



THURSDAY, 18 FEBRUARY 2021

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HIS MAJESTY SULTAN HAITHAM BIN TARIK SPOKE TO INDIAN PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA MODI OVER PHONE ON WEDNESDAY, DISCUSSING THE STRONG RELATIONS BETWEEN THE TWO NATIONS. HIS MAJESTY EXPRESSED HIS GRATITUDE FOR PROVIDING OXFORD-ASTRAZENECA VACCINES TO OMAN.

His Majesty receives ambassadors



Sergei Terentiev, Ambassador of Belarus, presented his credentials to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik at Al Barakah Palace on Wednesday

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik received separately at Al Barakah Palace credentials of a number of ambassadors of friendly countries accredited to the sultanate on Wednesday.

His Majesty received creden-

tials of the following ambassa-

dors: Vakhtang Jaoshvili, Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador of President Salome Zourabichvili of Georgia, accredited to the sultanate.

Orazmuhammet Charyyev,

Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador of President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow of the Republic of Turkmenistan, accredited to the sultanate.

Vu Viet Dung, Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador of President Dr Nguyen Phu

Trong of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, accredited to the sultanate.

Sergei Terentiev, Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador of President Alexander Lukashenko of the Republic of Belarus, accredited to the

sultanate.

Anibal Gomez-Toledo, Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador of President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador of the United Mexican States, accredited to the sultanate.

Niclas Trouve, Extraordinary

and Plenipotentiary Ambassador of King Carl XVI Gustaf of Sweden, accredited to the sultanate.

Patrick Simont, Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador of Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commis-

sion, accredited to the sultanate.

And Luis Manuel Fernandez, Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador of President Dr Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa of the Portuguese Republic, accredited to the sultanate.

Continued on Page 02



Zanzibar's VP dies of COVID-19

Stone Town, Tanzania -

Zanzibar's first vice president, Seif Sharif Hamad, who led the island's opposition for three decades, died on Wednesday, the president said, after he had been hospitalised for over three weeks with coronavirus.

Tanzania and its semi-autonomous island Zanzibar have played down the threat of the virus, which President John Magufuli claims has been fended off by prayer.

However Hamad's ACT-Wazalendo party announced in January that the 77 year old had been hospitalised with the virus, as part of rising evidence of a surge in cases in the country.

"Hamad died this morning at Muhimbili National Hospital in Dar es Salaam where he was hospitalised," Zanzibar president Ali Hassan Mwinyi said in a short speech broadcast by state-run ZBC television.

"The nation has really lost a patriotic leader. I also declare seven days of mourning and the national flag will fly at half-mast."

Magufuli also expressed his condolences in a message on Twitter.

Demand for vaccine picks up as fears over safety fade

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Public apprehension over COVID-19 vaccines is being gradually allayed after the initial unconfirmed reports from around the world about side effects and deaths following immunisation. Vaccine uptake has since increased in some sections of society in the sultanate.

Authorised vaccine administering health centres have witnessed sizeable numbers of recipients in recent days. Jamal al Musallami's first attempt to get the vaccine was unsuccessful. "I went early morning to the Bausher centre. The nurses took my contact details saying that they would contact me if there was any chance." He did, in fact, receive a call from the centre later to go for the jab.

Others like Talal Masoud are still waiting for a call. "I went to try my luck to get the vaccine but seeing the long queue, I came back after leaving my details with the health centre."

Like many others, K Balakrishnan, a 65-year-old Indian expat, was initially hesitant to get immunised owing to the rumours surrounding the vaccines. "But I felt assured after medical experts and government agencies cleared the air. So I went and while there, I saw a big crowd. I was declined the first day, so I went the next and managed to get the jab." Balakrishnan has also got his booster dose.

Sri Lankan expat D Karupaiya too has got his second shot. "As the virus and its variants wreak havoc, the only way to be safe and secure is to get the vaccine. We cannot live in isolation and lockdown is not an option. I am



(Supplied photo)

sure the vaccine will develop our immunity and save us from further disaster."

H E Dr Mohammed bin Ahmed al Sa'eedi, Minister of Health, however, recently said in an interview to Oman TV that turnout in some governorates is still low and asked all those in the target categories to get vaccinated.

H E Dr Sa'eedi assured that the vaccines are safe and pose no risk. "The government is in touch with COVID-19 vaccine manufacturers with the aim of covering 60 per cent of the population."

As many as 14,463 individuals have been immunised with Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine so far.

277 new cases, five deaths in the last 24 hours

Muscat - The Ministry of Health (MoH) on Wednesday announced 277 new cases of COVID-19, taking the total to 138,206. There were five deaths and 209 recoveries in this period.

The number of recoveries has increased to 129,752, while the number of deaths has reached 1,549, an MoH statement said, adding that the rate of recovery now

stands at 94 per cent.

As of Wednesday, a total of 147 patients were admitted in health institutions, including 46 in intensive care units.

MoH advises all citizens and residents to continue washing hands with water and soap, avoid touching the face, nose, mouth and eyes, and follow healthy habits when coughing and sneezing.

Families with under-16s can request exemption from quarantine

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Families with children under 16 years can request exemption from institutional quarantine which is subject to approval from authorities, according to an official source at the Ministry of Social Development's Relief and Shelter Sector.

Hamoud bin Mohammed al Mundhiri, spokesman of the Relief and Shelter Sector, informed *Muscat Daily* that families may be exempted from institutional isolation if their children have no one, like grandparents, to take care of them. "It depends on the situation of the family."

Reiterating that mandatory institutional quarantine came into effect on February 15, Mundhiri said, "Passengers arriving in the country can stay in any hotel from the list prepared by the competent authorities for mandatory institutional at their own expense."

On Monday, the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) announced that diplomats, children under 16 and adults aged 60 and older are exempted from the requirement of presenting pre-confirmed hotel

Overall, families are not exempted. But there is a team at the airport to assess families' situations

HAMOU AL MUNDHIRI

reservations for mandatory institutional quarantine in Oman upon arrival in the sultanate.

The announcement left many families travelling with children to Oman in distress and evoked reaction from social media users.

Seeking clarity, twitterati Mohammed Faiyz asked, "Does this mean families with kids are exempted from institutional quarantine?" Another Twitter user Joe Morass queried, "Where will children live (when their parents are in institutional quarantine)?"

Following a flurry of social media activity, the Relief and Shelter Sector clarified that children under 16 are exempted from institutional quarantine if conditions are met. "Overall, families are not exempted. But there is a team at the airport to assess families' situations," Mundhiri said.



Oman climbs 6 places in UN's global e-commerce ranking



HM's Cup semis: All set for clash of champions

His Majesty receives ambassadors



Vakhtang Jaoshvili, Ambassador of Georgia



Luis Manuel Fernandez, Ambassador of Portugal



Patrick Simont, Ambassador of European Commission

Continued from Page 01

During meetings with His Majesty the Sultan, the ambassadors conveyed greetings of their countries' leaders along with their best wishes of good health, happiness and a long life to His Majesty the Sultan and continuous progress and prosperity to the Omani people under the wise leadership of His Majesty the Sultan.

They also expressed their honour and delight in presenting their credentials before His Majesty the Sultan. They affirmed to exert their sincere efforts to promote relations of their respective countries with the sultanate in various spheres in a manner that serves the joint interests of the Omani people and their countries' citizens.

His Majesty the Sultan welcomed the ambassadors, expressing his thanks for their leaders' greetings and best wishes. His Majesty the Sultan confirmed to them that they would receive all support from His Majesty, the government and the Omani people to facilitate carrying out their duties.

The credentials presentation ceremony was attended by the Minister of the Diwan of Royal Court, the Foreign Minister, the Head of Royal Protocols, the Commander of the Royal Guard of Oman and the military aides to His Majesty the Sultan.

ONA



Vu Viet Dung, Ambassador of Vietnam



Anibal Gomez-Toledo, Ambassador of Mexico



Niclas Trouve, Ambassador of Sweden



Orazmuhammet Charyyev, Ambassador of Turkmenistan

OCCI chairman asks ministers to support private sector

Our Correspondent
Muscat

As part of its effort to support the private sector in face of the present challenges, Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) held a meeting with a high-level ministerial delegation on Wednesday.

Eng Ridha bin Juma al Saleh, chairman of the Board of Directors of OCCI, took part in the meeting along with H E Sultan bin Salim bin Said al Habshi, Minister of Finance; H E Dr Said bin Mohammed bin Ahmad al Saqri, Minister of Economy; H E Qais bin Mohammed al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, and H E Dr Mahad bin Said bin Ali Ba'owain, Minister of Labour.

The meeting discussed the efforts made by government agencies to support the private sector and empower national cadres in light of the economic and financial conditions the sultanate is going through.

The meeting reviewed the visions and proposals presented to protect and support the private sector in light of the current economic and health conditions. The meeting also discussed mechanisms of constructive cooperation between government agencies related to economic work that would organise the



Eng Ridha bin Juma al Saleh

OCCI is working with government agencies on a number of studies and economic reports related to the current crisis

labour market and develop and enhance the role of private sector institutions to keep pace with the changes.

The OCCI, as an official representative of the private sector, is working with government agencies on a number of studies and economic reports related to the current crisis and its impact on the private sector. It has also presented a number of proposals and ideas aimed at stimulating and supporting the private sector to achieve growth and other economic returns.

Oman and Sri Lanka celebrate landmark in relations

Muscat - The Sultanate of Oman and Sri Lanka on Wednesday signed an agreement on mutual visa exemption for holders of diplomatic, special, service and official passports.

The signing took place during a ceremony held by Oman's Foreign Ministry, in cooperation with the Sri Lankan Embassy in Muscat, to mark the 40th anniversary of establishing diplomatic relations between the sultanate and Sri Lanka.

