfizer’s manufacturing site in Belgium, often accompanied by police or military escorts.

The logistics are seen as a challenge because the vaccine has to be kept at around minus 70

Celsius along the supply chain.

Some member states got ahead of Sunday’s official EU kick-off and began offering their vaccines on Saturday afternoon, including Hungary, Slovakia and Germany.

In a senior citizens’ centre in Halberstadt, in the state of Saxony-Anhalt, the first residents and staff received the jab.

Among the first to be vaccinated at the Krueger centre for senior citizens in the town was 101-year-old Edith Kwoizalla.

Ireland and the Netherlands are among the EU nations that received shipments but won’t start their vaccination programmes on Sunday. Ireland plans to start on Wednesday and the Netherlands on January 8. — dpa

■ STORM BELLA BATTERS FRANCE



High waves and strong winds hit The Four Lighthouse at Porspoder, western France on Sunday. Thousands of homes in north-western France were deprived of electricity on Sunday as Storm Bella swept through the area. More than 6,000 homes were without power in Normandy and around 4,000 in Brittany, electricity distributor Enedis said. The storm generated gusts reaching 80 to 100 km per hour inland and 100 to 120 km per hour as it battered the west coast. — AFP

Coronavirus pandemic won’t be last: WHO

GENEVA: World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus on Sunday warned that the COVID-19 pandemic will not be the last such crisis.

“History tells us that this won’t be the last pandemic and epidemics are a fact of life,” Tedros said in a video released to mark the first ever International Day of Epidemic Preparedness on Sunday.

The WHO head said that better investment in public health supported by governments and society could “ensure that our children and their children inherit a safer, more resilient and more sustainable world.”

Tedros said that the new coronavirus turned the world “upside down” over the past

twelve months with far-reaching consequences for societies and economies.

But the pandemic itself was not a surprise, especially since warnings of such a possibility, and of the world’s unpreparedness, had been issued many times over the years.

“We must all learn the lessons the pandemic is teaching us,” Tedros said. This includes investment in preparedness capacities not just in the health sector but rather an “all-of-government and all of society approach.”

“The pandemic has highlighted the intimate links between the health of humans, animals and planet,” which required a common approach, the WHO chief said. — dpa

Trump refuses to budge over pandemic aid bill

WASHINGTON: Millions of Americans are about to see their jobless benefits expire on Saturday as President Donald Trump has so far refused to sign into law a \$2.3 trillion pandemic aid and spending package, insisting that it did not do enough to help everyday people.

Trump stunned Republicans and Democrats alike when he said this week he was unhappy with the massive bill, which provides \$892 billion in badly needed coronavirus relief, including extending emergency unemployment benefits that expire at the close of December

26, and \$1.4 trillion for normal government spending.

Without Trump’s signature, about 14 million people could lose those extra benefits, according to Labor Department data. A partial government shutdown will begin on Tuesday, putting millions of government workers’ incomes at risk, unless Congress can agree a stop-gap government funding bill before then.

After months of wrangling, Republicans and Democrats agreed to the package last weekend, with the support of the White House. Trump, who hands over power to Democratic President-



People wait in line at the St Clements Food Pantry for food during the coronavirus disease pandemic in the Manhattan borough of New York City. — Reuters

elect Joe Biden on January 20, did not object to the terms of the deal before Congress voted it through on Monday night.

But since then he has complained that the bill gives too much money to special interests, cultural projects and foreign

aid, while the provision of \$600 stimulus checks to millions of struggling Americans was too small. He has demanded that be raised to \$2,000.

“I simply want to get our great people \$2000, rather than the measly \$600 that is now in the bill,” the president tweeted on Saturday.

His refusal to sign prompted a sharp rebuke from Biden, who called on the outgoing Republican president to act immediately.

“This abdication of responsibility has devastating consequences.... This bill is critical. It needs to be signed into

law now,” Biden, who is spending the holiday in his home state of Delaware, said in a statement. The president-elect was scheduled to meet with his transition advisers on Sunday.

Americans are living through an unprecedented holiday season amid a pandemic that has killed nearly 330,000 people in the United States, with a daily death toll now repeatedly well over 3,000 people, the highest since the pandemic began.

Many economists agree the bill’s aid is too low but say the immediate support is still urgently needed. — Reuters

SHORT TAKES

LONDON

UK plans new student exchange programme

Britain is planning to invest more than £100 million (\$134 million) on a new student exchange programme, after leaving the European Erasmus scheme following its departure from the EU.

Britain’s Department of Education said its Turing scheme would enable some 35,000 students to study abroad, starting in September.

The programme, named after mathematician and codebreaker Alan Turing, is to receive 100



million for 2021/22, but after that, funding is to be set out in future budgets.

BANGUI

Voting began in presidential, legislative polls

Voting began in presidential and legislative elections in the Central African Republic on Sunday, in a key test for one of the world’s most troubled nations.

The polls take place after a week of turbulence, marked by accusations of an attempted coup, the brief seizure of the CAR’s fourth-largest town and the dispatch of military personnel by Russia and Rwanda to help its beleaguered government.

UN peacekeepers and local and Rwandan soldiers were



patrolling the streets throughout the capital, with armoured vehicles posted outside voting places armed with machine guns.

RIO DE JANEIRO

Protests in Brazil against closure of businesses

Protests broke out in Manaus, capital of the state of Amazonas, against the closure of shops selling non-essential goods, as infection numbers increase in Brazil. Dozens of people took to the streets to demonstrate, according to news portal G1.

“Shop owners spend the whole year preparing for December, and now you’re closing them,” one demonstrator was quoted as saying. “You have enough to eat but many people don’t.”

The state government



imposed the regulation which came into force on Saturday and will initially apply for 15 days.

Pain is real and so does hope

The world's year-long battle with the coronavirus pandemic is going back and forth. Figures of the daily-infected cases and death rates are fluctuating up and down all over the world. Though, the vaccine of COVID-19 has already been developed, approved and it is being administered in many countries. This is a sign that there is light at the end of the tunnel.

In this respect, there is one question that comes to everyone's mind right now; when will this pandemic actually end?! Is it sooner than we think? Will this vaccine take a longer way to fight and kill this virus? Regardless, people are optimistic to regain their spirits and get their life back to normalcy once again.

Though pandemics happened before, they eventually pass as they become more controlled, vaccines are developed and people are vaccinated. However, researchers look at the past pandemics to make reference predictions about when this pandemic might end. But, the previous pandemics have typically lasted between 12 and 36 months.

But this coronavirus probably does not seem to be dying soon, as a new strain has been found lately in the UK. It started spreading to other countries.



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ALONG WITH
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It is predicted that this strain is up to 70 per cent more transmissible than the original virus. Thus, it is sparking panic among people and sowing fears of further economic disruptions.

Despite the sign of hope that world had when the vaccine was unveiled, the new strain of the virus brought disappointments to all. With the vaccine is being distributed, people have been impatiently waiting to see the scenario panning out. They have been enthusiastically longing for the New Year's celebrations. However, the virus unfortunately dances against the tune of people's wish!

Some might think that the new strain is only found in certain parts of the world since the there are travel curbs. However, nothing shall be taken for granted; the world is just a small village. As the saying goes: "The pain of the little finger is felt by the whole body".

The question that most people are having in mind is whether the discovered vaccine will be the right weapon to kill this new strain of the virus or not?! The short answer is no one can certainly know. It is impossible to say if and when the coronavirus will disappear because it is still a new virus. Scientists say that the UK variant

has 23 mutations in the genome of the virus; many are associated with alterations in a protein made by the virus. The biggest concern is the increase in the power of transmission, which makes a challenge when it comes to the race to distribute the vaccines. However, there is no evidence so far showing that the strain is more deadly.

All what we all sure about is that experts and researchers are leaving no stone unturned, striving to fight this global crisis and discover the mysterious secret behind it. Scientists are racing to discover how infectious the virus strain is and if vaccines can beat it.

The whole world is being extra cautious over the new coronavirus strain. Hopefully it does not go viral and things get out of control. Hence, we, as individuals, should continue to adhere to precautionary measures until the mystery of this virus is discovered.

On the other hand, we should stay positive as this could be the last batch of Covid-19 virus. Let us all positively look forward for the New Year, learn the lessons from 2020 and mark a new beginning. The belief that we should all have is that pain is real and so does hope and pain will leave once it has finished teaching us.

HUNGRY FOR CHANGE

Faulty food systems laid bare by COVID-19 and climate crises

THIN LEI WIN AND CORMAC O'BRIEN

From wildfires in California and locust attacks in Ethiopia to job losses caused by pandemic lockdowns in Italy and Myanmar, climate change and COVID-19 disrupted food production and tipped millions more people into hunger in 2020. Now there are fears the situation could worsen next year as both the coronavirus crisis and wild weather exacerbate fragile conditions linked to conflicts and poverty in many parts of the globe, aid officials told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

"Even before COVID-19 hit, 135 million people were marching towards the brink of starvation. This could double to 270 million within a few short months," warned David Beasley, head of the UN World Food Programme (WFP), in e-mailed comments. In April, Beasley, whose Rome-based organisation was awarded the 2020 Nobel Peace Prize, told the UN Security Council that the world was facing "a hunger pandemic" and "multiple famines of biblical proportions". "Those warnings are backed up by even stronger evidence today," he said, noting that Burkina Faso, Nigeria, South Sudan and Yemen faced famine, and the full impact of COVID-19 had yet to be felt in many places.

At the same time, the coronavirus crisis has shown how faster international action and better cooperation in areas like science

and technology could help tackle the problem, he said. Farmers and poor urban residents have so far borne the brunt of the pandemic, meaning inequality between and within countries could deepen further in 2021, said Ismahane Elouafi, chief scientist at the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

Cut off from markets and with a plunge in customer demand, farmers struggled to sell their produce while informal workers in urban areas, living hand to mouth, found themselves jobless as lockdowns were imposed, she said. As a result, millions of people — from Texas and Geneva to Bangkok and Accra — were forced to rely on food handouts for the first time.

Meanwhile, more than 50 million people in East and Central Africa require emergency food aid — and those numbers are set to rise as the region braces for a harsh drought linked to the La Nina climate pattern, as well as more locust swarms, Oxfam said.

With 2020 on track to be one of the hottest years on record, African farmers have already seen a surge in tough climate conditions as well as crop-destroying pests, said Agnes Kalibata, UN special envoy for the 2021 Food Systems Summit.

"The double whammy of extreme weather and COVID-19 has brought the shortcomings of our global food system into sharp relief," said Kalibata, a former Rwandan agriculture minister. Two recent UN reports warned that the coronavirus pandemic could cause a spike in extreme poverty. One in 33 people will require humanitarian aid to meet basic needs like food and water in 2021, a rise of 40 per cent from this year, said one.

