

Oman, Sri Lanka review ties

COLOMBO: President Gotabaya Rajapaksa of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, received Shaikh Jumaa bin Hamdan al Malik al Shuhi, the Sultanate's Ambassador to Sri Lanka, at the presidential palace on Saturday. The meeting reviewed the distinguished relationship binding the two friendly countries and topics of common concern. **P 2**



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OMAN OBSERVER

www.omanobserver.om editor@omanobserver.om

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DJOKOVIC PULLS OUT OF MIAMI TO SPEND TIME WITH FAMILY



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SUGAR REFINERY, FOOD CLUSTER PROJECTS TO MAKE HEADWAY



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IRAQI TRUFFLE HUNTERS UNEARTH DESERT HARVEST



MUSCAT

HIS MAJESTY GREET'S NAMIBIA PRESIDENT

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

TUNISIA PRAISES OMAN'S POLICY

Azzedine el Tayse, Ambassador of the Republic of Tunisia to the Sultanate, praised the Sultanate's policy under the leadership of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, describing it as wise and balanced. Speaking to ONA on the occasion of Tunisia's Independence Anniversary, the Tunisian ambassador said that His Majesty the Sultan supports efforts aimed at enhancing cooperation between the two brotherly countries especially in the economic sphere. He also praised the response of Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry in supporting the economic ties between Oman and Tunisia. The ambassador added that the expos organised between Oman and Tunisia have contributed widely to the promoting of products, however the pandemic has hindered the organisation of expos, hoping that the upcoming period will see the return of those expos after the end of the Covid-19 pandemic. **SEE P2**

Now apply online for holding sales

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 20

The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) announced that the applications for holding consumer sales promotions, offers, discounts, marketing cards and advertising brochures, will be transferred to the electronic portal 'Invest Easy' as part of the facilitations and improvements of the services rendered by the ministry.

The ministry affirmed that the procedure will contribute to enhancing the public-private partnership with a view to encouraging investments in line

with the ministry's objectives to stimulate the national economy and attract local capitals and foreign investments to help achieve the goals of Oman Vision 2040.

The move comes within the framework of the ministry's plan aimed at modernising the services that fall under its remit with a view to keeping pace with the economic and commercial changes and expansions witnessed by the Sultanate's markets. It also aims to conform to the local laws and legislations governing the market and to ensure the implementation of the Sultanate's commitments to regional and international conventions.



People sit in the sun in the Palais Royal garden in Paris on the first day of a new lockdown. — AFP

Paris begins new lockdown to stop spread of Covid

PARIS: A third of France's population was under a new partial lockdown on Saturday to stop the spread of Covid-19, as some European countries resumed AstraZeneca vaccinations following an all-clear from EU regulators and the WHO. The pandemic is still speeding up worldwide, with the number of new global coronavirus infections rising by 14 per cent over the last week

compared to the previous week, according to the data.

THIRD WAVE

Fighting to prevent yet another wave of the virus, several countries in Europe went back into partial lockdown on Saturday — with Poland, parts of Ukraine and some French regions all waking up to tight new restrictions. — AFP



Bee happy, farmers creating sweet buzz during pandemic

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

One of the positive outcomes of the pandemic is the way how local farming is thriving and giving the local products a double-digit growth as farmers are getting time to spend with their farming activities over the months.

There has been 9.8 per cent increase in the activities related to agriculture and fishery sectors during the pandemic and the volume reached RO 571 million. At the end of September 2019, it was RO 520.1 million, according to a data released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

Various crops and other farming activities like, honey beekeeping, is certainly a cash crop for Omani farmers. Bees are grown in modern square

“Beekeeping has been thriving in our locality and a large number of farmers found it greatly lucrative and added more beehives to their existing collections

AL NABHANI

boxes which are more popular for their efficiency while bee colonies are maintained by many locals.

LUCRATIVE BUSINESS

Abdurahiman al Nabhani, an apiarist who keeps large number of honeybees on his farm in Dakhiliyah Governorate, is busy nurturing and

tapping the honey for both domestic as well as commercial purposes. He gets at least 30 to 40 kilos of natural honey a month from the beehives that adorn the farm.

“Beekeeping has been thriving in our locality and a large number of farmers found it greatly lucrative and added more beehives to their existing collections. It's truly a cash crop at the least investments”, Al Nabhani, who owns his farms in wilayat Imti, told the *Observer*.

There are two main types of honey in Oman which have got local and international markets alike. Named Sidr and Smer after the trees that offer their precious nectar, they are high in demand. Samr is dark in colour and thick. Samr is harvested in summer, whereas Sidr is harvested in winter and is light in both colour and flavour.

INSIDE



ASIAN NEIGHBOURS INCREASINGLY CRITICAL OF MYANMAR MILITARY

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BIDEN CONDEMNS VIOLENCE AGAINST ASIAN-AMERICANS

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KAUSHALENDRA SINGH
@patkaushal

The man who has given prime time of his life to a language is worried over not much progress in decoding the scripts. He is worried because the elders who have some clue about the extinct 'Shahri' language are passing away, and feels like time is running out of his hands.

Ali bin Ahmed bin Ali bin Mahash al Shahri, 73, took up the task of decoding the scripts of a language, the link of which has been found in Oman's southern province Dhofar and Colorado, a western US state.

He has recently been conferred the Order of Merit, First Class, from His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, for his contributions in the fields of Oman's heritage and



culture. The 'language man' of Oman is currently working on nine books, which are almost in the final stages of publishing.

HOW TO LEARN

“The books are on dictionaries of Shahri spoken words into Arabic; Shahri-Arabic folklores, a compilation of proverbs in Shahri and explanation in English; about local handicrafts; and how

to learn Shahri for Arabic and English speakers”, he said.

Ali al Shahri has travelled to several countries in search of an answer, but nothing substantial has come to his hands except for some more shreds of evidence that make him believe more strongly that one day he would be able to find proper scripts for 'Shahri' language, which is available only in spoken form.

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Tunisian ambassador praises Sultanate’s policy

MUSCAT: Azzedine el Tayse, Ambassador of the Republic of Tunisia to the Sultanate, has praised the Sultanate’s policy under the leadership of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, describing it as wise and balanced.

Speaking to Oman News Agency (ONA) on the occasion of Tunisia’s Independence Anniversary, the Tunisian ambassador said that His Majesty the Sultan supports efforts aimed at enhancing cooperation between the two brotherly countries especially in the economic sphere, citing the possibility of opening direct air flights or sea trips between the two countries as a lot of Omani products are in high demand in Tunisia and vice versa. He praised the response of Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) in supporting the economic ties

The Tunisian ambassador said that His Majesty the Sultan supports efforts aimed at enhancing cooperation between the two brotherly countries especially in the economic sphere

between Oman and Tunisia.

The ambassador added that the expos organised by Oman and Tunisia have contributed towards promotion of products. Though the current conditions experienced by the world countries and the impact of Covid-19 have hindered the organisation of expos, the ambassador hoped that the upcoming period will see the return of those expos after the end



of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The ambassador said: “We are looking forward, through visits and meetings, to signing many agreements and programmes that have been prepared in various fields. The Omani-Tunisian Joint

Committee will convene this year for consultation in various fields including culture and economy and will sign agreements and approve programmes. Besides, the fourth cycle of political consultation will also be held in Tunisia this

year after being delayed due to Covid-19.”

The Tunisian ambassador noted that the Sultanate-Tunisia relationships are deeply rooted in history dating back to the time when the Azd tribes set off from Oman during the Islamic conquests reaching Africa and spreading Islam in Tunisia, and they were warmly welcomed by the Tunisian people. He added that many Omanis had settled in Tunisia and set up civilisational exchange between the two sides.

The relationship between the two brotherly nations have developed since the late Sultan Qaboos bin Said ascended the throne by signing many agreements and memoranda of understanding in various fields, the ambassador said.

The ambassador referred to

the visit of the Tunisian President Kais Saied to the Sultanate to offer condolences on the death of Sultan Qaboos bin Said making his first visit outside of Tunisia. He affirmed that the Tunisian president values the civilisational rapprochement between the Sultanate of Oman and Tunisia and the importance of bolstering relations between the two countries, particularly in the fields of economy and commerce. He said that trade exchange between Oman and Tunisia stands at \$36 million.

The Ambassador of Tunisia to the Sultanate expressed his thanks and appreciation to the Omani government under the leadership of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik for the attention and the generous hospitality the Tunisian community is receiving in the Sultanate. — ONA

■ SRI LANKAN PRESIDENT RECEIVES SULTANATE’S ENVOY



COLOMBO: President Gotabaya Rajapaksa of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, received Shaikh Jumaa bin Hamdan al Malik al Shuhi, the Sultanate’s Ambassador to Sri Lanka, at the presidential palace on Saturday. The meeting reviewed the distinguished relationship binding the two friendly countries and topics of common concern. — ONA

Syrian minister visits National Museum

MUSCAT: Dr Faisal al Miqdad, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates of Syria and his accompanying delegation, visited the National Museum on Saturday as part of his official visit to the Sultanate.

The guest was received by Jamal bin Hassan al Musawi, Secretary-General of the National Museum.

The minister viewed the Syrian archaeological collectibles and palmyra pieces that were conserved by the experts of the National Museum with 131 Syrian archaeological pieces restored after being affected during the Syrian crisis. Coordination with the State Hermitage Museum in Russia is under way to restore nine palmyra pieces.

The minister and his delegation viewed the Maritime History gallery of the National Museum, the original manuscripts of “Kitāb al-fawāid fi ilm al-bahr wa-al-qawāid” (The Book of the Benefits of the Principles and Foundations of Seamanship), by the Omani navigator Ahmad bin Majid al Sa’adi currently on one-year loan from the Al Assad National Library in Syria. — ONA



Embassy in Tokyo monitoring Omani’s condition after quake

TOKYO: The Sultanate’s embassy in Tokyo said that it is closely following the condition of Omani citizens after an earthquake struck north-eastern Japan, calling upon Omani citizens to take precautions and to comply with the instructions issued by the local authorities.

In comments to Oman News Agency (ONA), Dr Mohammed bin Said al Busaidy, Sultanate’s Ambassador to Japan, said the embassy issued a circular to all Omani students and will contact them by phone for reassurance.

He explained that the

majority of Omani students are residing in the south of Tokyo while the earthquake struck north-east of the country.

The quake hit the Miyagi Prefecture on Saturday and had a magnitude of 7.2 at a depth of 60 km. The earthquake shook buildings in the capital Tokyo for 10 seconds.

Japan Meteorological Agency issued an alert for the northern prefectures and coastal areas of Miyagi which overlooks the Pacific. The authorities issued a 1-metre high tsunami warning for the country’s northeast coast.

— ONA

■ FROM PAGE 1

Working against time to decode ancient Omani script

“This language is quite popular in Dhofar and a section of people practice it in their day-to-day communication. I interact with youngsters and tell them to practice the language so that the evidence of the language remains even after the passing away of the elders,” he says with a sense of brimming hope.

He travelled to the UK and USA to give lectures and present papers in support of the Sahri language.

Asked about the progress, the man who is doing research for the last 36 years and himself approaching 74, says, “Lots of evidence have been found, collected and documented but still not fully established.”

He drops a hint that the language’s script found in Dhofar and Colorado, might be present-day ‘Sahri’ which is known also as ‘Jabbali’ to the people who live in mountain areas.

3 months jail for driving with cancelled licence

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 20

Driving a vehicle with a cancelled licence or a withdrawn plate number or with revoked or cancelled driver’s licence is an offence punishable by imprisonment for a period of up to three months and fine of RO 500 or by either one of these two sentences.

Traffic Law defines a vehicle licence as an official permit issued by the Directorate General of Traffic or specialised authority,

which entitles one to drive a vehicle on the road throughout its validity period.

The owner of the vehicle shall renew a vehicle licence after the payment of the renewal fees and before the licence expiry date. Otherwise, the fine shall be imposed proportionally depending on the delay period. Moreover, after the elapse of 30 days from the licence’s expiry date, the vehicle may be impounded, and its running licence may be withdrawn if it is apprehended while moving on the road.

According to Oman Public Prosecution, “Traffic law in Oman defines a road as any path accessible for public movement whether for pedestrians, materials or livestock. It includes roads, hard shoulders, streets, yards, passages, tunnels, and bridges, which the people may cross. Any vehicle stunt on roads or places not designated for such purpose is an offence punishable with imprisonment for a period of up to three months and a fine that extends to RO 500 or by either one of these two sentences.

‘Normal life likely by year-end despite surge’

VINOD NAIR

@vinot_nair

Despite figures showing a surge in the number of Covid-19 patients in hospitals, there are indications that life will return to normal in the Sultanate by the year-end, said a top official.

Dr Mohammad bin Saif al Hosani, Under-Secretary for Health Affairs and member of the Supreme Committee, said that the Sultanate will immunise nearly 30 per cent of the population by the end of June, and around 70 by the year-end.

“We have extended the interval between the two doses to 10 weeks and there is a plan to use a health passport to travel between countries and it is under study,” he said in an interview.

“While more batches are expected to arrive in the coming days, vaccines will be widely available from summer. European studies have shown that a single dose is sufficient to protect against admission to intensive care or death.”

He said that the number of vaccinated people in the Sultanate has reached 91,000 and added that we are now at the beginning of the third wave. “We hope everyone will abide by the commitment to limit the rise in injuries.”



“We have extended the interval between the two doses to 10 weeks and there is a plan to use a health passport to travel between countries and it is under study”

DR MOHAMMAD BIN SAIF AL HOSANI

Under-Secretary for Health Affairs

He added that the Sultanate is working to provide about a quarter of a million doses of coronavirus vaccine by the end of this month.

The Sultanate, which has a more stringent system in choosing vaccines, is working to provide 5,400,000 doses during this year.

Meanwhile, Khalid al Zadjali, a media personality, urged all those who meet the conditions for receiving the vaccine to start taking it as soon as possible.

“Only when our society is vaccinated, we gradually return to our normal condition.”

He added, “We must join hands and not turn to any rumours or any skepticism about the vaccine. History has shown that vaccines have contributed to the reduction of many diseases known at that time.”