The ceremony was attended by H E Sheikh Khalifa Ali al Harthy, Undersecretary for Diplomatic Affairs in the Foreign Ministry, and H E Omar Lebbe



Ameer Ajwad, Ambassador of Sri Lanka to the sultanate.

During the ceremony, the two sides also launched a commemorative logo symbolising the strong diplomatic relations between the two friendly countries.

The two sides also exchanged greetings on behalf of the respective foreign ministers.

Since establishing the diplomatic relations in 1981, the two countries consolidated pillars of fruitful cooperation in various political, diplomatic, economic and cultural spheres, characterised by mutual respect.

ONA

MoH signs agreement to train pharmacy students of NU

Muscat - Represented by the Directorate General for Human Resources Development (HRD), the Ministry of Health (MoH) signed an agreement on Wednesday with the National University of Science and Technology (NU) to train pharmacy students of the university.

Dr Ahmed al Abri, HRD director general, signed the agreement on behalf of the ministry, while Dr Khalid al Balushi, College of Pharmacy's dean, signed it on behalf of the university.

The agreement permits the use of MoH facilities to train the



(Supplied photo)

university's students who are enrolled in the College of Pharmacy.

The signing ceremony, held at the university headquarters in Bausher, was attended by Dr Ali al Bimani, vice chancellor and number of deans, in addition to MoH's officials.

The agreement is the third among similar pacts as part of the MoH's facilitations for the private higher education institutions to provide their undergraduates with the scientific and applied knowledge in their own academic fields of specialisation.



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RACHEL CHEW EXPLORES

I'M **RACHEL CHEW**; LOUD MOUTH, FOODIE AND A GENERAL EMBARRASSMENT WHO YOU CAN FIND ON HI FM WEEKDAYS 4-7PM.

Al Hinn sulphur pools near Bidbid



Forty-eight photos - we really need to get a grip and stop trying to pretend to be famous influencers. Mostly because my lazy eye and double chin don't need multiple people commenting on them

With parks and beaches closed, we thought we would get in the car and do some sight-seeing. For ages I have been begging my friends to come with me to the sulphur springs. Everyone had told me the drive to Sohar and back was very long and that the pools weren't worth the journey, however, there is another pool, the Al Hinn sulphur pool near Bidbid!

The spring itself was more of a crack in the rocky terrain, with a little pool at the end. The water was baby blue, which was glowing off the white rocks.

We arrived pretty early so it was nice and quiet with just two families taking photos at the spot.

The amount of photos my friend and I took is actually embarrassing... forty-eight!!! Forty-eight photos - we really need to get a grip and stop trying to pretend to be famous influencers. Mostly because my lazy eye and double chin don't need multiple people commenting on them. While most people there took a photo and jumped back in their car, my friend and I popped in for a dip and I was surprisingly pleased to find the water wasn't too cold and actually nice and cool. Now I know what you're thinking - it's a sulphur spring. Surely it smelt? You'd be correct it did smell a little bit eggy, but who cares when you're surrounded by mountains in the glowing blue water. I highly recommend you visit this 'eggcellent' spot.

If you do plan on visiting and maybe fancy a picnic by the water, I urge you to



take your rubbish with you please. I found it truly upsetting how much litter I came across and despite COVID-19 fears I did fill a whole bag full of rubbish before spraying my hands with disinfectant gel and heading back to Muscat.

The drive back to Muscat was lovely; we even spotted four camels on the side of the road, one of which was a baby camel that was adorable. Did I get out of the car to take photos of it? Yes. Did I scare the camel away? Sadly, yes. Classic response to my presence - I turn up and people run away to be fair!

The views and opinions expressed in this column are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of Muscat Daily or Apex Press & Publishing

OFC reopens bigger, efficient fish factory in Al Ashkharah

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman Fisheries Company (OFC), in coordination with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, has re-opened a fish factory in Al Ashkharah in South Sharqiyah governorate.

A statement issued by OFC said, 'The company reopened the fish factory after completing additional construction and development works. The factory aims to support artisanal fishermen.'

The factory is now equipped with advanced, more efficient freezing devices, which raise its capacity to 60 tonnes per day.

The capacity of its cold stores



was increased to 220 metric tonnes in addition to an ice factory that produces 20 tonnes of ice per day.'

According to the company, the factory aims to purchase approximately 60 tonnes of fish per

day from artisanal fishermen in the governorates of Al Wusta and South Sharqiyah.

'The equipment in the factory is of latest technologies and will reduce the time period of production,' OFC stated.

NONE OF MY BUSINESS

Just not superheroes and villains, everyone has – or would like to have - an alter ego to give vent to their wild dreams. If nothing, it helps take the mind off endless deadlines, commitments, cut-throat competition or just everyday banality

UP CLOSE & PERSONAL

'NONE OF MY BUSINESS' unveils people who make news as they're prodded to reveal little known facets of themselves – everything not related to their work and profession. Here is Anuj Singh, entrepreneur, up close and personal.



If you were born in Jamaica, what would you be doing now?

I would be a street performer. With a guitar sitting on a bench in park, I would be singing songs because Jamaica is known for music.

Who said 'Hasta la vista'?

It was Arnold Schwarzenegger in the film *Terminator II*.

What food can instantly tackle an angry spouse?

I am sure it will be dessert because it is sweet.

Sing two lines of a song on love.

(Hesitates) I am not so good with songs and I am not a singer. (Finally sings a Hindi number).

A day without a smartphone or a night without air-condition? Why?

I will opt for a day without smartphone because it will give me more time to mingle with others. Also sleep will make me look good.

Did you ever steal anything in childhood?

Oh! yes, I did steal occasionally from my dad's office - mainly fancy pens. Also coins from his wallet.

In the next 30 years, what will people be nostalgic about?

Probably in the next 30 years, the old ways of mixing in society will be badly missed. As we become modernised and digitalised, and more and more people get busier, we will soon miss social bonds.

Which Disney character suits you?

I love the film *Lion King*. It has a character called Pumbaa - he's my favourite. I like him because he is cheerful and doesn't care about anything, living life to the max.

How do you react to annoying honking drivers in traffic?

It is a very annoying thing. I will probably get very angry and turn away my face, but I will not say anything to him. (Makes angry expression).



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Asr	3.43pm
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SRI LANKAN COMMUNITY SULTANATE OF OMAN

ANNOUNCEMENT

Dear Members of the Sri Lankan Community in the Sultanate of Oman.

The Sri Lankan Community Social Club election for the new Board of Directors will be held on 20th March 2021.

Election nomination forms can be collected from the General Secretary of the Sri Lankan Community Social Club, Deanna Zuhiri.

All nomination forms after completion to be submitted to the General Secretary on or before 10th March 2021.

Please contact the **General Secretary of SLCSO** for further information:

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*Rates as on February 17
Source: xe.com

BRIEFS

Daimler partners with Amazon on self-driving trucks

German automobile giant Daimler, the world leader in heavy-goods vehicles, said on Wednesday that it had enlisted Amazon to help with its testing of Level 4 self-driving trucks.

Daimler subsidiary Torc Robotics, which specialises in vehicle automation software, selected Amazon Web Services as a cloud provider for its upcoming truck tests in the US states of New Mexico and Virginia, the German company said in a statement.

Amazon's 'extensive capabilities' in areas such as data transfer, storage and analytics would help Torc 'accelerate its testing and commercialisation' of Level 4 technology, Daimler said.

Torc Robotics, which is based in Virginia, first partnered with Daimler Trucks in early 2019, and was later acquired by the German giant.

In October 2020, Daimler also signed a global partnership with Google-Alphabet subsidiary Waymo to equip US company Freightliner's Cascadia lorries with Level 4 technology.

Oman climbs 6 notches in UN's global e-commerce ranking

The sultanate ranks among top 10 developing economies

Our Correspondent
Muscat

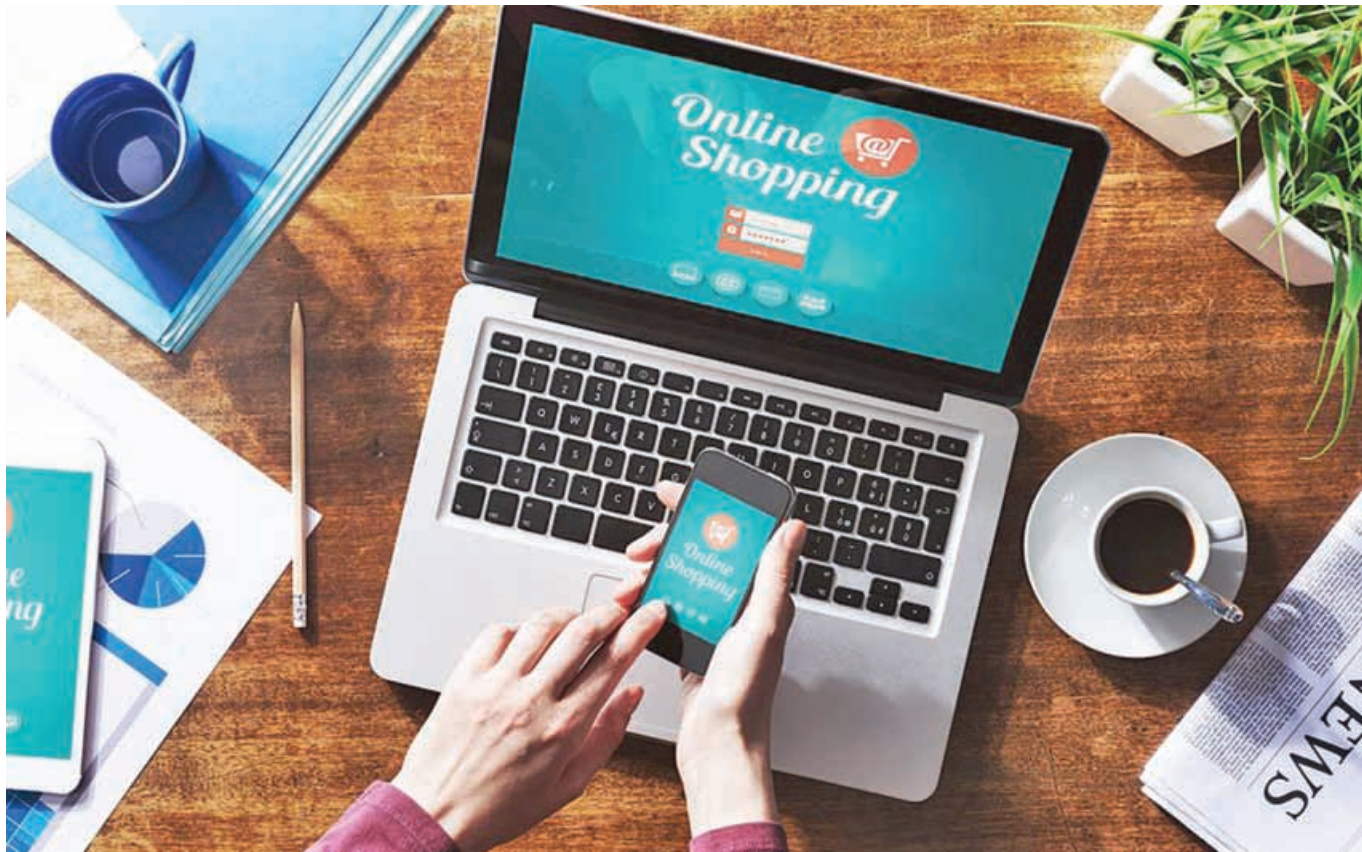
Recording a remarkable improvement in its international e-commerce readiness ranking, Oman has climbed six positions in the UN's global e-commerce index this year compared to its previous year's ranking.