— Thomson Reuters Foundation

TO CREATE MORE JOBS

Spain ruling coalition split over four-day work week to fight unempolymment

EMMANUELLE MICHEL

Spain's coalition government is deeply split over a proposal to shorten the work week to four days to fight high unemployment sparked by the coronavirus pandemic.

The measure is being pushed by far-left party Podemos, the junior partner in Socialist Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez's minority government which has ruled the euro zone's fourth largest economy since January.

Deputy Prime Minister Pablo Iglesias, the leader of Podemos, announced earlier this month that the labour ministry was looking into reducing work hours, saying this "could without a doubt favour the creation of employment".

He was responding during a TV interview to the proposal made by a far-left lawmaker that called for the work week to be reduced to 32 hours from the current 40 hours.

"Work time requires a new concept which dares to challenge, as we do, the laws and customs of the working world," added Labour Minister Yolanda Diaz, also from Podemos, on Twitter.

The proposal comes as the New Zealand branch of Unilever earlier this month began a trial of a four-day work week for its staff in the country.

Germany's powerful IG Metall union has also floated the idea.

But in Spain the idea has been met with reluctance from the Socialists, the dominant party in Spain's first coalition government since its return to democracy in the late 1970s.

Budget Minister Maria Jesus Montero said the government "must



Monica Tapias, 48, a healthcare worker of Los Olmos nursing home for the elderly, receives a dose of the COVID-19 vaccine on Sunday in Guadalajara. — AFP

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not lose focus" from its main priority, which is "to return to the growth rates which we had at the start of the pandemic".

Spain's heavily tourism-dependent economy had consistently outperformed much of Europe since it emerged from a five-year slump in 2013.

But the International Monetary Fund (IMF) sees the country's GDP slumping by 12.8 per cent this year, in what would make it the hardest-hit nation among the world's advanced economies.

"I don't think this issue is a priority

for Spain, given the current levels of productivity and competitiveness," said Social Security Minister Jose Luis Escrava, in a reference to productivity levels well below the European average, partially due to the large proportion of small businesses.

"I don't think there is room for that," he added. But Spain's second largest union confederation, the UGT which is close to the Socialists, has long called for a four-day work week, with a fifth day dedicated to professional development.

— AFP



Arteta relieved as Arsenal thump Chelsea

ANDY JALIL
LONDON, DEC 27

A rejuvenated Arsenal recorded a convincing 3-1 win over Chelsea to bring some relief to their beleaguered manager Mikel Arteta whose side had failed to win a match in the Premier League for nearly two months.

A broadly smiling Arteta said: "It doesn't get much better than winning a London derby against Chelsea on Boxing Day and hopefully this is a turning point for us and will elevate the confidence of the team because I know they can play at this level."

He added: "We were really disappointed and frustrated with the results, not so much with the performances but the results. We

knew we had to start winning games again and the boys did everything I asked of them. I am pleased for the players and for the supporters. We have let them down for many weeks so it was a good day to give them something to cheer about." It was a new-look Arsenal side with six changes from the team that lost to Everton the previous week. Arteta said: "It was a good mixture of senior players and young talent. They have shown in the last few weeks they deserved a chance and I had no doubt they would respond today."

Arsenal out-fought Chelsea throughout the first half and opened the scoring in the 34th minute when Kieran Tierney collected the ball near the corner flag and beat Reece James who

“
It doesn't get much better than winning a London derby against Chelsea on Boxing Day and hopefully, this is a turning point for us and will elevate the confidence of the team because I know they can play at this level

MIKEL ARTETA
Arsenal manager

then, in recovering, tread on Tierney's left foot causing him to fall in the box. Alex Lacazette sent

Edouard Mendy the wrong way in resulting penalty.

Ten minutes later, N'Golo Kante tripped Bukayo Saka 30 yards out from goal and Granit Xhaka stepped forward for the free-kick to hit a wonderful curling left-footed shot into the top corner. Chelsea had been unlucky when Mason Mount's free-kick hit the outside of the post with Bernd Leno not even close to getting a hand to the ball.

Chelsea lifted their game in the second half, no doubt, after a stern word from the manager Frank Lampard but Arsenal were well in control with Saka adding a third goal in the 56th minute. After combining with Smith Rowe, Saka drifted a chip, perhaps intending a cross, but it dropped in the net off the far post. If it was intentional, it

EPL RESULTS ON SATURDAY
Leicester 2 (Barnes 31, Tuanzebe 85-og) Manchester United 2 (Rashford 23, Fernandes 79)
Aston Villa 3 (Traore 5, Hause 66, El Ghazi 76) Crystal Palace 0
Fulham 0 Southampton 0
Arsenal 3 (Lacazette 34-pen, Xhaka 44, Saka 56) Chelsea 1 (Abraham 85)

was just brilliant.

Chelsea got a consolation goal with five minutes remaining after Tammy Abraham's effort was initially ruled out for the offside and then saw their weak penalty,

taken by substitute Jorginho, saved by Leno low to his left.

An understandably unhappy Lampard said: "I'm angry because I want us to win games. It was an opportunity to go second. You get what you deserve, I'm not sure if we were complacent but we were definitely lethargic. You can't turn up like that in the Premier League. If you're slow on and off the ball you will have problems."

Referring to Chelsea's big-money signing striker Timo Werner who was substituted, Lampard added: "I could have made more substitutions at half-time, but we needed more energy in that area and Timo was not giving us enough, with or without the ball. He needs time but we have to get there quickly."



Liverpool won't force Salah to stay: Klopp

Liverpool manager Juergen Klopp sees no reason why Mohamed Salah would want to leave the Premier League champions but says he would not keep the Egyptian forward at the club against his will. Salah told Spanish newspaper AS in an interview this month that he admired Real Madrid and Barcelona.



Former Dundee United manager McLean dies

Former Dundee United manager Jim McLean, who masterminded victories over Barcelona and Borussia Moenchengladbach on the way to the 1987 Uefa Cup final, has died at the age of 83, the Scottish Premiership side said. McLean guided United to their only Scottish top flight title in 1983.

McCollum lifts Blazers over Rockets

CAVS EDGE PISTONS, WIZARDS FALL TO MAGIC DESPITE WESTBROOK SHOW

LOS ANGELES: Portland's CJ McCollum drained the game-winning three-pointer with 6.9 seconds left in overtime as the Trail Blazers edged James Harden and short-handed Houston 128-126 in the Rockets' belated NBA season opener on Saturday.

McCollum scored 44 points, with a career-high nine three-pointers, and Damian Lillard added 32 as the Trail Blazers withstood a 44-point, 17-assist performance by Harden.

Center Christian Wood added 31 points for the Rockets, who had just nine players in uniform — one above the NBA minimum of eight — after two players tested positive for COVID-19 and four more were listed as unavailable due to "health and safety protocols" after being declared close contacts of those with the virus.

The Rockets' scheduled season opener against Oklahoma City had been postponed when they could not field eight players.

Harden was among those unavailable on Wednesday after he was deemed to have violated NBA anti-COVID measures that ban players from attending indoor



Portland Trail Blazers shooting guard CJ McCollum (3) drives to the basket as Houston Rockets shooting guard Sterling Brown (L) defends during the first half at Moda Center. — USA Today Sports

gatherings of more than 15 people.

He was fined \$50,000, in the latest installment of the pre-season drama surrounding Harden, who turned up late to training camp amid reports he has demanded to be traded.

The three-time — and reigning — NBA scoring champion played more than 43 minutes. He connected on 12 of 22 shots from the field, including six three-pointers.

Harden's step-back three-

pointer with 15.3 seconds left in overtime put the Rockets up 126-125.

But the Trail Blazers responded, Lillard driving towards the basket then kicking the ball out to McCollum who calmly sank a

three-pointer of his own.

"I just got to the corner," McCollum said. "I knew (Lillard) was going to be aggressive, he drew a crowd. My man turned his back so I just relocated to the open area and knocked down the trey."

The Rockets had the ball again after a timeout, but Robert Covington came up with the steal from Harden as he was driving towards the basket.

In Detroit, Cleveland guard Collin Sexton scored 32 points, including a lay-up to force a second overtime as the Cavaliers beat the Detroit Pistons 128-119.

Andre Drummond added 23 points against his former team, Cedi Osman scored 22 off the bench and Darius Garland chipped in 21 as the Cavaliers rallied from a nine-point deficit with 2:15 left in the first overtime.

The Pistons appeared to seize control in the third quarter, when Jerami Grant scored 14 of his 28 points. Blake Griffin scored 26 points and Derrick Rose had 13, but the Pistons — with 24 turnovers leading to 31 Cavaliers points — could not hang on for the win.

"It was multiple opportunities where we could've given in, there were multiple opportunities that we could've lost the fight," Cavaliers coach JB Bickerstaff said. "Every player, to a man, decided that was not going to happen."

It was close in Charlotte, where Oklahoma City's Shai Gilgeous-Alexander drained a game-winning jump shot with 1.4 seconds left in the Thunder's 109-107 season-opening win over the Hornets.

Oklahoma City led by 13 with less than two minutes to play and held off a Hornets rally to gain the win.

Miles Bridges scored three 3-pointers in the final 25 seconds as the Hornets battled back, knotting the score at 107-107 with 10.3 seconds remaining. — AFP

NBA RESULTS

ATLANTA bt Memphis **122-112**
Oklahoma City bt Charlotte **109-107**
Cleveland bt Detroit **128-119 (OT)**
Orlando bt Washington **130-120**
Philadelphia bt New York **109-89**
Indiana bt Chicago **125-106**
San Antonio bt Toronto **119-114**
Minnesota bt Utah **116-111**
Portland bt Houston **128-126 (OT)**
Sacramento bt Phoenix **106-103**

Khawar inspires IT Works to end Muscat CT's unbeaten run



Khawar Ali of IT Works



Nester Dhamba of IT Works

MUSCAT: Khawar Ali's superb all-rounder show and Nester Dhamba's four-wicket haul helped IT Works to a thrilling 37-run win over unbeaten Muscat CT in a Premier Division 50-over League contest at OC Turf 1 in Al Amerat on Saturday.

IT Works struggled to score runs, folding up for 190 in the 48th over, Khawar (49) and Zeeshan Maqsood (35) being their main scorers. Ayaan Khan and Munis Ansari picked up three wickets each.

Muscat found the going tough from the outset, getting dismissed for a disappointing 153 in the 48th over. Only Shoaib Khan (34) and Syed Aamir Kaleem (31) showed some resistance against the guile of Nester and Khawar who claimed four and three wickets respectively.

