

His Majesty greets Estonian President

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Kersti Kaljulaid of the Republic of Estonia, on her country's National Day. In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his sincere sentiments and best wishes to President Kaljulaid and her country's friendly people further progress and prosperity. — ONA



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AL SALAM CROWNED FIRST DIVISION LEAGUE WINNERS



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PRODUCTION BEGINS FROM THIRD WELL IN BLOCK 50'S YUMNA FIELD



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SENEGAL'S SAVANNAH JOCKEY DREAMS OF INTERNATIONAL GLORY



Honourable Lady congratulates teachers on Teacher's Day

MUSCAT: The Sultanate will today mark the Teacher's Day which falls on February 24 every year. This year's celebration comes at a time when teachers are making double efforts as the education sector faces big challenges including distance learning due to Covid-19.

On this occasion, the Honourable Lady, Spouse of His Majesty the Sultan, extended greetings to teachers. In her greetings she said: "The gratitude to education and those working in the sector is a lofty objective and the way to the progress of the nations.

"On this day, we feel delighted as we enjoy bounties in our country Oman, to extend our sincere greetings to the people of education and knowledge, and to all those who have exerted efforts for the sake of education. To them we say: You have eliminated ignorance, illuminated the road and elevated generations to higher standing. For all that, we wish you all happy Teacher's Day."



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■ BUILDERS OF FUTURE GENERATIONS



Today the Sultanate celebrates Omani Teacher's Day, which falls on February 24 every year. On this day the efforts of teachers, whose dedication in fulfilling their lofty mission in preparing students for a better future, are appreciated. The challenges facing the world after the spread of the Covid-19 has had a major impact in various areas of life including health, economy, society and other areas, and cast a shadow on the education sector. **DETAILS ON P2**

Sultanate ranks second in Arab world on food security

MUSCAT: The Sultanate was ranked second among Arab countries in the Global Food Security Index (GFSI 2020). The index is developed by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), Britain.

Oman was placed 34th globally as it received 70.2 points.

Finland topped the index, followed by Ireland, the Netherlands, Austria and the Czech Republic.

The index highlights the importance of addressing core causes of food shortage through effective policies and establishing a stronger, resilient and sustainable global food security system.

MAJOR IMPACT

In times of crisis, the effects of systemic gaps are felt more deeply. Amid the spread of Covid-19, economic, social

and environmental inequalities have had a major impact on how countries have been able to meet the food, health and economic needs of their populations. The pandemic has exposed the risk that these factors pose to food systems and highlighted the importance of examining not just the current levels of food insecurity, but also the underlying drivers and causes. — ONA

New norms issued for institutional quarantine

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 23

All incoming passengers aged 18 and less, if travelling alone, will be exempted from institutional quarantine, said the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) on Tuesday.

"Based on the decisions made by the Supreme Committee on Covid-19, and with reference to the circulars issued on February 11 and 15, the CAA said some passengers are exempted from presenting pre-confirmed hotel reservations before they are checked in at the airport of departure."

Following categories come under exemption: Diplomats working at foreign diplomatic missions accredited to the Sultanate, their families, and diplomats visiting the Sultanate. Arriving passengers aged 18 and less if travelling alone, and aged 60 and above.

SICK PASSENGERS

Aircrew members are subject to precautionary measures issued by the Ministry of Health.

Sick passengers whose health conditions require special attention as per the attached health form. The exception includes two companions – a female under 18 years old patients and only one companion with male patients above 18.

Holders of permits for private institutional isolation centres which are pre-approved by the Relief and Shelter Sector.

For sea crew moored in the

This day a year ago, first cases were reported

VINOD NAIR
[@vinot_nair](#)

The first two Covid-19 cases were reported in the country a year ago on February 24. The Ministry of Health announced on that day that two women have been diagnosed with the novel coronavirus after arriving from Iran. The ministry said in a statement that they were the country's first-ever recorded cases of the coronavirus, officially known as Covid-19.

Meanwhile, on Tuesday, the ministry has reported 297 new cases of Covid-19, bringing the total number of cases registered in the Sultanate to 139,989.

The ministry also reported two Covid-related deaths, taking the total death toll to 1,557. **SEE ALSO P3**

territorial waters of the Sultanate, airlines are obliged to ensure that there is a hotel reservation covering the duration of their stay in Oman based on the letter of the shipping agent.

"All other requirements as stipulated in previous circulars remain valid," the CAA added.

As per the earlier schedule, only arriving passengers under the age of 16 and aged above 60 and sick passengers who obtain an exemption in writing from the health authorities concerned due to their medical circumstances.

SQU Fanar start-up wins first place in Arab contest

MUSCAT: Fanar start-up of Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) secured top spot in the Arab environment contest "Innovate for Good", organised by Spread Passion, a Kuwait-based non-profit enterprise.

The Omani student start-up made it through its participation in a project code-named "Let's Make Environment Smile".

Nibras bin Hamdan al Shukaili, Executive Manager of Fanar, said

that the start-up joined a large cross-section of teams from Arab countries in promoting the "Let's Make Environment Smile" project.

After successfully contesting early stages of the competition, Fanar team entered the final stage, after which the knockouts focused on 15 teams, then 10, and later Fanar was short-listed among three teams for the final. It was proclaimed winner after the



sorting of votes from within the Sultanate and abroad. It bagged 745 votes.

Nibras said that Fanar team considered options to rid the environment from harmful waste. It developed the idea of recycling used cooking oils and engine oils, which are usually poured in wastewater pipes and eventually end up polluting sea water or other spaces of the environment.

"We decided to utilise these oils,

as well as some toxic or neglected plants in Omani environment, to produce biofuel as a by-product of a burning process that emits low-carbon gases beneficial to the environment. The biofuel sustains and protects environment resources and is added to other economic products such as soap, candle wax and others," said Nibras, adding that the team is currently working towards obtaining patent rights. — ONA

MoCIIP to allow new types of exhibitions

VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) said it is working on new amendments to the regulations for organising and managing exhibitions to keep pace with the current economic conditions in the Sultanate.

The ministry seeks to make amendments to help more companies and encourage them to expand and diversify when holding exhibitions and conferences in the Sultanate, and even to attract regional and international events.

The new amendments to the regulations will contribute to more organisation of the exhibitions and conferences sector, which is one of the most important economic, social and cultural tools that contribute to encouraging and attracting investments in the various economic sectors.

The new amendments will include adding new types of exhibitions that will keep pace with the current economic and health conditions, which are virtual



exhibitions that are organised through electronic platforms.

About marketing exhibitions (commercial), the organising company will be allowed to directly sell to consumers on the last day of the exhibition only.

Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI)'s committee on exhibitions and conferences recently demanded exemptions

from government fees, such as rents and tax, in addition to discounts of nearly 75 per cent from Oman Convention and Exhibition Center when activities resume.

The Exhibitions and Conferences Committee of OCCI held its first meeting for 2021 headed by Faisal al Shanfari, Vice-Chairman of the committee, and

in the presence of Ridha bin Juma al Saleh, Chairman, OCCI.

The meeting discussed the issue of financial compensation and the members of the committee urged Oman Development Bank to finance companies with reasonable guarantees to mitigate the effects that the exhibition and conference companies faced due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The new amendments will include adding new types of exhibitions that will keep pace with the current economic and health conditions, which are virtual exhibitions that are organised through electronic platforms

The committee suggested that the exhibitions sector should be included in ODB Bank and Raffd Fund for loans to small and medium enterprises to help these companies to obtain financial compensation, in addition to financing loans guaranteed by the commercial registry to pay off the debts accumulated on them and to rearrange their conditions to continue.

According to GlobalData, Meetings, Incentives, Conferencing, and Exhibitions (MICE) tourism was one of the first types of tourism to be impacted by

the global spread of Covid-19 and it could be one of the last to fully return as international business arrivals are still affected.

MICE events are now taking place online, without the need for companies operating in the tourism sector. This is a worrying trend for all industries involved in travel and tourism — the length of restrictions and guidelines last around MICE tourism, while other national economies start to pick up, the more companies, attendees, and event organisers may start to become accustomed to hosting and attending MICE events online, whilst appreciating the unseen benefits they bring, the report said.

Companies in all sectors will be looking for ways to reduce costs in the coming years as they reel from the economic impact created by Covid-19.

Business travel is a costly expense for all companies, and with the rise of video-conferencing software such as Zoom and Google Meet, many will realise that this type of ongoing expense is unnecessary.

RNO commander receives top US naval official

MUSCAT: Rear Admiral Saif bin Nasser al Rahbi, Commander of the Royal Navy of Oman (RNO) received at Maritime Security Center (MSC) on Tuesday Vice Admiral Samuel Paparo, Commander of the US Naval Forces Central Command and his accompanying delegation, currently visiting the Sultanate.

The two sides discussed views on matters related to the naval fields between the two friendly countries.

The meeting was

attended by RNO senior officers and the US Ambassador to the Sultanate.

The US guest, accompanied by the SAF Chief of Staff, toured the MSC's facilities. He was briefed on the tasks and roles of the centre in managing and leading operations of maritime security in terms of maritime hazards, mainly search and rescue operations and protecting the marine environment from various risks.

— ONA



Bread of kindness!

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

As a mark of help to needy people, a good Samaritan came out with a unique idea of keeping some loaves of bread and other food items for free inside a bakery shop in Al Amerat.

The gentleman who started the practice wants to remain anonymous even though his idea has gained momentum and in many bakeries in Al Amerat people are noticing one small tray where the shoppers are keeping some bread packets after their own shopping.

It started from one bakery in Al Amerat where he kept the tray and many have adopted this noble idea. Now many bakeries have the same model of 'free bread' kept for those who need them. Driven by the idea of serving the people in need, the gentleman started this practice a few months ago. He kept a three-tier vegetable tray inside Zain bakery in Al Amerat and kept some Arabic bread and other

staples.

Now it has almost become a practice for most of the customers to keep a few baisas for this basket, while some buy bread in excess and keep it in the tray.

"We received this tray from a citizen who told us to keep extra bread and other foods on this so that if anyone needs them can take them home. He never revealed his name nor we did inquire about him," Maanu who runs the bakery said. His act of charity spread immediately. Today many bakeries in Al Amerat and elsewhere have their own stock of extra bread and other food items for this tray. "It has been a regular practice that I buy extra and keep some in the basket," Fadhil al Ghannabi, a young Omani said. In many countries, there is a practice of 'suspended lunch' or 'suspended coffee' where people pay for an additional lunch or coffee and make the seller the custodian of the same until the needy visits them and request for the same.

Minister appreciates teachers' efforts during pandemic

Today the Sultanate celebrates the Omani Teacher's Day, which falls on 24th of February of each year. On this occasion, Dr Madeeha bint Ahmed bin Nasser al Shaibaniyah, Minister of Education, extended her greetings to all teachers in Oman, appreciating their efforts and dedication in preparing students for a better future.

Dr Al Shaibaniyah said "Education in the Sultanate enjoys a great interest and diligent follow-up from His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik. The Higher Committee in charge of dealing with the spread of Covid-19, made the decision of applying the blended learning curriculum with a focus on distance education. Accordingly, the Ministry of Education has laid the foundations and controls needed to implement blended education, activate the E-learning as a central component of the educational process, and take precautionary measures to ensure the safety of teachers, students and the school environment.

She also indicated that the current school year is an exceptional year and said, "The current school year is an exceptional year in every sense of the word. The educational



process has not faced a difficult challenge as the one currently facing, but what you have made sacrifices in order to educate your students since the beginning of the pandemic. We are very proud of

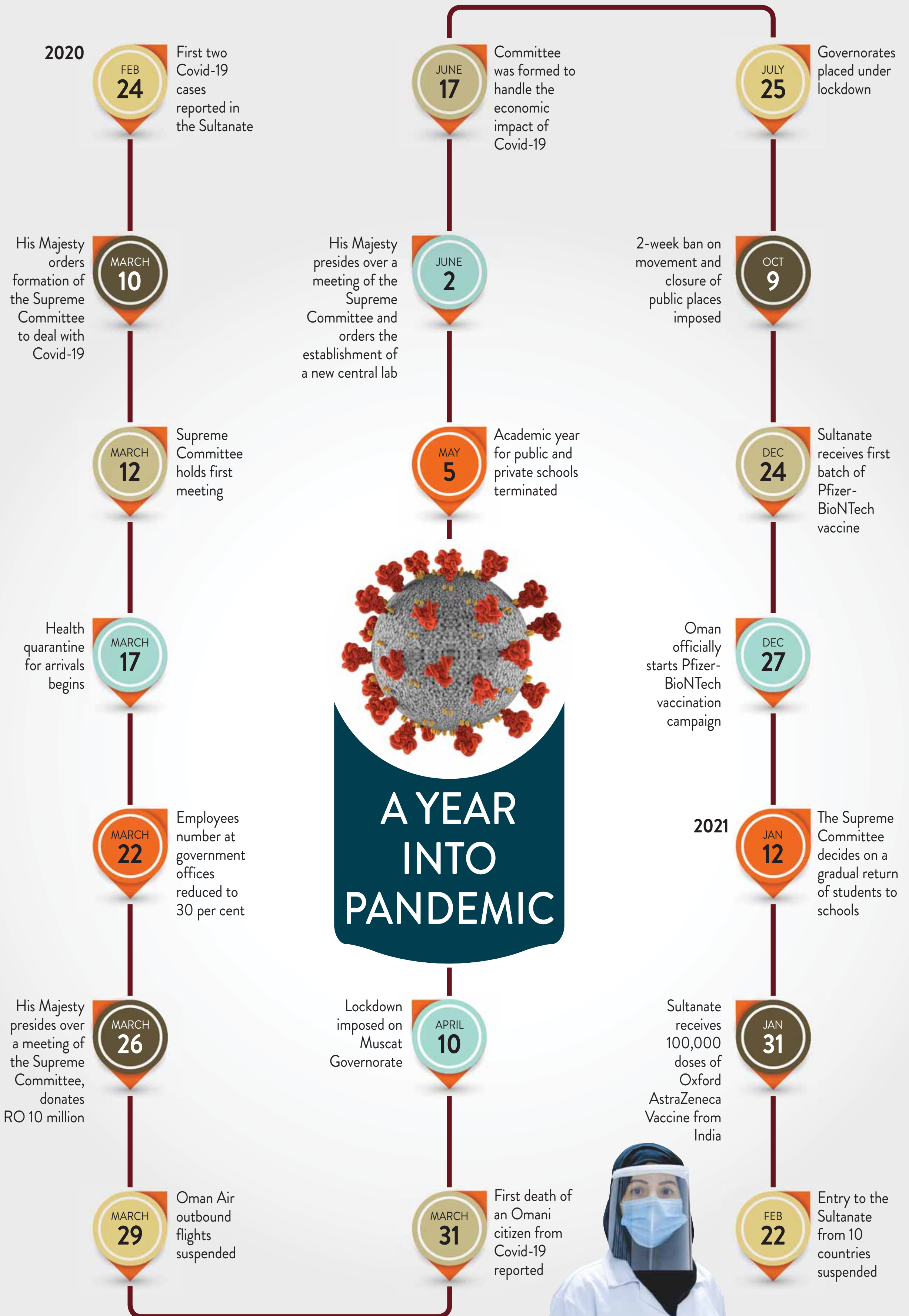
your remarkable role in educating students about the importance of adhering to health procedures, your positive interaction with electronic educational platforms, and your great effort in producing

educational content."