The sultanate ranked 54th globally in the Business-to-Consumer (B2C) E-Commerce Index 2020 released by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) on Wednesday. Oman had ranked at 60th place in UNCTAD's 2019 B2C E-Commerce Index, which ranks 152 countries on their readiness to engage in online commerce.

As per the index report released by UNCTAD, Oman this year has been able to secure its place among Top 10 most prepared developing economies for B2C e-commerce.

Switzerland climbed to the top of global e-commerce index this year by replacing the Netherlands. Europe remains by far the most prepared region for e-commerce, according to UNCTAD.

The index scores 152 nations on their readiness for online shopping, worth an estimated US\$4.4tn globally in 2018, up 7 per cent from the previous year. Countries are scored on access to secure Internet servers, reliability of postal services and infrastructure, and the portion of their population that uses the Internet



and has an account with a financial institution or a provider of mobile money services.

The two largest B2C e-commerce markets in the world, China and the US, rank 55th and 12th respectively in the index.

"The e-commerce divide remains huge," said Shamika N Sirimanne, director of UNCTAD's division that prepares the annual index. "Even among G20 countries, the extent to which people shop online ranges from 3 per cent in India to 87 per cent in the UK."

The 2020 edition of the index

includes a few notable changes from the previous year. In the composition of the top 10 positions, Hong Kong (China) replaced Australia. Among the top 10 developing economies, Oman replaced Turkey, UNCTAD noted.

As per the UNCTAD report, more than 92 per cent individuals in Oman use Internet and 74 per cent of the sultanate's adult population keep an account with financial institution or provider of mobile money services.

It said, in Canada, the United States and 10 European nations,

more than 70 per cent of the adult population makes purchases online. But that proportion is well below 10 per cent in most low- and lower-middle-income countries.

In the GCC region, the UAE ranked 37th in UNCTAD's B2C E-Commerce Index 2020, nine notches lower compared to its ranking in 2019 index.

While Saudi Arabia retained its ranking same as last year's at 49th position, Qatar's global e-commerce ranking dropped to 50th place from 47th a year ago.

"The COVID-19 pandemic has made it more urgent to ensure the countries trailing behind are able to catch up and strengthen their e-trade readiness," Shamika said.

The index, she said, underscores the need for governments to do more to ensure more people can avail of e-commerce opportunities.

"Otherwise, their businesses and people will miss out on the opportunities offered by the digital economy, and they will be less prepared to deal with various challenges," she added.

OPAL signs agreement for Cloud services

Muscat - Oman Society for Petroleum Services (OPAL) signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Jebel Akdhar Data Center (Datamount), a leading data centre for hosting services company in Oman, to create OPAL Cloud.

The memorandum of understanding establishes a framework for closer collaboration between OPAL and Datamount, leveraging innovative networking, data centre and security infrastructure solutions, cloud hardware and managed services for cloud and collaboration.

The scope of this MoU agreement enables Datamount to create OPAL Cloud for the customers and OPAL. OPAL Cloud will consist of highly secure cloud services, platform as a service, industry software, disaster recovery services, backup services, IVMS (In Vehicle Monitoring System), IoT (Internet of things) and all other required technology.

The services provided by Datamount will be in collaboration with various other third party service providers for engagements such as software as services, co-location, managed services IoT platform, backup solutions, private/public cloud compute services, manage security virtualisation, storage solutions, firewall and load balancers, needed for customer information technology environment in this industry.

ONA

INTERVIEW

DR NICK TAYLOR, CEO AND CO-FOUNDER OF UNMIND

'COVID-19 crisis highlights urgent need to support employee wellbeing'

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Dr Nick Taylor is the chief executive and co-founder of the UK-based Unmind, a workplace mental health platform that provides clinically-backed tools and training to create healthier, happier and more human organisations.

As a lead clinical psychologist in the UK's National Health Service (NHS) in 2015, Dr Taylor faced the challenges of managing absenteeism, presenteeism, and turnover among highly pressured frontline staff. Determined to find a solution, he discovered that, by combining clinical science with corporate wellness, organisations could help their teams to proactively nurture their own mental health, and in turn boost productivity.

Dr Taylor will be speaking at the Wellbeing @ Work Middle East Summit that will take place between February 22-24, 2021.

As an expert in wellbeing and mental health in the workplace, what main challenges do you think organisations are facing at the moment?

The organisations around the world are facing challenges, the likes of which we haven't seen in a generation. The most pressing perhaps is supporting the wellbeing of our workforces through this period. Most people fortunate enough to still be in employment won't have avoided having their work-life balances drastically disrupted. Our personal and profes-

sional lives have blurred and now we have to wear many hats - whether that's as carers, teachers, or within our roles.

Another challenge is maintaining the steady operation - let alone innovation - in the face of so much uncertainty. Our abilities to plan for the 'next normal' are compromised by this ambiguity, which is why we need to focus on individual and organisational resilience.

What strategies have you seen developing globally over the past 6-12 months during the pandemic to address mental health in the workplace?

The COVID-19 crisis caused a tipping point in the mental health agenda, highlighting the very real and urgent need for employers to support the wellbeing of their people. The three increasingly prominent strategies include:

Businesses are realising the importance of proactive and preventative mental health support, rather than just reactive measures. Employees need the right care at the right time.

As our personal and professional lives have become increasingly blurred, businesses need to think about how they take a whole-person approach to employee mental health. This means not only supporting psychological health, but also social and physical wellbeing.

The third emerging strategy is the dominance of digital mental health support. With the prevalence of remote and geographically dispersed



Enabling employers to offer their employees proactive support helps them not just to prevent problems, but to realise the wonderful things that come with good mental health

DR NICK TAYLOR

ways of working, organisations are looking to digital to offer their entire workforces the right care at the right time, wherever they are.

Why is employee wellbeing so important to you personally?

While working as a clinical psychologist in Britain's National Health Service, never once did I see a patient at

the right stage of their mental wellbeing journey. Never once did I see someone who was already experiencing poor mental health and think that I couldn't have supported them better had I not seen them sooner. Enabling employers to offer their employees proactive support helps them not just to prevent problems, but to realise the wonderful things that come with good

mental health. I would say prevention truly is better than cure.

What are you most looking forward to about the virtual Wellbeing @ Work Middle East event this month?

I am so excited to hear about how HR, wellbeing, benefit and business leaders from across the Middle East are supporting the mental wellbeing of their people. I find it so inspiring to be part of a global workplace wellbeing movement and can't wait to learn from others leading the charge in this region.

Can you tell what is your vision for the workplace of the future, in terms of employee engagement, mental health and wellbeing?

At Unmind, our unwavering vision is a world where mental health is universally understood, nurtured and celebrated. We believe that, with the right tools and resources, it's possible for every organisation to empower every employee with expert support to improve their own mental health.

COVID-19 has undoubtedly influenced all areas of employees' personal and professional lives. What are the key learnings from this period and what are your tips for supporting each other through uncertainty?

On the one hand, we have experienced the fragility as societies, and on the other we have witnessed our remarkable ability to adapt as humans: As friends, loved ones, co-workers, and leaders. We have harnessed the

capabilities of technology to sustain social connections, tend to focus on our health, maintain productivity, and support our wellbeing.

In order to get through the coming months we should: Keep connecting with each other with whatever tools at our disposal; remain flexible and empathetic with one another; remember to carve out time for ourselves to connect with what we find meaningful - whether that's family, nature, exercise or hobbies and prioritise both our mental and physical health with daily exercise for each.

How has your organisation been leading the way to deal with the situation over the last 12 months?

We have been fortunate enough to experience growth in the last 12 months, which has meant onboarding many incredible new people to our organisation. We have worked with field experts to ensure our platform content, support and resources have remained at the forefront of our users' needs. And we have used our reach and various communications channels to provide as much relevant and useful information around supporting our mental health as possible.

(Dr Nick Taylor will be interviewing Ellen Dubois du Bellay, chief human resources officer of Jumeriah Group, at Wellbeing @ Work Middle East Summit that takes place on February 22-24, 2021. For further details on the summit, please go to <https://fowinsights.com>)

MSM rises 0.12%; activity improves

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The benchmark index of the Muscat Securities Market (MSM) rose 0.12 per cent to close at 3,558.46 points on Wednesday.