OHI beat Maniz Azad

Douglas OHI sealed an exciting 3-wicket victory against Maniz Azad International in a C Division game at Muscat Municipality ground 2 on Friday.

Chasing Maniz Azad's 145 for

6 that included Shoaib Ismail's 46 and Shoaib Mohammed's 43, OHI surpassed the target in the final over, scoring 146 for 7 thanks to a vital 30 by Santosh Wishwakarma and a whirlwind 23 off 11 by Abhishek Rai. Adnan-ul Haq claimed 3 for 15 while Shoaib Ismail took 2 for 14.

Karthik helps Design Group to victory

In another C Division match, Karthik Rajappa struck an unbeaten 83 off 46 to steer Design Group Engineering Consultants (DGEC) to an emphatic 8-wicket victory against Khalsa United at Muscat Municipality ground 1 on Friday. Khalsa' 160 for 5 had main contributions from Muhammed Zahid Nawaz (50) and Sushil Kadam (40).

Design Group raced to the target in just 15.4 overs, scoring 161 for 2 thanks to Karthik and Parvez Beg's (60) brilliant batting.

Latha bats Ideal to big win

Latha Nair's hurricane 68 not out off 35 balls helped Ideal technology to a thumping



Design Group's Parvez

10-wicket win over OCT Maabela in a D Division match at Muscat Municipality ground 3.

Ideal overhauled Mabela's 131 for 5 in only 12 overs, scoring 133 without loss thanks to Latha's scintillating knock. Amir Mahmood batted well too, scoring 55 not out.

Jotun too good for Al Rehwan

In another D Division game at the same venue, Jotun CT thrashed Al Rehwan by 7 wickets thanks to a vital 58 off 38 by Vijayan Pillai.

Al Rehwan posted 133 for 9 on the board, PC Aboo top-scoring with 45. Abraham Chacko bowled well, taking 3 for 16.

Jotun faced no difficulty on their way to 136 for 3 in 15.1 overs, thanks to Vijayan's brilliant knock. Aboo took two wickets.

BRIEF SCORES

Premier Division

IT Works 190 all out in 47.4 overs (Khawar Ali 49 – 6x4, Zeeshan Maqsood 35 – 4x4, 1x6, Ayaan Khan 3-20, Munis Ansari 3-28, Siddharth Bukkapatnam 2-42) beat Muscat



Design Group's Karthik

CT 153 all out in 47.5 overs (Shoaib Khan 34 – 3x4, 1x6, Syed Aamir Kaleem 31 – 1x4, Nester Dhamba 4-25, Khawar Ali 3-29, Muhammed Nadeem 2-20) by 37 runs.

D Division

Al Rehwan 133 for 9 in 20 overs (P C Aboo 45 – 4x4, Joby Abraham Chacko 3-16, Sreedharan Pillai 2-30) lost to Jotun Cricket Team 136 for 3 in 15.1 overs (Vijayan Pillai 58 – 9x4, 1x6, P C Aboo 2-27) by 7 wickets.

C Division

Maniz Azad International 145 for 6 in 20 overs (Shoaib Ismail 49 – 7x4, Shoaib Mohammed 43 – 4x4) lost to Douglas OHI 146 for 7 in 19.2 overs (Santosh Vishwakarma 30 – 2x4, 1x6, Adnan-ul Haq 3-15, Shoaib Ismail 2-14) by 3 wickets.

Khalsa United CT 160 for 5 in 20 overs (Muhammad Zahid Nawaz 50 – 4x4, 1x6, Sushil Kadam 40 – 1x4, Irfan Ahmed 35 – 5x4) lost to Design Group Engineering Consultants 161 for 2 in 15.4 overs (Karthik Rajappa 83 not out – 13x4, 1x6, Parvez Beg 60 – 8x4, 1x6, Majid Rafique 2-35) by 8 wickets.

D Division

Oct Maabela 131 for 5 in 20 overs (Farooq Hussain 34 – 1x4, Zafarullah al Balushi 29 – 3x4, 1x6, Harish Mohan 2-24, Sooraj A Raj 2-33) lost to Ideal Technology 133 without loss in 12 overs (Latha Nair 68 – 12x4, Amir Mahmood 55 – 7x4) by 10 wickets.

SA openers thrive against depleted Sri Lankans

CENTURION, South Africa: South African opening batsmen Dean Elgar and Aiden Markram scored freely against a depleted Sri Lankan bowling attack as the host nation fought back on the second day of the first Test at SuperSport Park in Centurion on Sunday.

South Africa were 180 for one at tea in reply to Sri Lanka's imposing first innings total of 396.

Elgar and Markram put on 141 for the first wicket, scoring at almost five runs an over, before Markram was caught at gully off Vishwa Fernando for 68. Elgar was unbeaten on 86 at the interval.

Sri Lanka went into the match without leading fast bowler Suranga Lakmal because of a hamstring strain and suffered a major blow when opening bowler Kasun Rajitha limped off the field with what appeared to be a groin injury after bowling one ball in his third over.

Sri Lanka were already without batsman Dhananjaya de Silva who was ruled out of the rest of the series after suffering a grade two tear in his left thigh which forced him to retire hurt after scoring 79 on Saturday.

With De Silva also a capable off-spin bowler, the tourists were reduced to a four-man attack, which included Dasun Shanaka, bowling at a gentle medium pace, and debutant leg-spinner Wanindu Hasaranga.

As had been the case with the inexperienced South African bowlers, the Sri Lankans struggled to find consistency and the batsmen took advantage of



South Africa's Dean Elgar plays a shot during the second day of the first Test against Sri Lanka at SuperSport Park in Centurion. — AFP

some loose bowling. Markram and Elgar struck 14 fours each across a fast outfield.

Earlier, Shanaka hit an aggressive 66 not out before South African new cap Lutho Sipamla wrapped up the Sri Lankan innings by taking three wickets in 11 balls.

Shanaka, 29, playing in his first Test in more than three years, and with a previous highest score of 17 in three appearances, hit three fours and five sixes in his 87-ball innings.

Sri Lanka's total far exceeded their previous highest in a Test innings in South Africa, 342 in Cape Town in 2011/12. — AFP

BRIEF SCORES (AT TEA):

Sri Lanka 396 (D Chandimal 85, D de Silva 79 retired hurt, N Dickwella 49, D Shanaka 66 not out; L Sipamla 4-76, W Mulder 3-69)

South Africa 180-1 (D Elgar 86 not out, A Markram 68)

Gutsy Rahane century puts India in driving seat



MELBOURNE: Stand-in skipper Ajinkya Rahane rode his luck to hit a gritty unbeaten century as India built an ominous 82-run lead over Australia on day two to take a stranglehold on the second Test in Melbourne on Sunday.

It was a determined and crucial knock against a world-class attack by the mild-mannered 32-year-old, who assumed the captaincy from Virat Kohli after he returned home for the birth of his first child. Batting at four, he faced 200 balls for his 104 to steer India to 277 for five before rain ended play 15 minutes early. Ravindra Jadeja was not out 40. The hosts took just four wickets during a frustrating day in the field as the match began to slip away with India zeroing in on levelling the series after losing the first Test by eight wickets in Adelaide.

“Not our best day, but not our worst,” said Australia’s Mitchell Starc, who has two wickets but also saw catches put down off his bowling. “Jinx (Rahane) batted really well through the day there and they had some pretty good partnerships.

“I thought there was some really good stuff from us as well, we just didn’t capitalise on some of the chances we created to finish in a better position.

“We’re just going to have to back up tomorrow and take five wickets as quick as we can.”

While Rahane was the hero, it was a gutsy Indian team performance, with three 50-plus wicket partnerships to help silence their critics after being skittled for their all-time low of 36 last week.

Debutant Shubman Gill chipped in with an impressive 45 and paid tribute to Rahane.

“His knock was all about pa-

Not our best day, but not our worst. Jinx (Rahane) batted really well through the day there and they had some pretty good partnerships

MITCHELL STARC

Australian bowler

tience. Sometimes against such a high-quality bowling attack you go into your shell and then you’re not able to score runs,” he said.

“The way Ajinkya played, it was such a magnificent knock to watch, the way he saw off the tough periods and the loose balls he was making sure he put them all away.”

PROBLEMS

On a steamy day at the Melbourne Cricket Ground, India resumed on 36 for one in reply to Australia’s first innings 195, having weathered 11 overs Saturday when they lost Mayank Agarwal for a duck to Starc.

In an action-packed morning, the Australian attack consistently hit its line and length with Pat Cummins bagging Gill then the experienced Cheteshwar Pujara for 17.

That brought Rahane to the crease and — first with Hanuma Vihari, then Rishabh Pant and finally Jadeja — he built half-century stands to put India in a strong position.

He brought up his 12th Test ton in his 67th game, and his second in Melbourne, with a four off Cummins, but he enjoyed some good fortune.

Australia removed first slip during Starc’s first spell in the final session and lived to regret it with Rahane getting an edge on 57 that would almost certainly have been caught if the fielder was there.

He had a huge let-off on 73 when he was dropped at second slip by Steve Smith and again on 104 when the ball popped out of Travis Head’s hands as he landed after taking the catch. — AFP

SCOREBOARD

Australia first innings: 195	
India first innings (O/n: 36/1)	
M Agarwal lbw Starc	0
S Gill c Paine b Cummins	45
C Pujara c Paine c Cummins	17
A Rahane (not out)	104
H Vihari c Smith b Lyon	21
R Pant c Paine b Starc	29
R Jadeja (not out)	40
Extras (B-12, LB-6, W-1, NB-2)	21
Total (For 5 wks, 91.3 overs)	277
Fall of wickets: 0-1, 2-61, 3-64, 4-116, 5-173.	
Bowling: Starc 18.3-3-61-2, Cummins 22-7-71-2, Hazlewood 21-6-44-0, Lyon 18-2-52-1, Green 12-1-31-0	

Jamieson strikes as Pakistan stumble in reply to NZ

MOUNT MAUNGANUI, NEW ZEALAND: New Zealand were banking on a deteriorating pitch to defend their Kane Williamson-anchored 431 after reducing Pakistan to 30 for one on day two of the first Test at Mount Maunganui on Sunday.

Abid Ali was not out 19 with nightwatchman Mohammad Abbas yet to score after Kyle Jamieson removed opener Shan Masood for 10.

The Bay Oval pitch, Williamson’s home wicket, is renowned for supporting the bowlers on the first and last day.

But Williamson said it was already showing signs it would favour spin through the middle stages, while New Zealand sweated on the availability of short-ball specialist Neil Wagner.

“Hopefully the cracks start to open and hopefully it starts to deteriorate,” Williamson said.