Yousuf al Hooti, a journalist, said, “Everyone must take the matter seriously, and we must trust our health measures that strongly support vaccination and work to extricate society from this deadly pandemic, which has decimated the economy and disrupted the interests of the people.”

Timing is everything.



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CONDOLENCES

The Members of the Board, Management and Employees of

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express their heartfelt condolences to the Chairman,

Mr. Saleem Qassim Ahmed Al Zawawi

on sad demise of his brother

Mr. Suhail Qassim Ahmed Al Zawawi

We pray to Almighty to rest his soul in eternal peace and grant his family the strength to bear this irreparable loss.

VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

REVVING UP TO GO ELECTRIC

DESPITE the global shutdown of the transportation system, pollution continues to be a concern, impacting the climate and the way we live our life.

One of the major efforts by the researchers and manufacturers around the world has been to get electric vehicles (EV) to hit the market as soon as possible.

According to the World Economic Forum, electric vehicles, especially cars, came into their own with sales picking up across the world. While batteries and performance have been improved, infrastructure like the charging outlets in public places still lag.

While Norway continues to dominate the electric car market in terms of sales, according to WEF, the positive story is the growth of all types of EV vehicles in China.

Apart from passenger cars, the number of mass transport vehicles including heavy-duty buses and trucks is expected to enter the markets in a big way.

Here in Oman too, consumers are now having multiple options with electric and hybrids cars, with some products in their

line-up namely from Toyota and Hyundai.

“EVs are getting serious attention of the customers, who still have doubts over the infrastructure to support these vehicles, especially in long drives. With the government taking steps to support EVs and hybrids through subsidies, customers just need some adequate infrastructure in place”, said a showroom executive.

“These days we have found a few brands of hybrid and electric cars,

One of the major efforts by the researchers and manufacturers around the world has been to get electric vehicles to hit the market as soon as possible. In Oman too, consumers are now having multiple options with electric and hybrids cars, with some products in their line-up

including Tesla, on the streets of Muscat. With the recent development plan of the government focusing on smart cities, the use of bicycles and electric vehicles are expected to get a major push in the coming months”, said Salem, who is still exploring a Tesla brand.

According to WEF, nearly 290 million charging points at the cost of \$500 billion need to be deployed by 2040, which is in parallel with Oman Vision 2040.

The competent regulatory authorities in Oman have been working on frameworks for electric vehicle penetration and learn from international best practices

in this area. One of the main challenges facing the use of EVs in the Sultanate is the cost as the cost of such vehicles is high. The cost of EVs is expected to be affordable to users in the Sultanate with prices already coming down since 2020.

In coordination with the Royal Oman Police (ROP) and the ministries concerned, there have been efforts to develop specifications and standards, by removing all obstacles that limit the use of EVs.

It may be also noted that reducing overdependence on oil has been the aim of economic policymakers in the GCC from the current levels of nearly 60 to 70%.

Across the world, car manufacturers are introducing new electric models in 2021 with improved range and performance, including Volkswagen and Volvo. According to reports, the average price of a vehicle battery pack fell from \$1,160 in 2010 to \$156 in 2019. The World Economic Forum's Global Battery Alliance, involving manufacturers and raw material producers, have been playing a key role in reducing the carbon footprint of the transport and power sectors.

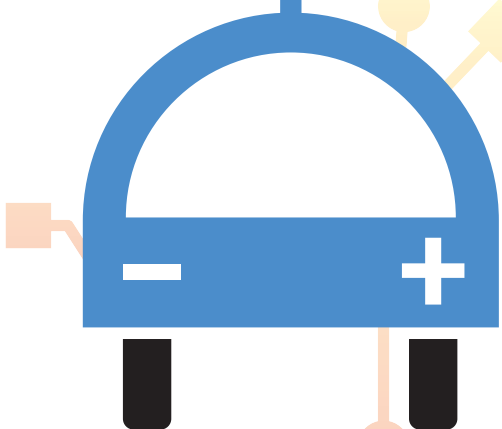
THE AVERAGE
PRICE OF
A VEHICLE
BATTERY PACK

\$1,160

IN 2010

\$156

IN 2019



AL DAKHILIYAH MUNICIPALITY KEEN ON MEETING CITIZENS' NEEDS



AMAL AL RIYAMI
@amal92alriyami

Al Dakhiliyah Municipality and its departments in the wilayats play an important role in meeting the citizens' needs and solving civic issues as soon as possible.

Despite the long distance and difficult terrain between the cities and villages of the governorate, the municipality is striving to implement development projects such as paving of roads, lighting them, setting up of parks and beautification work.

The municipality's department entrusted with ensuring food safety and quality conducts inspections on various establishments.

The technical affairs department does the follow-up and periodical inspection of buildings and take action against those who violate rules.

Other activities of the municipality include awareness programmes, health campaigns, competitions, and various programmes in cooperation



with schools, sports clubs, youth teams, women's associations and others. In order to improve the performance of workers, it conducts training for them in various facilities and in carrying out vector control measures at various sites to contain the spread of rodents and insects.

The technical department plays a major role by implementing various tasks which include road and lighting projects, afforestation work and the setting up of gardens

and parks.

Last year, the department issued 3,675 major building permits, 548 minor building permits and 1,331 building completion certificates in the Al Dakhiliyah Governorate.

The year also witnessed many activities aimed at stemming the spread of the coronavirus in accordance with the instructions of the Supreme Committee. In this regard, it conducted about 210 awareness programmes, besides media campaigns.

ELT symposium highlights role of English in a connected world

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 20

The third annual ELT (English Language Teaching) symposium themed 'English in a connected world' focused on the professional development of people involved in English teaching and make them able to maintain pace with the latest techniques of teaching.

The symposium was organised virtually on Thursday by the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS) Salalah.

In his welcome speech, Saeed al Mashikhi, head of the ELT centre, explained the importance of the symposium in light of the Covid-19 pandemic to those interested in teaching English around the world. He exhorted the participants, researchers and research paper owners to adopt the new teaching techniques to make the way of teaching interesting and more relevant.

Diverse issues came up for discussion, as the participants took part in the symposium through structured workshops



and scientific posters.

"The symposium was a scientific forum in which researchers, teachers, authors and specialists in the field of educational, academic curricula from both inside and outside the Sultanate, took part. All of these formed the basis for this year's symposium slogan, 'English in a connected world,' said a participant and presenter.

A group of prominent speakers, from Oman and abroad, engaged in the theory and practice of teaching English took part. The four keynote speakers at the symposium in-

cluded Professor Scott Thornbury, Lecturer and Trainer in English Language Teaching, author and award-winning researcher from Spain; Professor John Hughes, presenter and trainer working at Oxford University and composer of award-winning written content, in many different forums and spanning an array of editorial contexts, from National Geographic; Professor Chris Farrell, Head of Training and Development for CES Group Ireland; and Jonathan Hadley, who is a teacher, trainer and adviser at Macmillan Education, an educational conglomerate publisher and the multimedia company from the United Kingdom.

Professor Scott Thornbury discussed the notion of returning to what is conventionally referred to as "the old normal" in education; the challenges that teachers face in teaching in the current environment; and the differences that are spotlighted when future circumstances may merit returning to the real-time classroom.

Professor Jonathan Hadley, a consultant at Macmillan Education, has worked in English language teaching for 25 years and is presently a specialist in education reform programmes in the Middle East.

He highlighted his personal experience over the past 20 years in teaching English, along with his insights on many aspects of English language teaching, including important issues that should be addressed, contemporary challenges that should be confronted, and possible future developments, from his perspective, that should be taken into account.

TENDERS ANNOUNCEMENT

Al Ghubrah Power and Desalination Company (GPDC) and Wadi Al Jizzi Power Company (WJPC), invite the specialized companies to participate and submit their best offers for the tenders below;

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GPDC/2021/01	Sale of Desalination Inventory Spare Parts in GPDC	25 March 2021	11 April 2021	100/-
WJPC/2021/01	Dismantling of Common Plant Equipment and Buyback (Purchase) of Scrap and Equipment in WJPC	25 March 2021	11 April 2021	100/-

- Bids shall be submitted in a single envelope and sealed with red wax addressed to the "Chairman of the Internal Tender Committee" and must write on the envelope the tender name & number.
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- GPDC / WJPC is not obliged to accept the lowest or any other bid.
- Interested party to deposit the Tender Fee (Non-Refundable) on: Account Name: Al Ghubrah Power and Desalination Company, Bank Muscat: 0423011069510017 (Bidder name and Tender Number to be clearly mentioned). Tender Documents will be received by email.
- Interested party to deposit the Tender Fee (Non-Refundable) on: Account Name: Wadi Al Jizzi Power Company, Bank Muscat: 0423010776530017 (Bidder name and Tender Number to be clearly mentioned). Tender Documents will be received by email.
- The deposit at the last day of purchasing should be before 02.00 pm.
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Palestinians prepare for first parliamentary polls in 15 years

G A Z A / R A M A L L A H : Palestinians took another step in preparations for their first parliamentary election in 15 years on Saturday, opening registration offices to admit the political parties and independent candidates that will take part.

The May 22 election in the West Bank and Gaza is part of a broader push for reconciliation between President Mahmud Abbas' Fatah faction and rival group Hamas. This is seen as vital to building broader support for any future statehood talks with Israel, frozen since 2014.

The last time a parliamentary ballot was held in 2006, Hamas emerged as the surprise victor. A power struggle ensued, and in 2007, after weeks of fighting that left dozens dead, the group seized control of Gaza from forces loyal to Abbas. Abbas' authority has limited control over the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

Some 93 per cent of the 2.8 million eligible voters in the West Bank and Gaza have registered for the polling. The total population in the Palestinian territories is 5.2 million.

Israel has yet to respond to a Palestinian request to allow balloting to take place in East Jerusalem, Palestinian officials said.

Israel captured the eastern part of Jerusalem in a 1967 war



Police officers seen as Palestinians begin registering party lists for May parliamentary election, at the Palestinian Central Elections Commission's office in Gaza City. — Reuters

and later annexed it in a move that has not won international recognition. It did allow voting there in 2006.

Unlike in the 1996 and 2006 elections, Palestinians will not be voting for individual candidates, rather for parties or lists that contain between 16 and 132 candidates.

Farid Taamallah, a spokesman of the Palestinian Central Election Commission, said on Saturday that officials had so far registered

two electoral lists. Registration ends on March 31.

Meanwhile, a Palestinian was shot dead by Israeli soldiers when clashes erupted during a demonstration in the Israeli-occupied West Bank on Friday, the Palestinian health ministry said.

"A citizen who was shot in the head with live ammunition died", the ministry said, adding the incident happened in the village of Beit Dajan, near Nablus.

The Israeli army acknowledged a "violent riot" took place there, "during which dozens of Palestinian rioters hurled rocks at IDF troops."

"IDF troops responded with riot dispersal means and by firing into the air", a statement from the army said. "We are aware of reports regarding a Palestinian casualty. The cause of the injury is still unknown", the army said.

"The incident is being examined." — Reuters/AFP

ICC gives Israel a month's time for war crimes probe delay

THE HAGUE: The International Criminal Court has given Israel and the Palestinians one month to ask the tribunal to postpone its war crimes investigation, provided they can prove they are carrying out their own probes.

The ICC's chief prosecutor announced on March 3 that she had opened a full investigation into the situation in the Israeli-occupied territories — infuriating Israel, which is not a member of The Hague-based court.

A deferral notice was "sent on March 9 to all member states of the ICC, including all states that would normally exercise jurisdiction — including Israel and Palestine", an official in the prosecutor's office said.

The notice, sent under Article 18 of the court's founding document, the Rome Statute, gives countries a month to tell judges they are investigating crimes similar to those being probed by the ICC, the official said.

States may then reply to the ICC detailing whether they are in fact carrying out their own probe into alleged perpetrators, and can ask the

chief prosecutor for a deferral.

The Palestinians, who have been a state party to the ICC since 2015, have welcomed the investigation and said they will not seek any deferral.

The world's only permanent war crimes tribunal, the ICC was set up in 2002 to try the humanity's worst crimes where local courts are unwilling or unable to step in.

ICC prosecutor Fatou Bensouda has said her investigation will cover the situation in the blockaded Gaza Strip along with the Israeli-occupied West Bank and east Jerusalem since 2014.

It will mainly focus on the 2014 Gaza War but also look at the deaths of Palestinian demonstrators from 2018 onwards.

There is "reasonable basis" to believe crimes were committed by both sides — by the Israeli Defence Forces and Israeli authorities, and by Hamas and Palestinian groups, Bensouda said after concluding a five-year preliminary probe in 2019.

Israel has rejected the investigation, saying the court has no jurisdiction over its citizens. — AFP

Supreme leader ushers in Iranian new year

TEHRAN: Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei named the Iranian new year that of "production, support and removal of barriers" in a live televised speech broadcast on Saturday.

"There is good ground for a production leap", Khamenei said, adding that the government needed to get rid of any legal obstacles to production and growth.

The Iranian army fired gun salutes at Tehran's Azadi Square to usher in Nowruz — or "New Day" in Persian — at 13.07 local time.

Nowrouz, an ancient celebration and the most important date in the Iranian

calendar, begins at the spring equinox — the moment when the sun crosses the equator, and day and night are of equal length. It is also celebrated in Afghanistan, the Kurdish regions of Iraq, Turkey and Syria, and throughout Central Asia.

Khamenei said the new year of 1400 is "an important and sensitive" one because of the upcoming presidential election in June.

In a separate message, President Hassan Rouhani said he was hopeful that the new year will see the end of sanctions that the former US president imposed after abandoning a 2015 Iran nuclear deal with world powers. — Reuters

Town abuzz with drones in airspace test

HADERA/HAIFA: The skies above the Israeli town of Hadera were abuzz with delivery drones last week as national authorities tested a central control room for safely coordinating the small pilotless aircraft with each other as well as with planes and helicopters.

The popularity of the cheap, low-flying drones, and their potential for ferrying anything from pizzas to prescription drugs between businesses and homes, has stirred fears of mid-air collisions or crashes that could cause casualties on the ground.