Trading activity improved from the previous session as turnover rose by 2.58 per cent to RO1.06mn and volumes increased 55.18 per cent to 8.59mn shares.

While Financial index rose 0.23 per cent, Industrial and Services indices fell 0.05 per cent and 0.15 per cent, respectively. The MSM Shariah index closed up by 0.38 per cent at 533.79 points.

Market breadth remained negative as seven companies closed up, while ten companies closed down. The rest 14 traded stocks closed flat for the day.

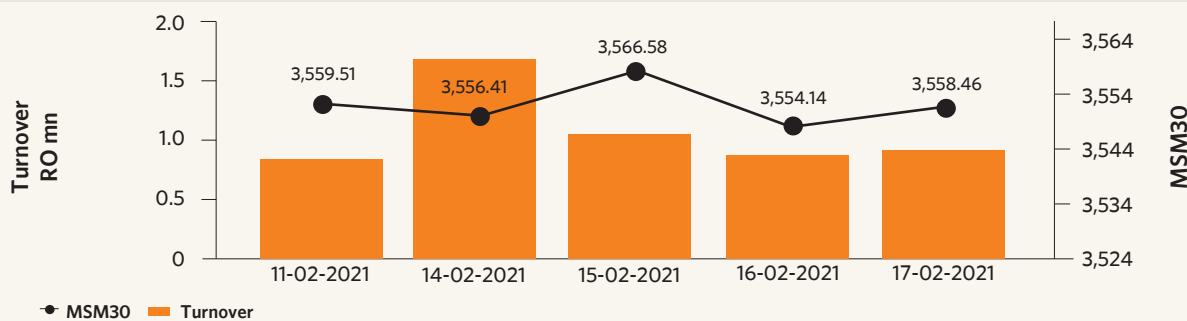
Top gainers were Sharqiyah Desalination (3.31 per cent), Bank Nizwa (2.08 per



cent), Galfar Engineering & Contracting (2.08 per cent) and Al Jazeera Services (1.73 per cent). Top losers were Oman and Emirates Investment (-4.76 per

cent), United Finance (-2.7 per cent), Dhofar Insurance (-2.44 per cent) and National Aluminium Products Company (-2.35 per cent).

MSM INDEX AND TURNOVER OF FIVE TRADING DAYS



Spend 'big,' Biden says in push for stimulus

Milwaukee, US - US President Joe Biden sidestepped a divided Congress and went straight to the nation on Tuesday with a primetime televised town hall in Wisconsin seeking support for his US\$1.9tn economic rescue package.

"Now is the time we should spending. Now is the time to go big," Biden told the live CNN audience in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

With lawmakers reeling from the aftermath of Donald Trump's impeachment acquittal, Biden used his first official trip away from Washington as President to address ordinary voters.

His stimulus package would more than double the previous measure passed by Congress, after intense debate, in December.

The administration says massive injections of money, including US\$1,400 checks sent to many Americans, are vital to preventing a sluggish economic recovery from stalling altogether.

Another major goal of the spending spree is to boost the COVID-19 vaccine rollout - a logistical, medical and financial challenge upon which Biden's entire first term may hang.

But the stimulus bill's price tag, as well as some of the spending details, leaves most Republicans in Congress sceptical.

Biden's choice of Wisconsin for the town hall was no coincidence: He won the battleground state by just 20,000 votes against Trump in November and it will feature prominently again in the 2022 midterms and 2024 presidential race.

On Thursday, he will go to another swing state when he tours the Pfizer plant in Kalamazoo, Michigan, where coronavirus vaccines are being manufactured.

And on Friday, Biden will pursue his stimulus bill pitch on the international stage when he addresses the virtual G7 leaders' meeting and the Munich Security Conference.



US President Joe Biden participates in a CNN town hall at the Pabst Theater in Milwaukee, Wisconsin on Tuesday (AFP)

The White House says he will stress 'the importance of all industrialised countries maintaining economic support for the recovery and collective measures to build back better'.

With slim majorities in both the House and Senate, Democrats could force through Biden's package without Republicans at all.

But Biden took office insisting he would seek cross-party solutions, turning the page on Trump's ultra-divisive style. So he is keen to break through to at least some Republicans.

Last week, Biden met in the Oval Office with a group of Democratic and Republican governors and mayors to discuss the COVID relief package.

As local and regional officials most immediately caught up in the consequences of the twin health and economic crisis, they were a relatively receptive audience.

"You folks are all on the front lines and dealing with the crisis since day one," Biden noted.

In Wisconsin, he insisted that only the 'fringes' are keeping the

country apart, where in reality 'it's not nearly as divided as we make it out to be'.

His efforts seem to be paying off - among voters at least, if not yet with congressional Republicans.

A Quinnipiac poll this month showed nearly 70 per cent of Americans support the stimulus package, while a CNBC poll reported 64 per cent believe the price tag is sufficient or not even enough. Only 36 per cent said it was too much.

Biden himself is on a solid footing with nearly 55 per cent average approval ratings. Trump may still hold a powerful grip over the Republican voter base but his final average approval rating on leaving office was a measly 38.6 per cent.

"If you look at the polls, they are very consistent," White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Tuesday.

"The vast majority of the American people like what they see in this package and that should be... noted by members of Congress."

AFP

Bitcoin surges past \$50,000 for first time

London, UK - Bitcoin hit another record on Wednesday, at US\$51,719.10, having broken US\$50,000 for the first time on Tuesday as corporate heavyweights increasingly back the world's most popular virtual currency.

The unit, once the preserve of Internet geeks and hobbyists, has since exploded in popularity and has now rocketed by almost 75 per cent in value this year.

"The crypto king has crossed the US\$50,000 price level for the first time as institutions are all over it," said AvaTrade analyst Naeem Aslam.

"There is a lot of FOMO (fear of missing out) among traders as the price is going through the

roof and we have limited supply."

Aslam told AFP that bitcoin could reach US\$100,000.

"Of course, there will be some bumps but investors should consider them as an opportunity to bag some bargains," he added.

Bitcoin has been on a meteoric rise since March last year, when it stood at US\$5,000, spurred by online payments giant PayPal saying it would allow account holders to use cryptocurrency.

The unit last week blasted its way past US\$45,000 after Elon Musk's Tesla invested US\$1.5bn in the virtual unit.

In a further boost, Tesla unveiled plans to accept the cryptocurrency from customers

buying its vehicles.

Mastercard plus US financial giant BNY Mellon have meanwhile agreed to accept digital currencies as payments, even as many regulators remain sceptical.

Adding further legitimacy, Twitter chief Jack Dorsey and rap mogul Jay-Z are creating a fund aimed at making bitcoin 'the Internet's currency'.

Bitcoin, which was launched in 2009, hit the headlines in 2017 after soaring from less than US\$1,000 in January to almost US\$20,000 in December of the same year.

The virtual bubble then burst in subsequent days, with bitcoin's value then fluctuating

wildly before sinking below US\$5,000 by October 2018.

However, strengthening corporate support has transformed the outlook this time around, commentators say.

"Growing corporate support for the crypto makes this a very different market to what it was in 2017," noted Markets.com analyst Neil Wilson.

In response to the rapid rise of cryptocurrencies and the dwindling global use of cash, a number of central banks have announced plans for bank-backed digital units.

Bitcoins are traded via a decentralised registry system known as a blockchain.

AFP



A building of the assembly plant of US car maker Ford is illuminated with the lettering 'E-Mobilitaet' (E-Mobility) in Cologne, western Germany on Wednesday (AFP)

Ford launches \$1bn drive to go fully electric in Europe by 2030

Frankfurt, Germany - US auto giant Ford said on Wednesday it was investing US\$1bn in Germany in a bid to make all of its passenger vehicles sold in Europe electric by 2030.

The company said in a statement that 'by mid-2026, 100 percent of Ford's passenger vehicle range in Europe will be zero-emissions capable, all-electric or plug-in hybrid, with two-thirds of Ford's commercial vehicle sales expected to be all-electric or plug-in hybrid by 2030'.

It said it would upgrade its assembly plant in Cologne, the home of Ford Europe, with a US\$1bn investment to advance the company's

'all-electric future'.

Ford said its first European-built all-electric passenger vehicle for European customers would be produced at the facility from 2023.

The following year, its entire commercial vehicle range is to be zero-emissions capable, all-electric or plug-in hybrid, with two-thirds of Ford's commercial vehicle sales expected to be all-electric or plug-in hybrid by 2030.

Under European Union legislation that came into force last year, manufacturers' fleets of newly sold cars must emit on av-

erage less than 95 grammes of CO₂ per kilometre, or face hefty fines from 2021.

To comply with the new EU pollution limits, auto companies across the industry must massively increase their sales of electric and hybrid cars.

German manufacturer Volkswagen said last month that CO₂ emissions from its passenger-car fleet had decreased 'by around 20 per cent' year-on-year, helped by a fourfold increase in the numbers of electric and hybrid vehicles sold in Europe.

AFP

WTO needs to show results on economic crisis and vaccines, says Okonjo-Iweala

Washington, US - Nigeria's Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, newly selected head of the World Trade Organization (WTO), said on Tuesday she will push for concrete results in addressing the dual economic and health crises facing the globe.

Her immediate goals are to ensure vaccines are produced and distributed worldwide, not just for rich nations, and to resist the push towards protectionism that worsened during the pandemic, so that free trade can help the economic recovery.

"I think the WTO is too important to allow it to be slowed down, paralysed and moribund," she told AFP in an interview. "That's not right."

She will take over leadership on March 1 of an institution that has become weighed down and increasingly defanged, especially by the open hostility of Donald Trump's administration.