“Spin will come more into play. There are bits of rough as well so I’ve no doubt spin will definitely have a role.”

The immediate concern for New Zealand was the availability of Wagner who was to have a scan at the end of the day after being hit on the foot by a Shaheen Afridi yorker when he batted.

Wagner managed three overs

when Pakistan batted but was clearly in pain. New Zealand, having started the day at 222 for three, added a further 209 runs before Wagner was the last man out.

The innings was headlined by Williamson’s 129, his 23rd Test century, with sizeable contributions from BJ Watling (73) and Henry Nicholls (56) to go with Ross Taylor’s 70 on the first day.

SCOREBOARD

NEW ZEALAND FIRST INNINGS (O/N: 222-3):	
T Latham c Azhar Ali b Afridi	4
T Blundell c Y Shah b Afridi	5
K Williamson c Sohail b Y Shah	129
R Taylor c Rizwan b Afridi	70
H Nicholls c Masood b Shah	56
B Watling c Y Shah b Afridi	73
M Santner c Rizwan b Ashraf	19
K Jamieson c Rizwan b Abbas	32
T Southee b Y Shah	0
N Wagner c Masood b Y Shah	19
T Boult (not out)	8
Extras (LB-5, W-5, NB-6)	16
Total (all out, 155 overs)	431
Fall of wickets: 1-4, 2-13, 3-133, 4-266, 5-281, 6-317, 7-383, 8-388, 9-421.	
Bowling: Afridi 36-7-109-4, Abbas 31-14-49-1, Ashraf 19-8-40-1, N Shah 25-3-96-1, Y Shah 37-4-113-3, S Masood 2-1-2-0, Sohail 5-0-17-0.	
PAKISTAN FIRST INNINGS:	
S Masood c Watling b Jamieson	10
A Ali (not out)	19
M Abbas (not out)	0
Extras (NB-1)	1
Total (For 1 wkt, 20 overs)	30
Fall of wickets: 1-28.	
To bat: Azhar Ali, Fawad Alam, Haris Sohail, Mohammad Rizwan (capt), Faheem Ashraf, Yasir Shah, Shaheen Afridi, Naseem Shah	
Bowling: Southee 7-2-13-0, Boult 4-2-8-0, Jamieson 6-4-5-1, Wagner 3-1-4-0 (1nb)	

PATIENCE AND CONCENTRATION

Williamson described his knock as “really satisfying” after New Zealand were sent into bat on a green wicket and with Afridi and Mohammad Abbas making life difficult with swing and seam on the first day.

Although there was not the same movement on day two, the drying pitch started to show signs of turn which brought spin into play with Yasir Shah taking three wickets, including the prized scalp of Williamson.

Nicholls, who had partnered Williamson in a 133-run stand for the fourth wicket, was the first to fall, bizarrely departing the field when he would have been allowed to stay had he argued his case.

He was given out caught off the gloves, and after consulting with Williamson they felt the ball may have also touched the bat so

they decided not to seek a review when replays later showed the ball hit his forearm and did not brush either glove or bat.

Williamson, a model of patience and concentration, needed 261 balls to bring up his century, his slowest Test hundred, but once that milestone passed he picked up the pace and needed only 36 more deliveries to get to 129.

The introduction of Yasir Shah brought the end of the New Zealand captain.

With his third ball, the leg-spinner found enough turn to catch the edge of the bat and Haris Sohail took a smart one-handed catch. Watling, who scored a double century against England on the same Bay Oval wicket a year ago, took over as the batting mainstay.

He featured in a 36-run stand with Mitchell Santner (19) and 66 with Jamieson (32). — AFP



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Industrial exports projected at RO 10.7 bn by 2040

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 27

The value of Oman's industrial output is projected to soar four-fold over the next two years with exports poised to climb to RO 10.7 billion by 2040, according to a key official of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion.

Eng Salim bin Suleiman al Hatmi, Acting Director of the Planning and Industrial Studies Department, said the Sultanate's Industrial Strategy 2040 is designed to endow Oman with a modern and technically advanced manufacturing base.

"Since the publication of the first phase of the Industrial Strategy 2040 in January 2019, the key performance indicators have been reviewed and formulated again. These reviews show that the data of recent years as well as those of available investment opportunities and priority industries were made available.



They included those of recycling industries and transportation handling industries — data of which were not available earlier," Al Hatmi noted.

The Strategy is designed to deliver a nearly six-fold increase in the constant added value of high-tech and medium-sized industries. Priority industries are expected to grow very swiftly and much faster than any other industry. High-tech industries are also expected to expand. It is also likely that high-tech and medium non-priority industries may also increase at five per cent annual growth rate, he said.

Additionally, there are plans to establish industrial complexes catering to investments in health, environment, commodity production, electrical and mechanical equipment, transportation equipment, steel and glass, and foodstuffs.

"There is an expectation that

KEY GOAL: Industrial Strategy 2040 to endow Oman with a technically advanced manufacturing base

health and recycling clusters will grow faster. Both will start from an exceptionally low base. It is also expected that the electro-mechanical sector would show strong performance," he further stated.

Significantly, Strategic or priority industries will expand by 4.5 times over the next 20 years, according to the official. They will be driven by the group of high-tech industries notably focused on steel, glass and foodstuff complexes.

The petrochemical sector is expected to expand slightly less than other priority and average manufacturing industries. It will also remain the most important

industry in 2040, representing at least 37 per cent of the manufacturing sector.

The 4th Industrial Revolution will have wide-ranging effects on manufacturing processes. The production with modern technologies will become faster and more diversified. The integration between companies and their customers will also grow.

These developments will lead to significant increase in productivity and decrease in job opportunities if countries would not innovate and produce new products and industries to compensate for the losses in the old products, he said.

It is also expected that the Industrial Strategy 2040 will contribute to incentives for research and development, in addition to closer and stronger relations between universities and industry. This will allow the graduates to get a deeper understanding of the new technologies and contribute largely to the production activity.

43 homes in Muscat to have solar energy by year-end

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 27

Solar energy systems have been installed at more than 21 homes in Muscat Governorate — a number expected to double to around 43 homes by the end of 2020, according to Muscat Electricity Distribution Company (MEDC).

"In line with the requirements of our subscribers, we have tested and operated solar energy systems for 21 homes and we hope that the number will reach 43 homes by the end of 2020," the distribution company — part of Nama Group — said in a statement.

"We work to help those who wish to use this service by facilitating the transaction and providing the necessary workshops and arrangements. For more information about the solar energy delivery service, you can view the following link: <https://medcoman.com/arabic/solar-energy.php>, the statement added.

RO 61.5 million poultry farm set for launch in January 2021

MUSCAT: Osool Poultry, a project conceived as part of the Omani government's strategy to develop and strengthen the country's food security, will formally come on stream around the middle of January next year.

The plant, set up in Haima in central Oman, is dedicated to the production of hatching eggs — the source of baby chicks for poultry farms mushrooming around the Sultanate. Total investment in the project, which is spearheaded by Oman Food Investment Holding Company (OFIC) — a subsidiary of Oman Investment Authority (OIA) — is RO 61.5 million.

Annual output at full capacity is envisioned at a world-scale 150 million fertilised eggs per annum — a target set to be achieved by 2040. At this capacity, Oman is set to be more than self-sufficient in meeting its domestic requirement of hatching eggs, but in addition, will have surplus volumes



to supply overseas regional markets as well.

Eng Mohammed bin Suhail al Shanfari, Chairman of Osool Poultry, said the project, set on an area covering 47 sq km in the Wilayat of Haima, is unique to the Middle East region. It will support Oman's economic diversification as well as job creation goals.

One of the farms that make of the poultry complex is fully operational, paving for its

Built to international specs, the plant also features a slaughterhouse, water treatment plant, power plant, warehouses, housing, administrative offices, facilities for services, and other amenities.

Adding to the uniqueness of Osool Poultry is its location in the arid desert wastelands of central Oman — a setting that contributes to the project's overall biosecurity, according to project officials.

The complex features a network of four plots. While three of the plots feature poultry houses for rearing and egg production, a fourth plot will be equipped with a small-scale processing plant for the culling of chickens and production of small quantities of white meat.

A feed-mill designed to meet the chicken feed requirements of the entire project is also planned on the fourth plot. — ONA

Brexit offers Britain chance to do financial services

LONDON: Brexit offers Britain a chance to do things differently in financial services, Finance Minister Rishi Sunak said on Sunday, but it will co-operate with the European Union on an approach to the sector despite little detail on the topic in its trade deal.

From January 1, British-based financial services groups lose automatic access to the EU's single market, and both sides have said new market access must be negotiated outside the trade agreement in specific equivalence deals.

"Now that we've left the European Union, we can do things a bit differently (in financial services)," Sunak told broadcasters. Britain and the EU clinched a trade deal on Thursday, but Prime Minister Boris Johnson has admitted it is an accord which does not have as much as he would have liked about the financial services sector and regulatory equivalence.

This deal also provides reassurance because there's a stable regulatory co-operative framework mentioned in the deal

RISHI SUNAK
Britain's finance minister

Under a system known as equivalence, access to EU markets will not be granted to banks, insurers and other financial firms based in Britain unless their home rules are deemed by Brussels to be "equivalent", or as robust as regulations in the bloc.

The two sides will aim to agree a memorandum of understanding on regulatory cooperation in



Rishi Sunak

financial services by March 2021, and Sunak said that such language should provide reassurance.

"This deal also provides reassurance because there's a stable regulatory co-operative framework mentioned in the deal," he said. "I think (that) will give people that reassurance that we will remain in close dialogue with our European partners when it comes to things

like equivalence decisions."

Meanwhile, promoters of Britain's divorce from the EU had said they would revitalise bonds with the United States, where President Donald Trump, with his shared disdain for multinational bodies, seemed the perfect partner.

Come January, Britain both definitively leaves the 27-nation bloc and will deal with a new US president, Joe Biden, who prioritises the EU and shares none of the Brexiters' romanticism about going it alone.

Biden, an Irish-American who will be the second Catholic president, had already warned Prime Minister Boris Johnson not to jeopardise peace in Northern Ireland by erecting a hard border between the British-ruled province and EU member Ireland.

Even as trade talks dragged on, Britain reached a deal with Brussels on special arrangements

for Northern Ireland — a sign to observers that Biden's election had already made an impact.

"It was recognised in London that if you messed up the Northern Irish border, it would have been absolutely poisonous for the US-UK relationship," said Jacob Kirkegaard, a senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

Johnson's Conservative government has emphasised issues on which it enjoys common ground with Biden, including fighting climate change, and announced a historic boost in military spending.