"This is an opportunity for the regulators to learn what is needed to establish delivery drones as a daily reality, and for the drone operators to learn what is expected of them in turn", said Hagit Lidor of the Israel Innovation Authority,



The coastal city of Hadera shows a deliveryman placing an order of hamburgers onto an unmanned aerial vehicle as part of the main demonstration performed by the companies who won the tender for this project. — AFP

one of several state agencies involved in the test.

In the first live trial of a two-year test phase launched in

January, rural Hadera's airspace was turned over to five private firms that flew drones on criss-cross runs designed to test the

Commercial drone deliveries in Israel were unlikely before 2023, when the testing is due to end

responses of a control room in the city of Haifa, 56 km away.

To keep the drones — which went up 20 at a time — no more than 120 metres above ground and no less than 60 metres apart, the control-room staff sent alerts and rerouting instructions to their operators electronically.

"For the first time, we are managing airspace as a single entity, synthesising drone operators with established civil and military aviation", said Lidor.

— Reuters

TUNIS

Libya to investigate discovery of bodies in Benghazi

The prime minister of Libya's new unity government said he had instructed the attorney general to open an investigation into the discovery of bodies in Benghazi.

Local media said more than a dozen bodies of people shot dead were found in the eastern city that is the stronghold of Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA), whose assault on the capital Tripoli was repulsed last year.

Prime Minister Abdulhamid Dbeibeh, tweeted that such events cannot be tolerated or



covered up.

"I gave direct instructions to the Interior Minister to deal with this event and I requested the Attorney General to open an investigation", he said. — Reuters

SANAA

Yemen's fighters attack oil facility

Yemen's Ansar Allah fighters said last week they had attacked a Saudi oil facility in the capital Riyadh amid a surge in attacks by the fighter group on Saudi Arabia which has confirmed the attack.

An unnamed official at the Saudi Energy Ministry said a refinery in Riyadh had been subjected to a drone attack, Saudi Arabia's state news agency SPA reported, without elaborating.

The agency said the kingdom strongly condemned this



"cowardly aggression" and that such attacks were aimed at the stability of energy supplies to the world and the global economy. No casualties or damage was reported. — dpa

ALGIERS

Algerian protesters call for free press, judiciary

Thousands protested in Algiers to demand press freedom and judicial independence, as the Hirak pro-democracy movement keeps up its weekly demonstrations, despite a ban on gatherings due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The Hirak protest movement was sparked in February 2019 over then-president Abdelaziz Bouteflika's bid for a fifth term in office.

The ailing strongman was forced to step down weeks later,



but the Hirak continued with demonstrations, demanding a sweeping overhaul of a ruling system in place since Algeria's independence from France in 1962. — AFP

In brief

■ TOKYO



MAGNITUDE-7.2 EARTHQUAKE ROCKS JAPAN

A magnitude-7.2 earthquake struck north-eastern Japan on Saturday, prompting authorities to issue a tsunami warning for the prefecture of Miyagi. The Japan Meteorological Agency warned of up to a 1-metre high tsunami in Miyagi and the first tsunami wave has already swept ashore in the city of Ishinomaki, according to broadcaster NHK.

The warning prompted some residents in Miyagi to rush to higher ground ahead of the possible arrival of tsunami, NHK footage showed. There were no immediate reports of casualties or damage to property. The quake also shook buildings in Tokyo. — dpa

■ COLOMBO



BUS CRASH KILLS 14, INJURES 30 IN CENTRAL SRI LANKA

A crowded bus crashed into a precipice in central Sri Lanka, killing the driver and 13 passengers in the worst road accident in 16 years, police said. The privately-owned bus was travelling through the hilly region of Passara when it went off the road and crashed as the driver swerved to avoid an oncoming truck at a narrow pass, police said.

Five of the dead passengers were women and eight were men, police said, while another 30 people sustained injuries. Police spokesman Ajith Rohana said CCTV footage suggested the bus driver was negligent before the accident. — AFP

■ MANILA



PHILIPPINES REPORTS RECORD 7,999 NEW COVID INFECTIONS

The Philippines recorded 7,999 new coronavirus infections, the second straight day that the country posted a record high in daily cases. In a bulletin, the health ministry said total confirmed cases have risen to 656,056 while confirmed deaths have reached 12,930, after 30 more were recorded.

The Southeast Asian nation is battling a renewed surge in infections, including those of the new and more transmissible variants, delaying the further reopening of its pandemic-stricken economy. "The country's recorded Covid-19 cases remain high. Better to stay home if going out is unnecessary," the ministry said. — Reuters

Asian neighbours increasingly critical of Myanmar military

PROTESTERS BACK OUT AS TWO KILLED IN OVERNIGHT SHOOTING

YANGON: Opponents of Myanmar's coup protested again on Saturday and international pressure on the military junta to halt its repression of democracy supporters increased, with Asian neighbours joining Western countries in condemning lethal force.

A young man was shot and killed in one of the most turbulent neighbourhoods of the main city of Yangon, a resident and media reported, taking the death toll since the February 1 coup to 238, according to a tally by the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners activist group.

The bloodshed has not quelled public abhorrence for the return of military rule and anger over the ouster of the elected government and the detention of its leader, Aung San Suu Kyi.

But some activists say they have had to adapt tactics.

"We protest where there are no police or military, then when we hear they're coming, we disperse quickly," campaigner Kyaw Min Htike said from Dawei in the south before he and others staged a brief rally outside the town centre.

"I don't want to lose a single one of my comrades but we'll protest any way we can until our revolution prevails."



A protester jumps over a makeshift barricade during a crackdown by security forces on a demonstration against the military coup in Yangon's Thaketa township. — AFP

Some groups gather at night with candles and placards, then melt away after taking photographs. People also stage "unmanned" protests, with rows of placards with messages like "We will never stop until we get democracy" set up on a street.

On Saturday, dozens of demonstrators gathered in the second city of Mandalay. Several were injured when a vehicle drove into them and when police fired rubber

bullets, a city news portal reported. It was not clear why the vehicle hit the protesters.

There were small protests in other towns, including Kyaukse and Hsipaw in the northeast, Kawlin in the north, Hpa-an and Myawaddy in the east, Labutta in the south and the central town of Yay Oo, according to news portals and social media images.

Hundreds marched in the

town of Monywa and burned a copy of the 2008 constitution, which was drafted under military supervision and limits the powers of elected civilians, the Irrawaddy news portal reported.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres condemned what he called the military's continuing brutal violence. A "firm, unified international response" was urgently needed, his spokesman quoted as saying. — Reuters

Pakistan PM tests positive for Covid-19

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan has tested positive for Covid-19 two days after receiving his first vaccine dose, government officials said on Saturday, urging people not to be deterred from getting vaccinated.

Pakistan's vaccination roll-out has been met with widespread vaccine hesitancy, and Khan's positive test could serve as a setback to the mass inoculation drive in the country of 220 million people, health experts said.

Khan, 68, is "self isolating at home," Health Minister Faisal Sultan said in a tweet, and a close aide said he had a mild cough and fever.

Senior aides stressed that he had likely been infected before he was vaccinated on Thursday.

While it was not clear which vaccine the prime minister was given, the vaccine produced by China National Pharmaceutical Group (Sinopharm) is the only one available in Pakistan. — Reuters

Heavy rain, flash flooding batter Australia's east coast

MELBOURNE: Australia's east coast was smashed by heavy rains on Saturday, sparking dangerous flash flooding that forced the evacuation of multiple regions as the fast-moving waters unmoored houses, engulfed roads, stranded towns and cut power lines.

In Sydney, the country's biggest city, authorities pleaded for people to stay at home as a major dam overflowed and a mini-tornado tore through a western suburb.

Most of the coast of New South Wales (NSW) state, which is home to about a third of Australia's 25 million people, has already seen March rainfall records broken and authorities warned the downpour was likely to continue for several days.

"I hate to say this again to all our citizens of the state, but it's not going to be an easy week for us," NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian told a televised briefing. "The rain may not stop till Thursday or Friday."

Officials had issued nine evacuation orders for about 15 areas by Saturday afternoon.

Television footage showed increasing damage across the state, with water engulfing houses up to the windows, people kayaking through the streets, and damaged roads. One video showed an entire house being swept away.

Local media reported that the house owners had managed to evacuate.

Warragamba Dam, a major



State Emergency Service vehicles approach flooded residential areas in western Sydney amid mass evacuations being ordered in low-lying areas along Australia's east coast as torrential rains caused potentially 'life-threatening' floods. — AFP

water supply for Sydney, began overflowing on Saturday afternoon. Officials warned that the overflow would quickly add to swollen rivers, leading to flash flooding.

A mini-tornado ripped through a suburb in the west of the city, causing damage to more than 30 homes, knocking down trees and cutting power, emergency services said.

People were urged to stay at home and avoid any non-essential trips, with officials lambasting those who had needed help after venturing out into the stormy weather.

Emergency crews responded to about 4,000 calls for help over the past two days, including 500 direct flood rescues, a level NSW Emergency Services Minister

David Elliott said was "just completely unacceptable."

"The message is clear: do not walk through or drive through floodwaters, do not drive over water that is covering a road," Elliott said.

Social and sporting events were called off across the state, including football games and one of Australian turf's marquee horse races, the A\$3.5 million (\$2.7 million) Golden Slipper.

The federal government said the extreme weather was affecting its Covid-19 vaccine delivery in Sydney and throughout state, but said delays should last only a few days.

Australia plans to deliver the first vaccine doses to almost six million people over the next few weeks. — Reuters

LAVA ERUPTION FROM LONG-DORMANT ICELANDIC VOLCANO

GRINDAVIK: Glowing red lava spewed on Saturday from a volcano that has erupted near Iceland's capital Reykjavik after being dormant for more than 900 years.

But officials said the eruption was small and did not appear to represent a danger to people.

Dramatic images filmed by a coast guard helicopter showed streams of red lava bubbling and flowing out of a fissure in a valley in Geldingadalur, close to Mount Fagradalsfjall on the Reykjanes peninsula in southwestern Iceland.

As the lava continued to flow on Saturday, clouds of blue gas were also swirling from the site, located just 40 kilometres from the capital and near the Blue Lagoon geothermal spa, a popular

tourist destination.

The eruption occurred on Friday around 2045 GMT, lighting up the night sky with a crimson glow, after hundreds of small earthquakes shook the area. While Iceland's Keflavik International Airport and the small fishing port of Grindavik are just a few kilometres away, the zone is uninhabited and the eruption did not appear to present any danger. From Grindavik, steam could be seen rising from the area in between rain showers, a reporter said.

"The eruption is considered small," the Icelandic Meteorological Office (IMO), which monitors seismic activity, said in a statement on Saturday.

It said the "eruption fissure" is estimated to be about 500-1,000



Lava flows from a volcano in Reykjanes Peninsula, Iceland. — Reuters

metres long. The lava, it added, is estimated to be less than one square kilometre in size. "There is little eruption activity in the area," the IMO said.

The eruption took place in the Krysuvik volcanic system, which does not have a central volcano, about five kilometres inland from the southern coast.

There were no reports of ash fall, although tephra — solidified magma rock fragments — and gas emissions were to be expected. The public has been advised to stay away from the scene and access to the area has been blocked off.

Police ordered residents living east of the volcano to close their windows and stay indoors due to the risk of possible gas pollution carried by the wind. — AFP

Biden condemns violence against Asian-Americans

ATLANTA: US President Joe Biden on Friday denounced the upsurge of violence against Asian-Americans, telling a community plunged into grief after this week's Atlanta murders that the nation must not be complicit in the face of racism and xenophobia.

After meeting with leaders of Georgia's Asian-American community, Biden delivered a brief speech at Atlanta's Emory University, where he branded hate and racism "the ugly poison that's long haunted our nation."

Such bigotry and violence has been "often met with silence" in the United States, he said.

"But that has to change because our silence is complicity. We cannot be complicit," Biden stressed.

"We have to speak out, we have to act," he added, as he called on Americans to "combat this resurgence of xenophobia."

And he levelled a rebuke of previous president Donald Trump without mentioning his name, saying: "Words have consequences. It's the coronavirus, full stop."

Trump faced severe blowback last year for repeatedly calling Covid-19 — which has now killed 540,000 people in the United States — the "China virus" after the country where it was first detected.

Biden noted that attacks on Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders have been "skyrocketing,"



US President Joe Biden and Vice-President Kamala Harris deliver remarks after meeting with Asian-American leaders to discuss 'the ongoing attacks and threats against the community,' during a stop at Emory University in Atlanta. — Reuters

a trend confirmed by the group Stop AAPI Hate which says nearly 3,800 cases have been reported since last year, including verbal and physical assaults, discrimination and civil rights abuses.

Biden's pre-scheduled trip to the southern metropolis was originally intended to focus on his Covid-19 battle plan.

The president began with a visit to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, where he received a briefing, and he also marked a key milestone in the US having administered 100 million

Biden notes that attacks on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders have been 'skyrocketing,' a trend confirmed by the group Stop AAPI Hate

vaccine doses. "We did it in about 60 days," Biden said. "We're not stopping now."

But this week's carnage around Georgia's largest city prompted Biden, accompanied by Vice-

President Kamala Harris, to add a meeting with Asian-Americans.

Three massage parlors around Atlanta were targeted on Tuesday, and a 21-year-old suspect was arrested.

Robert Aaron Long faces eight counts of murder and one charge of aggravated assault.

Of the eight fatalities, six were women of Asian descent. Biden said it was "heart-wrenching" to listen to the grieving community members.

Among them was Stephanie Cho, executive director of Asian Americans Advancing Justice-Atlanta.

"It was very emotional to hear" messages by the victims' families read aloud to the president and vice-president, Cho told CNN afterwards.

She said the Asian-American women in the room, including Harris whose mother was an Indian immigrant, "had a very somber moment" considering the issue centred around violence against women of Asian descent.

Long has admitted carrying out the attacks, according to law enforcement, but claims he was not motivated by racial hatred.