Amid the turmoil, including the US move that shutdown the dispute resolution court in December 2019 about complaints about handling of disputes with China, her predecessor stepped down last August, a year before his term was up.

Selected by the membership on Monday, after US President Joe Biden's administration backed her candidacy, Okonjo-Iweala promised to breathe fresh life into the trade body which she



Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala (AFP)

says has lost focus on helping improve living conditions for real people.

"I believe the WTO can contribute more strongly to a resolution of the COVID-19 pandemic by helping to improve access accessibility and affordability of vaccines to poor countries," she said.

Vaccine push

"It's really in the self-interest of every country to see everyone vaccinated because you're not safe until everyone is safe."

Some countries, such as India and South Africa, have been pushing for a suspension of trade rules on patents to allow more rapid vaccine rollout.

But rather than get caught in another squabble among WTO members, Okonjo-Iweala said

the organisation could promote a quicker path.

'Instead of spending time arguing on those we should look at what the private sector is doing' with licensing agreements, to allow vaccines to be produced in multiple countries - something she noted AstraZeneca already has done in India.

"The private sector has already looked for a solution because they want to be part of reaching poor countries and poor people," she said.

In addition, the WTO needs to work to ward off the trend towards export restrictions for medical devices and therapeutics, as well as the possibility of restrictions on the vaccines themselves.

While it is natural for politicians to help their own countries

first, she warned that supply chains are tightly linked and cannot be quickly disentangled to create all-domestic production.

The MIT-trained economist, who served as Nigeria's first woman and longest serving finance minister, who also is a US citizen, is adamant the WTO must return to its original function of helping countries to deliver better living standards to their people.

"It's about creating employment, decent work for people. It's about ... improving lives," she said.

'There is definitely a role for trade to play in the recovery' from the COVID-19 economic crisis.

Even before the pandemic sparked a global recession, the organisation had lost sight of that goal, she said, lamenting the example of the negotiations over a fisheries subsidies agreement that has dragged on for two decades.

"This cannot go on. We must bring it to a conclusion. We can't afford to fail on this."

The talks, which aim to end subsidies that lead to overfishing, failed to yield an agreement by the end-2020 deadline.

She blamed some of the calcification on the dominance of negotiators, which she called an 'Achilles heel' of the WTO.

AFP

BankDhofar among most trusted brands in Oman

Since its inception 30 years ago, BankDhofar has maintained a pioneering position, and has become one of the most trusted brands among the banking sector in the sultanate. This achievement was possible through strategic planning employing the best technologies, international processes, and practices.

Commenting on that, Ahmed Said al Ibrahim, chief operating officer at BankDhofar said, "BankDhofar is one of the prominent brands in the banking sector. Being the second largest bank in market share, we have played a crucial role, in shaping the banking and financial landscape of the sultanate. We believe that our customers' satisfaction is the reflection of our success. Therefore, we have focused in our journey on creating unparalleled customer experience through our customer touchpoints including branches and digital banking channels."

Convenient banking experience

Providing a convenient banking experience has always been the top priority for BankDhofar since its inception, putting technology and innovation at the core of its strategy to improve the experience of its customers.

Customers may conduct their transactions at ease and around



the clock through the highly secured and user-friendly digital banking channels. BankDhofar's, award-winning, Mobile Banking App offers a wide range of exclusive services. The services include; instant transfer to any bank in the sultanate, cardless

cash, mobile top-up for all telecom providers in the sultanate, increasing daily withdrawal limit to RO5,000, Instant International money transfer service with Western Union, among other services.

Through Internet Banking, BankDhofar provides several features for retail and corporate customers. Additionally, BankDhofar customers may access the financial services through a wide network of ATMs and CDMs around the sultanate. The bank launched Cardless ATM Banking Services using mobile. The first-of-its-kind service in the world enables customers to conduct ATM transactions easily only by using their mobile numbers.

Additionally, with the user-

friendly IVR system, BankDhofar customers can enrol and avail for their banking services very easily and in a fast-paced manner.

Along with the services provided over BankDhofar's digital channels, BankDhofar customers may conduct their payment transactions conveniently through BankDhofar cards with the 'Tap & Go' feature. This feature allows customers to pay on the go for shopping, traveling, or for any payments. The cards are highly secured and come with an RFID protection card and cover. BankDhofar credit cardholders may benefit from the Rewards Program and enjoy holidays, travel, shopping, and a better lifestyle for free. Every time they

use BankDhofar's credit cards, they earn points which may be redeemed at various shopping outlets, restaurants, cafes, health clubs and spas.

Revamped branches

With its prime locations, BankDhofar exerts its efforts to enhance the overall customer experience and journey by revamping several branches across the sultanate. The top-notch revamped branches are designed to provide convenient banking experience to the customers, reflecting the traditional Omani culture of hospitality. Placing customer experience as the heart of the design the BankDhofar branches affords customer with privacy, hospitality and a

personalised experience.

The bank has also introduced Drive-Thru Banking Services with the aim of providing state of the art services that ensure utmost convenient banking experience. The first-of-its-kind service in the sultanate enables customers to conduct transactions without stepping out of their car, including; cash deposit and withdrawal, cheque deposit, instant debit card issuance, bank transfers, and request for account statements. The service is now available in Al Seeb Town branch and is planned to expand across other branches.

To enhance customers' banking experience, BankDhofar branches at Muscat International Airport, Muscat Grand Mall, Mall

of Muscat, Falaj al Qabail, Sur City Centre, and Salalah Gardens Mall serve the customers for extended working hours till 9pm.

Talent development for best customer experience

BankDhofar strongly believes in continuous training and talent development of its staff to best serve the customers. Thus, the bank provides various training and development courses through its Performance Academy. Equipped with state-of-art facilities, Performance Academy includes classrooms where training sessions are conducted, a library full of resources, and Computer labs.

Intending to equip its employees with the required skills to best serve the customers, the academy includes a mock branch where employees are trained and they go through real experience. BankDhofar, through the academy, aims to make training available to all its employees through its branch network across Oman. Certified online learning and development courses will be available for the staff of BankDhofar across different regions. The bank has maintained a high level of Omanisation ratio and strives to offer Omani nationals with sound career and development opportunities.

Muzn celebrates triple win at WOMANi Awards

Muzn, National Bank of Oman's (NBO) Islamic banking window, is celebrating a triple win for three female team members, who have been named among the top 300 most influential women in Islamic business and finance at the WOMANi Awards.

Salima al Marzooqi, chief Islamic Banking Officer; Mathla al Maamri, Ma'abala branch manager; and Sadaa al Harthy, Azaba branch operations manager, received the awards, which are run by UK-based financial intelligence house, Cambridge IFA.

The women were recognised for their professional leadership, advocacy and industry-wide recognition, as well as their influence and leadership over their company and market sector, and career and performance to date.

Salima commented, "We are lucky to have a huge pool of positive female talent at the bank, which is nurtured by the bank's ongoing commitment to a culture and work environment that supports us. This commitment is just important as ever as we con-



tinue to be at the forefront for equal opportunities in the industry, while supporting Oman's Vision 2040 for a progressive and equal society. We hope this award is an example to women across the sultanate of what they are capable of, and as a reminder of our important contribution to the nation's development."

Salima is the first woman in the GCC to become head of an Islamic banking institution, and is credited for her instrumental role in shaping the development of the industry in the sultanate. She is also the first female regional manager of a local bank in Oman, first female head of branches of

a local bank in Oman and first female head of Islamic retail of a local bank in Oman. As well as holding an MBA from Strathclyde University, UK, she also has a CISI Level 3 certificate in Islamic financing from the Chartered Institute for Securities and Investment (CISI).

Mathla, who has been with the bank for eight years and is currently head of Muzn's Ma'abala branch, is a certified Islamic Finance Professional from CISI. Sadaa has worked at Muzn for the last eight years, and holds an Islamic Finance qualification and special training in Information Security Awareness, operational training and Islamic Law of Contract.

Launched in 2011, WOMANi is a world-wide recognition and felicitation programme designed by Cambridge IFA to showcase the achievements of women in Islamic business and finance and redress the gender imbalance. NBO continues to sponsor and endorse female leaders in different walks of life, encouraging employee development.

Zubair SEC holds Tajribati session on challenges for traditional restaurants, cafes

With an objective to help members to grow and achieve success, Zubair Small Enterprises Centre (Zubair SEC) organised a 'Tajribati' session on the challenges of running traditional restaurants and cafes. The recently held virtual 'Tajribati' session provided an overview on how entrepreneurs can innovate in traditional restaurants and cafes successfully without changing in the traditional identity of the dishes.

Azza Mohammed al Mamari, Sou-Chef, Shangri-La Barr al Jisrah Resort and Spa, was the key speaker at the session which focused mechanisms of developing popular dishes in terms of basic ingredients.

Participants were apprised on how to present local folk food in a new way without prejudice to the Omani identity. The session deliberated on the challenges and risks facing home projects and the processes to deal with it. Upcoming entrepreneurs were advised on safe and healthy preservation mechanisms for storing foodstuffs. They were



counselled on the cost calculation mechanisms for products.

Senior advisor at Zubair was the moderator of the session.

The virtual 'Tajribati' session was attended by members, cafe owners, small business entrepreneurs, and aspiring entrepreneurs. The 'Tajribati' series serves as a unique platform to connect business experts with start-up owners and new entrepreneurs to exchange views, discuss common challenges and

share best practices.

The session also stressed on the need to be efficient, to have the right people manning the space, serve a good quality food.

Experts advised those who aspire to own traditional restaurants and cafes to write a business plan which includes a clear definition of the concept; an understanding of the market; the menu and pricing; detailed financial data, expense forecasts; a marketing plan and a compre-

hensive strategy that summarise how to deal with the challenges.