In the current academic year 2020/2021, the total number of teachers in public schools reached 56,827 of whom 48,176 were Omani. Female teachers formed the highest percentage of 72.96 per cent while the male teachers formed 27.03 per cent of the total number. The statistics indicated that the largest number of Omani teachers are concentrated in North al Batinah Governorate, with 10,103 teachers.

The Ministry of Education was keen to enhance the knowledge of the Omani teachers and provide them with the necessary skills to face the challenges of Covid-19, which requires providing them with the knowledge and methods necessary to develop their level of performance in the field of distance education.

The ministry is also keen on qualifying teachers by providing opportunities for candidacy to obtain academic qualifications in postgraduate programmes for masters or doctoral degrees in accordance with the approved nomination controls set by the ministry in cooperation with universities and colleges inside and outside the Sultanate.



KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

Lack of safety measures is a threat to the scrapyards businesses and livelihood of hundreds of workers.

“I believe the damages could have been mitigated had there been a fire control post nearby and all scrap dealers wouldn't mind pooling in money to maintain the security post”, says Mazhar Hussain, the owner of one of the largest garages with 300 scrap vehicles. He had 20 vehicles for repair, which went up in flames.

“I lost all my savings in the few hours of the fire on Thursday. This is an irrevocable loss on top of the pandemic blow that made many of us hapless. But I don't lose hope on Almighty”, he said in a bid to hold his tears.

Thousands of cars were charred beyond recognition in the massive fire last week. Many among them were kept for repair, but the fire left just charred frames. The losses of the scrap owners are yet to be ascertained.

The reluctance of insurance companies to insure the premises of scrapyard is another challenge for the businesses.

“The issue of getting reinsurance is dissuading these insurance firms from extending coverage to these scrap yards and a high-level intervention is needed in this issue”, Hussain said.

An insurance expert said many insurance companies are unwilling to extend insurance protection for manifold reasons.

Hussain admitted that he has not seen a fire or any major incident in his life here. “In my thirty-plus years in Wadi Kabir, I have not seen such major damage, the loss due to which is beyond imagination. All my investment is here, lying in a pile of ashes, ribbed and mangled pieces of metals and these skeleton pieces of vehicles.”

Lack of safety measures add fuel to fire



5 fire incidents in a week, PACDA urges caution

Overall precautions need to be exercised in industrial areas as well as in domestic houses to avoid fire incidents, the Public Authority for Civil Defence and Ambulance (PACDA) urged both citizens and residents.

Five fire incidents happened in less than a week. The fire in Wadi Kabir on Thursday burnt thousands of cars that caused huge losses to the affected people.

Another fire broke out in Al Khuwair, apparently from an electrified hoarding, as yet another reported from a farm in Barka. A restaurant in Al Khoudh caught fire but the timely intervention of the staff mitigated the loss. The last one, a 4-WD vehicle was burnt completely in Athaiba near a hypermarket on Monday morning.

“Follow the safety instructions carefully and make safety your top priority. One shouldn't be careless in handling inflammable materials”, a source at the PACDA said.

JOINT COOPERATION

Environment Authority views MoH data & statistics system

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 23

The Ministry of Health (MoH), represented by the Directorate General of Planning and Studies (DGPS) received on Tuesday a team from the Environment Authority to understand the statistical system of the ministry.

The visit is part of the joint cooperation between government sectors to exchange national experiences on the information system, as well as sharing the data and statistical experiences.

The visiting team met Dr Omar bin Abdulaziz al Farsi, MoH Director of Information and Statistics, through which the statistical system of the ministry, which is locally and regionally advanced was highlighted during the meeting.

The DGPS ensures obtaining high-quality national health data and working with various related authorities in the Sultanate to enhance the quality of the health statistics.

The meeting reviewed the role of information technology in improving the health data collection tools and the achievements that have been made.

The staff of the Information and Statistics Department provided a visual presentation on the mechanism of data flow from the health institutions along with Al-Shifa Pulse system, which will be the main source of data in the future.

A number of common issues have been discussed between the two sides such as the 3,9,3 targets of the Sustainable Development Goals which provide for reducing the mortality rate caused by air pollution, unsafe water and unsafe sewage services. Achieving these joint targets is a common matter between the two sides.

It is worth mentioning that the ministry has adopted a national health data and statistics strategy in the Health Vision (Health 2050) to ensure the response of health data in the Sultanate for the national, regional and global needs in order to obtain reliable health data in time.

The role of information technology in improving the health data collection tools and the achievements reviewed



Concern over squirrels in Omani farms

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In the past few weeks, a new environmental problem has cropped up in Oman. Palm squirrels have been spotted in some farms, causing damages to environment and agriculture.

Farmers in different wilayats, especially in the South and North Al Batinah governorates, noticed squirrels in their farms that caused damage to fruits and crops.

They also observed that the tendency of these squirrels was to attack bird nests to eat their eggs. Many theories are there behind the sudden spread of squirrels in the Sultanate.

Some believe that they came from neighbouring countries, while others believe they escaped from the cages of animal fanciers. Others say that they settled for ten years ago in the custody of a pet dealer, then escaped and started spreading.

Some people find their source is the ships docking in the Sultanate's ports. They find farms and abandoned homes suitable environment for reproduction.



Environmentalists are studying other damages caused by these squirrels, as it has been proven that they eat fruits, nuts, smaller rodents, insects, worms, eggs and

young birds. They also eat larvae and seeds, causing damage to crops and also eat mice and small reptiles.

Palm squirrels are characterised by their agility, small size and movement speed. Their activity increases mainly during daylight hours. They live in trees and deserted places. They also collect and store food.

The monthly newsletter 'Lynx', by the National Field Research Center for Environmental Conservation, said in its latest edition issued on Monday that there are concerns that

these squirrels will become an environmental pest urging all competent authorities to deal with this problem while is still beginning in the Sultanate before it worsens and becomes very difficult to deal with.

A recent scientific study published by Sultan Qaboos University talked about this issue saying that squirrels found in Oman are from Funambulus species, 7 of which are North Indian palm squirrel with five lines known as 'Funambulus pennantii' while the other four types are still unconfirmed.

The study says, “It is known that the five-striped and the three-striped palm squirrels are found in the United Arab Emirates. Therefore, these species appeared in the Sultanate.”

Palm squirrels are slightly smaller than the regular ones with a length of 6 to 7.8 inches. Its body is slightly longer than its thick tail and its weight rarely exceeds 120 grams. Palm squirrels are surprisingly fast as they can travel about 16 km per hour. It also has a strong memory. It lives from 2 to 4 years, feeds on fruits of palm trees.

Initiative to distribute free eco-friendly bags

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@vinot_nair

Salim bin Ali bin Salim al Hakmani, Chairman of Consumer Protection Authority (CPA), held a meeting with owners of commercial centres in the Governorate of Muscat on Tuesday to review the situation after the decision to ban the use of single-use plastic bags.

Al Hakmani said the establishments should implement initiatives that serve consumers and encourage them to use environmentally friendly bags, which have been welcomed by suppliers and some commercial centres.

Some retail outlets are offering eco-friendly bags for free for every purchase over RO 3 or more based on an initiative for giving environmentally friendly bags if the minimum purchase value was RO 5.

Other initiatives include distributing eco-friendly bags free of charge regardless of the value of the purchase. One of the



centres said that a total of one million eco-friendly reusable bags will be distributed in the coming days, while another mall will distribute 50,000 during the year 2021.

More initiatives will be announced in the coming days.

Al Hakmani stressed that providing environmentally friendly bags in stores and commercial centres for free requires the consumer to develop a culture of using the same bags in every shopping until there is a need to replace the bag, which can be done free of charge.



Sultanate participates in Arab Women's Conference

MUSCAT: The Sultanate, represented by the Ministry of Social Development, on Tuesday took part in the 8th conference of the Arab Women Organization themed "Arab Woman and Cultural Challenges". The opening ceremony of the conference was held under the auspices of President Michel Aoun of the Lebanese Republic.

The Sultanate was represented in the conference by Laila bint

Ahmed bin Awadh al Najar, Minister of Social Development.

Held via video-conferencing in Lebanon, the three-day conference addresses a range of topics pertaining to status of Arab women between heritage and modernity: between confrontation and reconciliation, Arab women in the midst of literary and artistic production, the mechanisms of socialisation and the economic role of women

in sustainable development and the elimination of poverty and marginalisation.

The conference also discusses the Arab women between citizenship, government policies and civil struggles, and the dissemination of a gender culture: diverse and intersecting Arab tracks, as well as the contribution of women to strengthening and steadfastness of society and the land. — ONA



MAFWR, FAO hold virtual meeting



MUSCAT: The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR) on Tuesday held a meeting via video-conferencing with Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). The meeting reviewed performance of agriculture and fisheries sectors, volume

of agriculture and fisheries production in the Sultanate.

The Omani side was headed by Dr Saud bin Hamoud al Habsi, Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, while Qu Dongyu, FAO Director General, chaired from the organisation side.

The minister thanked FAO for its constant cooperation and support to the Sultanate, which culminated in implementing several projects of agriculture, fisheries and water resources. He expressed the Sultanate's desire to enhance its strategic partnership with FAO. — ONA

Oman takes part in Arab space cooperation group meeting

MUSCAT: The Sultanate, represented by the National Space Programme Team (NSPT) at Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology took part at the 6th meeting of the Arab Space Cooperation Group.

The Sultanate was represented at the virtual meeting by Dr Saud bin Humaid al Shueili, Head of NSPT.

The meeting discussed many topics of concern to the joint Arab action, including the status of the Arab countries that have not signed the charter of joining the group. The meeting also reviewed the strategic trends and the existing projects of each



country in this sector, in addition to aspects of cooperation among member states to promote the Arab space sector. The Arab Space Cooperation Group

was formed as an initiative by the United Arab Emirates in 2019 as the Sultanate officially joined the group by signing the charter in 2020. — ONA

Centre for disabled children opens in Dima W'attayeen

MUSCAT: Al Wafa Rehabilitation Center for Disabled Children was opened in the Wilayat of Dima W'attayeen under the auspices of Shaikh Ali bin Ahmed al Shamsi, Governor of North Al Sharqiyah, on Tuesday.

Hamad bin Hamood al Mishiqri, Director of Social Development in North Al Sharqiyah, said the establishment of the centre was the outcome of cooperation between the government



represented by the Ministry of Social Development which contributed RO 14,000 and a number of private companies which together pitched in RO 100,000 in addition to RO 17,000 contributed by the wilayat's residents.

He added that the project represents a real partnership between the public sector, the private sector and the community sector that aimed at serving children with disabilities.

Most popular social media in Oman

VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

WhatsApp is the widely used social media platform in the Sultanate by individuals aged 18 years and above, said a report from the Ministry of Transport, Communications, and Information Technology (MTCIT).

As per the list, 92 per cent of the respondents in Muscat used WhatsApp, 81 per cent for YouTube, 56 per cent for Facebook, 47 per cent for IMO, 44 per cent for Instagram, and 25 per cent for Twitter.

The number of WhatsApp users increased by three per cent in 2020 from 2019, followed by YouTube (11 per cent), Facebook (seven per cent), Instagram (five per cent), Twitter (two per cent), Snapchat (two per cent), LinkedIn (three per cent) and Pinterest two per cent.

While the use of IMO, chat forums, and blogs decreased by five per cent, three per cent, and three per cent, respectively.

A total of 417,021 attacks on the Sultanate's cyberspace were reported and handled in 2020, compared to 483,749 attacks in 2019, the report said.

The report said that 1,461 actual incidents related to cyberattacks were reported in 2020.

Note

Rural Areas Electricity Company (S.O.A.C)
announces to modify the last date of collecting tender document of tender

No. (Tanweer - 10/2021)

Maintenance and Repair Work of Engines Hall Roof Shed and Main Doors in Al Duqm Power and Desalination Plants at Al Duqm in Al-Wusta Governorate

**To be 01/03/2021,
and to extend the closing date till 10/03/2021**

- Interested and Specialized Companies which registered with Tender Board, Tanweer and Distribution Code Review Panel (DCRP) may obtain the Tender documents from Procurement & Contracts Department, against non-refundable amount of RO (55/-). The fees for the tenders shall be deposited on Tanweer account 0423010783090041 – Bank Muscat and for more information please contact via email address i.e. tender.purchase@tanweer.nama.om, or call us on phone number : 24250824.
- The Completed Tender should be deposited in the Tender Box at the Rural Areas Electricity Company (S.A.O.C) Main Office at Wilayat Al Seeb, before 12:00 P.M on the last date of submission.

For more information, please contact: 80077787



Tanweer
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MUSCAT MUNICIPALITY Advertisement No. 7/2021						
Muscat Municipality invites interested companies to the following biddings:						
Serial	Bidding No.	Bidding Description	Document Fee	Deadline for Inquiries submission	Deadline for obtaining Bidding Docs.	Deadline for Submission
1	BB/01/2021	Car Cleaning Service at the Parking of Muscat Municipality Head Office	25/-OMR	17/03/2021	24/03/2021	28/03/2021
2	BB/02/2021	Car Cleaning Service for the Parking at Al-Khwair - Bowsher	25/-OMR	17/03/2021	24/03/2021	28/03/2021
3	BB/03/2021	Rental and Operating of Cold Stores Nos. (C: B9), (B:D1) & (D:16) at the Central Market of Fruit & Vegetable	25/-OMR	17/03/2021	24/03/2021	28/03/2021
4	BB/04/2021	Rental of Bicycles and Strollers on the walkway located in Sur Al-Hadid at Al-Seeb	25/-OMR	17/03/2021	24/03/2021	28/03/2021
5	BB/05/2021	Rental and Operating of Fixed Containers (Coffee Shops) at Shatti Al Qurum	25/-OMR	17/03/2021	24/03/2021	28/03/2021
6	BB/06/2021	Rental a site for selling snacks at Al-Mahj Walkway in Al-Amerat	25/-OMR	17/03/2021	24/03/2021	28/03/2021
7	BB/07/2021	Investing & Operating The Entertainment Children's Games Center at Al-Seeb Public Park	25/-OMR	17/03/2021	24/03/2021	28/03/2021
8	AB/08/2021	Investing Plot Number (271) at Muttrah	500/-OMR	17/03/2021	24/03/2021	28/03/2021
9	RE-AB/09/2020	(Re-Bidding) Promoting & Selling of the book "Cities for people"	30/-OMR	17/03/2021	24/03/2021	28/03/2021

Registered companies with Muscat Municipality are invited to participate in the above biddings as the following:

- Pay the specified document fee for the requested bid via bank deposit to MM's Bank account as follows :
Bank Muscat | 0423010702710024
- A copy of the transaction's receipt must be sent to the following e-mail (MM.PC@mm.gov.om), provided with the company data (name and bid number, delegate name, phone number, mobile number, email address approved by company).
- The tender form will be provided to the company via email.

Submitted offers must be accompanied with a bond mentioned in the tender form valid for a period not less than (120) days issued by any local bank in Oman addressed to Muscat Municipality. Bidding that do not meet the required bond **will not be accepted**.

Documents must be enclosed in a plain envelope sealed with red wax (without any company information). box's locations are as follows:

Tender at The Serial	The box's location for Tender Bonds
1-2-3-4-5-6-7	Muscat Municipality Ruwi Building (Main Entrance), located on Capital Market Street
8-9	Third floor at Directorate General of Quantity Surveying and Contracts in Muscat Municipality, Head Office, Darsait

Note:

- Companies which not registered in MM or their registration has been expired shall register through the municipality's website (www.mm.gov.om). For technical support, please contact Muscat Municipality through email (crm@mm.gov.om).
- At **10:00 AM** on the above mentioned date, is the last timing for receiving bids. Offers submitted after the above mentioned date & Time shall not be accepted for any reason.
- Muscat Municipality has the right to accept or reject any offer without assigning any reason.