Officers said Long told police he was grappling with a sexual addiction and that he wanted to "eliminate" a temptation that put him in conflict with his strict religious beliefs. — AFP

Police clash with Covid protesters in German city

KASSEL: Police used pepper spray to disperse people protesting against coronavirus curbs in the German city of Kassel on Saturday, in one of the country's largest such rallies so far this year.

Several thousand people gathered at the main protest site on a square in the city centre, packed closely together without wearing face masks, an AFP reporter saw.

Scuffles erupted when a group of demonstrators tried to break through a police cordon to join up with other protesters, resulting in shoving and prompting officers to use pepper spray.

"This is not what a peaceful protest looks like," North Hesse police tweeted.

Officers had used "pepper spray and batons" against protesters, police said, adding that there had been "repeated attacks" against emergency service workers. "We don't tolerate such attacks," they wrote, saying they had water cannon on stand by.

The protest was called by the "Querdenker" or Lateral Thinkers movement, an umbrella group that has organised some of Germany's largest "anti-corona" demonstrations since the start of the pandemic.

The movement has drawn in people from the far-left, conspiracy theorists, anti-vaxxers and right-wing extremists.

Some of them don't believe



A protester and a policeman clash on the sidelines of a demonstration demanding an end of the coronavirus measures in Kassel. — AFP

the pandemic is real, while others claim the curbs imposed to rein in the coronavirus infringe on their civil rights.

Some demonstrators in Kassel held up signs that read "End the lockdown" and "Corona rebels", or carried heart-shaped balloons.

Many also waved "Querdenker" flags from different parts of the country, suggesting people had travelled to join the rally.

The founder of the Querdenker movement, Michael Ballweg, in late December urged supporters to halt their protests until the spring.

The Kassel protest's organisers had registered for up to 6,000 participants. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

ZURICH

3 teachers dismissed for refusing to wear masks

Three Austrian teachers who persistently refused to wear particle filtering masks to protect against the spread of coronavirus have been fired, the *Kronen Zeitung* newspaper reported.

Meanwhile in Switzerland, a customer who refused to wear a mask has been banned for five years from the Migros supermarket chain. Coronavirus fatigue is rising in both countries with protests taking place against restrictions which have seen shops and restaurants closed, and man-



datory mask wearing introduced.

One teacher in each of the districts of Freistadt, Voecklabruck and in the city of Wels in upper Austria were dismissed after talks with the authorities failed to resolve the situation. — Reuters

KAMPALA

Six lions found dead in suspected poisoning

Six lions have been found dead and mutilated in one of Uganda's best-known national parks, a conservation official said, with wildlife traffickers suspected of having poisoned the big cats. The lion carcasses were found in the Queen Elizabeth National Park in the country's west with most of their body parts missing and surrounded by dead vultures, suggesting poison was at play.

The Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) said it was "saddened" by the death of these particular



lions, known for their unusual ability to climb trees in the famous reserve. An investigation has been launched, with a team at the scene working with local police to determine exactly what happened to the cats. — AFP

DAR ES SALAAM

Tanzanians pay their respects to late president

Tanzania's President Samia Suluhu Hassan led mourners in paying their last respects to her predecessor John Magufuli, who died suddenly this week after an illness shrouded in mystery.

Mourners lined the streets of Dar es Salaam to bid farewell to the late president, some of them weeping and throwing flower petals as the casket, towed on a gun carriage by a military vehicle, was transferred from a church to Uhuru Stadium to lie in state.

"Before I saw the coffin, I



didn't believe our president was really dead," said flower-seller Pauline Attony after watching the motorcade pass. Hassan, who was sworn in on Friday, is the country's first female president. — AFP

Empty houses and empty beds challenge passive investment

While, obviously, we are unable to put Covid-19 to one side, it may help to do so from a health perspective, in terms of seeking to maintain an element of economic clarity, for Omani investors who must currently be facing, at least a lack of confidence and probably worse, and being challenged by a decidedly pessimistic outlook from two diverse perspectives.

First the tourism and hospitality sector must be on a fine knife edge as they face the challenges of the pandemic, with virtually no tourism. Local operators report redundancies, enforced annual leaves, reduced and delayed salaries, and quite simply as one General Manager told me, “The Internet is dead, the phones are quiet, the carpark is empty, and nobody is coming in the door. It’s a complete disaster!” He went on to say that everybody is in the same boat, so he wasn’t crying crocodile tears, but genuinely concerned as he said. “Right now, I can’t say if we will still be there, and whether the doors of the hotel will still be open in a couple of months. It’s not a pretty prospect for any of us.”

I put it to him that New Zealand, being significantly reliant upon tourism, had closures, but also reported good responses to ‘staycation’ marketing campaigns, aimed at attracting locals who would normally be holidaying overseas, not to delay their trips away, but to go



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local. Using the slogan, “Don’t leave home till you’ve seen your country,” paraphrased from a successful 60’s and 70’s campaign when the country was just dipping its toes into tourism. Pre-Covid research by Seeler (AUT, 2018), had identified that “65% of residents wanted to see more of their country,” so acting upon that the industry has focused, not on profit, but turnover, and promoted affordable family and couples’ options. Tourism NZ CEO Steven England-Hall says, “It won’t fill the \$3billion hole, but in capturing a share of the \$9billion spent overseas by Kiwis annually, it is critical to the future of the sector.” Maybe, tourism here could use a similar, ministry or sector coordinated, campaign?

Recent discussions with small real estate investors reveal the breadth of issue facing the local economy. A good example is Ali, who lives in Muscat with his family, works in education, and owns another property, a villa, which he purchased as, “An investment, an extra income stream, and a way to pay for my two daughter’s overseas education, as they have ambitious plans.” He laughed as he said that, but the smile faded somewhat as he explained that the villa was, “a nice one, in the ‘right’ part of town, and for the eight years I’ve had it we have had great tenants, expats from one of the big multinational companies, but since May of last year it’s been empty,

and although I have it listed with two agencies, nothing is happening. Absolutely no interest at all.” He has a good job, some money in the bank, and fortuitously, the pandemic has meant that both daughters have continued their education online, so they haven’t really touched their savings, and as he put it, “We are doing okay for now, but looking ahead... I don’t know.”

In terms of the rental property scene, most are owned by these relatively passive, family investors, most will have other income, and because the wider family often lives together, multi-streamed, diverse incomes. But no investor budgets to have an empty property. There is no ‘staycation’ parachute for landlords however because the disappearing tenants are not coming back, and not being replaced by incoming expatriates, in the way they were, so the client pool is rapidly emptying out.

The campaign and policies promoting Omanisation are a good thing, and long overdue in the Sultanate, however the pace of change has been astonishing, catching most unawares, and certainly real estate investors. Maybe the ‘new wave’ could have been, and be, managed better? The intent was, and is, laudable, but the staggering number of ‘To Let,’ and ‘For Rent’ signs, especially in the capital, signposts potential social and economic challenges.

ESSENTIAL TO LIFE

Choose happiness today

MASSRAT SHAIKH

20th March International Day of Happiness observed by the United Nations recognises happiness as a fundamental human goal.

In our world that is facing multiple crises, finding joy is essential for our wellbeing. To find joy and hold on to it is most important to remain grounded and deal with the stress of our daily lives.

In happiness research, a common denominator among those deemed “happy” is a sense that they choose to be happy. They believe that happiness is possible, and there is a willingness to turn towards it. We can intentionally arouse states of joy, and with practice, develop them into ongoing habits that bring presence and peace to our lives.

Our brains are designed to scan for trouble and fixate on what might go wrong in any given situation. It is an excellent strategy for avoiding real danger. However, in the absence of a true threat, it limits our capacity for enjoying and celebrating our moments.

Try these simple strategies to bring more happiness to your life.

Time is precious, and minutes disappear like water into sand unless we choose to pay attention. Be present with whatever you are doing. Do not let the day slip through your fingers, but live it fully now, this breath, this moment, catapulting you into full awareness.

Be compassionate with yourself, be open and loving to others, be determined to share what is yours. When we choose compassion, we are not only bringing happiness to others but more for ourselves.

Experience everything, relating, eating, doing all the little necessary tasks of life as if you are doing it for the first time, pushing nothing aside as unimportant. The happiness we are looking for lies in small things.

Feel the sense of joy in your own being when you are helping others. Every time we take a step in the direction of generosity, we know that we are moving from fear to love.

Pause when something wonderful has touched you, become familiar with how that taste of joy or happiness lives in your body, heart, and mind.

When we run through our thoughts repeatedly, it creates certain biochemistry in the body that perpetuates more of the same. Whatever you practice grows strong. If we practice judgment and anxious worrying, those grow stronger. Likewise, when we practice gratitude or sending well wishes to others, then those are the pathways that deepen and flourish our sense of joy.

It is said that where attention goes, energy flows. Intentionally turning towards joy cultivates a pathway that uplifts our minds and undoes the negativity. It creates a kind of inner atmosphere that allows true happiness to unfold itself.

We can begin to train our minds to feel joy by noticing and savouring our moments of happiness. Just 20-30 seconds of immersing ourselves in the feelings evoked by the hug of a dear friend or the laughter of a grandchild can strengthen the neural pathways in the brain. When we experience joy for simple things, we know we really can be happy, no matter what.

Happiness does not simply happen to us. We must choose happiness over negativity and then keep choosing it every day. In our pursuit of happiness, we know that it cannot be found through great effort and willpower but is already here, right now, in those small things and in letting go.

(The writer is an Educational Psychologist & Mindfulness Educator. Connect with Massrat at www.massratshaikh.com)

VACCINE SAFETY

Restoring confidence in AstraZeneca

The World Health Organization (WHO) said it trusted people’s uncertainty about AstraZeneca’s Covid-19 vaccine could be overcome, following its temporary suspension in several countries in Europe and around the world on fears of blood clotting.

“It’s a great vaccine,” WHO expert Bruce Aylward said on Friday.

The WHO said people would be reassured that the safety and monitoring systems in place had proved their worth.

“This happens with new products,” said WHO emergency relief coordinator Mike Ryan, noting that medicines are checked again following their roll-out.

A number of EU countries were rolling out the Oxford/AstraZeneca Covid-19 vaccine once again on Friday, lifting their suspensions after receiving new safety assurances from the European Union’s medicines regulator. The vaccinations resumed in several states in Germany, while in neighbouring France Prime Minister Jean Castex was injected with the AstraZeneca formulation in front of television cameras.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who was hospitalised last year with a severe bout of Covid-19, also received his first dose of the jab later on Friday.

“Let’s get the jab done,” Johnson wrote in a post on Twitter, along with a picture of him getting the shot. “Getting the jab is the best thing we



Europe pushed to get its Covid-19 vaccination drive back on track after EU and British regulators said the benefits of AstraZeneca’s shot outweighed any risks and the World Health Organization gave its backing to it. – Reuters

EU COUNTRIES
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UNION’S MEDICINES
REGULATOR

can do to get back to the lives we miss so much,” he added.

Governments are trying to bolster damaged public confidence in the vaccine after its use was halted starting late last week in several Nordic countries over cases of blood clots in a handful of recipients.

Then other nations such as Germany, France, Italy and Spain ordered their own pauses to the AstraZeneca jab pending a new assessment by the European Medicines Agency (EMA).

The regulator said on Thursday evening that the vaccine was “safe and effective” after an extensive review of possible blood clot risks.

The EMA concluded that the vaccine was not associated with an increase in the overall risk of thromboembolic events or blood clots, although it could not definitively rule out a link between cases of rare, very serious clotting disorders, mostly in younger women.

With that asterisk still hanging over the jab, France and Germany were among the countries to issue advice on who should get it.

France’s top health authority on Friday recommended the AstraZeneca vaccine only for people over the age of 55 due to the possible increased risk of a certain type of brain clot in younger people. — dpa

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Oman, Jordan play out goalless draw

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, MARCH 20

Oman national football team ended the first preparatory friendly match against Jordan in a goalless draw. The match, which was held at Maktoom bin Rashid Stadium on Saturday, was part of the Red Warriors' external camp underway in Dubai. Another preparatory match is set and scheduled for the Sultanate team against India on Thursday at the same venue. The overseas camp

in Dubai is part of team's gearing up to the joint qualifiers of World Cup Qatar 2022 and AFC Asian Cup China 2023. After the India match, the team will end Dubai camp and travel back to Muscat. It was the first international match under supervision of the Croatian coach, Branko Ivankovic, the head coach of the national football team, who was appointed as head coach in January last year. The Red Warriors entered the warm-up match after an absence of international matches since more than one year due to the

ongoing pandemic. Oman team players delivered a technically sound game defending and attacking well despite the goalless draw result. Many new faces took part in the match including Ahmed al Khamisi, Juma al Habsi and Amjad al Harthi due to an absence of many players including Mohammed al Musalami as he is suffering injury and is currently undergoing recovery treatment. Branko began the match with Faye al Rushaidi as goalkeeper. Abdulaziz al Ghilani, Ahmed al

Khamisi, Juma al Habsi and Amjad al Harthi in the defending line. Harib al Saadi, Abdullah Fawaz, Ali al Busaidi and Mohsin Jawher in the middle while Mohsin al Ghassani and Abdulaziz al Maqbali in attack. The Sultanate's players organised a series of attacks that never threatened Jordan's goalkeeper Ahmed Abdul Sattar. Mohsin Jawher commenced Oman's initial attempts towards Jordan side but the opponent's defending line broke the experiment. Ahmed Sameer

and Mahmood Mardhi were the top players who created many disturbances in Oman defending zone but Abdulaziz al Ghilani and his team-mates and behind them Faye broke all their scoring attacks. As expected in the second half, the Croatian coach did many substitutions to test more players as Salah al Yahyai and Zahir al Aghbari replaced Abdulaziz al Maqbali and Mohsin al Ghassani. After his entrance immediately, Al Aghbari was very close to score the opening goal as he received a

golden pass from Ali al Busaidi but his shout went above the net in the 66th minute. The opponent team, Jordan, were the better side in the second half as they had many scoring attempts through Ahmed al Erssan but they were saved by Faye al Rushaidi. The dying minutes of the match did not see any further changes in the match final result which ended in a goalless draw but with many technical benefits for the coaching staff and both teams' players.