Thanking Zubair SEC for hosting the session Azza said, "It was a wonderful opportunity for me to interact with smart minds from the centre. Tajribati is a great platform and aspiring entrepreneurs can learn, gain knowledge, obtain information, debate common challenges and get an understanding of happenings in the field they want to operate in."

National Business Centre signs agreements with two companies

The National Business Centre (NBC), which falls under the umbrella of the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates - Madayn, signed incubation agreements with Pharmaceutical Consulting Office and Rumoz Company. NBC will provide a flourishing environment for the two incubated companies with a wide range of services that will contribute to their growth.

Pharmaceutical Consulting Office is specialised in providing logistical services in the pharmaceutical field and offering advice to health institutions in determining the quality of services and ways to improve and evaluate them. Moreover, the Pharmaceutical Consulting Office directs pharmacists and healthcare providers to improve and develop functional and scientific skills and involve them in scientific research and innovation.



Specialised in the industrial technical marketing field and driven by youth with innovative ideas, Rumoz Company aims at supplying the Omani market and local products with unique

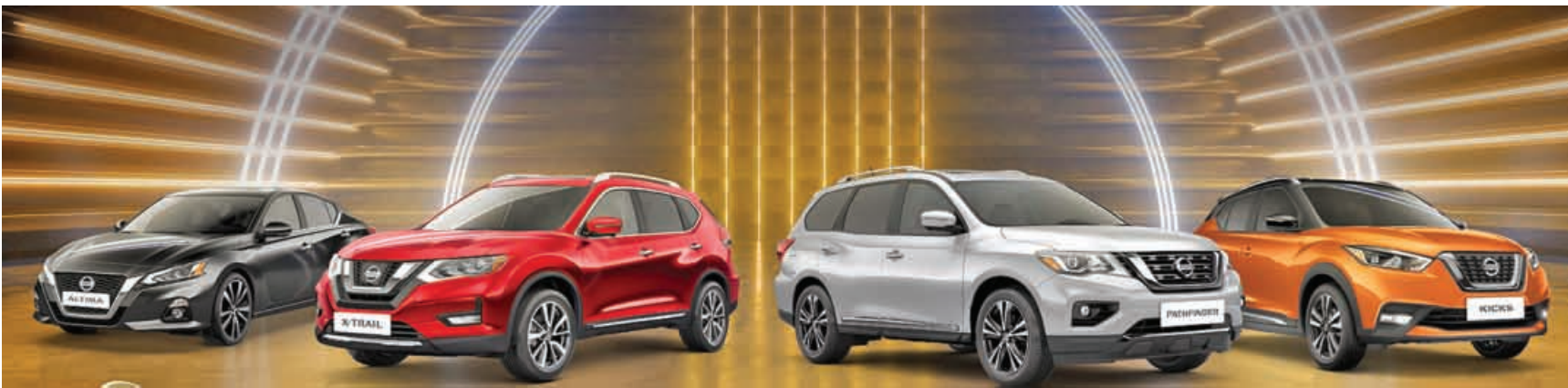
brands and innovative packaging solutions that enhance product reliability. Rumoz works as an integrated business chain to develop and establish the visual identity of the project, and devise

solutions for packaging and marketing the product with innovative digital videos. It should be noted that Rumoz is the marketing arm of the Industrial Innovation Centre.



It is worthwhile mentioning that NBC is an initiative launched by Madayn at the Knowledge Oasis Muscat (KOM) to offer promising Omani entrepreneurs a platform to develop their business ideas and advance them into growing ventures.

The centre offers a premier platform for Omani entrepreneurs by providing business development support and guidance, training and mentoring, access to markets and industry experts, and state-of-the-art and fully equipped office space, meeting rooms and presentation facilities.



Nissan Oman's 0% interest offer receives great response

The '0% interest up to three years on select models' offer announced by Nissan Oman, from the house of Suhail Bahwan Automobiles (SBA), has garnered great response from customers.

To deliver the best possible value with amazing offers and value propositions, Nissan Oman has launched a special offer on a range of its models as part of new promotion.

Apart from the 0 per cent interest up to three years on select models, other interest slabs include 1.99 per cent for 4 years or 2.49 per cent for 5 years or 2.99 per cent for 6 years. The offer is applicable on select stock of Kicks, X-Trail, Altima and Pathfinder.

The special promotion is available till March 23 on applicable models purchased for personal use. As part of the special offer, Nissan Oman is also offering free fuel card, periodic maintenance service, cash gift, free insurance and free registration.

Muntasar Ambusaidi booked a Nissan Altima based on the 0 per cent interest up to three years promotion.

"The special offer encouraged me to buy a new vehicle. It is a very valuable offer and people

who aspire to buy a Nissan brand of vehicle, this is the perfect time to do so," he said.

Ali Nasser says the offer helped him save a lot of money.

"I am glad I purchased my Nissan during the offer. I ended up saving so much. There is a lot of value propositions in buying a vehicle when an offer is in place," he said.

Rahima Balushi who brought Nissan Kicks recently says the special rate of interest makes the vehicles very affordable.

"I always wanted to own a Nissan Kicks which offers excellent mileage and unique styling. The special offer made the buying experience very pleasant and affordable," she said.

A senior official of Nissan Oman, from the house of Suhail Bahwan Automobiles (SBA) explained that the promotion has been designed for customers who aspire to own a Nissan vehicle. "We are happy our customers have benefited from this special offer. The offer will enable buyers to purchase Nissan cars at attractive EMIs. This scheme is designed to be flexible and customers can choose special interest rates as per their convenience," he said.

Special interest rate

Popular Nissan models – Kicks, X-Trail, Altima and Pathfinder – are available on a special rate of interest. On models of Kicks, X-Trail, Altima and Pathfinder customers can get 0 per cent up to three years or 1.99 per cent for four years or 2.49 per cent for five years or 2.99 per cent for six years.

For all tenures beyond six years, normal interest rates will apply for the full tenure of the loan. This rate is applicable for individual purchase with private registration only and is subject to Finance/Credit approval. Customers can opt for only one of the interest rate options. EMIs will be highest for 0 per cent for three years scheme. This offer is valid till stocks of these unit last. This benefit will be applicable for financing through select finance companies only. Customers purchasing in cash, LPO, credit will not be eligible for special interest rate benefit.

EMI for popular models

Customers can avail low EMI rate as part of the offer. Starting EMI for Nissan Kicks is RO126, Nissan X-Trail is RO181, Nissan

Altima is RO163 and Nissan Pathfinder is RO256. These EMIs are calculated on basis 2.99 per cent rate of interest for 6 years loan tenure.

Service package

Customers can enjoy free periodic maintenance service package for 3 years/ 60,000km. This offer is valid for 10,000km service intervals.

Assured cash gift

Under the special promotion, customers can avail assured cash gift of RO3,100 on Nissan X-Trial, from RO2,200 to RO2,600 on Nissan Altima; from RO1,700 to RO2,000 on Nissan Kicks; from RO4,000 to RO4,500 on Nissan Pathfinder.

Free insurance

Customers of Kicks, X-Trail, Altima and Pathfinder can enjoy free insurance in Oman & UAE for first year for private registration. Nissan patrons can enjoy free registration on Nissan Kicks, X-Trail, Pathfinder, Altima for the first year.

Awards for Nissan

In 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019, Nissan was conferred with

'Oman's Most Trusted Brand' award across categories including SUV, crossover, 4WD and mid-size Nissan, considered a premium and trusted name in the market, was the only brand to have won the recognition for four times in a row in the automobile category. The award is instituted by Apex Press and Publishing.

SBA commitment

SBA is largely committed to supporting Nissan's growth in the sultanate through major emphasis on customer satisfaction and by providing world-class after-sales services in Oman. With a national network of 12 showrooms, 17 service centres and 24 spare parts outlets, SBA has further built upon its legacy of excellent customer service and providing value for money to each of its customers.

After sales service

Every customer purchasing a Nissan vehicle can be assured of Nissan's top class after sales service, which guarantees the advantage of factory-trained experts.

For test drive options call Nissan Toll free 80050011.

Oman Flour Mills wins His Majesty's Award

Oman Flour Mills gives huge importance to social responsibility programme as part of its goals. It does not separate itself from the society and the service to the people of the country. This approach has helped it winning the His Majesty the Sultan's Award for Industrial Excellence in the social responsibility category.

The social responsibility programmes of Oman Flour Mills includes its fund 'Campaign for You' meant for supporting underprivileged families with various food products, providing healthy meals at schools for needy students, as well as a support programmes for charities and the National Committee for the Disabled, and as well as work for establishment of environment friendly gardens in various regions of the sultanate.

The amount of the contributions of Omani Flour Mills to social responsibility programmes was RO175,000 for the year 2020.

The company adopts social responsibility programmes with many government organisations and active civil society institutions. It provides contributions and does charity works and social services and organises a number of activities which are socially sustainable. The company is also working to support the development of small and medium enterprises. For the purpose, it is training Omani youth for self-employment and helping them in setting up their own small projects such as clean-



ing and maintenance companies. It is preparing them for future by giving them grants and concessions to establish their own fast-food outlets and add value to them.

Speaking at the occasion, Haitham bin Muhammad al Fannah, chief executive officer of Oman Flour Mills, said that the company gave huge important and extraordinary attention to social responsibility. It has long-term, sustainable projects targeting the needy groups of the society.

The honouring of Oman Flour Mills Company with His Majesty the Sultan's Award for social responsibility is an appreciation of its efforts which it has made over the years, he said.

He said, "It is our resolve that we will continue our work even in most difficult times. We did not stop production even in the times of crises, exceptional climate changes and epidemiological conditions which swept the country."

The Spa at Chedi Muscat reopens

With the stress of recent months weighing heavily on our shoulders, many of us could do with a relaxing spa day to treat ourselves. Welcoming the new spa director, Hapsari Tri Widyaningrum, the luxury spa at The Chedi Muscat reopened on February 14 for all guests.