Website: www.mm.gov.om

FOOD AID IN YEMEN



People displaced by conflict receive food aid donated by a Kuwaiti charity organisation in the village of Hays, near the conflict zone in Yemen's western province of Hodeida, on Monday. – AFP

Iran starts limiting UN inspections

TEHRAN: Iran said on Tuesday it had started to restrict some site inspections by the UN nuclear watchdog in response to the US refusal so far to lift sanctions imposed by former president Donald Trump.

Interim arrangements agreed at talks on Sunday in Tehran meant the International Atomic Energy Agency would not be “flying blind” while “political discussions” on restoring a 2015 deal between Tehran and major powers go ahead, IAEA Director Rafael Grossi has said.

But while praising Grossi’s 11th-hour diplomacy, Washington called on Tehran to “fully meet its verification and other nuclear non-proliferation commitments” under the deal while talks were under way.

The changes to the IAEA’s monitoring and inspection regime, which were ordered by Iran’s conservative-dominated parliament last year, are the latest in a series of retaliatory measures Iran has adopted in response to Trump’s 2018 withdrawal from

The changes to the IAEA’s monitoring and inspection regime are response to Trump’s 2018 withdrawal from the nuclear agreement

the agreement. “The implementation of the law began this morning”, Iran’s Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif told the official IRNA news agency.

Recordings from monitoring equipment the IAEA installed at Iran’s nuclear sites to verify its compliance will now be withheld by Tehran until US President Joe Biden has lifted the crippling sanctions imposed by Trump.

So-called “voluntary transparency measures”, including snap inspections of sites not under regular monitoring — are also suspended.

Zarif said the changes would have no major immediate

impact on the work of the IAEA inspectors.

“The crux of this deal is that the data recorded on our nuclear programme... will be stored and not handed over to the IAEA”, Iran’s top diplomat said.

The data “had never been supplied to the IAEA in real time but had been handed over on a daily or weekly basis”, he said.

If talks on a US return to the nuclear deal drag on, that will change, however.

The Iranian Atomic Energy Organization has said that under the new law, if there is still no lifting of US sanctions after three months, it would start erasing the recordings.

If the sanctions were not “fully lifted in the next three months”, the data would be “destroyed for good”, it said. Biden has signalled readiness to revive the nuclear deal but insists Iran first return to all its nuclear commitments.

The Biden administration has said it is willing to join EU-led talks with Iran in search of a compromise. — AFP

Saudi oil minister who brought the West to its knees dies

DUBAI: Saudi Arabia’s Ahmed Zaki Yamani, the embodiment of the ascent of Arab petroleum power and the face of the 1973 oil embargo that brought the West to its knees, has died.

Yamani was a witness to the 1975 murder of the Saudi king who had plucked him, a non-royal, from obscurity to be oil minister. Later the same year Yamani was kidnapped at an Opec meeting by Ilyich Ramirez Sanchez, known as Carlos the Jackal.

Yamani, 91, died in London, Saudi state media reported on Tuesday.

Known for his elegant manner and trademark goatee beard, Yamani’s 24-year tenure running the oil affairs of the world’s biggest crude producer made him a global celebrity during the inflationary “oil shocks” of the 1970s.

That ended with his abrupt sacking in 1986 after a costly attempt to prop up crude prices, a failed strategy which has cast a shadow over Saudi oil policy to this day.

In December 1975, Yamani attended the meeting of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in Vienna,

which ended in a hail of bullets fired into the ceiling from Venezuelan assassin Carlos and five cohorts. Three bystanders were killed.

Carlos, promoting the Palestinian cause, targeted Yamani as the most valuable hostage, telling him repeatedly that he had been sentenced to death. Ministers were held for two days in a dynamite-charged room before the captors were granted a plane out of Austria with their hostages.

A deal was struck in Algiers and Carlos vanished, escaping arrest until 1994.

Months earlier, Yamani was at the side of Saudi King Faisal in Riyadh, receiving a visiting delegation when a disaffected Saudi prince pulled out a revolver and shot the king dead.

Yamani’s career was remarkable, for the time, as a commoner in a society dominated by the royal family.

Born on June 30, 1930, the son of an Islamic scholar and judge in Mecca, Yamani was expected to follow his father and grandfather into teaching.

After studying law in Cairo he left for New York University and



Harvard. Returning to Saudi Arabia, he set up a law firm and took on government work, drawing the attention of the future King Faisal. He became oil minister in 1962.

Yamani became a leading figure in the development of Opec, founded in 1960. He extricated the Saudi oil industry from the grip of American companies in a series of steps that produced a deal on national ownership of Saudi Aramco in 1976.

Aramco remains among the world’s wealthiest companies by assets.

In Yamani’s early years as oil minister, Arab nationalism was on the rise and oil power was at the heart of it.

By the time of the 1967 Arab-Israeli Six-Day War, Riyadh was ready to flex its economic muscle. Yamani announced a supply embargo against countries friendly to Israel. But the embargo did not

bite. High inventories in the West and extra supply from Venezuela and pre-revolutionary Iran filled the gap.

In 1973 the fourth Arab-Israeli conflict prompted Yamani to trigger another oil embargo. This time it worked — a four-fold increase in the price of crude marked the high point of Opec power and sent western economies into recession as inflation soared in what became known as the first oil shock.

Yamani summed up that moment when oil producers took charge. “The moment has come”, he said. “We are masters of our own commodity.”

With the end of the war and the embargo, Riyadh found an accommodation with the United States.

Yamani was now a price moderate, espousing the view that high prices would ultimately destroy demand and encourage production from new exploration in places such as the North Sea.

When the 1979 Iranian revolution triggered a second oil shock in the West, most in Opec raised oil prices. Riyadh, close now to Washington, issued the “Yamani Edict”, holding Saudi prices at official levels to ease the pain for importers.

Yamani’s new-found price moderation was to cost him. A supply glut born of the early 1980s recession in the West depressed fuel demand.

Faisal’s successor, King Fahd, called on Yamani to both protect Saudi market share and boost prices. Instead, he cut Saudi production to a 20-year low of only 2 million barrels per day in an effort to shore up prices.

Fellow Opec members were not as disciplined on production and Yamani was criticised at home as others increased their market share at Riyadh’s expense. As the oil glut ballooned, crude prices crashed below \$10 a barrel.

Having disobeyed Fahd and failed, Yamani paid the price. In October 1986 he learned of his dismissal from a public announcement on Saudi television, apparently designed to embarrass him.

Yamani retreated to his private life and became the figurehead for a consultancy, the Centre for Global Energy Studies. At its launch in London in 1989, with crude still worth only \$20 a barrel, he predicted prices would eventually break \$100, as they did eventually in the new millennium. — Reuters

SHORT TAKES

CAPE TOWN

Tutu Foundation warns of genocide in Tigray

The people of Ethiopia’s restive Tigray region are facing “genocide”, the foundation of Nobel Peace Prize laureate Desmond Tutu warned on Tuesday.

“While the global radar is, rightly, on humanity overcoming Covid-19, we cannot stand by while human rights violations, and even genocidal actions, are perpetrated against certain peoples”, the Foundation said.

The people of Ethiopia’s Tigray region, China’s Uyghur ethnic group and the Rohingya of



Myanmar all face genocide, as defined by the UN as “violence and persecution committed with the intention to destroy a national, religious, ethnic or racial group”, the foundation said.

GENEVA

20 per cent more Syrians need aid

The pandemic and the worsening economic crisis in Syria have pushed the number of people who need humanitarian aid to 13.4 million, 20 per cent more than a year ago, according to the United Nations.

The value of the Syrian currency plummeted 78 per cent last year while prices have risen sharply, the UN humanitarian aid office (OCHA) said on Tuesday in Geneva.

As a result, many families can no longer afford medical care,



medicine, adequate food or education for their children. Some 2 million people in Syria are living in extreme poverty.

OCHA said that \$4.2 billion are needed this year to help people in the country

JERUSALEM

Shared vaccines with Palestine, Honduras: Israel

Israel is giving a “symbolic” amount of surplus Covid-19 vaccines to the Palestinians and to several countries, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s office said on Tuesday. An Israeli official said Honduras was among the recipients.

The Central American country said last year it intended to move its Israel Embassy to Jerusalem, a diplomatic gain for Israel.

Israel regards all of Jerusalem as its capital, although that is not



recognised by most countries. Palestinians seek East Jerusalem, which Israel captured in the 1967 Middle East war, as the capital of a future independent state.

The Honduran Embassy in Israel had no immediate comment.

In brief

NEW DELHI



CLIMATE ACTIVIST LINKED TO THUNBERG WINS BAIL

An Indian climate change activist was granted bail on Tuesday 10 days after being arrested for allegedly creating a "toolkit" to help the country's farmer protests that was tweeted by Greta Thunberg.

The arrest of 22-year-old Disha Ravi on charges of sedition — which can carry a sentence of life imprisonment — sparked fierce criticism from activists and India's opposition politicians.

Police alleged that Ravi was a "key conspirator" in the formation of the toolkit, which was shared by Swedish climate activist Thunberg on social media. The toolkit offers basic advice on joining the protest on the ground and spells out how to show support on social media.

KATHMANDU



NEPAL PARLIAMENT REINSTATED

Nepal's top court on Tuesday ordered the reinstatement of the nation's parliament, a court official said, dealing a political blow to beleaguered Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli.

The court order comes two months after Oli plunged the Himalayan nation into political turmoil when he dissolved parliament and called for an early election due to bitter squabbling within the ruling Communist party.

"The recommendation for the dissolution of the House of Representatives and the notice dissolving Parliament have been rejected by the honourable judges," Bhadrakali Pokharel, a court official, said.

COLOMBO



PAKISTANI PM ON TWO-DAY VISIT TO SRI LANKA

Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan arrived for a two-day visit in Sri Lanka on Tuesday to discuss a range of topics from politics to business, officials said.

Khan and his delegation were welcomed by his Sri Lankan counterpart Mahinda Rajapaksa at the Bandaranaike International Airport at Katunayake, 23 kilometres north of the capital Colombo. On his first official visit outside the country this year, Khan is accompanied by a high-powered delegation of Pakistani business leaders and investors, including sectors such as textiles, pharmaceuticals, agriculture, sports goods, jewellery and automotive.

— Agencies

G7 'firmly condemn' Myanmar military attacks on protesters

LONDON: G7 countries said on Tuesday they "firmly condemn" violence committed by Myanmar's security forces against protesters and urged them to "exercise utmost restraint and respect human rights and international law".

The bloc of wealthy nations — comprising Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Britain and the United States as well as the European Union's High Representative — reiterated their opposition to the February 1 coup and the increasingly heavy-handed response to demonstrations against it.

"Use of live ammunition against unarmed people is unacceptable. Anyone responding to peaceful protests with violence must be held to account," G7 foreign ministers said in a statement.

"We condemn the intimidation and oppression of those opposing the coup. We raise our concern at the crackdown on freedom of expression, including through the Internet blackout and draconian changes to the law that repress free speech." The G7 called for an end to the "systematic targeting"



A young protester holds up the three finger salute as they take part in a demonstration against the military coup in Yangon on Tuesday. — AFP

of protesters, doctors, civil society and journalists and for the military junta to revoke its declared state of emergency.

It also urged Myanmar's military to allow full humanitarian access

to support the most vulnerable.

"We remain united in condemning the coup in Myanmar. We call again for the immediate and unconditional release of those detained arbitrarily, including

State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and President Win Myint and continue to stand with the people of Myanmar in their quest for democracy and freedom," the statement said.

— AFP

Virus variants not behind surge in Covid cases: India

NEW DELHI: India said on Tuesday mutated versions of coronavirus were not responsible for an upsurge in cases in two states, a potential relief for a country where mask-wearing and social distancing have largely disappeared.

Maharashtra and Kerala account for 75 per cent of India's current active cases of about 147,000, and both states have seen a sudden rise in new infections in recent days, fuelling calls for a faster roll-out of vaccines.

India has reported more than 11 million cases — the most in the world after the United States — and about 156,000 deaths. Actual infections have inched closer to 300 million in the country of 1.35 billion people, according to a study of antibodies done by the government.

— AFP

Japanese Emperor hopes for bright future amid pandemic

TOKYO: Emperor Naruhito said he was anticipating a "bright future" as Japan began its coronavirus inoculation programme, during an address to mark his 61st birthday on Tuesday.

Celebrations to mark the Emperor's birthday have been muted this year because of the pandemic. "Fortunately, the number of new infections appears to be declining nationwide. Furthermore, coronavirus vaccinations have started," Naruhito said, speaking to reporters at the imperial palace from behind a large transparent partition.

"I look forward to a bright future ahead, as our people overcome the coronavirus crisis by sharing the pain and helping each other," Naruhito said.

Japan's Covid-19 vaccination started this month, but one of the world's most rapidly ageing societies faces challenges with the programme.

There will be limited supplies of vaccine doses for the first months of the rollout and shots for the elderly will be distributed gradually, the inoculation chief said on Monday.

On the Emperor's birthday, visitors usually come to the imperial palace to offer good wishes and sign a guestbook — a practice that dates back to 1948. The Emperor also appears on a palace



Emperor Naruhito speaks during a news conference on the occasion of his 61st birthday at Akasaka Palace in Tokyo on Tuesday. — Reuters

balcony with other members of the imperial family to speak to visitors. Those events were cancelled this year. Naruhito's new year public appearance last month was also replaced by a video message.

— Reuters

Malaysia deports over 1,000 Myanmar nationals

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia sent more than 1,000 Myanmar nationals back to their strife-torn homeland on Tuesday despite a court order to halt the deportation, a move rights groups said could endanger the deportees' lives.

The 1,086 Myanmar citizens were sent back on three navy ships sent by Myanmar's military, which seized power in a February 1 coup, sparking weeks of protests from pro-democracy activists. Malaysia had initially said it would deport 1,200.

Malaysia vowed not to deport Rohingya Muslims or refugees registered with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

But the agency has said at least six people registered with it were among the deportees. Refugee groups also say asylum-seekers from the minority Chin, Kachin and non-Rohingya Muslim communities fleeing conflict and persecution at home are among

those being deported.

Malaysia's Immigration Department director-general said the repatriated Myanmar citizens did not include Rohingya refugees or asylum-seekers.

"All of those returned had agreed to be sent back voluntarily without being forced by any party," Khairul Dzaimie Daud said in a statement.

He did not respond to queries on why the repatriation was carried out despite the court-ordered halt.

The Kuala Lumpur High Court had granted a stay until 10 am on Wednesday, when it was scheduled to hear an application by rights groups for a judicial review to suspend the deportation.

Just before the ruling, the migrants were bussed in from across the country to the naval base at Lumut in western Malaysia where the Myanmar ships were docked.

— AFP

Philippines offers nurses in exchange for vaccines

MANILA: The Philippines will let thousands of its healthcare workers, mostly nurses, take up jobs in Britain and Germany if the two countries agree to donate much-needed coronavirus vaccines, a senior official said on Tuesday.

The Philippines, which has among Asia's highest number of coronavirus cases, has relaxed a ban on deploying its healthcare workers overseas, but still limits the number of medical professionals leaving the country to 5,000 a year.