Karatsev beats Rublev to reach first ATP final in Dubai

Aslan Karatsev battled past fellow Russian Andrey Rublev in Dubai on Friday to continue his dream season and reach his maiden ATP singles final. The 27-year-old, who became the first man to reach the semifinals on their Grand Slam debut in the Open era at the Australian Open last month, edged out his in-form compatriot 6-2, 4-6, 6-4.



'Yadav, Kishan good enough to play T20 World Cup'

Batting great Sachin Tendulkar is convinced Suryakumar Yadav and Ishan Kishan are good enough to be in the India squad when the nation hosts the Twenty20 World Cup later this year. Both top-order batsmen made their India debut in the ongoing T20 series against England, with Kishan smashing a fifty in his first match.

FIRST-TIMER OWCA BECOMES WOMEN'S LEAGUE CHAMPION

SHAHZAD RAZA
MUSCAT, MARCH 20

Nayan Anil's super bat struck another half century, helping Oman Women's Cricket Academy (OWCA) to a sensational 11-run victory against Indian Social Club (ISC) Women at OC Turf 1 in AL Amerat on Wednesday.

ISC, which came into the final without losing a game, put OWCA in after winning the toss. Aware of the value of putting a fighting total on the board, OWCA crawled its way to 113 for 4 in 20 overs, Nayan leading the way with splendid 62, taking her tally of runs to 237 in 6 matches to become the tournament's highest run getter. Payal Kanojia, ISC's woman with the golden arm, picked up two wickets to become tournament's joint top wicket-taker along with OWCA's Sherya Dhuri, both taking 13 each. Afida Afthab contributed vital 19 to OWCA's total.

ISC Women found the going tough as OWCA bowled with amazing discipline, restricting it to 102 for 4 in 20 overs despite Priyanka Mendonca's solid 50 not out off 60 and Trupti Pawde's 38-ball 35. Saya Channa, Sherya Dhuri and Afida Afthab all bowled well, taking a wicket each. Shreya's 13 wickets in the championship came at an incredible economy



rate of just 2.6.

OWCA captain Vaishali Jesrani was overjoyed and rightly so.

"It feels amazing beating a defending champion that had yet to lose a game in the championship. We were a new face to the tournament. Nobody expected us to reach the final let alone winning it. We got our combinations right. All the girls

were talented and skilled and delivered extremely well in all departments," she said.

Vaishali was all praise for her coaches, saying regular training helped her side that bonded well and played as a unit.

"We had very few experienced players in the side that was composed of many newcomers playing the league for the first

time. Credit must also go to our coaches Desmond Berhardt, Nilesh Parmer and Haider Ali who were excellent throughout the season," she added.

Commenting on how her side was able to beat a side that had hardly put a foot wrong in the competition, Vaishali said discipline was key to winning the final.

"We did not think too much about who we were playing with. It was the game number 6 for us and we knew if we stuck to the basics and kept things simple we will do well. I thought 112 was gettable on this pitch but we bowled and fielded with great discipline.

"That helped us again as we had secured a last-over win against Muscat Women in our

“It feels amazing beating a defending champion that had yet to lose a game in the championship. We were a new face to the tournament. Nobody expected us to reach the final let alone winning it. We got our combinations right. All the girls were talented and skilled and delivered extremely well in all departments

VAISHALI DESAI
OWCA captain

previous group match. Our girls believed in themselves and came up trumps," concluded a delighted Vaishali.

BRIEF SCORES (Women's League T20): OWCA 113 for 4 in 20 overs (Nayan Anil 62 – 10x4, Afida Afthab 19 – 2x4, Payal Kanojia 2-26, Mamta Thakur 1-16) defeated ISC Women 102 for 4 in 20 overs (Priyanka Mendonca 50 not out – 3x4, Trupti Pawde 35 – 3x4, Saya Channa 1-16, Shreya Dhuri 1-15, Afida Afthab 1-20) by 11 runs.



Serbia's Novak Djokovic in action. – Reuters

Djokovic pulls out of Miami to spend time with family

LONDON: World number one Novak Djokovic will delay his comeback to the ATP Tour following a muscle injury after deciding to skip the Miami Open starting next week to spend more time with his family.

Djokovic sustained a muscle tear that hindered him during his successful Australian Open title defence last month and the 33-year-old planned to return at Miami before playing the Monte-Carlo Masters and the ATP 250 Serbia Open. "Dear fans, I'm very sorry to announce that this year I won't travel to Miami to compete," Djokovic tweeted.

"I decided to use this precious time at home to stay with my family. With all restrictions, I need to find balance in my time on tour and at home. I look

forward to coming back next year."

Djokovic, who won his 18th Grand Slam title at Melbourne Park, eclipsed Roger Federer's all-time record for most weeks as the men's world number one on March 8 when he moved past the Swiss to hold the top ranking for the 311th week.

He said at the time that his focus would be on winning more majors, adding he would make necessary adjustments to his playing schedule to achieve that goal. Rafael Nadal also decided to skip the March 22-April 4 Masters 1000 event to recover from a back injury, while Federer will not be present as he works his way back to full fitness after two knee operations in the past 12 months. — Reuters

Tsitsipas, Zverev book Acapulco title clash

ACAPULCO, Mexico: Stefanos Tsitsipas and Alexander Zverev will duel for the ATP title in Acapulco, the top two seeds advancing with straight-set semifinal wins on Friday.

World number five Tsitsipas of Greece beat Italian qualifier Lorenzo Musetti 6-1, 6-3 to reach his first final of 2021.

Zverev was shaken but not unnerved by an earthquake in the second set of his 6-4, 7-6 (7/5) victory over fellow German Dominik Koepfer.

"The lights started shaking and the crowd felt it more than we did," Zverev said of the 5.7 magnitude quake with an epicentre 60 km away in San Marcos.

"We were running around the court, so we had to play a point during the earthquake," he added. "We didn't feel much, but still, obviously, I know it happens here in Acapulco."

Koepfer, unfazed, seized the first break of the second set to take a 3-1 lead.

But Zverev, ranked seventh in the world, kept the pressure on, creating break chances in each of Koepfer's next three service games and converting at 5-4 for a break that would force the tiebreaker.

Zverev will be seeking a 14th ATP title and his first of the year



Germany's Alexander Zverev in action during his semifinal match against Germany's Dominik Koepfer. – Reuters

when he takes on Tsitsipas, a five-time ATP title winner who was playing in his third semifinal of the year after making the final four at the Australian Open and Rotterdam.

"I am really looking forward to the final," said Tsitsipas, who has won five of six prior encounters with the German. "Sascha is someone I've played against in the past and it's never easy. We're both really hungry and we're both very competitive."

Tsitsipas needed just 79 minutes to end the run of 120th-ranked Musetti, the world No 120 who had reached his second career semifinal in just his fourth ATP main draw appearance.

He stormed through the first set, but didn't get a break chance in the second until the seventh game, when he broke his 19-year-old Italian opponent at love.

Serving to stay in the match two games later, Musetti fended off three break points before Tsitsipas finally collected the win when the Italian hit a backhand into the net.

"We'll definitely see a lot from Lorenzo in the future, he has a wonderful one handed backhand and creates lots of opportunities," Tsitsipas said. "He showed his level this week." — AFP



The Jazz, stung by a 131-122 loss to the Washington Wizards on Thursday, bounced back by the skin of their teeth as Raptors centre Pascal Siakam’s potential game-tying shot dipped in then out at the buzzer

NBA Results

Miami: 110	lt to Indiana: 137
Orlando: 121	bt Brooklyn: 113
Toronto: 112	lt to Utah: 115
Cleveland: 110	lt to San Antonio: 116
Boston: 96	lt to Sacramento: 107
Phoenix: 1	13 bt Minnesota: 101
Portland: 125	bt Dallas: 119
Denver: 131	bt Chicago: 127 (OT)
Houston: 100	lt to Detroit: 113
Memphis: 103	lt to Golden State: 116

Jazz back in tune, Magic shock Nets

LOS ANGELES: Utah guard Donovan Mitchell scored 12 of his 31 points in the fourth quarter on Friday as the NBA-leading Jazz eked out a 115-112 victory over the Toronto Raptors.

The Jazz, stung by a 131-122 loss to the Washington Wizards on Thursday, bounced back by the skin of their teeth as Raptors centre Pascal Siakam’s potential game-tying shot dipped in then out at the buzzer.

It wasn’t the kind of dominance the Jazz displayed in winning 11 straight games in January and another nine in a row in February.

But they gradually heated up offensively, out-rebounded the Raptors 48-31 and made 35 of 41 attempts from the free-throw line to prevail.

In a fourth quarter that featured eight lead changes, Donovan made the difference, scoring eight straight points in the final minute and a half.

“Finding guys and also seeing where I can fit in and do my thing,” Donovan said of finding the right balance between facilitating his team-mates and taking over.

“I forced a shot early in the game, but in the second half I was pleased with all the decisions I made.”

Jazz coach Quin Snyder thought Donovan, who added five rebounds and six assists, got it right as the Jazz became the first team this season to reach 30 victories.

“Toronto’s one of the best defenses in the league, particularly

on the ball, and I thought Donovan showed a lot of resolve,” Snyder said.

“There was a toughness that he had. Not only was he aggressive and forceful, he was also precise, and made really good reads.”

In the East, the Brooklyn Nets slipped half a game behind conference leaders Philadelphia with a 121-113 loss to the Orlando Magic.

Orlando’s Aaron Gordon scored 38 points and Evan Fournier chipped in 31 as the Magic fended off a late rally by Brooklyn.

Orlando withstood a 43-point performance from Nets star Kyrie Irving, snapping Brooklyn’s six-game winning streak while ending their own nine-game skid.

The Nets trailed by 19 go-

ing into the fourth quarter, but opened the final period on a 16-1 scoring run.

A tip-in and a three-pointer by Gordon, however, helped the Magic turn back the challenge.

Irving scored just seven points in the fourth quarter and star guard James Harden scored just 19 points on four-of-15 shooting — his streak of 14 straight games of at least 20 points ending.

NUGGETS TOP BULLS

Nikola Jokic and Jamal Murray keyed Denver’s stunning rally for a 131-127 overtime victory over the Chicago Bulls.

Serbia’s Jokic and Canada’s Murray scored 34 points apiece against a Bulls team that dominated most of the way thanks to

point guard Zach Lavine, who put up 32 points. The Bulls led by 14 early in the fourth quarter, but Jokic and Murray combined for 24 points in the final frame.

Murray drilled a three-pointer with four-tenths of a second left in regulation and added seven points in the extra session. Jokic added six in overtime as the Nuggets pulled away for the win.

Zach LaVine scored nine of his 32 for the Bulls in overtime, but the Nuggets notched their third straight win to remain tied for fifth place in the Western Conference with the Portland Trail Blazers, who beat the Dallas Mavericks 125-119.

CJ McCollum led the Blazers with 32 points and Damian Lillard shook off a second-half in-

jury scare — staying in the game after taking a painful knock to his left knee — to score 31.

Luka Doncic led the Mavs with 38 points, nine rebounds and nine assists. In Memphis, Golden State forward Andrew Wiggins stepped up in the absence of star Stephen Curry, scoring 40 points in the Warriors’ 116-103 victory over the Grizzlies.

Curry was sidelined by a bruised tailbone suffered in a sideline fall on Wednesday.

But with a dominant offensive display from Wiggins and 25 points from second-year guard Jordan Poole — who got the start in place of Curry — the Warriors won for the first time in three games without Curry this season.

— AFP



Digital Banking
from A to Z



The merger of
Al Yusr Islamic
window with
Alizz Islamic Bank



Omanisation
exceeds 96%



Inauguration of
the first innovation
hub in the banking
industry

The Oman Arab Bank Annual Report for the financial year ending 31 December 2020, has revealed positive results across several parameters, especially after successfully completed the integration of Al Yusr Islamic window with Alizz Islamic Bank.



Rashad bin Mohammad
Al Zubair, Chairman

Dear Shareholders,

I am delighted to share the results achieved for the financial year ended on December 31, 2020.

Towards the end of 2020, low oil prices and challenges resulting from the spread of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic continued to affect various business sectors and the national economy. These circumstances caused a decline in the performance of various sectors of the economy in the second and third quarters as a result of the closure of many local economic activities for varying periods, in addition to the decline in global trade activities and their repercussions at the local level. The safety of our customers and employees remains at the forefront of our priorities. Oman Arab Bank (OAB) worked along with all other economic and social sectors to overcome this difficult stage while focusing on the strategic initiatives launched at the beginning of the year and the rearrangement of objectives to ensure business continuity.

Integration with Alizz Islamic Bank

During Q2 2020, the Bank completed its acquisition of Alizz Islamic Bank (AIB). OAB acquired 100 per cent of the shares in AIB and became a public joint-stock company (SAOG). The shares of the Bank were listed on the Muscat Securities Market for the first time on 6th of July 2020.

OAB also successfully completed the sale and integration of Al Yusr Islamic Banking window of OAB with AIB in Q3 2020. This included the transfer and integration of customers, services, employees, assets, and liabilities resulting in a larger Islamic banking entity which is independent operationally and administratively, and has its own Board of Directors and independent Sharia Supervisory Board. The bank's market share in Islamic Financing assets increased from 3% in June 2020 to 17% in December 2020 after the acquisition.

This acquisition also created a strategic platform to expand the scope of our services and enabled us to reach more customers through our extended network. The synergies within the Group will allow us to provide an enhanced customer experience.

Supporting Government Efforts to Combat COVID-19

In line with OAB's sustainability strategy, and the government's efforts in combating the effects of the spread of the (COVID-19) pandemic, the Bank has taken several measures to support these efforts. OAB has allocated an account for the donations and contributions to the Ministry of Health and donated OMR 500,000 to support these efforts. OAB was the first to provide its customers with convenient and round the clock services through its digital channels and ATMs, to facilitate the donation process directly to the account of the Ministry of Health. In March 2020, OAB postponed loan installments for all eligible customers.