The Spa at The Chedi Muscat is an 800sqm majestic, relaxation haven. Known to be one of the largest spas in Muscat, it offers personalised, discreet service from the region's finest wellness professionals. Embracing eastern philosophies with Asian oriental practices, The Spa offers an extensive variety of beauty rituals based on the holistic principles of aromatherapy, Ayurveda and herbalism.

At the Zen-inspired spa, guests are enveloped in a world of understated elegance as they relax under the healing touch of



trained therapists in one of the 13 meditative spa suites, that combine dramatic Omani architecture with calming Asian interiors.

To complement The Spa's Zen-like journey, the hotel offers a selection of high-end organic products from brands such as Ren, Voya, Ila and Tiyya.

Created from natural ingredients, each brand has its unique essence and allows the team to

design a personalised experience for every guest.

Joining the talented team is the new spa director, Hapsari, who brings with her over 10 years of experience and a solid understanding of the luxury hotel wellness industry as well as creative flair and passion.

For more information or reservation, call +96824526850 or email spa@chedimuscat.com

Qatar Airways Cargo transports 5,000 tonnes of flowers on Valentine's Day

It is a floral February for Qatar Airways Cargo as it transported millions of flowers for Valentine's Day, one of the biggest events worldwide. Qatar Airways Cargo transported more than 5,000 tonnes of flowers, mainly roses and carnations. The increase in floral exports for 2021's Valentine's Day is a testament to the customers' trust in the airline's cool chain solutions.

Thanks to its innovative QR Fresh solution, the flowers are maintained in a temperature-controlled environment during the transport process including any transit. The cargo carrier shipped flowers from all over the world with the main markets being Ecuador, Colombia and Kenya. Flowers are also uplifted from The Netherlands, India,



South Africa, Uganda, Thailand, Sri Lanka and Ethiopia, among other countries.

Guillaume Halleux, Qatar Airways chief officer cargo said, "Valentine's Day is a global celebration and there is no better way to express your love, than with flowers. We are glad to help spread tonnes of love and cheer around the world by introducing additional capacity and

freighters on our key routes to support our customers. Understanding the nature of these delicate flowers, we have special processes in place to ensure a seamless cold chain for their transport."

To meet the demand, Qatar Airways Cargo operated eight Boeing 777 freighters from Quito with flowers destined for European and Australian markets, in

addition to its scheduled four weekly Boeing 777 freighters.

The carrier also added three freighters from Quito to Miami, in addition to the three regular rotations. Miami serves as one of the largest distribution hubs in the United States of America. It also added 13 mini freighters and five Boeing 777 freighters from Nairobi, to support Valentine's Day shipments besides transporting flowers on its regular four weekly Boeing 777 freighters.

From Bogotá, the carrier transported flowers on its two weekly Boeing 777 freighters. It is the airline's fifth Valentine season from Ecuador, second from Colombia and sixteenth season from Kenya. In 2020, Qatar Airways Cargo uplifted close to 32,000 tonnes of flowers.

Gulf Air and Etihad Airways announce commercial cooperation agreement

Gulf Air, the national carrier of the Kingdom of Bahrain, and Etihad Airways, the national airline of the United Arab Emirates, have signed a Strategic Commercial Cooperation Agreement (SCCA) to deepen their partnership between Bahrain and Abu Dhabi and beyond the respective hubs.

The wide-ranging SCCA, subject to obtaining applicable governmental and regulatory approvals, sets out specific actions for deepening and broadening commercial cooperation, building on the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) the airlines signed in 2018.

The SCCA envisages a phased approach to closer col-

laboration between the partners.

In the first phase, by June 2021, the scope of the partners' codeshare agreement, first signed in 2019, will be significantly expanded. Gulf Air and Etihad will be able to offer up to an additional 30 combined destinations beyond the Bahrain and Abu Dhabi hubs, across the Middle East, Africa, Europe and Asia.

The partners will work together to optimise joint operations on the Bahrain-Abu Dhabi route, with improvements to network connectivity over each of the partners' hubs. The partners will also enhance their respective offerings to premium tier customers of Falconflyer and Etihad



Guest, including reciprocal lounge access at the hubs and enhanced recognition through a guest's journey, regardless of the

operating airline.

Additionally, the partners will work together to improve the customer journey on Bahrain -

Abu Dhabi, making it more seamless, regardless of the operating carrier, with enhanced and harmonised policies and prod-

ucts in areas such as baggage and ancillaries. The 2018 MoU also provided for exploration of MRO, pilot and crew training, and cargo opportunities, which the parties will now re-visit in light of current market opportunities and company requirements.

The agreement was signed by Captain Waleed AlAlawi, Gulf Air's acting chief executive officer and Tony Douglas, group chief executive officer, Etihad Aviation Group.

Captain AlAlawi said, "Our relationship with Etihad Airways has always been strong and today we are reaching a higher level of collaboration with many more opportunities in the hori-

zon between the national carriers of the Kingdom of Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates. This agreement will empower both of us to offer a more elevated experience to passengers and widen their travel options."

Douglas said, "This agreement reinforces the strength of the ongoing partnership between our two airlines. We look forward to exploring pragmatic ways in which the two carriers can increasingly work seamlessly between our two capitals, enhance benefits and customer experience for our most frequent travelers and further extend the reach of our joint networks beyond our hubs."

QUICK TAKES

Allies condemn Iraq rocket attack

France, Germany, Italy, Britain and the United States on Wednesday condemned 'in the strongest terms' a rocket attack on an airbase in Iraq's Kurdistan region that killed a foreign contractor. The firing of over a dozen rockets in the Kurdish regional capital Arbil on Monday wounded at least 14 people, as well as fatally injuring a contractor working for the US military. 'We are united in our view that attacks on US and coalition personnel and facilities will not be tolerated,' the foreign ministers of the five Western allies said in a joint statement. 'Together, our governments will support the government of Iraq's investigation into the attack with a view to holding accountable those responsible.'

Turkey detains Russian IS

Turkish border guards have detained five Russians, including a woman suspected of being a member the Islamic State group, and a Libyan who were attempting to cross from Syria, officials said on Wednesday. It was not immediately clear whether all six were suspected of being members of the extremist group. 'Our border guards stationed in Hatay's Narlica district (in southern Turkey) caught six people including one Libyan and five Russian nationals who were attempting to illegally cross into Turkey from Syria', the ministry tweeted in English. 'One of the Russian nationals was a woman identified as a wanted Daesh member,' it said, using an Arabic acronym for the group.

#MeToo: Indian minister loses case

A former minister lost a defamation suit on Wednesday against a woman who had accused him of sexual harassment, in a verdict hailed as a major victory for India's #MeToo movement. In 2018, Priya Ramani became the first of a string of women to go public with allegations against M J Akbar, a former high-profile newspaper editor and later a junior minister in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government. Ramani said she was 23 when Akbar called her to a Mumbai hotel for a job interview more than 20 years ago and told her to come up to his room. 'Turns out you were as talented a predator as you were a writer. It was more date, less interview,' she wrote.

Singapore temple priest charged

The former chief priest of Singapore's oldest Hindu temple has been charged with repeatedly pawning gold religious ornaments for a total of US\$1.5mn, court officials said on Wednesday. Kandasamy Senapathi would redeem the pawned ornaments when he had raised enough money and return them to the temple, according to local media - but his ruse was uncovered when he could not get enough cash to buy the gold back after the coronavirus pandemic hit. The 37 year old Indian national worked at the Sri Mariamman Temple, a 194 year old, ornately decorated place of worship in downtown Singapore.

Iran says ready for talks with UN nuclear watchdog chief Grossi

Tehran, Iran - President Hassan Rouhani said on Wednesday that Iran is ready to hold talks with the UN nuclear watchdog chief, ahead of a next week deadline set by lawmakers for the suspension of some inspections.

Rouhani stressed that Iran would not cease working with the International Atomic Energy Agency or expel its inspectors after the new measure takes effect next Tuesday.

Iran has notified the watchdog that it will suspend 'voluntary transparency measures', notably inspection visits to non-nuclear sites, including military sites suspected of nuclear-related activity, if the United States has not lifted the sweeping sanctions then president Donald Trump reimposed in 2018.

The provision has stoked international concern about a possible expulsion of UN inspectors, in what would be a huge blow to confidence in the nuclear deal Iran struck with major powers in 2015. But Rouhani's government has stressed repeatedly that it has no desire to see an end to inspections of its nuclear facilities and is ready to return to full compliance with the nuclear accord just as soon as Washington does so too.

"Foreign propaganda has started, saying that you are expelling IAEA inspectors. Why are you lying?" Rouhani said in televised remarks to his Cabinet.

"Not only we will not expel



Iran's President Hassan Rouhani (centre) with Cabinet members during a meeting, in Tehran on Wednesday (AFP)

Foreign propaganda has started, saying that you are expelling IAEA inspectors. Why are you lying? Even the IAEA's director has now requested to come to Tehran, and he can

HASSAN ROUHANI

(anyone), but even the IAEA's director has now requested to come to Tehran, and he can."

"If he wants to negotiate, he can negotiate," Rouhani said, emphasising that the new measure approved by parliament 'is not about our nuclear activity being left uninspected'.

IAEA director Rafael Grossi suggested to member states on

Friday that he visit Iran to try to find a 'solution'.

The new US administration of President Joe Biden has expressed readiness to return to the 2015 deal abandoned by Trump, but has called on Iran to return to full compliance first.

Tehran says it is ready to return to its commitments on condition that Washington does so

first by lifting sweeping unilateral sanctions that have dealt a heavy blow to the Iranian economy.

Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei stressed on Wednesday that 'that meant action and not just words from the Biden administration'.

"The Islamic republic will not be satisfied this time with words and promises," he said.

"This time, only action, action. If we see action from the opposite side, we will act too."