Alice Visperas, director of the labour ministry's international affairs bureau, said the Philippines was open to lifting the cap in exchange for vaccines from Britain

The Philippines, which has among Asia's highest number of coronavirus cases, has relaxed a ban on deploying its healthcare workers overseas, but still limits the number of medical professionals leaving the country to 5,000 a year

and Germany, which it would use to inoculate outbound workers and hundreds of thousands of Filipino repatriates. Nurses are among the



Filipino workers, including nurses applying to work in United Kingdom, attend a lecture at a review centre in Manila. — Reuters file photo

millions of Filipinos who work overseas, providing in excess of \$30 billion a year in remittances vital to the country's economy.

"We are considering the request to lift the deployment cap, subject to agreement," Visperas said.

Britain is grappling with the

world's sixth-highest coronavirus death toll and one of the worst economic hits from the pandemic, while Germany has the 10th most infections globally.

While the two countries have inoculated a combined 23 million people, the Philippines has yet to start its campaign to immunise 70 million adults, or two-thirds of its 108 million people. It expects to receive its first batch of vaccines this week, donated by China.

The Philippines wants to secure 148 million doses of vaccines altogether. The British Embassy in Manila did not immediately respond to a request for comment while calls to Germany's mission went unanswered.

— Reuters

70 per cent decline in Covid-19 infections after first Pfizer shot

EDINBURGH: Data from two separate studies published in the UK on Monday, one in England and another in Scotland, have shown vaccines against Covid-19 are effective in cutting disease transmission and hospitalisations from the first dose.

Analysis from Public Health England has shown the vaccine manufactured by Pfizer-BioNTech reduces the risk of catching infection by more than 70 per cent after a first dose. That risk is reduced by 85 per cent after a second dose.

The public health body's study of real-world data also showed vaccinated people who go on to become infected are far less likely to die or be hospitalised.

Hospitalisation and death from Covid-19 is reduced by over 75 per cent in those who have received a dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, according to the analysis.

"This crucial report shows vaccines are working — it is extremely encouraging to see evidence that the Pfizer vaccine offers a high degree of protection against coronavirus," Health Secretary Matt Hancock said.

Britain is one of the countries hardest-hit by the Covid-19 pandemic, with 120,757 deaths.

It was the first nation to begin mass vaccinations in December and more than 17 million people have now received at least a first vaccine dose — one-third of the UK's adult population.

"We will see much more data over the coming weeks and months but we should be very encouraged



by these initial findings," Dr Mary Ramsay, Head of Immunisation at Public Health England, said.

At the same time a study in Scotland has shown the Pfizer-BioNTech and Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccinations have led to a reduction in Covid-19 admissions to hospitals after a first dose.

The study, led by the University of Edinburgh, found that by the fourth week after receiving the initial dose the Pfizer vaccine reduced the risk of hospitalisation from Covid by up to 85 per cent.

The Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine reduced the risk by 94 per cent.

"These results are very encouraging and have given us great reasons to be optimistic for

The risk of infection down by more than 70 per cent after a first dose. That risk is reduced by 85 per cent after a second dose. Hospitalisation and death from Covid-19 is reduced by over 75 per cent in those who have received first dose

the future," Professor Aziz Sheikh, who lead the research, said in a statement.

"We now have national evidence — across an entire country — that vaccination provides protection

against Covid-19 hospitalisations.

"Roll-out of the first vaccine dose now needs to be accelerated globally to help overcome this terrible disease," he added.

The research compared the outcomes of those who had received their first jab with those who had not.

It found that vaccination was associated with an 81 per cent reduction in hospitalisation risk in the fourth week among those aged 80 years and over, when the results for both vaccines were combined.

The project, which used patient data to track the pandemic and the vaccine roll-out in real time, analysed a data set covering the entire Scottish population of 5.4 million between December 8 and February 15.

— Reuters

Workers' rights under threat as online work surges five-fold: UN

BERLIN: Digital platforms have soared five-fold over the past decade, offering opportunities to some but also eroding workers' rights, the International Labour Organization (ILO) said on Tuesday.

From ride-sharing apps like Uber and online marketplaces like UpWork linking freelancers and clients, to software that allows employers to oversee workers, digital platforms have transformed the nature of work, the UN's ILO said.

"At their best, all these platforms provide new opportunities," said Guy Ryder, head of the ILO, which surveyed 12,000 workers in 100 countries, 70 businesses and 16 platform companies in its first in-depth report on the platform economy.

"There are opportunities for disabled workers, for those in remote locations. There's evidence that those who have been unemployed or marginalised might find their way into the labour market," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation in an interview.

The Covid-19 pandemic has sped up the shift to a digital economy, changing the way work has been organised and regulated for decades. With job losses, millions have become gig workers, providing on-demand driving, delivery or childcare services.

But in many cases the work is poorly paid — with half of online workers earning less than \$2 an hour — and lacks access to

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GUY RYDER

Director-General, ILO

traditional employment benefits, like collective bargaining, insurance and work-related injury protections, the ILO found.

Platforms generally classify workers as independent contractors and their rights depend on the platforms' own terms of service, not employment law.

The ILO found significant inequities in the platform economy, with workers in developing countries earning 60 per cent less than those in developed countries, even after controlling for basic characteristics and types of tasks.

More than 70 per cent of taxi drivers reported their average daily number of trips and earnings decreased after a platform took over the market.

— AFP

America mourns over 500,000 Covid-19 deaths

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden led Americans in observing a moment of silence on Monday to commemorate the grim milestone of more than 500,000 US deaths from Covid-19, urging Americans to set aside partisan differences and fight the pandemic together.

"Today we mark a truly grim, heartbreaking milestone — 500,071 dead. That's more Americans who have died in one year in this pandemic than in World War One, World War Two and the Vietnam War combined," Biden said in emotional remarks

at the White House. "But as we acknowledge the scale of this mass death in America, we remember each person and the life they lived. They're people we knew."

Biden, Vice-President Kamala Harris, first lady Jill Biden and second gentleman Doug Emhoff marked a moment of silence outdoors at the White House after the president's remarks, bowing their heads somberly.

Five hundred lit candles lined the White House steps to commemorate the dead and a military band played a soaring

rendition of "Amazing Grace."

The president called on Americans to remain vigilant in fighting the pandemic by continuing to wear masks, observe social distancing and receive vaccinations when it is their turn.

"We must end the politics and misinformation that has divided families, communities and the country, and has cost too many lives already. "It's not Democrats and Republicans who are dying from the virus. It's our fellow Americans," Biden said.

— AFP



US President Joe Biden, First Lady Jill Biden, US Vice-President Kamala Harris and her husband, Doug Emhoff, hold a moment of silence and candlelight ceremony in honour of those who lost their lives to Coronavirus on the South Lawn of the White House in Washington, DC, on Monday. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

ROME

Etna continues to spew more lava and ash

For the fifth time in a few days, the Italian volcano Mount Etna has hurled fountains of fire and clouds of ash into the sky.

The volcano on Sicily, which is over 3,300 metres high, began to rumble more and more at around 10 pm (21:00 GMT) on Monday, experts from the National Institute of Geophysics and Volcanology (INGV) reported on Tuesday.

According to the report, the new eruption started in the south-east crater. About an hour later,



lava jets shot up to 300 metres above the crater rim. Later, some of the ash column reached many kilometres into the sky. Around 1 am on Tuesday, the tremors and explosions quickly stopped.

CONAKRY

Ebola vaccination drive in Guinea

Guinea will launch an Ebola vaccination drive on Tuesday after a flight delayed by a Saharan dust storm arrived carrying thousands of jabs, as the West African country fights to stamp out a resurgence of the deadly virus.

The outbreak, declared last weekend, is the first in the region since a 2013-16 epidemic left more than 11,300 people dead, mainly in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. The start of the inoculation campaign had to be delayed by one day after a plane



carrying more than 11,000 vaccine doses was unable to land in Guinea's capital Conakry due to a dust storm. A special flight carrying the Merck vaccine finally landed in Guinea on Monday.

VALLETTA

Man pleads guilty to journalist murder

One of three men accused of the 2017 car bomb murder of Maltese anti-corruption journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia pleaded guilty to the killing on Tuesday.

Vince Muscat changed his plea from not guilty during pre-trial compilation of evidence. He has been under arrest since December 2017 when, together with another two men, he was accused of having planned and executed the murder.

The other two are sticking to their not-guilty plea. Caruana Galizia's killing by a car bomb



shone a spotlight on corruption in Malta. A fourth person is suspected of having masterminded the crime and has been accused of being an accomplice to murder.

Confusion and hope as US unveils new process for asylum-seekers

PATRICK J MCDONNELL & GABRIELA MINJARES

Angelina Baltazar, stranded in Los Angeles since August 2019 while waiting for her asylum case to move forward, was playing with her smartphone, having little success in registering online to cross the border to wait instead on the US side with her family.

“I need to ask someone for help,” said an exasperated Baltazar, 40, a native of Guatemala who lived for more than a decade in Los Angeles — and is now keen to get back there and be reunited with her three US-born children.

“I’m afraid of being left out,” said Baltazar, standing on the grounds of a shelter in this border city across the Rio Grande from El Paso. “If I don’t get enrolled, they’ll just ignore me.”

A sense of hope, combined with renewed anxiety, has emerged for Baltazar and tens of thousands of other migrants — mostly Central Americans but including Cubans, Venezuelans and others — who have been forced to wait in Mexico under a Trump administration doctrine as their political asylum cases proceed through US immigration courts. Some have

LAUNCHED MORE THAN TWO YEARS AGO, MPP WAS A SIGNATURE EFFORT IN TRUMP’S CAMPAIGN TO CLAMP DOWN ON IMMIGRATION

been in the queue for more than a year as the pandemic has pushed back court dates. Most have been marooned in dangerous border towns under Trump’s “Remain in Mexico” initiative, formally known as the Migrant Protection Protocols.

Launched more than two years ago, MPP was a signature effort in Trump’s campaign to clamp down on immigration by compelling most to wait in tenuous living conditions as their cases proceeded. Previously, migrants who claimed persecution at home and were seeking legal refuge under US and international law were allowed to remain in the United States as their court cases proceeded.

The Biden administration has now stopped adding new enrollees to MPP, and unveiled a plan to work through a backlog of some 25,000 people with active petitions in US immigration courts. The complex guidelines involve online registration and Covid-19 tests for those eventually allowed to pursue cases in the United States.

It will be slow going. About 25 migrants in Tijuana were processed last Friday and entered San Diego for future legal proceedings, according to

the Department of Homeland Security. The rollout is scheduled to be extended to other border towns incoming weeks.

The new plan is slated to launch last Friday in Ciudad Juarez, which has the largest number of pending MPP enrollees, more than 10,000, according to the Transactional Records Access Clearing house at Syracuse University, which tracks court cases.

Most live in shelters or cheap hotels, or crowd into low-rent apartments. Unlike Matamoros, the border town more than 800 miles down the Rio Grande, there is no large migrant camp in Ciudad Juárez, a sprawling desert metropolis of 1.5 million. Confusion is rampant. Few migrants interviewed here in recent days had any idea what the new system entailed. People are on edge.

“We’re all nervous because we don’t know what’s going to happen, or how this is going to work,” said Laurent Nicole Bueso Cartagena, 19, a native of Honduras who was among a number of MPP applicants interviewed at the Pan de Vida (Bread of Life) shelter, just a few yards from the metal border fence.

— dpa

WRITE FOR US

Oman Daily Observer welcomes original contributions for publication in its opinion page. The newspaper reserves the right to publish or edit the article accordingly. The article’s length must not exceed 550 words. Please send the articles to opinion@omanobserver.om

FALLING BEHIND

Covid-19 might widen wealth gaps in Europe

JAN STRUPCZEWSKI

The Covid-19 pandemic is likely to widen wealth gaps in Europe unless policymakers help end the health crisis globally, support economies until the pandemic is over and invest in making economies greener, the International Monetary Fund said.

In a speech to a European Parliament conference on Monday, IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva praised EU governments for putting more than 3 trillion euros in fiscal support for firms and households, including job-retention schemes that helped more than 54 million workers.

“But the path to recovery is... uneven... because of the difference in starting positions, economic structure and capacity to respond, causing inequalities to grow both across and within countries,” she said.

She said in the 27-nation EU, countries that are traditional tourist destinations, such as Spain,

Greece and Italy contracted more than 9 per cent in 2020 compared to an average contraction of 6.4 per cent across the bloc.

According to IMF forecasts, by the end of 2022, per capita income for central and eastern Europe would be 3.8 per cent below pre-crisis projections, compared with a shortfall of just 1.3 per cent for advanced EU economies.

Economists have warned that such divergence would make the economic management of the EU, including the monetary policy of the European Central Bank, more difficult and would increase the risk of crises down the road.

“Gradual withdrawal has to follow, not precede, a durable exit from the health crisis. It matters internally, and also in terms of spillovers — a premature tightening of policy when worse-hit economies are still deeply fragile could exacerbate divergence between countries,” Georgieva said.

EU finance ministers want to keep the fiscal stimulus for now, but will hold talks in the second quarter on when to start shifting from the current blanket support for all businesses to more a targeted approach as the economy recovers, and how to deal with a wave of bankruptcies expected as a result.

The EU agreed last year to jointly borrow 750 billion euros and spend it via grants and loans on reforms and green and digital investment that would boost potential growth of those most at risk of falling behind.

Georgieva said the coordination of such green and digital investment was the most important action in the long run.

— Reuters



The path to recovery is... uneven... because of the difference in starting positions, economic structure and capacity to respond, causing inequalities to grow both across and within countries
KRISTALINA GEORGIEVA
IMF Managing Director

LOOMING CRISIS

Why a predictable cold snap crippled the Texas power grid

TIM MCLAUGHLIN AND STEPHANIE KELLY

As Texans cranked up their heaters early on Monday to combat plunging temperatures, a record surge of electricity demand set off a disastrous chain reaction in the state’s power grid.

Wind turbines in the state’s northern Panhandle locked up. Natural gas plants shut down when frozen pipes and components shut off fuel flow. A South Texas nuclear reactor went dark after a five-foot section of uninsulated pipe seized up. Power outages quickly spread statewide — leaving millions shivering in their homes for days, with deadly consequences.

It could have been far worse: Before dawn on Monday, the state’s grid operator was “seconds and minutes” away from an uncontrolled blackout for its 26 million customers, its CEO has said. Such a collapse occurs when operators lose the ability to manage the crisis through rolling blackouts; in such cases, it can take weeks or months to fully restore power to customers.

Monday was one of the state’s coldest days in more than a century — but the unprecedented power crisis was hardly unpredictable after Texas had experienced a similar, though less severe, disruption during a 2011 cold snap. Still, Texas power producers failed to adequately winter-proof their systems. And the state’s grid operator underestimated its need for reserve power capacity before the crisis, then moved too slowly to tell utilities to institute rolling blackouts to protect against a grid meltdown, energy analysts, traders and economists said.



Workers install a utility pole to support power lines after an unprecedented winter storm in Houston, Texas, on Monday. — Reuters

TEXAS IS THE ONLY STATE IN THE CONTINENTAL UNITED STATES WITH AN INDEPENDENT AND ISOLATED GRID

Early signs of trouble came long before the forced outages. Two days earlier, for example, the grid suddenly lost 539 megawatts (MW) of power, or enough electricity for nearly 108,000 homes, according to operational messages disclosed by the state’s primary grid operator, the Electric Reliability Council of Texas (ERCOT).