Kirkegaard said Britain was hoping to punch above its weight as a strategic security partner of the United States, especially at a time of high tension with China, but said Biden could find similar capabilities in the much larger EU, where France is a major military player. — Reuters

Sainbury’s prepares for Oman operations, taps local bank

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 27

International Distribution Network SPC, the distribution arm of Sainsbury’s — one of the UK’s largest food retailers — has selected National Bank of Oman (NBO) as its onshore banking partner as it prepares to establish a new operations hub in Sohar Port. The Oman will support the distribution of over 12,000 FMCG products in the Middle East and Africa region.

Asif Redha, Head of Global Transaction Banking at NBO, said, “We are glad to offer our services to International Distribution Network SPC Oman and looking forward to strengthening our mutual collaboration over the coming years. NBO is always at the forefront of providing innovative technological solutions to international and local businesses.”



Shahid Rafique K, Director Sales & Operations at International Distribution Network SPC, added, “We are delighted to have chosen NBO as our onshore banking partner and are confident that the collaboration will help us to capitalise on the geographical advantages that Oman offers, as well as its rapidly developing transport and logistics infrastructure, as we seek to grow our presence in the wider region.”

Sainsbury’s, a multi-brand, multi-channel retailer, has over 1,400 stores throughout the UK.

Through the operations hub of International Distribution Network SPC set up recently in Sohar, Sainsbury’s now has access to potential markets encompassing the Middle East and Africa, which is home to nearly 1.4 billion people.

From this hub, International Distribution Network SPC plans to supply and reach Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Jordan, Egypt and Pakistan, besides Oman.

Equity trends: What to expect in 2021

PETER GARNRY

THIS year has surpassed even our wildest imagination with a global pandemic racing the world causing severe restrictions crumbling economic activity on a scale not witnessed since World War II.

Despite this horrible backdrop we have witnessed some extraordinary events in global equity markets from large winners and losers across companies, industries, and countries. We look at this year’s trends and whether they will continue next year.

What to expect in 2021?
Forecasting is a fool’s errand but nevertheless we will try to formulate our best guesses on what to expect in 2021. Our core argument is that policy makers will make the policy mistake of overstimulating the economy on top of a better than expected vaccine rollout. This will cause the economy to run hot next year pushing up real inflation in the physical world and with that long-term interest rates and thus significantly steepening the yield curve.

This will help financials and companies exposed to the physical world and thus value stocks could have one of its best years ever. But will it create a plunge in technology stocks?

If the interest rate rise is well behaved, and the US 10-year yield stays below 2 per cent then our guess is that technology



stocks will continue to rise but lose out to value stocks on a relative basis. If we move beyond 2 per cent on long-term yields, then the rate sensitive stocks (the super aggressively priced growth stocks) could experience a seismic change in valuation and a dramatic collapse in their stock prices. This move will most likely be linked to Europe which may have a good year in equities for once.

The US-China tension will continue to rise next year, and supply chains will continue to change with more companies diversifying their production out of China.

This will add to the rise in inflation as globalisation over the past 40 years with China turning into the world’s factory has put a lid on prices.

But despite of these changes the emerging markets will continue to do well, and we believe this part of the equity market will do very well next year. Green energy can almost only disappoint as the

sector is priced for perfection, but momentum trades can continue much longer than what would seem rational.

Next year could also be the year when investors are scared about the willingness of governments to intervene in markets to restore competition, especially in the digital economy.

The trajectory is for regulation and the big potential headline next year could be that of breaking up Facebook or forcing Google to ‘open up’ technology in search and other related technologies so competition can increase.

We saw similar moves in the 1960s with IBM and AT&T/Bell Labs, so it could happen again. Amazon is ripe for an antitrust move by the US government but our guess is that Amazon will make a pre-emptive move by spinning out Amazon Web Services driven by the valuation that Snowflake just recently got in its IPO but also because it can divert attention for a while. One thing is for sure.

Only half of the above guesses will come true and something crazy will likely hit the world that makes these forecasts look stupid in hindsight when the calendar reads December 2021.

But we feel confident that next year will throw new dramatic moves at investors, unless this is our ultimate failed prediction and markets become unusual quiet next year with super low volatility again. Time will tell.

(Peter Garnry is Head of Equity Strategy at Saxo Bank)

Oman sees 30pc drop in COVID-19 cyber-attacks

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 27

Oman has seen an impressive 30 per cent drop in the number of COVID-19-related cyberattacks from 920 in Q2 2020 to 640 in Q3 2020, according to new research from Trend Micro Incorporated, the leader in cloud security.

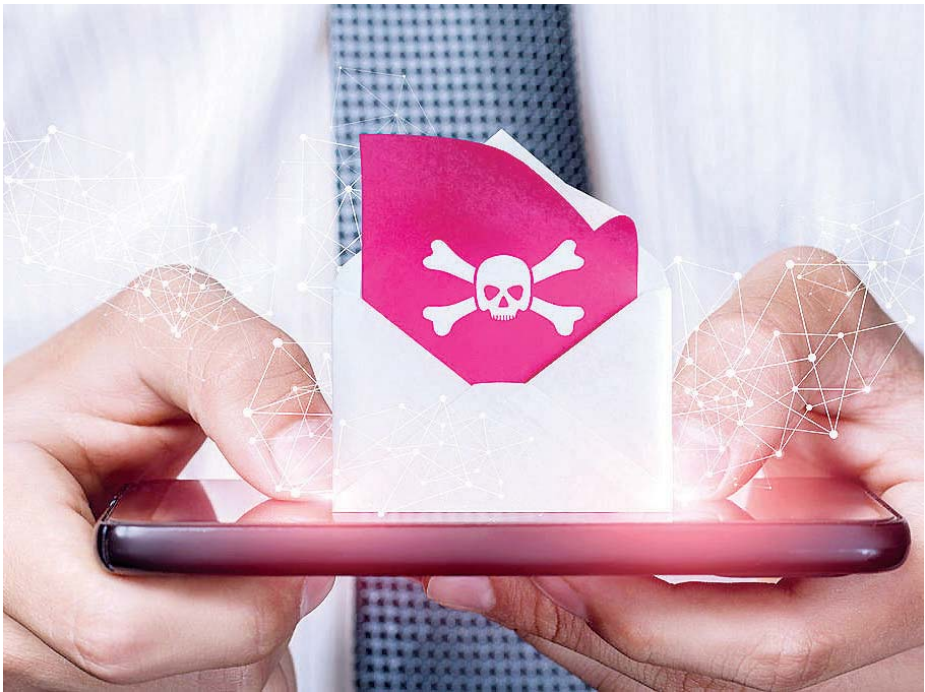
In Q3 2020, Oman’s COVID-19 related cyberattacks included: 610 e-mail spam attacks, down 27 per cent from 833 in Q2 2020; 29 malicious URL hits, down 67 per cent from 87 in Q2 2020; and 1 malware detection, up from 0 in Q2 2020.

“Oman’s 30 per cent decrease in COVID-19 related cyberattacks is an impressive signal that Oman’s IT decision-makers are taking pandemic-related attacks seriously,” said Assad Arabi, Managing Director — Gulf Cluster, Trend Micro.

“We are seeing Oman’s organisations deploy the right cybersecurity solutions and processes to enable secure remote work and work from home environments.”

During Q3 2020, the 14 countries of the MENA region experienced a total of 125,219 COVID-19 related cyberattacks, including 101,188 email spam attacks, 23,696 malicious URL hits, and 335 malware detections, according to Trend Micro’s Smart Protection Network.

MENA’s COVID-19 attacks were down by 54 per cent, with a 29 per cent decrease in email spam attacks, an 82 per cent decrease in malicious URL hits, but a 4.5-fold increase in malware



The concept of a virus from the Internet .

detections.

“While Oman and the Middle East are beginning to emerge from the pandemic, organisations must continue to protect their employees and malicious URLs and files that are embedded with malware,” added Assad Arabi.

“One of the biggest concerns is about phishing emails related to COVID-19 health and safety measures, or career updates, which could also expose sensitive corporate data to hackers.”

Worldwide, COIVD-19 related threats in Q3 2020 tallied 4,859,121 threats, including 3,818,307 total email threats, 1,025,301 hits on malicious URLs, and 15,513 detected malware files. Worldwide, from Q2 to Q3 2020, there was a 46.9 per cent decrease in email threats, but a 47.4 increase in

malicious URL hits.

Trend Micro’s researchers have found that this spike in malicious activity coincided with a shift in social engineering tactics — instead of using COVID-19 information to trick users, criminals used coronavirus-related school updates and job listings.

For example, many schools required more information about students’ health as part of their safety protocols for combating the virus.

Headers used in phishing e-mails have also changed. Instead of using COVID-19 as the subject, malicious actors are using titles related to job opportunities to trick users into opening spam mail.

Many people are out of work due to the economic downturn caused by the

Malicious actors are using titles related to job opportunities to trick users into opening spam mail

pandemic, and are eager to find job openings. Threat actors are aware of what users click on and use the most obvious bait to make their schemes more effective.

In remote work setups, organisations should set up two-factor authentication, preconfigure work from home arrangements, back up data, ensure that there are enough VPN licenses, and limit the use of VPNs.

Employees should use a company computer, follow company security standards, use company-designated VPNs, split networks, prepare backup options, and be wary of online scams.

Home network security basics include securing the router, work with a proxy, strengthen passwords, and keep software up to date.

For families, Internet safety fundamentals include securing other computers in use, protecting smartphones, saving bandwidth, and discussing the importance of online safety.

PRESS RELEASE

JUMAN TWO APARTMENTS OFFERS ENVIABLE LOCATION

Al Mouj Muscat has released the final phase of Juman Two, luxury apartments in a premium location directly overlooking its stunning marina. It is the last chance to buy marina-front apartments off-plan where signature lifestyle and leisure experiences comes as part of the package.

Al Mouj Muscat is Oman’s



leading Integrated Tourism Complex (ITC) and a public-private venture between Majid

BANK MUSCAT CONTINUES TO IMPLEMENT AL MAZYONA CAMPAIGN

In line with its commitment to partnership in promoting a strong savings culture in Oman, Bank Muscat, has called upon all its customers to increase the savings in their Al Mazyona accounts to be able to win high value prizes at the special End-of-Year Al Mazyona savings prize draw.

Over RO 1 million in prizes will



be given away to lucky winners during the special draw for the 2020 scheme. The bank has been

Oman-based firms win MEED Project Awards

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 27

At the 10th MEED Project Awards, held in Dubai recently, Oman-based entities, Lalbuksh Voltas and Voltas Oman were recognised for their stellar performance in the Oman projects industry. Voltas secured a total of five awards, bagging National Winner labels in four categories and GCC Winner in one category.