The Bank continued to adhere to the directives of the Central Bank of Oman, regarding the deferment of installments for those affected by the pandemic. This is in addition to waiving transfer fees and providing more facilities for small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

With regards to measures taken to mitigate the effects of the pandemic within the work environment, we were one of the first institutions to implement effective and record-breaking solutions to ensure the highest levels of safety for both, employees and customers. This included the effective launch of Work From Home protocols and the launch of the Wiqaya platform.

Debt Exemption Initiative for Defaulting Borrowers

In line with the Bank's celebrations of the 50th National Day, and as part of its sustainability strategy, OAB launched an initiative to write-off the loans of over 150 defaulting borrowers. This was carried out in consideration of their special circumstances and the challenges faced due to the current situation. Borrowers have been chosen based on stringent criteria to support those most in need and included the elderly, retirees, widows and people with special needs.

Enhance Customer Experience and Support Innovation

During the past year 2020, OAB has continued to develop its digital infrastructure and provide advanced solutions to enhance the overall customers' experience. In the first quarter of the year, the Bank opened the first Innovation Lab in the local banking sector to provide a professional platform to nurture talents in the financial technology world including students, employees and companies operating in this field. The Bank has also entered into several partnerships to support this approach with experts in the field of technology, both within and outside the Sultanate.

Omanization & Talent Management

The Bank's policy is based on providing opportunities to its talented and distinguished employees in various disciplines through programs and plans. These are designed to prepare them to take on supervisory and leadership positions as part of the succession plans. The talent management strategy, the core of the Human Resources Division at OAB, includes the use of various scientific and learning methods and focuses on the practical side in addition to the investment in modern technologies to establish a culture of learning and develop performance. As a result of this clear focus, the Bank has maintained one of the highest Omanisation rates in the sector exceeding 96%, as well as maintained an Omanization ratio of 85% in the top management level.

Financial Overview

The Financial statements have been prepared in accordance to International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS), the requirements of the Commercial Companies Law of 2019, the Capital Market Authority (CMA) of the Sultanate of Oman and the applicable regulations of the Central Bank of Oman (CBO). Readers of such financial reports must note that the 2019 financial position includes the assets and liabilities of standalone OAB

SAOC with its Islamic window (Al Yusr), while the Balance Sheet of 2020 includes both consolidated (OAB SAOG and AIB SAOC) and standalone OAB SAOG without Al Yusr. Similarly, the comprehensive income statement for 2019 reflects the standalone results of OAB SAOC with Al Yusr whereas consolidated results of 2020 reflects the results of standalone OAB SAOG including 6 months results of Al Yusr and AIB SAOC from 1 July 2020 to 31 December 2020.

Sustainability

Given the current situation, most large-scale events and volunteering initiatives have been cancelled or postponed. Therefore, OAB has accelerated a number of its online initiatives to help those who need it most. Through OAB ATMs and the OAB Online App, we continue to encourage donations to the Ministry of Health and six other charities to help those in need.

In August 2020, we supported a virtual fundraiser organized by the Environmental Society of Oman (ESO). OAB is proud to support ESO's work for many years, as they are the only non-profit organization in Oman dedicated to conserving the environment.

OAB launched its first eco-friendly desk calendar for 2021, made entirely from recycled paper and vegetable-based inks. It was developed in collaboration with several talented Omani photographers to promote their work.

During the past year, the Bank has launched its future plan to reduce its carbon footprint by measuring its environmental impact in various fields, with the objective to find more sustainable solutions.

Conclusion

On behalf of the Board of Directors, I would like to thank all our stakeholders for their continued confidence and their commitment to Oman Arab Bank. As our nation progresses through these unprecedented times, the Bank continues to support the Omani government in its efforts to keep the Sultanate safe and progressive. I would like to thank the executive management of the Bank and all its employees for their hard work during these exceptional circumstances to achieve the desired goals. We also extend our thanks and appreciation to the Central Bank of Oman, Capital Market Authority and all government entities for their efforts and continuous support for the banking sector in the Sultanate. We immensely appreciate the role that the Government of Oman has played, especially regarding the various measures taken to manage the current financial crisis.

In conclusion, we would like to extend our sincerest gratitude to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik – may the Almighty protect and preserve him – for his wise leadership to ensure the sound vision of the future of this country. May the Almighty bless him as he continues to lead Oman and all its people.

Statement of Comprehensive Income for the Year Ended 31 December 2020

Details	Consolidated	Parent	
	RO. 000's 2020	RO. 000's 2020	RO. 000's 2019
Gross Interest Income	109,102	109,102	106,695
Interest Expense	(47,963)	(47,952)	(41,640)
Net Interest Income	61,139	61,150	65,055
Other Operating Income			
1. Dividend Income	71	71	189
2. Net Fee & Commission Income			
a) Fee and Commission Income	26,545	16,211	15,780
Less: b) Fee and Commission Expense	(899)	(896)	(1,480)
3. Net Foreign Exchange Income			
a) Income	5,341	5,173	6,300
Less: b) Expense			
4. Net Income from dealing in securities			
a) Gain / (loss)	33	-	-
Less: b) Expense			
5. Net Income from Investment securities			
a) Income	8,886	8,886	7,230
Less: b) Expense			
Gross Income	101,116	90,595	93,074
General Administrative Expenses	(58,528)	(49,163)	(42,824)
Depreciation	(6,880)	(6,136)	(5,812)
Total Operating Costs	(65,408)	(55,299)	(48,636)
Net Operating Profit (Profit on ordinary activities before provisions)	35,708	35,296	44,438
Bad debts Written Off		-	(30)
ECL Allowance (net) charged for Loans & Advances	(18,674)	(17,748)	(5,534)
ECL Allowance (net) charged for Investments	403	-	(54)
ECL Allowance (net) charged for Placements	258	258	184
ECL Allowance charged (net) for Off-Balance Sheet items	325	358	(128)
ECL Allowance charged (net) for Others (if any)	-	-	-
Provision for diminution / gain in value of Investments	(71)	(71)	(112)
Profit for the year after loan loss provisions	17,949	18,093	38,764
Taxation	(3,778)	(3,778)	(6,208)
Net Profits after Tax	14,171	14,315	32,556
Other Comprehensive Income for the year			
- Movement in fair value of available for sale / FVOCI investment for the year	1	(134)	108
- Effect of currency translation for the year	-	-	-
- Debt investments at FVOCI - reclassified to profit or loss	(134)	-	-
Total Comprehensive Income for the year	14,038	14,181	32,664

Assets and Liabilities as of 31 December, 2020

Assets (Net of total ECL)	Consolidated	Parent	
	RO. 000's 2020	RO. 000's 2020	RO. 000's 2019
1. Cash	39,892	31,165	42,511
2. Balances with CBO	180,058	141,987	136,653
3. Capital Deposit with CBO	1,025	500	500
4. Government & Other Securities	193,175	171,908	158,002
5. Treasury Bills & Other Bills	-	-	-
6. Due from H.O., branches, principal shareholders & affiliates abroad	5,347	3,560	15,836
7. Due from Banks:			
i) Placements	67,435	67,435	34,966
ii) Loans & advances	-	-	-
8. Other Money Market Placements	-	-	-
9. Investments	47,043	111,936	7,420
10. Loans and advances	2,635,455	1,928,866	2,006,330
11. Tangible Fixed Assets	46,605	42,479	39,725
12. Losses carried forward	-	-	-
13. Other Assets	84,008	55,287	55,186
Total Assets	3,300,043	2,555,123	2,497,129
Liabilities	Consolidated	Parent	
	RO. 000's 2020	RO. 000's 2020	RO. 000's 2019
1. Deposits (incl. Govt.)			
a) Demand	958,585	745,291	777,386
b) Savings	540,442	358,471	306,971
c) Time	1,256,283	927,000	914,079
2. Certificate of Deposits	-	-	-
3. Due to H.O., branches, principal shareholders & affiliates abroad	7,039	7,039	7,074
4. Due to Banks:			
i) Placements	7,382	3,532	24,391
ii) Borrowings	-	-	-
5. Other Money Market Deposits	-	-	-
6. Borrowings from CBO	-	-	-
7. Capital	166,941	166,941	134,620
8. Reserves	139,477	139,208	97,400
9. Retained Earnings	52,606	52,884	64,270
10. Capital Bonds	72,553	72,553	72,553
11. Other Liabilities	98,735	82,204	98,385
Total Liabilities	3,300,043	2,555,123	2,497,129

Sohar sugar refinery, food cluster projects to make headway this year

KEY MILESTONES:
Construction of the sugar refinery will commence around mid-year, while work on a food processing cluster will kick off before the year-end

CONRAD PRABHU
@conradprabhu

Construction work on a long-awaited sugar refinery project as well as a large-scale food processing cluster at Sohar Port and Freezone is expected to get under way this year. When fully operational, both ventures will help fuel the growth of a full-fledged agro-food processing industry at the maritime gateway.

According to a senior port official, initial groundwork on the world-scale sugar refinery project — the first of its kind in the Sultanate — will commence shortly. Planned on its heels is the development of an ambitious food processing cluster backed by a leading UAE promoter.

“The Oman Sugar Refinery project will now commence piling operations with a view to starting construction in the middle of the year”, said Robert Bartstra, Executive Commercial Manager – Sohar Port and Freezone.

Oman Sugar Refinery Company (OSRC), backed by a Tanzanian-based Omani investor, had signed an agreement for the establishment of a state-of-the-art refinery on a waterfront site within the port.



Plans, as revealed by the promoters back in 2013, envisage a capacity of 700,000 tonnes per annum of refined sugar in the first phase, eventually ramping up to 1 million tonnes per annum in Phase 2.

In addition, the Sohar Food Cluster Company, which will be located in between the Sohar Flour Mills and the Sugar Refinery, is expected to start their construction by end-2021, said the Executive Commercial Manager.

The dedicated food processing cluster project is being spearheaded by Essa Al Ghurair Investments (AGI), a prominent UAE business conglomerate. Its proximity to the flour mill and sugar refinery will enable Sohar Food Cluster Company to focus on the development of value

chains in the food sector.

In written remarks to the *Observer*, Bartstra said Sohar Port has ambitious to further strengthen its position in securing the Sultanate’s long-term food requirements.

“The food cluster in Sohar Port and Freezone consists of import and export facilities, both bulk and containerised, in the port. In addition, there are a number of facilities in the port, both in operation and under construction, to handle and process food commodities”, he stated.

A key element of the Food Cluster already in operation since December 2018 is Sohar Flour Mills with an annual capacity of 216,000 metric tonnes (MT). Under construction nearby is a complex of 12 grain silos, which

will also be operated by Sohar Flour Mills. Besides supporting local demand, Sohar Flour Mills also exports to the GCC countries, East Africa and Yemen, he said.

Significantly, all of the support infrastructure necessary to underpin the growth of a promising food processing industry in the port are already in place, he pointed out.

“The Sohar Freezone has a number of warehouse operators, with both dry and temperature controlled facilities, that allow both storage and distribution of food products.

Linked to the existing port import and export facilities, the Sohar Freezone is also actively pursuing opportunities for food processing and packaging activities as well as food logistics

The food cluster in Sohar Port and Freezone consists of import and export facilities, both bulk and containerised, in the port. In addition, there are a number of facilities in the port, both in operation and under construction, to handle and process food commodities

services. This could include processing of cereals, bakery products, beverages, edible oils, confectionary, etc.

Packaging industry could benefit from the existing aluminium and plastic producers already operating in Sohar”, said Bartstra.

Furthermore, the Freezone boasts of a number of advantages to investors, including 100 per cent foreign ownership, attractive local labour requirements, 0 per cent import/export duties and 0 per cent income tax, as well as a dedicated One-Stop-Shop service to acquire all registrations, licenses and visas, he pointed out.

“Apart from this and the world-class logistics services in the port, Sohar Port and Freezone is managed by one entity, and has a bonded corridor between port and free zone, which allows for easy flow of goods, as well as optimum choice in terms of location for tenants.

The container terminal, managed by Hutchinson Ports Sohar, now also has a 24/7 customs clearing service, specifically for agricultural products”, he added.

177 permits for street vendors issued in 2020



BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 20

Street vending permits covering 177 different types of economic and commercial activities were issued by the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion last year.

This compares with a 147 activities approved in 2019, an increase of 20.40 per cent, the ministry said.

In a statement to ONA, the ministry noted that Omanis can register as street vendors via the Invest Easy portal — a feature that regulates such activities while guaranteeing the rights of vendors, prevent competition from migrant labour, ensure the health of consumers through the enforcement of health requirements that the seller must comply with, and providing security and safety for vehicles and equipment used in the activities.



MSM WEEKLY REVIEW

MSM ends in green supported by all sub-indices

The MSM30 Index ended the week up by 1.40 per cent, supported by all the sub-indices. Financial index rose by 0.88 per cent. The Services Index and Industrial index, rose by 0.59 per cent and 0.39 per cent, respectively. The MSM Shariah Index was higher by 0.95 per cent. Foreign investors will be entitled to ownership of land for the first time in the Sultanate under the new Economic Stimulus Plan unveiled by the Omani government.

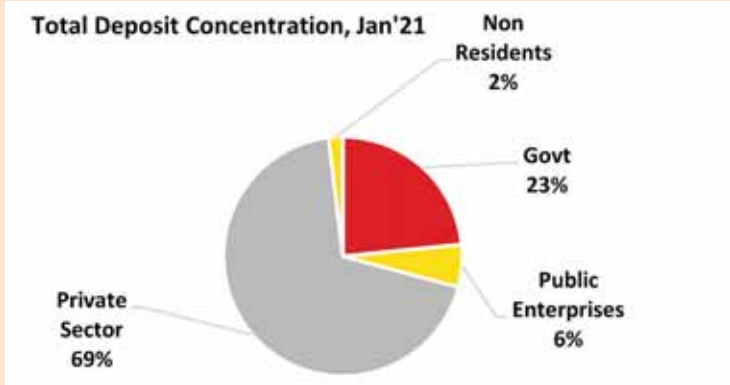
According to Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP), the move is part of a series of incentives offered by the government to enhance Oman’s investment appeal, as well as ease the business environment severely impacted by the pandemic and economic

slowdown.