The crisis stemmed from a unique confluence of weaknesses in the state’s power system. Texas is the only state in the continental United States with an independent and isolated grid. That allows the state to avoid federal regulation — but also severely limits its ability to draw emergency power

from other grids. ERCOT also operates the only major US grid that does not have a capacity market — a system that provides payments to operators to be on standby to supply power during severe weather events.

After more than 3 million ERCOT customers lost power in a February 2011 freeze, federal regulators recommended that ERCOT prepare for winter with the same urgency as it does the peak summer season. They also said that, while ERCOT’s reserve power capacity looked good on paper, it did not take into account that many generation units could get knocked offline by freezing weather.

— Reuters

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Al Salam crowned first division league winners

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, FEB 23

The experienced national volleyball coach, Shihab al Din al Riyami, affirmed that crowning Al Salam club as champion of the Oman volleyball first division league 2020-21 is based on the proper implementation of the technical and tactical training plan.

The technical director of Al Salam club added that the team depended on the advanced technology applications to perform different training sessions including Data Volley Programme which is classified as one of the top software.

“I have set a clear map for shaping the team and that is according to full implementation of proper scientific ways in training. Also, we are having an experienced

coach in the club represented by Tunisian Haitham al Wasalti. We are using different advanced items during the training sessions including speed radars and dedicated devices for other training parts which assist you in identifying the weakness part in the opponent team,” he added.

The international lecturer unveiled that the team’s objective is to dominate all the internal competitions including the top tier league. The Ministry’s Volleyball Shield Championship is the next target and we will face Al Kamil W’al Wafi team again in the semis round. It is quite a tough and exceptional season as the league duration was less than two months,” he concluded.

Late on Monday, the northern Batinah team, Al Salam, retained title of the Oman volleyball first division league 2020-21 as they

edged Al Kamil W’al Wafi 3-2 in the concluding game at the indoor halls of Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex.

Al Salam confirmed their domination as they duplicated the win since the last fixture few days ago when they beat Al Kamil W’al Wafi 3-1 in the last round of the league. Al Salam won 25-23, 22-25, 17-25, 25-23 and 15-11.

The event was held under the auspices of Rashad bin Ahmed bin Mohammed al Hinai, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, in presence of Shaikh Badar bin Ali al Rawas, Chairman of Oman Volleyball Association (OVA).

The chief guest awarded the medals and shield to the top winners. Al Salam’s Falah al Jaradi was named as the Most Valuable Player award (MVP) of the championship.



Songeet, Janger star in Bausher victory against Seeb

HARIDEV PUSHPARAJ
MUSCAT, FEB 23

Songeet Singh and Janger Singh starred with two goals each as Bausher thumped Seeb 4-2 in their Group B match of the HM Cup Hockey Championship at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex on Tuesday.

Songeet Singh’s goals came in the 21st and 38th minutes and Janger Singh slammed goals in the 20th and 34th minutes of the

match as they registered a come-from-behind win.

Seeb had taken a 2-0 lead after Fahad al Lawati’s first minute goal and Mubasher Ali’s penalty stroke in the sixth minute of the match.

SOHAR, AL NASR WIN

In Monday’s matches, Sohar outplayed Majees 4-2 with a brace each from Ahmed al Shibli (11th, 23rd) and Mohammed Ali (24th, 58th) while Al Nasr edged past Dhofar 1-0.



In the first game, Sohar began well with Al Shibli scoring field goals in the first and second periods. Mohammed Ali chipped in with his contribution in the second period with a penalty corner conversion.

Ali then struck the fourth goal in the final period.

Mohammed Adel had scored the equaliser in the 14th minute for Majees while Hussam Mahmood scored the only other goal in the 35th minute.

Arman Qurashi’s 50th minute goal was the winner for Al Nasr against Dhofar.

Results (Tuesday): Bausher: 4 (Songeet Singh 21st, 38th, Janger Singh 20th, 34th) bt Seeb: 2 (Fahad al Lawati 1st, Mubasher Ali 6th).

(Monday’s matches): Sohar: 4 (Ahmed al Shibli 11th, 23rd, Mohammed Ali 24th, 58th) bt Majees: 2 (Mohammed Adel 14th, Hussam Mahmood 35th); Al Nasr: 1 (Arman Qurashi 50th) bt Dhofar: 0.



Ronaldo's Crotona double keeps Juventus in title hunt

Cristiano Ronaldo kept Juventus within sight of the Serie A summit on Monday with a headed brace which helped the champions to a 3-0 win over bottom club Crotona. Portugal forward Ronaldo struck twice late in the first half to break the resistance of lowly Crotona and keep Juventus eight points behind league leaders Inter Milan.



Benteke's last-gasp goal hands Crystal Palace win over Brighton

Christian Benteke's stoppage-time volley earned Crystal Palace a dramatic 2-1 victory at Brighton & Hove Albion in the Premier League on Monday, despite the visitors being second best for much of the contest.

Abdullah back behind the wheel through Oman local rally

MUSCAT: Talented Omani rally driver Abdullah al Zubair will return back behind the wheel of the rally car after his last participation last year during which he managed to achieve the second place in the Jordan National Rally.

This time Al Zubair decided to participate in the first rounds of the Oman Rally Championship this season, which will be his first participation in the local rally of Oman.

The rally champ Abdullah al Zubair has taken a part in the Oman International Rally last season, which was held in February last year, and achieved a positive result despite some technical issues in the car, where other participation whether local or regional



Abdullah al Zubair

participation has been postponed due to the pandemic of Covid-19.

Rally driver Abdullah al Zubair in this local participation will



be setting behind the steering of Subaru Impreza (N14) with his well-known navigator Taha Soomar, and seeks through this participation to

enhance his skills in driving on the roads in Oman and gain additional experience, where these stages and roads are a school from which the

drivers learn skills and gain more experience, in dealing with all terrains and landscapes.

"In fact, I thought a lot before

participating in the rally again," said Al Zubair, "and I loved this participation to support my friends and the rest of the rally drivers in this rally, where the rally must have large number of contestants in order to make the rally famous among the nearby countries."

"This participation comes after a period of cancellation of all the championships due to the interruption of sports activities following the Corona pandemic, so you find everyone eager to return strongly to the rally competitions and I am thankful to OAA for their hosting of the event at this time and looking forward to be in top positions specially in our group at the end of the rally," he added.



DECISIVE BATTLE FOR INDIA, ENGLAND AT BIGGEST STADIUM

AHMEDABAD: India and England head into a crucial third Test starting on Wednesday at the world's biggest cricket stadium with more than a series between two of the biggest rivals at stake, according to their pace spearheads Ishant Sharma and Jimmy Anderson.

With the four-match series tied at 1-1, both sides need a win in Ahmedabad to be able to keep alive their hopes of reaching the World Test Championship final against New Zealand.

India just need to win the series to get through, while England have to win by 3-1. A tied series would let Australia through.

The tension is rising in both camps who each registered a crushing win in the first two matches.

"We have got to win two Tests matches, it is as simple as it gets for us," said Anderson who took crucial wickets in England's 227 run win in the first game.

England have "put to bed the disappointment" of their 317-run defeat in Chennai last week, the 38-year-old added.

The teams are "refreshed" and "we are excited that we have still got the opportunity to qualify for the Test championship and have still got the opportunity to beat India in India, which is something that not many teams do."

I have just one thing on my mind. That is to win the next Test, win the series and qualify for the World Test Championship. I have just one format to play and this is like a World Cup to me.

ISHANT SHARMA
India fast bowler

ISHANT'S TEST TON

"I have just one thing on my mind," responded Sharma, India's 32-year-old veteran who will be in his 100th Test.

"That is to win the next Test, win the series and qualify for the World Test Championship," Sharma said.

"I have just one format to play and this is like a World Cup to me. So if we reach the Test championship final and win, so it's like winning an ICC World Cup."

An intense atmosphere is certain at the 110,000 capacity Sardar Patel Stadium that was used for a rally by US president Donald Trump last February.

Authorities have said more than 50,000 tickets will go on sale



for the first cricket game to be played in the revamped ground.

The pink ball, LED lights instead of usual floodlights and the size of the ground add to the test of nerves, according to batsman Rohit Sharma.

"Whenever you play in a new stadium, that's always a challenge," said Sharma. "Getting used to the lights and the seats in the stadium, because its new seats so obviously it will be shiny."

India's last pink-ball outing ended in a disastrous show in Adelaide when Kohli's team were skittled out for their Test lowest of 36.

The hosts, who beat Bangladesh in under three days in their first day-night Test in Kolkata in 2019,

are expected to stick largely to their winning side from Chennai.

Joe Root's England though will be forced to make changes because of their rotation policy.

Moeen Ali headed back home after the second Test loss when he was England's standout performer with eight wickets and a quickfire 43 with the bat.

Off-spinner Dom Bess is expected to get his place back and fast bowler Anderson should return.

"I believe this series is absolutely on a knife-edge," former England spinner Graeme Swann said.

"It is a brilliant place for England to be, and they've got a great chance to go ahead once

more. I'm full of optimism going into this game, mainly due to Jimmy coming back.

"He was irrepressible in the first match, and he just keeps defying the odds and gets better and better."

Returning batsman Jonny Bairstow and fast bowler Mark Wood will also be in contention, while Jofra Archer, who missed the second Test with an elbow problem, is expected to make the team.

"Always nice to be in competition for the squad," said a fit-again Archer.

The England paceman said he was looking forward to playing on the new "beautiful" ground in front of the crowd. — AFP

Arabic-Spanish soccer dictionary launched

MUSCAT: Spanish football league La Liga and the Instituto Cervantes have launched an Arabic-Spanish language soccer dictionary. Its release coincides with Unesco's International Mother Language Day 2021, held on February 21 every year.

The Embassy of Spain in Oman is coordinating to spread this Spanish-Arabic dictionary and put it at the disposal of the schools in Oman.

The dictionary contains descriptions and information about clubs, players, stadiums, competitions, other football terminology and other useful travel phrases, with texts in Spanish and Arabic presented side by side and in a colourful and attractive way.

The Cervantes Institute is a non-profit organisation created by Spain's government to promote the study of Spanish language and culture around the world and the company La Liga has already partnered with the Cervantes Institute to produce similar football dictionaries in the Chinese and Indonesian languages.

The dictionary will be distributed online to Spanish-teaching centres, universities, colleges and libraries throughout Oman, as well as in the sports environment.

It can also be downloaded online for free on the website of the Spanish Embassy in Muscat:

<http://www.exteriores.gob.es> or on <https://elcairo.cervantes.es/imagenes>

Dhofar miss chance to go level with leaders Seeb

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, FEB 23

Second-placed Dhofar missed a golden chance to go level with league leaders Seeb after they were held to a goalless draw by Al Suwaiq late on Monday at Al Rustaq Sports Complex.

Seeb's 2-1 defeat by Al Nasr in the 10th round of Omantel League trimmed their lead over Dhofar by two points in the points table. Seeb remained on top with 22 points followed by Dhofar with 20 points.

Al Suwaiq, under the supervision of the experienced Iraqi coach Hakeem Shaker, missed many scoring attempts while Rasheed Jaber's men did not succeed in penetrating the defence of goalkeeper Mazin al Kasbi and the match ended goalless.

Oman Club and Bahla match had a same result at the Seeb Stadium. The goalless draw assisted Bahla to jump into sixth place with 15 points while Nizwa remained in the 11th position with seven points.

Experienced national coach Hamed al Azani made a winning debut with Al Nahda as they reached six points. Al Nahda beat Muscat 3-1 at the Seeb Stadium. The seventh defeat of Muscat put them firmly in the relegation zone with three points only.

In earlier fixtures on Sunday, Seeb suffered their second successive loss against Al Nasr after going down 2-1 at the Seeb Stadium. The victory took Salalah power-



house to one spot above at fourth place with 18 points. Seeb took the lead through Zahir al Aghbari but Al Nasr fought back with Moosa Kabiro netting the equaliser. Marwan Talal scored the winner in the second half.

AL MUSANNAH IMPRESS

Unfancied Al Musannah continued to impress with a 2-0 win over Al Rustaq in the Southern Batinah derby at the Al Rustaq Sports Complex. The triumph raised Al Musannah's kitty to 20 points in the third place while Al Rustaq remained at seventh position with 14 points.

Al Ittihad snatched three crucial points from Saham with a 2-1 score at Sohar Sports Complex.

The win took the Salalah-based team to move into eighth place with 12 points, while Saham are last without any points. Al Ittihad recently secured spot in the semi-finals and they are gearing up for their match against Al Suwaiq at Al Saada Sports Complex on Friday.

Nizwa's Abas al Hashmi spoiled the hopes of Sohar as he netted the equaliser with 15 minutes to go. Sohar took a 2-0 lead as Mohammed al Siyabi and Said al Ruzaqi found the targets.

Nizwa's top professional player Sessi reduced the gap before Abas al Hashmi struck the equaliser to end the match in a 2-2 draw. Both teams did not benefit from the draw result as Sohar remained in the previous 11th place with seven points while Sohar are 10th with eight points.



Al Nahda and Muscat players fight for the ball. – Faisal al Balushi

OMANTEL LEAGUE POINTS TABLE										
Team, played, won, draw, loss, goals for, goals against, points										
Seeb	10	7	1	2	21	3	22			
Dhofar	10	8	2	0	19	3	20 (-6)			
Al Musannah	10	6	2	2	14	10	20			
Al Nasr	10	5	3	2	11	8	18			
Al Suwaiq	10	5	2	3	11	9	17			
Bahla	10	3	6	1	10	9	15			
Al Rustaq	10	4	2	4	9	9	14			
Al Ittihad	10	2	6	2	10	12	12			
Oman Club	10	3	2	5	6	9	11			
Sohar	10	2	2	6	8	14	8			
Nizwa	10	1	4	5	8	15	7			
Al Nahda	10	3	3	4	9	9	6 (-6)			
Muscat	10	0	3	7	4	17	3			
Saham	10	2	0	8	7	20	0 (-6)			



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Pact signed for financing of 100-bed private hospital

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 23

Bank Nizwa recently has signed an agreement to finance the construction of a new, state-of-the-art multispecialty private hospital in the Sultanate.

The financing agreement was signed by Khalid al Kayed, CEO, Bank Nizwa and Dr Salim al Ghannami, CEO, Shifa Hospital. Shifa Hospital will be designed, owned and operated solely by Omanis with a corefocus on surgical specialties.

Built on more than 10,000 sq metres of land, Shifa Hospital will start operating with a 100-bed multispecialty facility in the first phase.

It will contain nine state-of-the-art care facilities mainly focusing on surgical specialties. It will specialise in offering sports medicine as well.

Speaking on the occasion, Dr Salim al Ghannami said: “The construction of the new private hospital will support the national socio-economic sector and uplift the healthcare system. This will be achieved through the provision of modern and high standard medical services at the facility.”

New investments to add value to Oman’s Million Date Palm Project

STRESS ON SUSTAINABILITY: High-tech animal feed mill and composting plant among RO 92m investments to support circular economy around Sultanate’s flagship date palm project

CONRAD PRABHU
[@conradprabhu](#)

Investments in an animal feed mill and an organic composting plant are among several initiatives planned by majority government-owned Nakheel Oman Development Company to optimise value creation from the Million Date Palms Project of the Diwan of Royal Court.

The ancillary investments are part of a circular economy business model around which the Million Date Palms Project is being implemented in the Sultanate.