In the National Winner category, Lalbuksh Voltas scooped Innovation Sustainability medals



for its work on the Mazoon Dairy project, while Voltas Oman’s Kempinski Hotel project collected ‘Hotel Project of the Year’ and ‘Commercial Property of the Year’ accolades. In the GCC Winner category, Sachin Watarkar of Lalbuksh Voltas was

named ‘Engineer of the Year’.

The awards celebrate the GCC’s best projects completed in 2018 and 2019 that showcase GCC’s dynamic projects industry, which is valued at nearly \$3 trillion, according to projects tracking database MEED Projects. The 2020 edition of the awards received over 130 entries from leading organisations, project owners, contractors and consultants.

“We would like to congratulate everyone at Lalbuksh Voltas and Voltas Oman for playing a crucial role in executing these challenging projects.



In brief

■ SHANGHAI

**CHINA INCREASES IMPRISONMENT TERMS FOR MARKET CRIMES**

China amended a criminal law to increase imprisonment terms for securities and futures market crimes, including fraudulent securities issuances and information disclosure fraud.

According to an online posting by the China Securities Regulatory Commission (CSRC) on Saturday, the imprisonment for fraudulent securities issuances was raised from five to 15 years, while the maximum sentencing for fraudulent disclosures was raised to 10 years from three.

The amendment was passed by the National People's Congress Standing Committee, and will come into effect from March 1 next year. — **Reuters**

■ WASHINGTON

**US HOLIDAY RETAIL SALES RISE 3% AS ONLINE SHOPPING BOOMS**

US retail sales rose 3 per cent during this year's expanded holiday shopping season from October 11 to December 24, a report by Mastercard Inc said, powered by a pandemic-driven shift toward online shopping.

US e-commerce sales jumped 49 per cent in this year's holiday shopping season, according to Mastercard SpendingPulse report, underscoring the COVID-19 pandemic's role in transforming customers' shopping habits.

Holiday e-commerce sales made up 19.7 per cent of total retail sales this year, the data showed. The holiday shopping season can account for the majority of certain retailers' annual sales. — **Reuters**

■ FRANKFURT

**BITCOIN RISES ABOVE 25,000 DOLLARS FOR THE FIRST TIME**

The price of digital currency Bitcoin rose above 25,000 dollars on Saturday for the first time. The oldest and best-known cryptocurrency reached 25,022 dollars on the Bitstamp trading platform, a record high.

On other trading platforms, of which there are many, the record highs may differ, as there is no central Bitcoin exchange. Bitcoin has seen a breathtaking rise this year. In early 2020, it was worth 8,000 dollars, but then fell to 4,000 dollars when the pandemic broke out in the spring.

It gradually began to increase, a rise that then accelerated sharply in the fall.

Bitcoin has more than doubled in value since mid-October. — **dpa**

US jobless benefit cut-off pushes millions to financial cliff-edge

WASHINGTON: When the US Congress passed a pandemic aid bill on Monday, Meghan Meyer, a single mom from Lincoln, Nebraska, thought she would get some respite from the daily struggle to feed and house her two kids during an unprecedented health and economic crisis.

But the next day President Donald Trump declared the long-awaited relief package "a disgrace" and said he would not sign it into law, decrying some of its spending measures while also demanding it include bigger stimulus checks for most Americans.

By the weekend, he had refused to budge. That leaves Meyer, who has been on unpaid medical leave from her customer service job at retailer TJ Maxx since May because she is at risk of severe COVID, facing a financial cliff edge.

She is one of roughly 14 million Americans whose emergency unemployment benefits, introduced by Congress when the pandemic took hold in March, ended on Saturday. "I don't know what I'm going to do," Meyer, 39, said in a phone interview.

To make it through 2020, Meyer said she has had to lean on friends and charities to help put food on the table, pay her rent, cover the family dog's medical expenses, and buy Christmas presents for her kids. "I have held out and held out," she said.



Volunteers from Forgotten Harvest food bank sort and separate different goods before a mobile pantry distribution ahead of Christmas, amid the COVID-19 pandemic in Warren, Michigan. — **Reuters**

The new relief bill would extend through mid-March programmes that support self-employed workers and those unemployed for more than half a year.

It also gives an additional \$300 a week through mid-March to all those receiving jobless benefits, some 20.3 million people.

And it extends through January a moratorium on evictions due to expire on December 31 and provides \$25 billion in emergency rental assistance. Many economists agree that the aid is insufficient and more will be needed after Democratic President-elect Joe Biden takes

The new relief bill would extend through mid-March programmes that support self-employed workers and those unemployed for more than half a year

office on January 20.

Biden has called the bill a "down payment."

Negotiated by Trump's own Treasury secretary, Steven Mnuchin, and the Republican

Party's congressional leaders, the bill has been flown to the president's Florida beach resort where he is staying for the holiday, awaiting his possible signature.

In tweets on Saturday, Trump signalled he was still unwilling to sign the bill, despite pleas from lawmakers to show goodwill at Christmas time.

"I simply want to get our great people \$2000, rather than the measly \$600," he tweeted on Saturday, referring to the bill's stimulus checks, while he also continued to rail about the November election as he made baseless claims about election fraud. — **Reuters**

Haiti's cocoa wants international recognition

PORT-AU-PRINCE: Although small in the face of South America's giants, Haiti is slowly developing its cocoa industry, earning better incomes for thousands of farmers and refuting the stereotype that culinary art is the preserve of wealthy countries.

Haiti's annual production of 5,000 tonnes of cocoa pales in comparison to the 70,000 tonnes produced per year by neighbouring Dominican Republic, but the sector's development is recent in the island nation.



Sorting of cocoa beans according to their size and appearance is done in the workshops of Makaya Chocolat in Petionville, Haiti. — **AFP**

Feccano, a federation of cocoa cooperatives in northern Haiti, became the first group to organise exchanges in 2001 by prioritising farmers' profits.

"Before, there was the systematic destruction of cocoa trees because the market price wasn't interesting for farmers who preferred very short-cycle crops," said Guito Gilot, Feccano's commercial director.

The cooperative now works with more than 4,000 farmers in northern Haiti.

By fermenting its members' beans before export, Feccano has been able to target the market for fine and aromatic cocoa.

"Feccano's customers pay for quality: they don't have the

New York Stock Exchange as a reference," said Gilot.

Smelling potential, Haiti's private sector finally began investing in the cocoa industry, which until then had been supported solely by non-governmental organisations and humanitarian efforts.

By setting up its fermentation setter in 2014 in Acul-du-Nord, 15 kilometres from Haiti's second city Cap-Haitien, the company Produit des îles (PISA) entered the market. But the logistical challenges are many. — **AFP**

Australian lobster sector claws back trade after ban

FREMANTLE, Australia: Even in the scorching Australian summer sun, long queues of customers snake around Fremantle harbour — a soothing sight for beleaguered local fishermen trying to replace lost business with China.

Australia's rock lobster exports are worth half a billion US dollars a year — and in normal times, 94 per cent of them go to China.

But all that changed a few weeks ago, when Beijing imposed a near-total import ban on lobster, part of a broader politically charged "shadow trade war".

"It has affected us drastically," third-generation fisherman Fedele Camarda said. "Our income has been reduced considerably."

Relations between Canberra and Beijing have been in free-fall for most of this year, with China hitting out at a list of issues including Australia's call for an inquiry into the origins of COVID-19 and a ban on Huawei's



Fisherman Joe Paratore displaying his catch of western rock lobsters aboard his boat to customers at the Fishing Boat Harbour that features a bronze statue of a lobster fisherman in Fremantle in Western Australia. — **AFP**

participation in the nation's 5G network.

The row has seen more than a dozen Australian sectors hit with import levies, with the barley and wine industries particularly badly hit. Exporters stand to lose as much as US\$2-4 billion worth of sales.

Some barley farmers have planted other grains or re-routed shipments to the Middle East, and winemakers have focused on selling more in Japan.

But the lobster industry is looking closer to home.

In a bid to help the ravaged sector, local authorities recently changed legislation to allow commercial rock lobster fishers to sell large quantities from the back of their boats during December and January.

So far the Australian public has responded enthusiastically, offering a much-needed lifeline to Camarda and his fellow vendors.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, prices topped US\$80 a kilogramme in Western Australia and usually averaged around \$53 per kilo.

On one muggy pre-Christmas weekday, sweat-drenched customers bought the world-renowned western rock lobster direct on the quay for \$34 a

AIDA cancels New Year's Eve cruises due to IT problems

HAMBURG: German shipping company AIDA Cruises has cancelled the planned New Year's Eve cruises on its ships Aida Perla and Aida Mardue to IT problems.

The IT problems hindered communication with the arriving guests and were the cause of the travel cancellations, but the ship's operation was secured, an AIDA spokesman said on request on Saturday.

The guests on the cancelled trips should be reimbursed for the price they paid and they would receive an additional cruise credit, it said.

Several media had previously reported on the cancellation of the trips.

The mass-circulation *Bild* newspaper had also reported a possible hacker attack as the cause of the IT problems. The spokesman gave no information on Saturday about the exact cause of the IT problems or a possible hacker attack.

The ships' current trips should be ended according to plan in La Palma and Gran Canaria. Aida Perla guests should disembark on Saturday, the Aida Mar guests on Sunday.

Earlier, AIDA Cruises had announced that all scheduled cruises between October 31 and November 30, 2020 were cancelled.

The announcement comes after Germany implemented far-reaching measures to contain the COVID-19 infection and as a result, passed further restrictions on public life and travel.

The partial lockdown in Germany will start from November 2, until the end of the month. — **dpa**



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■ SERVICES

NEW family flats in Darsait near the beach, 5 bedrooms, hall with AC, 4 bathrooms, balcony with sea view, RO 450 per month. Contact: 99315986.

FLAT for rent. 98403020

FLAT for rent in Maabela 3 master rooms. 96088926.

Good flat, one room with hall, one bathroom and kitchen, 2 split ACs, Ruwi and Al Khuwair and Wadi Al Kabir contact: 99358589 or 97079146 or 95570288.

2 BEDROOM flat Al Khuwair. 99322344.

FOR rent in Salalah, north Auqadain. Call 91711118.

NEW apartment for rent, one room, 2 toilets, kitchen and dinning. Location, Al Khoudh Market, Red Taj building, 7th floor. Per month rent RO 190/-. 92838118

WELL maintained 1&2 BHK and office space/ store available at Rex Road. Contact 92227165

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FLAT for rent at Al Khuwair 33, 4 bedrooms, majlis, 2 halls, kitchen and store. 99383446.

NEW apartment in Ruwi near church consists of 2 rooms with its facilities. Contact. 94664635, 95850345.