Ooredoo’s highly anticipated Data Centre is now open for business. The 7,000 sqm facility, located in Baushar, was completed in less than 12 months, and is now fully equipped to manage the requirements of the rapidly growing demands for local hosts and digital data processing in Oman.

Galfar Engineering have increased their loss in the audited financials to RO 28.2 million for year 2020 compared to RO 21.8 million earlier in its initial estimates. Initial numbers had a worth RO 2.86 million while the audited one has provisions of RO 3.07 million.

Al Hassan Engineering reported a net profit of RO 14.6 million in audited financials compared to RO 0.052 million in initial disclosure. Higher profit was largely because



of gain on loss of control of subsidiaries in UAE amounting to RO 14.56 million. Company lost control of three of its subsidiaries in UAE, namely, Al Hassan Engineering Company Dubai LLC, Al Hassan Engineering Company Abu Dhabi LLC and Al Hassan Tecnidas Reunidas Project LLC.

The latest CBO bulletin reveals that Oman banking sector’s total credit stood at RO 26.89bn (+0.8 per cent MoM and +3.8 per cent YoY) as at the

end of Jan 2021.

Total deposits stood at RO 24.5 bn (+0.7 per cent MoM and +3.9 per cent YoY).

Total private sector credit stood at RO 23.1 bn, (+0.8 per cent MoM and +1.4 per cent YoY). Loan-to-deposit Ratio remained stable at 109.8 per cent in Jan 2021, as compared to 109.7 per cent in Dec 2020 and Nov 2020, and is below 109.9 per cent recorded a year ago, due to a relatively slower increase in credit as compared to deposits. Conventional

credit picked up to +2.7 per cent YoY from +2.2 per cent YoY in Dec 2020.

Total conventional credit reached RO 22.48 bn (+RO 138.5 million on MoM basis or +0.6 per cent MoM).

Conventional credit expanded on MoM basis largely on account of a 0.9 per cent MoM, or RO 166.5 million worth of increase in Private Sector credit.

Government and Public Enterprises credit declined by 1.9 per cent MoM and 0.7 per cent MoM, while credit to non-residents increased by about 0.5 per cent MoM.

Conventional deposits grew by +2.8 per cent YoY as compared to +2.4 per cent in Dec 2020. Total conventional deposits stood at RO 20.67 bn (+RO 123.4 million on MoM basis or +0.6 per cent MoM).

Sector Loan-to-deposit (LTD) ratio marginally stood

stable at 108.8 per cent since Dec 2020 on equal growth rates of loans and deposits.

Conventional deposits increased on MoM basis on account of Government, Public Enterprises and Private Sector deposits, while Non-Resident deposits declined by 27.2 per cent MoM.

Government deposits rose by 3.2 per cent MoM (up RO 138.1 million), Public enterprises’ deposits rose 10.6 per cent MoM or by RO 114.2 million, and Private Sector deposits rose +0.3 per cent MoM or by RO 45.5 million.

The share of Government & Public Enterprises deposits, which had dropped to the lowest value in our records at 26.6 per cent in Dec 2020 as compared to a simple average of 30.0 per cent over the previous trailing 12 months, now rose to 27.6 per cent in Jan 2021.

[Courtesy: U-Capital]



Side effects of the pandemic on the economy

One year after the beginning of the pandemic we can now draw some conclusions based on numbers.

While many countries in the world are going through the vaccination program and slowly get back to normality, from Q1 2020 to Q1 2021 we have seen some extraordinary events that have affected business for better or for worse.

Let us start with the negative first, so that we can close the column with a glint of hope. As I often do, I refer to the US data as an indicator, mostly because they are readily available.

I am very aware that it might not always be an applicable measure to the rest of the world, but in this case I am confident it would render justice.

The main reason is because the United States of America are 50 federal states that enjoy a certain degree of independence.

As such the Covid measures varied from state to state, therefore using US data to analyse the impact on business keeps in account a multitude of different approaches, similarly to the rest of the world after all.

The number of new business in 2020 as compared to new businesses in 2019 has dropped by a dramatic 81 per cent. In 2019 over 930 thousand new companies we registered in the US, providing over 1.65 million jobs overall, with an average of 1.7 employees per business.

In sharp contrast, 2020 saw only 170 thousand new businesses providing approximately 315 thousand jobs, with a slight increment to 1.85 employees per entity.

So the missed employment opportunities account for 1.3 million from small business, to which we need to add the 9.5 million jobs lost overall during the pandemic.

Since the US accounts for a



STEFANO VIRGILLI
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THE NUMBER OF NEW BUSINESS IN 2020 AS COMPARED TO NEW BUSINESSES IN 2019 HAS DROPPED BY A DRAMATIC 81 PER CENT

population of approximately 330 million, with just a little more than 250 million adults. Therefore about 4.5 per cent of the population eligible to work was affected by job loss or missed employment.

This number does not keep in account those whose employment terms changed. For instance, fewer hours or reduced salary. In some industries these change of terms might have severely impacted the workforce.

For instance, food and beverage outlets, cinema theatres, gyms, theme parks and events of all types. In the F&B industry, unemployment shot up from 6 per cent in 2019 to 14 per cent in 2020.

Gyms have reported a business decline of 37 per cent, accounting for over \$15 billion in lost revenues. In the entertainment industry things went terribly for artists of all sorts.

Unemployment skyrocketed

from 4.7 per cent in 2019 to over 19 per cent in 2020. Some musicians have not played in public for more than a year.

On the other hand, there has been some positive impacts too, even in the industries that have suffered the most.

For instance, drive through and QR code menu have become increasingly more popular, representing an innovation for food and beverage.

In addition, perhaps one of the best "side effects" of the pandemic, getting all of us used to Zoom calls has finally opened the door for online medical consultation.

We can now have a doctor virtually coming to our home, instead of us getting in line — with the other sick people — queuing just to be told that we are sick and we need to stay at home. Hopefully this new approach is here to stay.

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

PRESS RELEASE

MAZOOON ELECTRICITY WINS ASIAN POWER AWARDS



Oman's leading electricity provider Mazoon Electricity Company has won the 'Environmental Upgrade of the Year' recognition at the 2020 Asian Power Awards' in recognition for its successful environmentally friendly electrical transformers.

Considered as the 'Oscars of the power industry', Asian Power Awards honours ground-breaking projects and trailblazing initiatives in the power sector in Asia. The awards aimed at recognising the broad spectrum of Asia's power industry and acknowledging their vital input. Several leading Asian power companies participated in the awards.

The jury of the Asian Power Awards encompassed practitioners and experts from related industry.

Understanding that current and future energy challenges require a market efficient, reliable, and environment-friendly technology, Mazoon Electricity uses modern approaches to implement suitable environmental upgrades.

ALIZZ ISLAMIC CONDUCTS BUSHRA PRIZE SAVINGS ACCOUNT MONTHLY DRAWS



Alizz Islamic Bank organised the latest monthly draw event for Oman's first Sharia-compliant Prize Savings Account, Bushra, recently. The draw was held at Alizz Islamic Bank head office, in the presence of a number of senior staff members of the bank.

Three winners received the monthly prize of RO 25,000 each. The special monthly draws for men & women were also conducted, which include one male winner from each branch, receiving RO 500 each and one female winner from each branch, receiving RO 500 each as well.

Alizz Islamic Bank launched the Bushra Prize Savings Account in 2016 as Oman's first Sharia compliant prize savings account offering daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, half yearly and annual cash prizes as hiba (gift) from the shareholders. The account, which comes with the approval of the Sharia Supervisory Board, reflects the bank's efforts to deliver innovative and high-quality products and ensure a premium customer experience. Bushra Prize Savings Account is based on the Sharia principle of 'Mudaraba' under which the bank invests customer savings in Sharia-compliant financing to generate the best possible returns and profits. The customer acts as the capital provider while the bank takes up the role of 'Mudarib' or entrepreneur.

Approvals of promotions now via Invest Easy portal

BUSINESS REPORTER

MUSCAT, MARCH 20

Applications for promotional offers and discounts, as well as approvals of marketing materials and advertising brochures may now be submitted via the Invest Easy portal of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP).

In a statement, the Ministry stressed that this new feature will add to the ease of doing business in the Sultanate in line with the broader goals of Oman 2040 Vision.

In addition to digitizing public services, the new feature is also in line with Sultanate's obligations under various regional and international agreements.

Commenting on this improvement, Amal bint



Abdullah al Fahdia, Head of Commercial Licences Department at the Department of Commercial Affairs at MoCIIP said: "The Invest Easy portal has been created to facilitate the establishing of commercial and industrial projects, supporting the import and export activities and saving the time and efforts of

the investors. Hence, by adding this new service to the portal, the requests to hold promotional offers, discounts, marketing cards and advertising brochures will be received electronically along with attaching and uploading the required documents via Sanad offices or online self-service through the portal.

Musk to shut Tesla if cars used for spying

BEIJING: Tesla CEO Elon Musk (pictured) said on Saturday his company would be shut down if its cars were used to spy, his first comments on news that China's military has banned Teslas from its facilities.

"There's a very strong incentive for us to be very confidential with any information", Musk told a Chinese forum during a virtual discussion. "If Tesla used cars to spy in China or anywhere, we will get shut down."

The Chinese military has banned Tesla cars from entering its complexes, citing security concerns over cameras installed on the vehicles. Those restrictions surfaced as the top Chinese



and US diplomats were holding a contentious meeting in Alaska, the first such in-person interaction since US President Joe Biden took office.

Musk urged greater mutual trust between the world's two biggest economies, in his remarks to the China Development Forum, a high-level business gathering hosted by a foundation under the State Council.

— Reuters

Jury tells Apple to pay \$308.5 million for patent infringement

TEXAS: A federal jury in Texas said Apple Inc must pay about \$308.5 million to Personalized Media Communications LLC (PMC) for infringing a patent associated with digital rights management.

The jurors directed Apple to pay a running royalty to PMC, which is generally based on the amount of sales of a product or service. PMC, a licensing firm, had originally sued Apple in 2015 alleging the tech giant's iTunes service infringed seven of its patents.

Apple successfully challenged PMC's case at the United States patent office, but an appeals court in March last year reversed that decision, paving the way for the trial.

The iPhone maker did not immediately respond to Reuters' request for comment



A worker sprays disinfectant outside Apple flagship store in Beijing. — Reuters

but told Bloomberg that it was disappointed with the ruling and would appeal.

"Cases like this, brought by companies that don't make or sell any products, stifle innovation and ultimately harm consumers",

Apple was quoted as saying by Bloomberg here.

Sugarland, Texas-based PMC has infringement cases pending against companies including Netflix Inc, Alphabet Inc's Google and Amazon.com Inc. — Reuters



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Omani adventurers know the way

After a long stressful week working in a bank, Shamsa al Battashi packs her bag to engage in outdoor adventures which she considers a source of stimulation. Here's why she thinks you need to get out of your comfort zone and explore Oman's nature... **P20**

INSIDE STORIES

LOCAL SCENE

To the sound of drums and flutes, a freshly coiffed Palestinian groom dances with his brothers, cousins and friends, anxiously waiting for his veiled bride to arrive in her shimmering gown...
Story on P18

These super-abode are amorphous houses built by using natural and local materials like old fishing nets mixed with plaster for additional reinforcement and locally available stone for flooring...

Story on P18

It walks the reader through seven conversations that capture the defining moments in a love relationship and instructs how to shape these moments to create a secure and lasting bond.

Scientists believe they have identified a meteorite formed in the first million years of our solar system, making it the oldest known meteor of volcanic origin... **Story on P19**

Farmers in Al Abyadh village in the Wilayat of Nakhl began harvesting the Omkhi wheat crop known locally as "al Bur" which is cultivated in some villages of the wilayat under the supervision and follow-up of the agricultural development department... **Story on P19**



CHANGING WORLD

‘A blessing from God’: Iraqi truffle hunters unearth desert harvest



SAMAWA DESERT, IRAQ: “Here it is, the truffle, a blessing from God” Zahra Buheir carefully digs out a desert truffle from the sandy earth and shows it off between her calloused fingers.

“Rain came, and then thunder, bringing truffles up to the surface,” the 72-year-old said.

Braving the harsh weather of Iraq’s southern desert, as well as left-behind land mines, Buheir and her family of seven have spent weeks hunting for the seasonal truffles that have provided them with an income for generations.

Fetching its hunters up to \$7 a kilo this year, Iraq’s desert truffle is cheaper than its rarer European cousins that can cost hundreds of dollars or more a kilo.



But with Iraq’s economy in crisis, the local variety are a big help to Buheir and her family.

This year the rain came late and Buheir could only find about a kilo of truffles a day, one tenth of what she would dig up in a good year.

Turning over stones and poking the earth with her bare hands, Buheir’s granddaughter, 5-year-old Riyam, accompanied her parents to learn a trade and the desert lifestyle.

“When there is no work, truffles are a source of income. And we are happy here,” said Riyam’s father Mohsen Farhan, who cherishes the weeks he spends with his family in their tent in the desert.

Learning to hunt for truffles these days also involves understanding the desert’s dangers.

“We are afraid of wolves, there are a lot here. And there are mines. A while ago, someone died,” Farhan said.

Remnants from the Gulf war in 1991, unexploded devices beneath the earth could be mistaken for truffles by the inexperienced eye.

Every few days, Hussein Abu Ali, drives into the desert from the city of Samawa to take the truffles to market.

There, Ali Tajj al Din sells them at auction, each with a different name according to size.