Total investments envisaged in the entire value chain, which includes an industrial-scale processing hub in Nizwa, is estimated at RO 92 million.

Over the past year, Nakheel Oman — a 50:50 joint venture between the Diwan of Royal



Overview of Nakheel Oman's industrial complex at Nizwa.

Court and Oman National Investments Development Company SAOC (Tanmia) – has been processing, packaging and marketing the initial harvests of dates from the 11 sprawling farms that together constitute the Million Date Palms Project.

This output has been marketed primarily under three labels: Tamrah (fine Omani dates and sweets), Nizwa (high quality table dates), and Zaad (dates for the wholesale market). Recently, Nakheel Oman celebrated its first export shipment of Zaad dates to India.

While value creation from the fruit harvests will be optimised

through processing and product innovation, Nakheel Oman is also focused on commercialising waste byproducts from the processing stage, as well as green waste from the farms, to drive sustainability across the project.

One such initiative planned in this regard is an Animal Feed Mill Facility designed to produce pelleted animal feed in the form of long-fibre pellets, concentrate feed and complete feed derived from a blend of agriculture waste and high-protein inferior dates.

The pellet feed

will serve as an environment-friendly, cost-competitive and nutritious alternative to water-intensive fodder grass currently being cultivated in several parts of the Sultanate.

According to Nakheel Oman, the animal feed mill will be constructed at Barka in South Al Batinah Governorate.

Due for completion in the

second quarter of 2022, the plant will be equipped to produce 48,000 metric tonnes of various types of animal feed per annum.

Also on the anvil is a composting plant designed and equipped to produce 100,000 metric tonnes per annum of high quality organic compost and high-end fertiliser utilising a mixture of date palm waste, general green waste and animal manure.

The compost will be used for the farms of the Million Date Palms Plantation Project, as well as domestic and export markets.

Meanwhile, contractors are bidding for a tender to build the civil facilities for a state-of-the-art industrial complex at Nizwa that will serve as the main processing and storage hub for all the date fruits harvested from the network of 11 farms.

Plant processing capacity is estimated at 30,000 tonnes per annum, making it one of the largest facilities of its kind in the world.

Production begins from third well in Block 50’s Yumna field

RISING OUTPUT: Processing capacity on the Yumna Mobile Offshore Production Unit (MOPU) is being upgraded to handle up to 30,000 bpd

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 23

Masirah Oil Limited, the 100 per cent license holder and operator of Block 50 off Oman’s east coast, has announced that production has commenced from the third development well drilled in the Yumna Field. The well was spudded on January 20, 2021 and production commenced on February 18, 2021. The well has been tested at a rate of 12,984 stock tank barrels per day (stb/d) of oil on natural flow.

“Yumna 3 encountered hydrocarbons in 10.4 metres of Lower Aruma sandstone with a very good porosity of



23.4 per cent, proving that the good quality reservoir sand is extensive to the South East of Yumna 1, with exceptional permeability of about 2,000 millidarcy (md). The reservoir pressure depletion over the first year of production is around 100 psi, confirming that excellent pressure support is provided by a strong aquifer,” said the company in a press statement.

The uptick in drilling activity follows a decision by Oman’s Ministry of Energy and Minerals last July to approve MOL’s Field Development Plan for the

Yumna Field. On its heels came MOL’s Declaration of Commerciality, signalling its intent to fully develop the Yumna reservoir, as well as explore for hydrocarbons elsewhere in the Block.

The Shelf Drilling Tenacious jack-up rig has been moved from the Yumna Field to the Zakhera exploration well location which is about 12 km to the south of the Yumna Field, it stated.

At the same time, to cater to the new crude oil volumes flowing from the Yumna reservoir, MOL has begun upgrading the production

facilities of its Mobile Offshore Production Unit (MOPU) deployed at site.

The processing capacity of the unit is being doubled to handle the additional volumes anticipated from all three Yumna production wells.

Dan Broström, Executive Chairman of Rex International, which holds a majority indirect stake in Masirah Oil, said, “We are very pleased with the Yumna 3 well initial results. The next step is to put all three production wells (Yumna 1, Yumna 2 and Yumna 3) on production simultaneously.

For this reason, the processing capacity on the Yumna Mobile Offshore Production Unit (MOPU) is being upgraded to handle up to 30,000 bpd. We expect the upgrade to be completed in March 2021. The operating costs for the field are estimated at \$80,000 per day, which with higher production levels, will translate into lower production cost per barrel.”

SOHAR Port and Freezone invites Tenderers in the following Tender

No.	Tender Ref.	Tender Title	Tender Fee OMR
1	2021/035	Engineering, Procurement and construction of a Non-Return Flap Valve System at the Outfall of the Storm Water Channel at Port of Sohar	RO 25/-

- Tenderers can request to receive the electronic tender documents 9:00 am on Sunday, 21/02/2020 until 4:00 pm on Thursday 04/03/2021.
- Tenderers to follow the below procedures and steps to obtain the electronic tender documents:
 - Step 1: Interested Tenderers should remit the stated tender fees as per the below bank details:

Account Name	Sohar Industrial Port Co
Account Number	3101-007970-500
Bank Name	Oman Arab Bank SAOC – Main Br
SWIFT	OMABOMRUXXX

Note: Bank transfers are the only mode of payment accepted
 - Step 2: Tenderers to send the following documents:
 - A request for the electronic tender documents
 - Scanned bank transfer
 - The firm's commercial registration documentsAll shall be communicated to the following e-mail address: sipc.procurement@soharportandfreezone.com
 - Step 3: Tenderers will receive the electronic tender documents
- The below procedure is still valid as of today for the submission of the bids. Due to COVID-19 restrictions and shall situation remains unchanged till the date of submission, tenderers will receive a circular with a very clear steps and procedure on the submission protocol.
- The Technical and Commercial proposals must be in separate, marked "Technical and Commercial" addressed to:

SOHAR Port and Freezone
Bid Opening Committee
Tender Reference No: **2020/035**
Tender Title: Engineering, Procurement and construction of a Non-Return Flap Valve System at the Outfall of the Storm Water Channel at Port of Sohar

- The Proposals should be submitted before **4:00pm on Thursday, 25/03/2021**
- SOHAR reserves the right to accept or reject any tender without assigning any reasons
- All SMES are requested to provide their Green Card along with the required documents
- For any clarification regarding the tenders please send an e-mail to : sipc.procurement@soharportandfreezone.com

soharportandfreezone.com

Business leaders on challenges of trading with EU

Since the start of the year, a raft of new requirements has made life increasingly difficult for UK businesses that trade with the European Union. On the surface, frictionless trade should have continued, but as the UK is no longer part of the EU Single Market and Customs Union, companies have been faced with an increased burden of bureaucracy.

In this two-part article, I highlight some of the problems that UK-based business leaders, suppliers and entrepreneurs face after the UK-EU's new trading agreement. Despite the government's pledge that the UK-EU trade deal would result in pain-free trade with the EU, problems have arisen.

Given the agreed zero tariff and zero quota regime, there have been widespread reports of disruption for UK companies

that trade with the EU since the Brexit transition period ended.

Smaller to medium businesses seem to have been hit the hardest as they grapple with the new paperwork requirements and additional costs.

Border Control: This has been a major problem. Since 11 pm on December 31, some goods, like agricultural products, have to undergo checks at UK-EU borders.

This has led to supermarket shortages in Northern Ireland, border disruption for Scottish seafood exporters and difficulties for professional musicians trying to travel to the EU.

"Get one thing wrong in the reams of new paperwork and goods can be impounded or fines levied. If you are selling your goods in multiple European countries that is hours more work now needed to make sure they sail through borders",



ANDY JALIL
andyjalil@aol.com

GIVEN THE AGREED ZERO TARIFF AND ZERO QUOTA REGIME, THERE HAVE BEEN WIDESPREAD REPORTS OF DISRUPTION FOR UK COMPANIES THAT TRADE WITH THE EU SINCE THE BREXIT TRANSITION PERIOD ENDED

said Selwyn Stein, Managing Director of London-based VAT reclamation firm VAT IT.

For example, UK meat exporters warned the government recently that post-Brexit changes at the border caused disruption to meat shipments crossing the channel. Tonnes of produce worth hundreds of thousands of pounds coming from the UK had been confiscated at EU ports due to companies not filling out the right paperwork.

It resulted in tonnes of meat being thrown out at EU borders. The new border checks and additional paperwork have caught many businesses by surprise.

This has led to some firms halting trade with the continent, such as luxury food store Fortnum & Mason, who stopped deliveries to Northern Ireland and countries in the European Union, while Debenhams shut

its online business in Ireland. Debenhams have since been in liquidation.

"Businesses have some difficult decisions to make in the coming months, they must decide on where best to send their goods into Europe, through which countries and by which type of transport", Stein added.

Deliveries: This has been another problem. Mark Elward, chief commercial officer at Huboo, a Bristol-based tech-driven fulfilment provider, said the late nature of the Brexit deal gave e-commerce businesses little time to get their head around the many administrative changes needed to go on trading internationally.

Elward said that during the first week post-Brexit, over 1,000 parcels at Huboo were missing the vital new commodity code required for carriers to ship them.

"An issue which can be rectified, but goes to show how easily errors are made", he said. Moreover, so-called Economic Operator Registration and Identification (EORI) numbers are required for importing and exporting goods to and from the EU.

Elward explained that the commodity codes now required post-Brexit are more complex, with the UK using the standard global six-digit format, and not the 8-digit minimum required by the EU. "Get the code wrong, and the item won't make it through customs and essentially won't reach the end-user.

A nightmare for an e-commerce business who are shipping to consumers who, due to the 'Amazon effect', have high expectations around delivery timings", he said. *(The writer is our foreign correspondent based in the UK)*

Bank Muscat Private: Redefining Private Banking in Oman



MUSCAT: Reaching out to Ultra High Net worth Individuals (UHNIs) and High Net worth Individuals (HNIs), Bank Muscat Private Banking offerings have been unmatched in the Sultanate for nearly two decades. Reflecting the bank's customer-centric vision "To serve you better, every day", these offerings include access to an exclusive Private Banking branch at the Bank Muscat Head Office.

All Private Banking clients have access to a dedicated Relationship Manager (RM) who is available to discuss their requirements and accordingly suggest wealth products. The RMs are backed by a strong team with multiple years of wealth management experience.

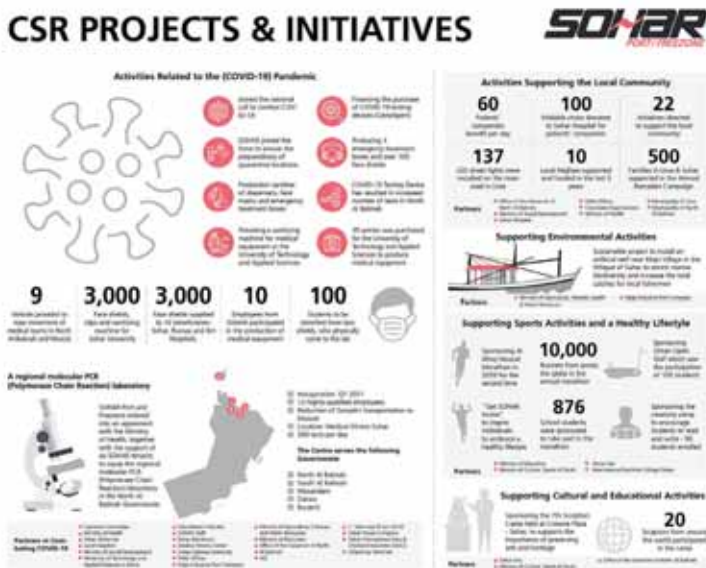
Abdulnasir al Raisi, DGM — Premier Banking, said: "Bank Muscat Private Banking has been a constant innovator in terms of new products and services in line with the bank's customer-centric vision. We follow the highest standards of professionalism conforming to international norms, standards and practices, which have been well recognized on the global stage with multiple awards being received over the past.

Private Banking has been steadily launching new and innovative services over the past many years for the benefits of its exclusive clientele."

BUSINESS REPORTER MUSCAT, FEB 23

Sohar Port and Freezone published its Corporate Social Responsibility report for the year 2020, which outlines the company's activities to support society and the environment, in accordance with its sustainable strategy plan.

Commenting on the issuance of the report, Mohsin al Jabri (pictured), Executive Manager — Corporate Affairs at Sohar Port and Freezone, said, "During the Covid-19 pandemic the last year we faced several challenges. That being said, we continued to enhance our efforts to reduce the negative impact on our employees, tenants and the local community. We were successful in mitigating the effects, together with the support and collaboration



of concerned entities, while simultaneously carrying out various activities on other fronts to support segments of society and to protect the environment.

We are delighted to announce our annual report, which

reinforces the commitment of Sohar towards focusing on social activities, in conjunction with our corporate efforts. Together, we look forward to another year of success in 2021."

The annual CSR report was



It outlines the company's activities to support society and the environment, in accordance with its sustainable strategy plan

divided into 5 sections. These included a focus on activities related to combating the effects of Covid-19 and the provision of support to the local community. Other sections comprise of sports initiatives to promote a healthy lifestyle, as well as

the support of cultural and environmental programmes. "Sohar seeks to strengthen its social efforts, in line with a sustainable strategy that aims to yield significant results in the long run.

Therefore, our focus areas are divided into several sectors that cover society, education, health, entrepreneurship and the environment.

These activities are implemented either as part of initiatives launched by Sohar or as a joint effort with other entities that share the same objectives. We believe that through the implementation of these programmes, we can strengthen cooperation with all our shareholders and tenants, in turn further enhancing the desired impact of these social activities", Mohsin added.

The best time to own a Lexus ES is now



MUSCAT: Lexus' most popular luxury sedan, the Lexus ES with its classic design, advanced features and premium luxury detailing, makes a fine mark on luxury enthusiasts. Those interested in owning the ES can look forward to free service 3 years/30,000 kms and free registration (Conditions apply. For more details, please visit the nearest Lexus showroom).

The provocative elegance of the design starts up front with the brand's signature grille, but adds individual cues that are unique to the ES such as the vertical grille

pattern and satin-plated trim and slim headlamps with distinctive L-shaped marker lights.

The Lexus ES line-up includes the ES300h, a Hybrid Electric model, which combines two power sources consisting of a petrol engine and two electric motors with zero-fuel consumption and carbon emissions producing a combined system output of 215 hp.

For more information, please visit www.lexusoman.com or www.youtube.com/lexusoman or www.facebook.com/LexusOmanSBA or instagram.com/oman.lexus/.

Lulu launches online delivery in Nizwa

MUSCAT: Lulu Oman has flagged off the operation of its online delivery service in Nizwa, bringing a world of products to customers' fingertips. The new channel has been launched keeping in mind the safety and convenience of online shoppers to meet the rising customer demand for online delivery services.

The commencement of the Nizwa operations follows the successful launch of similar operations across Muscat and Suhar. The online delivery store was inaugurated by Hamdan Naser Masoud, member of the Majlis AshShura, and Ali bin Saeed al Jamudi, senior official from the Nizwa Municipality, along with officials and staff of Lulu.

The operations have a modern infrastructure for more convenient handling of goods and is well equipped to cater to the needs of the customers around Nizwa. The new online store will enable hassle-free delivery of grocery and non-food products right at



customers' doorsteps.

Shoppers can browse and shop from an online selection of a range of products from everyday groceries, fresh food and dairy products to more trending electronics like mobiles, laptops, tablets, smartphones, mobile accessories to clothing & accessories, furniture, large & small appliances, home furnishings, as well as toys and household products.