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

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

WANTED House worker Contact: 95487503.

BUSINESS Development Executive, 22 years experience in Oman, seeks employment. Contact: 95950370.

PROPERTY leasing manager, send CV to vepsupervisor@gmail.com

WE are urgently for AC & Auto electrician (car electrician) who can join immediately. Contact: 99677756.

■ SIT. WANTED

SALES ENGINEER (PEB) B.Tech Mechanical with minimum 7 years of experience in Pre Engineered Steel Building (PEB) sales and marketing. Responsibility involves Technical discussion with the customers, preparing proposals, cost estimation and quotation. Valid GCC driving licence is a must. Contact: hrjob191@yahoo.com.

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

INDIAN Female Structural/Civil Engineer (B-Tech Civil), 18 years Gulf experience is seeking for suitable placement. Having valid visa and driving license. Ready to join immediately with necessary documents. Contact: 79858363.

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

EXPERIENCE in outdoor Sales & Operations with Oman driving license, looking for suitable job opportunities in Sales/ Operations. Mobile: 79857155.

SALES/Marketing/ retail executive BMS in Marketing. 6 years experience. Contact 93920174. Rehankadri91@hotmail.com

BE Civil Planning Engineer, 6 yrs experience in Sobha Limited (India) looking for suitable job in Oman. Email: vasantcivil19@gmail.com GSM: 0091 8870345416, 97676177

B Tech Mechanical Engineer, 2 yrs experience, looking for suitable job in Oman. Email: boovarasanoopathi@gmail.com GSM: 0091- 9159352599, 97676177.

INDIAN male, having bachelor's degree looking for position in office administration/ document control, total 22 years of experience, 19 years in Oman with Oman driving licence. NOC available. Contact 99757759.

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

■ ACC AVAILABLE

SINGLE room with attached bathroom and air-condition for executive bachelor, non-cooking, Wadi Kabir/ Al Falaj/ Ruwi High Street area. Contact 99657906

■ MANPOWER

MANPOWER from Philippines. Whatsapp: 91206344.

■ BUYING

AL Awsad Modern llc, electronic and furniture used. 99834373.

We buy used and broken cars which have instalments in cash. 90202090.

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

INDIAN male looking for the post of Sr Sales Executive with valid Omani licence. Contact 79285701.

LADY Indian English teacher with over 25 year experience, currently seeks full time position in colleges or training institutions. Responsibilities in English language teaching or soft skills trainer with preference for aviation sector. Possess valid Omani driving license. Contact GSM 92541510

■ ANNOUNCEMENT

Salala AL-Mumyaza Enterprises Partnership, registered at the Commercial Registry with the General Directorate of Commerce and Industry at the Secretariat of Commercial Registry, Al Batinah Governorate, under No (1116866), hereby announces that it is going to change its legal type from Partnership into One-Person Company according to Article No (13) repeated (2), so it is important to inform all the stakeholders of this amendment, and any rejections have to provide their reasons before the Secretariat of Commercial Registry at the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion within two months from the date of this announcement.

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.

■ INVESTMENT

AN organic jaggery (Al Harifayuh)1 manufacturing industry available for partnership or investment in Hubli India. 0091 9742421122.

Alqimah Specid Projects Company registered at the Commercial Registry Secretariat in the Ministry of Trade and Industry under No 1157759 announces that it is transferring its legal form from a joint liability company to a one-person company in accordance with Article No (30 of the Commercial Companies Law 18/2019 and its amendments and on all. Anyone who objects to this must submit the reasons for his objection to the Commercial Registry Secretariat at the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion within a period of one month from the date of the publication of this announcement.

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Al Tasnim an excellent grade multi-discipline contracting company in Oman wishes to engage sub-contractors (excluding materials) in all trades including MEP works in major building and civil engineering projects in Muscat and outstations including Nizwa, Salalah, Suwaiq, Khasab, Sohar and Duqm. Interested companies and individuals are hereby invited to submit the information and preferred locations for undertaking sub-contract works to uditha.galapatha@altasnim.com within 07 days of this notice. Al Tasnim will provide all details of subcontract works and commence the selection of sub-contractors after receipt of the information.

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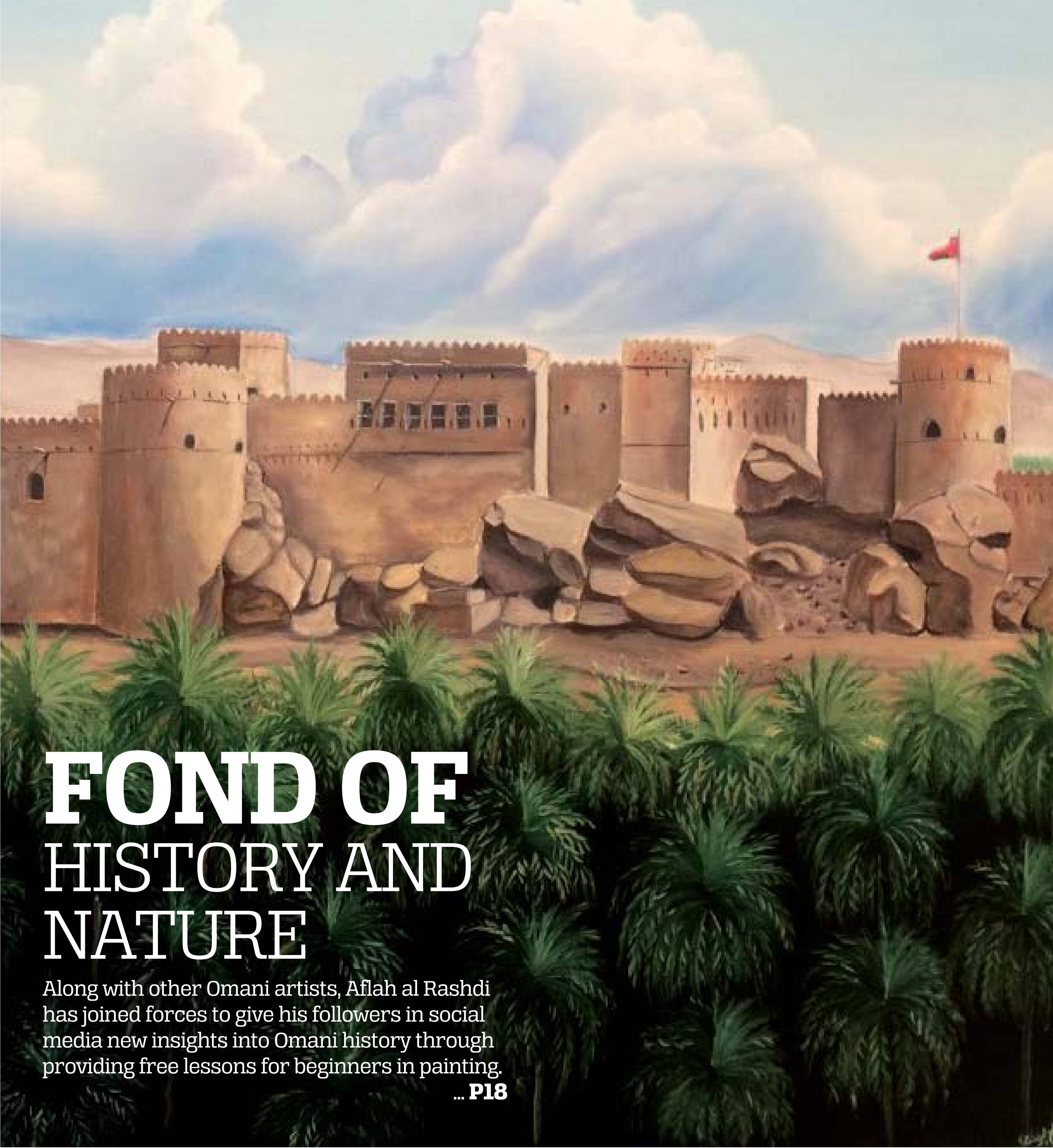
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features



FOND OF HISTORY AND NATURE

Along with other Omani artists, Aflah al Rashdi has joined forces to give his followers in social media new insights into Omani history through providing free lessons for beginners in painting. ... **P18**

INSIDE STORIES

SHARING KNOWLEDGE



A LITERAL ACT OF SHARING KNOWLEDGE

It is said, knowledge, unless transferred from person to person, and from generation to generation, is a waste of time in terms of acquiring it and in storing the same... **Story on Page P19**

PANDEMIC AWARENESS



ELEPHANT SANTAS SPREAD VIRUS AWARENESS AMONG THAI CHILDREN

Christmas and Thailand's love of elephants combined Wednesday when four of the giant creatures dressed as Santa turned up at a school just outside Bangkok, complete with huge coronavirus masks... **Story on Page 19**

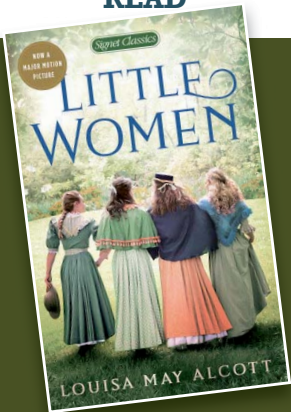
MARINE LIFE



IVORY COAST OPENS FIRST PROTECTED MARINE AREA

Ivory Coast initiated its first protected marine area on Monday to protect sharks and turtles from overfishing near the West African country's coastline... **Story on Page 20**