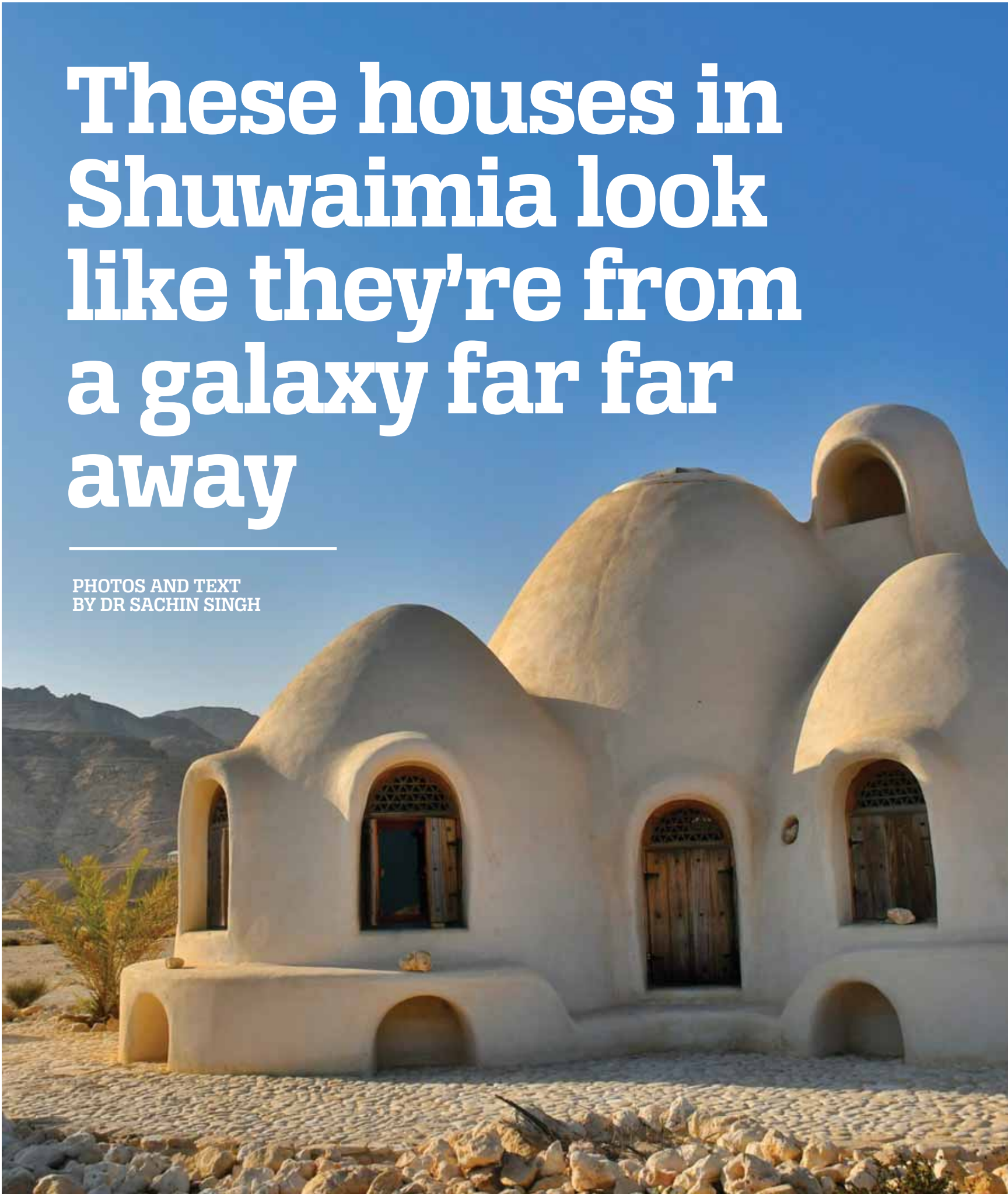
“These are walnuts, eggs, oranges, and here is the pomegranate, the biggest one,” he said.

This year, scarcity has pushed up prices and truffles that don’t sell locally are exported to wealthier Gulf countries.

But customers at Samawa’s “Beit al Hatab” restaurant relish its weekly truffle speciality.

“We fry or grill them, but the favourite dish is truffles on rice,” said restaurant owner Fawwaz Hatab.

— Reuters



PHOTOS AND TEXT
BY DR SACHIN SINGH

These super-abode houses are amorphous houses built by using natural and local materials like old fishing nets mixed with plaster for additional reinforcement and locally available stone for flooring.

At first glance, they would instantly remind you of the homes in the popular movie Star Wars which is why they stand out in the mountainous landscape of Shuwaimia.

But unlike those in the films, these houses were built with modern amenities mixing ancient techniques with modern comfort. Equipped with solar panels, the house is sustainable with electricity harnessed from the sun. An inspection inside reveals a solar heater and a solar-powered air-conditioning system.

Located approximately 320 km northeast of Salalah, these houses are near the fishing villages of Shuwaimia. This area has a 30km virgin pristine beach and because of its remote location, has the freshest air and the clearest night sky that’s just perfect for astro-photographers.

The house is said to be using the same principles used by Nasa as they try to create human settlements on the moon and Mars using available resources in the location and environment creating a settlement that is in harmony with nature.

As a doctor by profession, this place is a perfect getaway for families hoping to have a beautiful and calm place to relax. Since one will be driving through Salalah-Hasik road, even the drive itself is already a treat as one sees picturesque and beautiful views from the road.

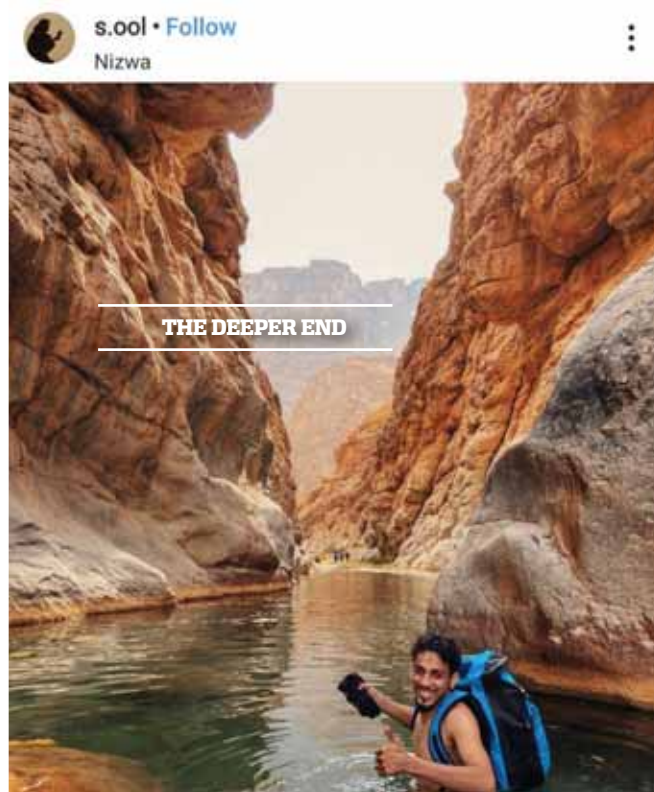
In the evening, as an avid photographer, I also enjoyed taking photos of the night sky. It is one of the best places to take photos of the Milky Way which is even visible with the naked eye.





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LOCAL SCENE

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It is time to harvest wheat in Nakhl

Farmers in Al Abyadh village in the wilayat of Nakhl began harvesting the Omani wheat crop known locally as "al Bur" which is cultivated in some villages of the wilayat under the supervision and follow-up of the Agricultural Development Department which provides technical and advisory support to ensure the quality and abundance of the harvest.

Engineer Muhammad al Nahdi, Head of the Agricultural Development Department in Barka, said that the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources pays great attention to the development and multiplication of Omani field crops, especially Omani wheat.

The department distributed at the beginning of this season wheat "seed", the type called

Wadi Qurayyat 110, on farmers in Nakhl, Wadi al Maawil and Barka, to cover an area of more than 15 acres to encourage farmers to grow it.

He added that the role of the department is to provide indicative and technical recommendations in terms of the use of fertilisers and irrigation during the cultivation period and the use of the best methods used in agricultural operations.

Wheat cultivation became a great success because of the series of field trials conducted. Farmers hope that support will be intensified for them highlighting the importance of introducing other agricultural varieties to the rest of the local grains that were grown in the wilayat. They also hope that they receive improved seedlings of fruits that are successfully cultivated in the fields and suitable for agricultural lands.



DISCOVERY

Scientists unearth meteorite from the birth of the solar system



SCIENTISTS BELIEVE they have identified a meteorite formed in the first million years of our solar system, making it the oldest known meteor of volcanic origin.

The space rock, which began its journey some 4.5 billion years ago, has already proved an "exceptional" witness to the building blocks of the planets.

Known as Erg Chech 002, the meteorite was discovered in May 2020 by meteor hunters in the Algerian Sahara desert. It had rested undisturbed for "at least 100 years", according to Jean-Alix Barrat, a geochemist at France's Brest University.

In a recent study published in the Proceedings of National Academy of Sciences journal, Barrat and his colleagues describe its discovery and several rare features.

There are 43 officially documented fragments, but "probably about a hundred" either still in the ground or unaccounted for, said the study. The largest ones are "as big as a fist," Barrat said.

With its greenish exterior and brownish interior, Erg Chech 002 might not appear extraordinary at first glance. But it is, in fact, extremely rare.

Of the roughly 65,000 meteorites so far documented on Earth, only around 4,000 contain what is known as "differentiated matter". This means they came from celestial bodies large enough to have experienced tectonic activity.

Of those 4,000, 95 per cent come from just two asteroids. But Erg Chech 002 is among the remaining five per cent.

"It's the only one out of 65,000 meteorites that is like it is," said Barrat.

"Such rocks were quite common at the very beginning of the history of the solar system."

There are two possible explanations for Erg Chech 002's rarity.

The type of protoplanet from which it originated provided raw material "for the growth of terrestrial planets" such as Earth, said Barrat.

Others were pulverised in the great cosmic billiard

game of the formation of the solar system.

The surface of the Moon, pockmarked with innumerable asteroid impacts, is a relatively recent witness to this second type of protoplanet.

"No asteroid shares the spectral features of EC 002, indicating that almost all of these bodies have disappeared, either because they went on to form the building blocks of larger bodies or planets or were simply destroyed," the study said.

Thrown into space

The so-called "parent body" of Erg Chech 002 could have measured around 100 kilometres across.

It was formed in the first million years of the solar system, according to the study's co-authors, March Chaussidon, from the Paris Globe Institute of Physics and Johan Villeneuve, a researcher from France's National Centre for Scientific Research at the University of Lorraine.

Metallic meteorites "correspond to the nuclei of protoplanets," said Barrat.

But Erg Chech 002 is volcanic in origin, meaning that it was part of the crust of a protoplanet, rather than its core.

The experts believe that its unique composition was the result of a string of fortunate events.

On the protoplanet in question, lava must have accumulated on the surface, fuelled by the heat of its aluminium core.

The crust containing the meteorite solidified briefly but — because it showed evidence of a sudden cooling — instead of remaining on the parent body, some violent force cast it asunder.

"The rock was thrown into space," said Barrat.

Further investigation into its composition found that Erg Chech 002 was formed around 4.65 billion years ago.

It travelled through the aeons, "in a gravel shell, protected from solar radiation," said Barrat.

Then, around 26 million years ago, the rock was dislodged, continuing its journey until colliding with Earth.

— AFP



HOW TO GET OUT OF A SLUMP?!

Omani adventurers know the way

By Muzna al Riyami

Life has become a routine and we have devoted ourselves to work like machines to fulfil our ego and make our time more productive. Therefore, we need to break this routine from time to time so that we get relaxed and get back to work with more energy and positive vibration.

People these days escape into the wild away from the dense urban jungle that is surrounded by buildings, cars and concrete. They were hoping to establish a connection with nature.

Spending time immersed in nature observing, exploring and listening to what the outdoor has to say can change

activity which was abseiling, and that trip was the turning point that changed her life.

"The enjoyment and feelings I felt after that trip was prodigious! It was the spark of addiction to adventure life", she expressed.

Shamsa's best destination is the Snake Canyon, in which she started her journey of adventuring. The thrill of walking between the tall cliffs, narrow paths and blue pools make the trip unforgettable as she describes. Besides, she occasionally heads to adventure nearby wadis where she can enjoy a combination of hiking mountains, abseiling down waterfalls, and swimming in



the way the brain functions. Moreover, being out in nature can help to relieve anxiety, stress and depression and contributes to a healthy foundation for personal well-being. Richard Louv, a journalist and author, says the results of nearly 1,000 studies "point in one direction: Nature is not only nice to have, but it's a have-to-have for physical health and cognitive functioning."

Oman with its mesmerizing natural scenic beauty that is woven from moun-

tain, plains, wadis and beaches has drawn plenty of locals and foreigners for adventure, exploration and recreation. This surfeit of natural wonders creates a potential for outdoor activities and adventure sports such as hiking, abseiling, rock-climbing, diving and snorkelling. While many people are adventuring, whether individually or in groups, for personal purposes, some turn their love of adventures and exploration into a career to earn their living out of it.

Involving in nature activities and sports is an ideal chance to step out of one's comfort zone by which an individual breaks the chains of fear such as fear of heights, fear of swimming and insect phobia. Shamsa added, "being exposed to



nature, experiencing and exploring, makes me a more relaxed and patient person, since I keep my normal busy lifestyle in a pause mode and drop everything behind to just live the moment in the lap of nature".

Shamsa also successfully climbed the summit of Jabal Shams, the highest peak in Oman and across the Arabian Gulf at an altitude of about 2,997 above sea level, often referred to as the Grand Canyon of Arabia. "The route was around



Among those adventure seekers is Shamsa al Battashi, who considers the outdoors as a source of stimulation, seeking different terrain for her everyday life in nature activities.

After a long stressful week working in a bank, Shamsa decided to break the routine of her normal weekend and add some adventure to her life by engaging in an outdoor activity. The first trip in wild was in April 2019 to Snake Canyon in Wadi Bani Ouf. She chose to disappear into a peaceful area away from the city trying a new

23 km and took me around 15 hours to complete. It was a rugged route, but I was able to reach the summit", she shared.

Eventually, Shamsa advises the beginners who are about to set their first steps into the adventurers' community to be physically fit and to do a few short attempts which are about 5 km as a warm-up and preferably to join teams or companies that are equipped with well-trained guides and safety gears.

"Life is too short, so live it fully", she said.