An expansive fleet of specially designed vehicles will reach the orders to the customers' doorstep in a safe and hygienic environment. The vehicles are fitted with 3 temperature

controlled compartments for Frozen, Chilled and Ambient requirements.

Ananth A V, Regional Director of Lulu Hypermarkets Oman & India, said, "The launch of the online delivery demonstrates Lulu's continuous quest for innovation and commitment to serve its customers in the most efficient manner. The online sales is a response to the changes in customer behaviour with a website and app that features a unique assortment of the brands and values that Lulu is known for. We are excited for customers to experience the brand in this new way."



Facebook unbans Australia after changes to media content laws



A 3D printed Facebook logo is seen in front of displayed Australia's flag in this illustration photo. — Reuters

CANBERRA: Facebook said on Tuesday it will restore Australian news pages after negotiating changes with the government to a proposed law that forces tech giants to pay for media content displayed on their platforms.

Australia and the social media group have been locked in a standoff for more than a week after the government introduced legislation that challenged Facebook and Alphabet Inc's Google's dominance in the news content market.

Facebook blocked Australian users from sharing and viewing news content on its popular social media platform, drawing criticism from publishers and the government.

But after a series of talks between Treasurer Josh Frydenberg and Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, a concession deal has been struck, with Australian news expected to return to the social media site in coming days.

The issue has been widely watched internationally as other countries including Canada and Britain consider similar legislation. "Facebook has refriended Australia, and Australian news will be restored to the Facebook platform", Frydenberg said.

Frydenberg said Australia had been a "proxy battle for the world" as other jurisdictions engage with tech companies over a range of issues around news and content. While Big Tech and media outlets have battled over the right to news content in other jurisdictions, Australia's proposed laws are the most expansive and seen as a possible template for other nations.

"Facebook and Google have not hidden the fact that they know that the eyes of the world are on Australia, and that's why they have sought I think to get a code here that is workable", Frydenberg said.

— Reuters

HSBC curbs profit and payout ambitions, bets on Asia wealth

HONG KONG: HSBC Holdings PLC on Tuesday abandoned its long-term profitability target, and unveiled a revised strategy focused mainly on wealth management in Asia after the Covid-19 shock saw its annual profits drop sharply.

Citing the low interest rate environment and tough market conditions, HSBC ditched its goal of achieving a return on tangible equity of 10 to 12 per cent, and said instead it will aim for 10 per cent over the medium-term.

The moves by Europe's biggest bank underlined the tough outlook for the banking sector as low interest rates worldwide take their toll, even as a global markets rally boosted the prospects for the wealth management business.

The margin pressure and mounting losses in Europe have forced HSBC to redouble its focus on Asia which provided a dominant share of the bank's profits in 2020.

"The big structural shift that's gone on since we set out the plan last February has really been the shift in interest rates down toward zero in most markets that we do business in", Ewen Stevenson, HSBC's group Chief Financial Officer, said.

"If interest rates were 100 basis points higher today across the board it would improve our returns by 3 percentage points."

The bank said it would pay a



A man takes a picture of a bronze lion statue in front of HSBC's headquarters in Hong Kong. — Reuters

dividend of \$0.15 a share in cash, the first payout announced since 2019, after the Bank of England blocked all big lenders from paying dividends or buying back shares in 2020 to conserve capital.

However, it said it would stop the previous practice of paying a quarterly dividend, and target a payout ratio of between 40 per cent and 55 per cent of reported earnings per ordinary share from 2022 onwards, well below the level in recent years.

HSBC also said it will make

hefty cuts to some of its back office functions such as technology and operations, without specifying the number of jobs affected. The lender cut 11,000 jobs in 2020 and had signalled it would make further reductions.

The announcement came as HSBC reported profit before tax of \$8.78 billion for 2020, down 34 per cent from a year earlier, but just above the \$8.33 billion average of analysts' estimates compiled by the bank.

HSBC's Hong Kong shares

were up 0.55 per cent by 0750 GMT, lagging the benchmark Hang Seng index as investors considered the bank's dividend cut and modest strategic ambitions.

Investors were resigned to HSBC's more modest ambitions and growth target. "It's hard to have high ambitions in this climate, or at least dangerous to declare them if they exist", said Hugh Young, Managing Director at Aberdeen Standard, the bank's 9th-largest shareholder.

— Reuters



Cattle shelters from the cold wind on the side of a pump jack array in Texas. — Reuters

Oil prices jump as US output struggles to fully restart

SINGAPORE: Oil prices jumped by more than \$1 on Tuesday, underpinned by optimism over Covid-19 vaccine rollouts and lower output as US supplies were slow to return after a deep freeze in Texas shut in crude production last week.

Shale oil producers in the southern United States could take at least two weeks to restart the more than 2 million barrels per day (bpd) of crude output that shut down because of cold weather, as frozen pipes and power supply interruptions slow their recovery, sources said.

Brent crude was up \$1.10, or 1.7 per cent, at \$66.34 a barrel after earlier hitting a high of \$66.79. US crude rose 92 cents, or 1.5 per cent, to \$62.62 a barrel, having reached a session high of \$63. — Reuters

UK unemployment edges up to 5.1 per cent

LONDON: Britain's unemployment rate edged up to 5.1 per cent in the final quarter of 2020, official data showed on Tuesday, as coronavirus lockdowns slashed economic activity.

The rate compared with 5.0 per cent in the three months to the end of November, which was a 4.5-year high, the Office for National Statistics said in a statement.

Analysts expect unemployment to surge when the UK government's furlough scheme paying the bulk of wages for millions of private-sector workers comes to a stop — as currently planned — at the end of April.

Finance Minister Rishi Sunak on Tuesday hinted at further employment support in the coming months as England begins



A person walks past a Job Centre Plus office in London. — Reuters

to exit its third lockdown form early March.

Details are expected to come in his annual budget next week. "I know how incredibly tough the

past year has been for everyone and every job lost is a personal tragedy", the chancellor of the exchequer said in a statement.

"That's why throughout the

I know how incredibly tough the past year has been for everyone and every job lost is a personal tragedy. That's why throughout the crisis, my focus has been on doing everything we can to protect jobs and livelihoods

RISHI SUNAK
Finance Minister

crisis, my focus has been on doing everything we can to protect jobs

and livelihoods.

"At the budget next week I will set out the next stage of our plan for jobs and the support we'll provide through the remainder of the pandemic and our recovery."

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson on Monday set out a four-step plan to ease coronavirus restrictions, expressing hope that life could get back to normal by the end of June. He outlined a "gradual and cautious" approach to lifting curbs in England, starting with the reopening of schools from March 8 and non-essential retail from April 12.

The ONS on Tuesday added that at 5.1 per cent, the unemployment rate was 1.3 percentage points higher compared with the final quarter of 2019. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

LONDON

EasyJet sees flight, holiday bookings soar

EasyJet said flight bookings jumped over 300 per cent and holidays bookings surged by more than 600 per cent week on week, after Britain laid out plans for international travel to restart, hinting that borders could reopen from mid-May.

The Britain-based airline said trips from the UK to beach destinations such as Malaga, Alicante and Palma in Spain, Faro in Portugal and Crete, Greece, were the most popular destinations with holidaymakers



keenest to travel in August. July and September were the next most popular months.

The bookings came despite ongoing uncertainty over exactly how and when international routes can reopen. — Reuters

WASHINGTON

Lucid Motors to go public in \$24 bn SPAC deal

Luxury electric vehicle maker Lucid Motors on Monday agreed to go public by merging with blank-check firm Churchill Capital IV Corp in a deal that valued the combined company at a pro-forma equity value of \$24 billion.

Lucid is the latest firm to tap the initial public offering market, with investors rushing into the EV sector, spurred by the rise of Tesla Inc and with emissions regulations toughening in Europe and elsewhere.

The deal, which has a transaction equity value of \$11.75 billion, includes a \$2.1 billion cash contribution from CCIV and a private investment in public equity investment of 2.5 billion from investors.

Other players in the sector went public through mergers with so-called special purpose acquisition companies (SPACs) last year. While some deals such as Fisker have delivered well, others such as Nikola have given up short-term gains. — Reuters

BEIJING

China's new home prices grow at faster pace

New home prices in China grew at a faster pace in January, driven by red-hot demand in the country's mega cities despite several rounds of government cooling measures.

Average new home prices in 70 major cities increased 0.3 per cent in January from a month earlier, the fastest growth since September based on government data.

That compared with an uptick of 0.1 per cent in December. On a year-on-year basis, new



home prices rose 3.9 per cent, quickening from a 3.8 per cent gain in December.

The data showed 53 cities reported monthly growth, with the number rising from 42 in December. — AFP

features



Why Oman is the perfect place to fall in love with hiking

Before cars became popular in Oman, Yusuf al Muqimi and his friends used to explore places in Al Sharqiyah by hiking when they were younger. They've seen Wadi Shab and Wadi Tiwi before tourists even heard of it. As an adult, Yusuf fully embraced his love for the outdoors and adventure and specified the reasons why Oman is the best place to go into hiking... **P20**

INSIDE STORIES

HUMAN INTEREST



STAR FRENCH FLORIST WEATHERS PANDEMIC

There was a time, pre-pandemic, that Thierry Boutemy's flowery creations graced catwalks, magazine covers and celebrity weddings... **Story on Page 19**

CHANGING WORLD



LITHUANIA'S LOCKED-DOWN BALLET AND OPERA TAKE TO TIKTOK

Lithuania's national opera and ballet theatre has turned to TikTok to reach audiences during lockdown, attracting millions of views to a performance of a sea shanty by its singers... **Story on Page 19**

READ



THE SANATORIUM BY SARAH PEARSE

Elin Warner must find her estranged brother's fiancée, who goes missing as a storm approaches a hotel that was once a sanatorium in the Swiss Alps.

TRAVEL TALES



SENEGAL'S SAVANNAH JOCKEY DREAMS OF INTERNATIONAL GLORY

A head shorter than his peers, Fallou Diop quickly vanishes into the crowd of jockeys preparing for early morning drills in the western Senegalese village of Niaga... **Story on Page 18**

BOOKS



ADVENTURES WITH DIVOT & SWISH PROMOTES POSITIVE IMPACT OF SPORTS

Your children can travel the globe, meet new people, learn about various cultures and experience exciting adventures with Divot and Swish, the relatable stars of the new children's book series, Adventures with Divot & Swish... **Story on Page 18**



BOOKS

Adventures with Divot & Swish promotes positive impact of sports



Your children can travel the globe, meet new people, learn about various cultures and experience exciting adventures with Divot and Swish, the relatable stars of the new children's book series, Adventures with Divot & Swish. Divot is a golf-loving character who appreciates meeting new people from different places and cultures. Her friend Swish is a basketball fanatic who is a little shy, but always loves trying other sports and activities. In each adventure, the duo meets a new friend who introduces them to a sport they've never played before, and they experience the many emotions that accompany the conquering of these challenges. Through support and encouragement from their friend, Divot and Swish are able to gain valuable skills and develop "superpowers" through playing sports.

"With all of the negativity in our world, Divot and Swish bring positivity, an openness to learning, and a fresh look at the opportunity to use sport and physical activity to help make the world a better place," says author Beth Brown, who is passionate about positive youth development through sport.

The first in the series, Adventures with Divot & Swish in Costa Rica, takes readers to the tropics where the duo meets Sammy the Surfer, who takes them through the lush jungle to a beach-side town where he'll teach them how to surf. Like many children would be, Divot and Swish are nervous about surfing and afraid of what could happen if they fall off their surfboards. They

follow Sammy's lead and work to learn how to stand, balance and paddle.

Apprehensive and unsure of their abilities, Divot and Swish watch Sammy take on the waves before trying it themselves. Will they find their superpower of courage so they can have an incredible adventure surfing with the fish?

While the series is written primarily for elementary school-aged children from 5 to 11, kids of all ages will identify with the inspirational characters, appreciate the fun-filled adventures, and enjoy learning about new places and activities. The series also gives parents, caregivers and educators an opportunity to intentionally and positively impact the young people in their lives through sharing the stories of Divot and Swish.

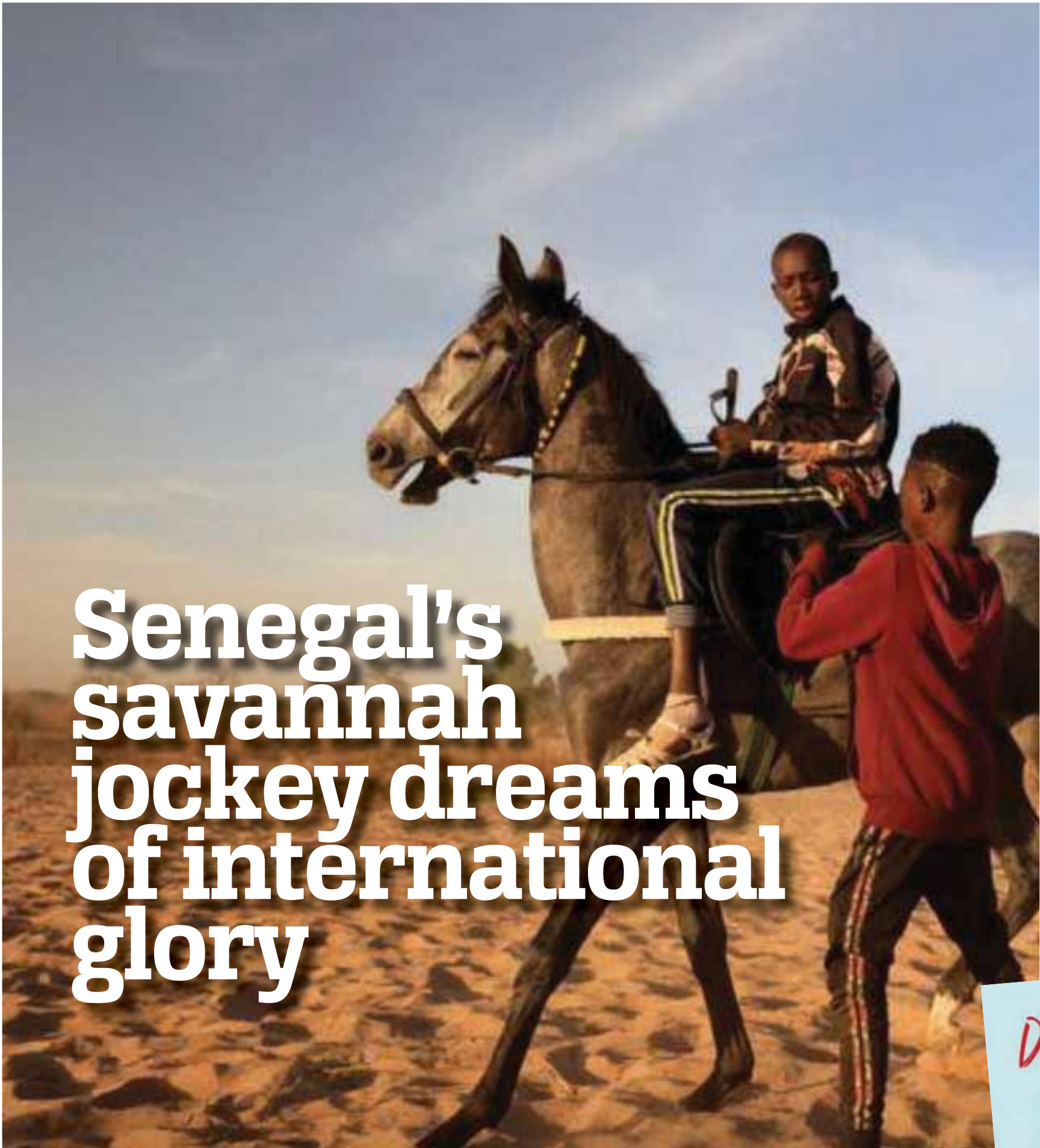
Author Beth Brown is a life-long educator on a mission to inspire families and kids to have fun, become more active and learn life lessons through sports in her children's book series Adventures with Divot & Swish. After picking up a basketball at age 2 and swinging her first golf club at age 8, Beth was hooked on sports. Her youth sport participation paved the way for her collegiate success as a member of the University of Oklahoma basketball and conference champion women's golf teams.