READ



LITTLE WOMEN

BY LOUISA MAY ALCOTT

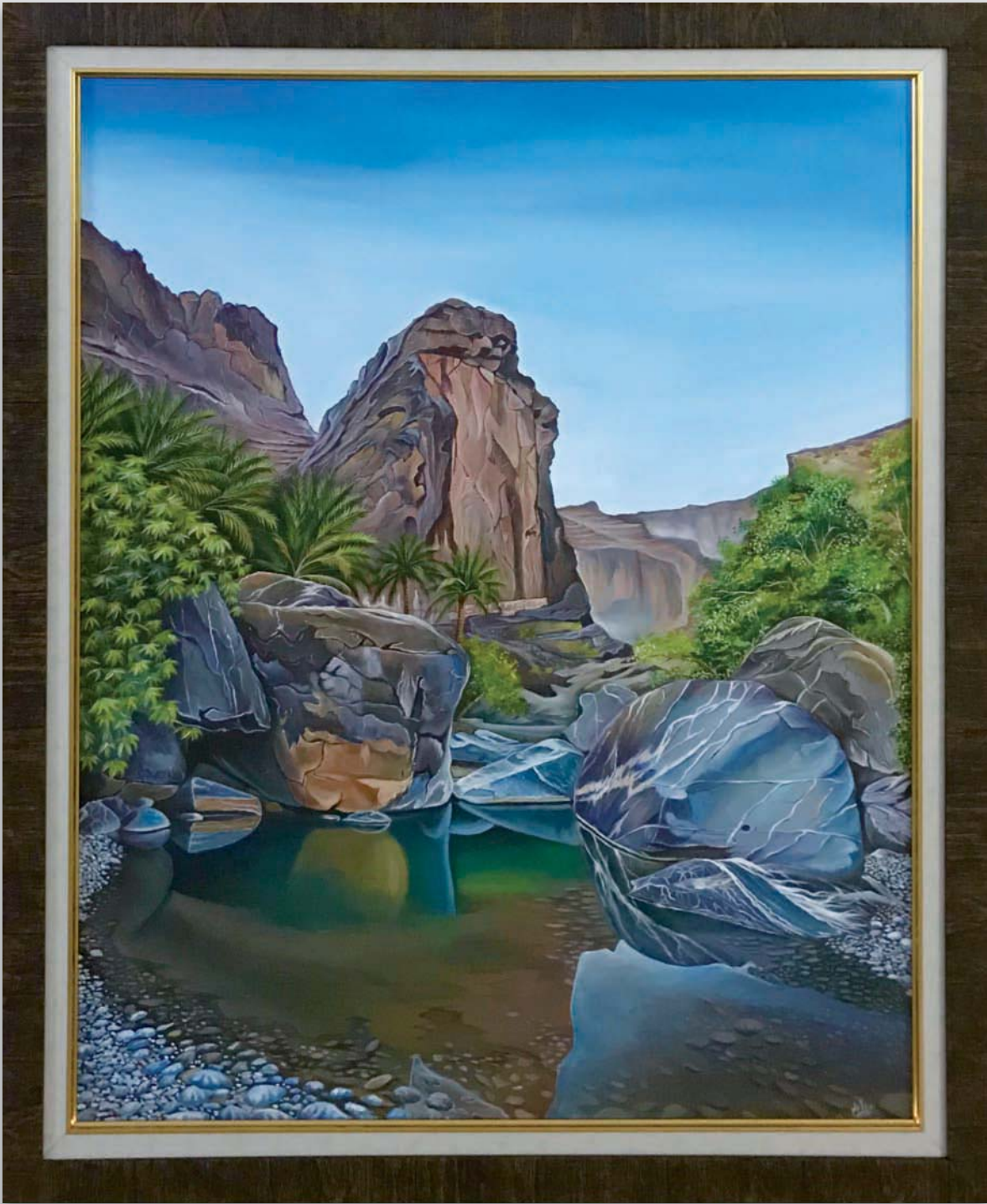
This is a tale of four sisters with their own very different and very prominent personalities. The novel draws the reader deep into their lives as we get to know each of their flaws, joys, struggles, and fears.

GASTRONOMY



ZIMBABWEAN BEETLE MAKES A SEASONAL SNACKA

Earnmore Chikavaza takes a mouthful of fried beetles and munches happily, downing the crunchy snack with a mouthful of water. He runs out of superlatives to sum up the benefits of a food that is healthy, tasty, organic and — a special advantage in a poor country — absolutely free.



FOND OF HISTORY AND NATURE

MAI AL ABRI

Along with other Omani artists, Aflah al Rashdi has joined forces to give his followers in social media new insights into Omani history through providing free lessons for beginners in painting.

Starting your hobby early in

age, Aflah thinks that other people who also have talents and wish to enhance should be well guided. As part of his social responsibility, he gives free lessons to beginners.

"Giving these lessons opened up new horizons for me. Not only being popular among beginners and artists, it also gave me a chance to have another look on my paintings. I could criticise my works by

myself and make the needed adjustments. Plus, helping others in each possible way promotes solidarity among the society and give a good feeling to the person".

"Of course, one would follow other stars in the field when focusing on something, but as you grow up and develop your skills, you will gradually wish to add your own touch. You reach a point where you feel that you

don't imitate others anymore. It is time to be yourself", Aflah expressed.

Aflah fell in love with nature and history. "These two elements make a wonderful combination. Imagine a fort and a mountain behind, the divine power met with the human efforts to complement the scene.", al Rashdi comments.

"When the lenses of the photographer take a photo, the eyes

of the painter can interpret this photo in a modified way. The painter can add or delete in each work, trusting his view and intuition that the result would be marvellous", Aflah believes.

In his imaginary painting, the colours shone and sparkled; the sky was turquoise; the fresh walls of the fort gave off a golden glow; and it defiantly works. The outcome of each painting is just what he imagined.



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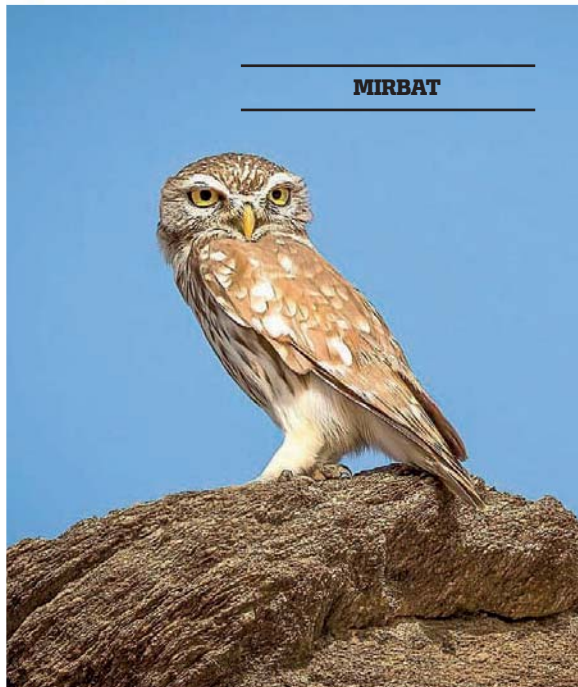
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SHARING KNOWLEDGE

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A literal act of sharing knowledge

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

It is said, knowledge, unless transferred from person to person, and from generation to generation, is a waste of time in terms of acquiring it and in storing the same.

A British national who made Muscat her home for decades has shown a way how to share knowledge and keep the present generation and many more to come reap benefits out of it.

She donated nearly 5,000 English language books published by Oxford and Cambridge University Press, Macmillan and Cengage/National Geographic Learning to the Ministry of Education so that local children can make use of them.

Dr Abdullah bin Khamis al Busaidy, the newly appointed Under-Secretary at the Ministry of Education received the books from her in his



office.

Maggie Jeans OBE, Director of Al Manahil International LLC who wanted to express her love and regards to the Sultanate knew no better way to display her gratitude to the country that has played a major role in her life than donating a reservoir of

knowledge to the country.

As to the sorting and distribution of these books under various genres, Dr Abdullah said, "The books will be divided up into book boxes which will be a valuable resource for teaching staff within the governorates."

Yacqoob al Jamoodi,

Director-General of the Directorate General for Educational Supervision. Mathematics, Science and Geography books

"We have worked in partnership with the Ministry of Education for many years and are delighted to be in a position to help with this project,"

PANDEMIC AWARENESS

Elephant Santas spread virus awareness among Thai children



Christmas and Thailand's love of elephants combined on Wednesday when four of the giant creatures dressed as Santa turned up at a school just outside Bangkok, complete with huge coronavirus masks.

Excited children from Jirasat Wittaya School in Ayutthaya, an hour's drive from the capital, sang Christmas carols and lined up to have their photos taken with the animals in the annual tradition.

The elephants, Sri Mongkon, 14, Sri Raya, 6, Peter, 15, and King Kaew, 18, used their trunks to carry baskets of face masks to the youngsters and motorists outside the school.

English and science teacher Brett Baxter said the event brought a special kind of Christmas spirit coupled with a flavour of Thailand.

"It's fantastic for the children. It mixes two cultures together. It's not just about Santa Claus... the culture of Thailand is based around elephants," he said.

Ayutthaya, the former capital of Siam, the country now known as Thailand, is considered the birthplace of the kingdom's Catholic community.

European Catholic missionaries built a

church on the banks of the Chao Phraya River three centuries ago.

Ittipan Paolamai, the manager of Ayutthaya's elephant palace, where the animals are cared for, said the school visit had been held for 17 years.

"This year due to the pandemic as well as the recent outbreak, we used this opportunity to raise public awareness about the spread of COVID-19," he said.

Thailand, a country of 70 million people, has registered more than 5,700 coronavirus infections and in the past week there has been a spike of more than 1,000 cases linked to an outbreak at a Thai seafood market.

But not everyone feels the Christmas school visit is a healthy tradition.

Jan Schmidt-Burbach, a wildlife veterinarian and adviser for World Animal Protection, said bringing elephants to a school "for these kinds of public stunts is quite questionable and not acceptable".

"Children will perceive elephants as entertainers and clowns rather than the wild animals they biologically are," he said.

The experience can be stressful for the animals, he added, and there was always the potential for accidents.

— AFP

IVORY COAST OPENS FIRST PROTECTED MARINE AREA



Ivory Coast initiated its first protected marine area on Monday to protect sharks and turtles from overfishing near the West African country's coastline. The marine conservation area, spanning more than 1,000 square miles (2590 square km) off the town of Grand-Bereby, is part of an effort to bring Ivory Coast's marine conservation efforts in line with UN targets, the government said. Larger than the commercial capital of Abidjan, the area is home to sea-bed

creatures, coral reefs and tropical fish, and is important nesting and foraging ground for turtles, including the vulnerable leatherback. The area will also "undoubtedly boost local tourism, creating jobs for the benefit of the community," the environment ministry said in statement last week. It is the first of five marine protected areas that Ivory Coast has pledged to create in its Atlantic waters. The United Nations is pushing governments to collectively set aside 30



per cent of the planet's land and sea areas for conservation when they meet next year in China to negotiate a new global wildlife pact. Scientists

have said the world may need more than 30 per cent to survive, if not thrive. "Levels of marine protection in West Africa are generally low, so the

Ivorian government's creation of a Marine Protected Area is a big statement that will hopefully act as a regional exemplar," Kristian Metcalfe, marine conservation scientist at Exeter University, said in a statement on Sunday. Researchers from the university helped Ivory Coast prepare the project by collecting data on the area's marine animals, plants and the health of its waters. The work included surveying previously undocumented reefs and tagging turtles with GPS monitors. The

area includes a fully protected zone closed to all activities, and an eco-development zone that will support sustainable fishing practices and ecotourism activities, according to the university. West Africa is one of the regions worst-affected by illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing that is driving several species towards extinction and jeopardising local livelihoods, according to a 2016 study by Overseas Development Institute researchers.

— Reuters