As her love for sports continued, she realised the unique opportunity sport has to impact not only physical abilities, but life skill development as well. Since earning her PhD in sports psychology at the University of Kansas, Beth has gone on to influence and impact thousands through her roles as a golf coach, an educational programme developer at The First Tee and LPGA-USGA Girls Golf, and founder and owner of the consulting agency, Team Aureus.

When she isn't writing the next adventure for Divot and Swish, Beth enjoys cheering on her beloved Sooners, riding her bike, and spending time with family, friends and puppy Truman. She is an enrolled citizen of the Cherokee Nation and lives in Norman, Oklahoma.



Senegal's savannah jockey dreams of international glory



A head shorter than his peers, Fallou Diop quickly vanishes into the crowd of jockeys preparing for early morning drills in the western Senegalese village of Niaga.

When the racing begins, however, his crouched silhouette is far ahead of the field, aided by an effortless riding style.

"When I start riding I get a bit stressed, but after a moment, it's over," Diop says. "At the time of the race, I'm only thinking of victory."

Diop is one of Senegal's most promising jockeys, having won the country's top racing prize when he was just 17. He hopes to begin racing in France next year, realising a dream coveted by some of Senegal's foremost riders.

Horses are an integral part of life in Senegal. Horse-drawn buggies are ubiquitous across the country, and over the past 50 years competitive racing has developed into a national pastime.

"It's a passion in my family," Diop said. "Since my grandfather we've supported horses, then my father after him."

In villages like Niaga, where Diop lives, horse feed and supply shops line the main roads, and fields are dotted with men on horse-back.

Adorned with colourful ceramic tiles on a busy back street, the house Diop shares with 12 family members is getting a new roof thanks to the money from his winnings.

Depending on the number of horses in a race, Diop can



earn up to \$600 per victory. Average monthly wages in Senegal were estimated at around \$180 at the end of 2019.

Diop's success is a source of pride for his father, who spent much of his life driving a horse and buggy around Niaga. His older brother, who also hoped to be a jockey before a growth spurt got in the way, boasts of Diop's achievements to visitors.

"It's the elders who taught us everything since we were young, and that's how I became passionate about horses," Diop said.

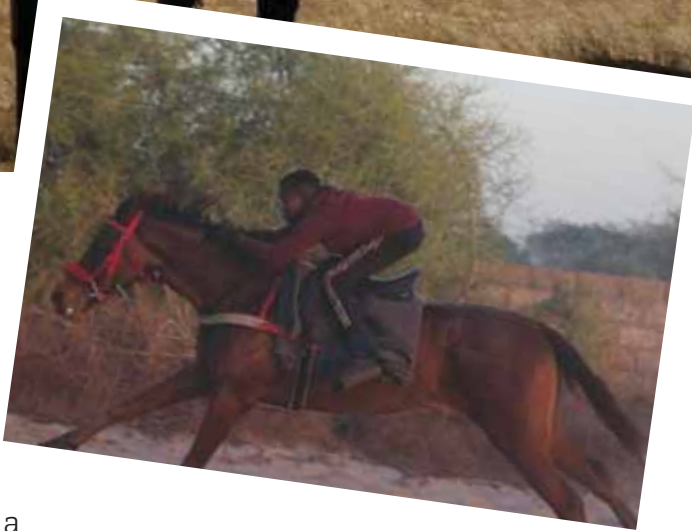
Diop, who has dropped formal schooling, was 12 when he left a tailoring apprenticeship to pursue racing. According to his father, he was so determined that he walked 10 miles to enrol in the nearest training pro-

gramme.

To day, Diop and other jockeys in Niaga are taught by Adama Bao, whose family has maintained a stud farm near the salty shores of Senegal's Lac Rose for three generations. "Diop is very gifted," Bao said. "He could compete up to 50 years with his weight and size."

Bao plans to send Diop to France for three months in early 2022 to race for a French-Senegalese breeder. He would have travelled last year, Bao said, had it not been for the Covid-19 pandemic.

On a recent Sunday afternoon, Diop's skills were put to the test at the racetrack in



Thiès, Senegal's third largest city.

Dressed in vibrant yellow and blue, Diop calmly mounted his steed and led it towards the track.

He went on to finish first in three of his five races that day, taking home nearly \$1,000 in winnings.

"I want to be the best jockey in a country other than mine," he said.

"In Morocco or France, anywhere there is horse racing." — Reuters



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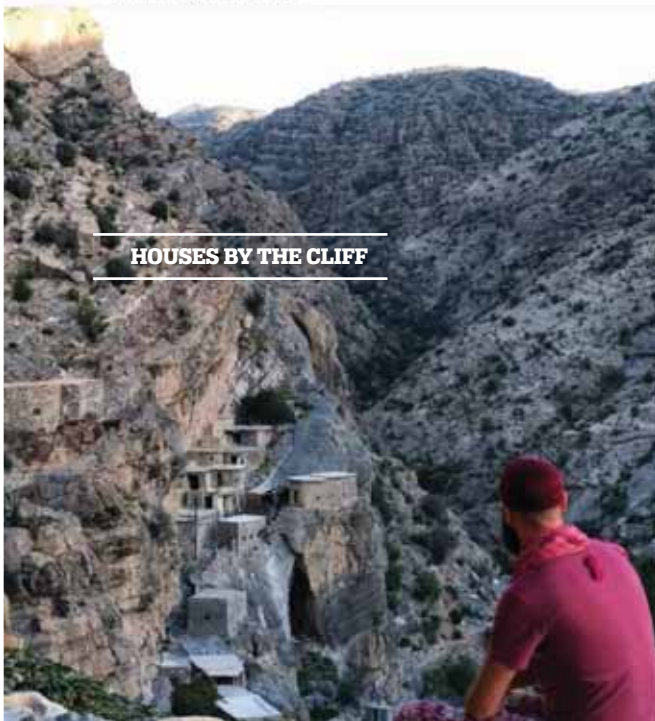
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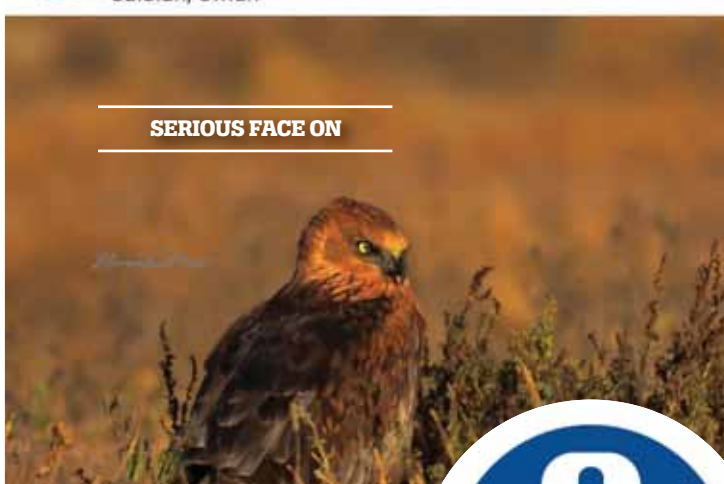
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CHANGING WORLD

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Star French florist weathers pandemic

There was a time, pre-pandemic, that Thierry Boutemy's flowery creations graced catwalks, magazine covers and celebrity weddings.

Now, of course, the French florist — who has worked for Sofia Coppola, Lady Gaga and the fashion house Hermes — is having to weather the crisis like anyone else.

But his passion for petals has not withered.

For more than 25 years, Boutemy has run his boutique in Brussels, a cob-walled den where Italian poppies, Dutch hellebores and tulips from the south of France perfume the air.

All are imported — "Belgium doesn't produce anything in winter", he says — but they are all blooming, alive, from soil,

That attention to detail and devotion to nature means Boutemy sources most of his plants from small growers discovered on the sidelines of the Royal FloraHolland Auction House — the biggest in the world — in the Dutch city of Aalsmeer, near Amsterdam

free from chemicals and of verified provenance.

That attention to detail and devotion to nature means Boutemy sources most of his

plants from small growers discovered on the sidelines of the Royal FloraHolland Auction House — the biggest in the world — in the Dutch city of Aalsmeer, near Amsterdam.

"That market is a disaster", he told AFP.

"It's an industry-scale war machine that works like a poultry battery farm. It's full-on commercialism", he said, describing a technique used by some to colour flowers by soaking them in dye.

"Instead of buying a bunch of flowers at a supermarket check-out, it's better to buy a single flower for three euros", he argued, complaining how horticulturists are being squeezed by the sector's industrialisation.

NO 'FASHION FLORIST'

Despite all that, Boutemy is forced at times to turn to the Aalsmeer auction market to complete artistic contracts, such as when he was tapped to provide a sumptuous peony display in the movie "Marie Antoinette" by Sofia Coppola — in the middle of winter.

That project, he said, remains his "most beautiful career memory".

Boutemy turned for inspiration to paintings by an 18th-century artist, Anne Vallayer-Coster, renowned for her skillful depiction of flowers, who caught the eye of King Louis XVI of France's wife Marie Antoinette.

The 52-year-old, wearing an orange jacket and sporting a curated beard, rejects the label "fashion florist" that some have thrown his way because of his work for couture houses such as Lanvin, Hermes and Dries Van Noten.

"I'm not at all interested in fashion, actually", he laughed.

What he prefers is "people

who sweep me away in their passion; sometimes maybe it's not to my taste but I have fun trying to understand what's going on in their mind."

He has teamed up several times with big-name fashion photographer Mario Testino, notably for a 2012 *Vogue* magazine cover of Lady Gaga for which he improvised an arch made of flowers and plants.

While waiting for normal activity to return, he is currently working on a film idea by an Italian director looking to tell the story of an eccentric who would like to build a palace made entirely of vegetation.

GARDEN 'REFUGE'

Boutemy's own floral artistry grew from a start learning horticulture as a 17-year-old. He quickly took to "fragile flowers".

He now cultivates his own garden, which he regards as a "refuge" to escape the world.

In his shop there is a small corner given over to medicinal plants — eucalyptus and heather bloom — that he had brought in recently for an arrangement for a sick bride-to-be who ended up cancelling her wedding because of Covid.

Events make up the mainstay of Boutemy's business, but the successive lockdowns and restrictions Europe has seen under the pandemic "have thrown us back 25 years".

"It's like having to start all over again, to do things simply", he said, before adding: "That's not so bad in itself."

The sudden rise in people having to spend much more time at home has meant "a lot of people want to have flowers, as flowers give life to a home", he said.

"In the end, that has given me a lot of happiness." — **AFP**

Lithuania's locked-down ballet and opera take to TikTok



Lithuania's national opera and ballet theatre has turned to TikTok to reach audiences during lockdown, attracting millions of views to a performance of a sea shanty by its singers.

The 59-second clip, featuring singers performing in the opera foyer, was watched 2.4 million times on the social network site since it was posted on February 7.

"Our secret is simple -

streak.

On Thursday, five ballerinas in tutus danced on the main national opera stage in front of around 1,000 empty seats, filming a TikTok "silhouette" video which involved dancing through five standalone door frames.

"Our advantage is that we can do simple things of very high quality. Many similar TikTok videos are filmed in a toilet. And here we are, on a nation-



we got lucky", said Gediminas Seduikis, a director at the theatre.

"We fired an email to all our singers with the idea, and some of them showed up at the agreed time to sing", said Seduikis. "That someone else liked the result is pure luck."

All public performances at the theatre have been cancelled since October, amid a lockdown designed to slow the spread of the coronavirus in the nation of 2.7 million people.

The theatre, which usually gets about 150,000 visitors per year, wants to extend its lucky

al opera stage, with five megastar ballerinas, 60 kilowatts of lighting and all the professional staff", said Seduikis.

The towering stage backdrop was draped in white cloth which was then illuminated in different colours from lights above.

Seduikis filmed 10 takes of the dance performance, consulting with a choreographer who guided the dancers.

"It's opera competing against ballet. Everyone can't wait to see who gets more views", said Jonas Sakalauskas, General Manager of the theatre. — **Reuters**



Why Oman is the perfect place to fall in love with hiking

TEXT BY MOHAMMED AL SHABIBI

THE SULTANATE offers a variety of adventure for everyone living in it. From the scenic coasts of the Sea of Oman in the southern part of the country to the wondrous Al Hajar mountains crossing across its interior, the activities one can do depends on your imagination.

But to many who already experienced the country, without a doubt, they would agree that it's one of the best places in the world to take a hike.

It is for this beauty and diverse destinations that led Yusuf al Muqimi to fully embrace and fall in love with hiking — a hobby he said that brings amazing rewards especially in the form of beautiful valleys, awe-inspiring wadis and challenging hiking trails.

"The love for hiking started when I was a child. I was living in a village which forced me to frequently walk to go to other destinations", Yusuf shared.

"Back in the day when cars and other vehicles were still scarce in Oman, we would walk 5 km from my village to Wadi Shab for swimming and relaxation. The Wadi Shab that many tourists enjoy today wasn't as developed back in the day. But we already know the beautiful waterfall inside the cave. When the sun illuminates that small cave, it was a wonder to us and it is in discovering this beauty that has inspired me to explore more and venture into the different hiking trails in Oman", he shared.

Yusuf said that Tiwi alone, even back in the day is already a hiking favourite.

"The high mountains on one side and with the rough waves on the other side, the cruel winds shaping many of the coastal cliffs, it shaped Tiwi to become this geological wonder for hiking", he said.

Tiwi is a town located in the Wilayat of Sur, around 140 km

from Muscat. For Yusuf, exploring the trails between Wadi Shab and Wadi Tiwi eventually led to enjoying famous hiking areas like Jabal Akhdhar, Majlis Al Jinn, Jabal Shams and others.

Although his village is located in quite a far place, this did not stop him from accepting any hiking challenge wherever the trail may be in the Sultanate.

"The love for adventure and excitement made me meet with people who eventually became my friends like coach Ali al Shuaibi, founder of Mountains Masters Team Adventure. Today, I'm working with him as an assistant leader since 2018", he shared.

"Hiking in Oman poses their own sets of danger. One needs a good team as much as possible to make sure that these risks are lessened. From my experience, I'm so glad to be part of a team that is more organised. We have yearly plans which are clear and I am really happy about the amazing camaraderie", he said.

During hikes, Yusuf is usually at the end of the queue watching after participants from the back of the group. He ensures that no one is left behind and that everyone gets to their destination safely. He also assists in medical emergencies which are to be expected from outdoor activities.

For Yusuf, it is a disservice to one's experience in Oman if one does not go on a hike. He believes that by taking a hike across the different terrains in the country, one is offered a closer look at the Sultanate's nature as well as its people.