Rouhani has said that if sanctions are lifted, Iran will need only 'a few hours' to verify the move and 'then we will return to our commitments'.

AFP

European powers, US to meet on deal

Paris, France - Three European nations will hold talks with the US over Iran on Thursday as they try to salvage a 2015 deal on Tehran's nuclear programme, France has said.

French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian will host his German and British counterparts in Paris, with America's new top diplomat Antony Blinken joining via videoconference, the French Foreign Ministry said on Wednesday.

The European ministers want to revive the nuclear deal that former US president Donald Trump walked away from in 2018. The administration of Trump's successor Joe Biden has said it could rejoin if Tehran returns to compliance with the deal.

'The meeting will focus on Iran and regional security in the Middle East, as part of their regular discussions on these topics,' the French statement said.

Analysts said that only a small window of opportunity remains to save the deal and world powers will have to act fast. The West is concerned that violations of the accord mean Iran is moving faster towards having the 'breakout'



A file photo of US Secretary of State Antony Blinken (AFP)

capacity for building an atomic bomb, while Iranian presidential elections in June add a major risk factor.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was based on Iran providing safeguards that it would not make an atomic bomb, in exchange for a gradual easing of international sanctions.

But the return of sanctions after Trump left the deal prompted Tehran to retaliate by intensifying its nuclear work in repeated violation of the deal.

The UN nuclear watchdog said last week Iran had started producing uranium metal in a new violation of the accord.

AFP



This file photo shows Sheikhha Latifa bint Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktoum (left) having a meal with Mary Robinson, former president of Ireland, at Sheikhha Latifa's home in Dubai (AFP)

'Dubai Princess pleas distressing'

London, UK - Britain's foreign minister on Wednesday called footage of the daughter of Dubai's ruler saying she is being held captive 'distressing' and said the government would 'watch closely' the response of the United Nations.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson later told British media he was 'concerned' by the videos, but that he would 'wait and see' the conclusions of a probe by the UN Commission on Human Rights.

Sheikha Latifa, who has not been seen in public since she attempted to escape from the emirate by sea in March 2018, said in a video clip aired by the BBC that she fears for her life.

"They are very distressing pictures," foreign minister Dominic Raab told Sky News. "We always raise human rights issues with all of our partners including the UAE," he said, adding 'we'll be watching and monitoring' the UN probe 'very closely'.

The BBC said the clips were filmed roughly a year after she was captured and returned to Dubai, showing her crouched in a corner of what she says is a bathroom. "I'm a hostage and this villa has been converted into a jail," she says in one cellphone video.

"There's five policemen outside and two policewomen inside the house. Every day I am worried about my safety and my life."

In another video, Latifa says her situation is 'getting more desperate every day'. "I don't want to be a hostage in this jail villa. I just want to be free," she says.

Latifa's father, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktoum, is Vice President and Prime Minister of the United Arab Emirates, of which Dubai is a constituent.

The undated videos were broadcast as Latifa's friends voiced concern that they are no longer receiving secret messages from her, the BBC said.

In 2018, Latifa attempted to flee the UAE on a boat that was intercepted by commandos off the coast of India, according to her companions and the UK-based group Detained in Dubai.

In the videos, Latifa says that men from the Emirates sat on her, tried to tie her up and injected her with a sedative.

A Dubai government source later said she had been 'brought back' and the UAE released photographs of Latifa, saying she was receiving 'the necessary care and support'.

AFP

Myanmar protesters stage biggest rallies since troop deployments

Yangon, Myanmar - Myanmar's anti-coup protesters returned to the streets in force on Wednesday, staging the biggest demonstrations since troops fanned out around the country to quell opposition to the new military junta.

Much of the country has been in open revolt since the military deposed Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi's government at the start of the month and charged her under an obscure import law.

Tens of thousands rallied in Yangon, some blockading roads with vehicles to stop security forces from moving around the nation's biggest city.

Police and soldiers were spotted near a key protest junction but appeared to be hanging back, looking on as demonstrators streamed past.

"We have to fight until the end," Nilar, a 21 year old student who asked not to use her real name, told AFP.

"We need to show our unity and strength to end military rule. People need to come out on the streets."

Wednesday's crowds came in defiance of violent efforts by the regime to bring resistance to heel - including use of tear gas and rubber bullets - following nationwide street protests and a disobedience campaign encouraging civil servants to strike.

Demonstrations over the past two days had been noticeably smaller since troops were deployed around Yangon at the weekend.

But social media platforms had been flooded with calls for a show of force by protesters in the hours before the junta imposed a third consecutive overnight internet blackout.

By noon, there were anti-coup demonstrations across Myanmar, from the remote highland



Protesters block a road during a demonstration against the military coup, in Yangon on Wednesday (AFP)

region of Chin state to a small town in the Irrawaddy delta where parading protesters hoisted Suu Kyi posters.

Right outside the administrative capital Naypyidaw, tens of thousands of people from different sectors - including engineers, doctors and teachers - marched through the logging town of Pyinmana carrying signs saying 'Help Myanmar'.

UN special rapporteur Tom Andrews warned that soldiers going into Yangon, as had been reported, could lead to the situation there spiralling out of control.

"We could be on the precipice of the military committing even greater crimes against the people of Myanmar," he said.

One young woman remained in a critical condition in Naypyidaw after being shot in the head last week.

Scores of well-wishers gathered Wednesday at the site where she was shot to hold a prayer session, carrying posters of her.

AFP

93% of Palestinian eligible voters sign up for polls

Ramallah, Palestinian Territories - More than 93 per cent of Palestinian eligible voters have registered for May legislative and July presidential elections, the first in 15 years, the electoral commission in Ramallah said on Wednesday.

The high rate reflects 'awareness of citizenship rights and people's thirst for the ballot box', Palestinian Civil Affairs Minister Hussein al Sheikh

wrote on Twitter.

More than 2.8mn Palestinians live in the West Bank, a territory occupied by Israel since 1967, and 2mn people live in the Gaza Strip, an enclave ruled by the Hamas movement.

Of these, more than 2.6mn, or 93.3 per cent of Palestinian eligible voters, had registered by the deadline late on Tuesday, said commission spokesman Farid Taamallah.

"We are proud of this result," he said, adding that the registration rate for the last legislative elections in 2006 was 80 per cent.

The last Palestinian presidential election in 2005 led to the victory of the secular Fatah party's Mahmoud Abbas.

The legislative elections the following year were won in Gaza by his Hamas rivals, a prelude to bloody clashes between the two camps.

Abbas signed a decree in mid-January this year to hold legislative elections on May 22 and presidential elections on July 31.

Fatah and Hamas met in Cairo this month and agreed on the modalities of the elections, including setting up an electoral tribunal and vowing to respect the ballot results.

AFP

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

UK study that will infect volunteers with COVID approved

London, UK - A study which will expose volunteers to the coronavirus is to begin in Britain within a month after it gained approval from the country's clinical ethics body, the government said on Wednesday.

The study, the first of its kind in the world, will expose up to 90 volunteers between 18 and 30 years old to COVID-19 in a controlled environment, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy said.

The trial will look to establish the smallest amount of virus needed to cause infection, in order to help develop vaccines and treatments.

"While there has been very positive progress in vaccine development, we want to find the best and most effective vaccines for use over the longer term," Business Secretary Kwasi Kwarteng said.

The study will 'help accelerate scientists' knowledge of how coronavirus affects people and could eventually further the rapid development of vaccines', he said.

Britain, one of the hardest-hit countries in the world by the coronavirus with more than 118,000 deaths, was also the first Western nation to begin a COVID vaccination campaign.



Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson speaks with a health worker at a vaccination centre at Cwmbran Stadium in Cwmbran, south Wales on Wednesday (AFP)

The country passed a vaccine milestone at the weekend with 15mn people having received their first jabs.

The government is targeting another 17mn people by the end of April, including everyone aged 50 and above, plus starting on second doses.

The study, backed by £33.6mn (US\$46.6mn approx) in government funding, will work in partnership with London's Royal Free Hospital.

Its secure clinical research facilities are specifically designed to contain the virus, the government said.

Once the initial phase of the study has concluded, vaccines proven to be safe in clinical trials could be given to small numbers of volunteers who are then exposed to the COVID-19 virus, helping to identify the most effective vaccines.

"Our eventual aim is to establish which vaccines and treatments work best in beating this disease, but we need volunteers to support us in this work," said chief investigator Chris Chiu from Imperial College London.

During the study, medics and scientists will be on hand 24 hours a day to ensure the safety of volunteers as well as monitor the effects of the virus.

AFP

UK virus variant spreading rapidly in Germany: Minister

Berlin, Germany - The UK variant of the coronavirus is spreading rapidly in Germany, where it now accounts for more than one in five cases, German Health Minister Jens Spahn said on Wednesday.

"The mutation that was first discovered in the UK is particularly worrying... We have to expect that it will now become the dominant variant here," said Spahn at a press conference.

Latest studies by Germany's Robert Koch Institute (RKI) for public health showed that the UK variant now accounted for 'more than 20 to 22 per cent of positive cases', as opposed to just six percent two weeks previously, Spahn said.

"That means that, just as we have seen in other countries, the proportion is doubling every week," he added.

The rise comes despite Germany partially closing its borders in an attempt to stem the spread of the new variants.



German Health Minister Jens Spahn addresses the media on COVID-19 mutations, in Berlin on Wednesday (AFP)

Europe's biggest economy has been filtering crossings from Austria's Tyrol region and the Czech Republic since Sunday, prompting criticism from the EU.

Berlin said on Monday it would not rule out doing the same at its border with France, where the South African variant is gaining ground in the eastern Moselle region.

On Wednesday, Spahn said that the South African variant still accounted for only around 1.5 per cent of positive cases in Germany.

He added that despite the spread of the UK variant, it was 'encouraging' that cases were falling overall.

"Even though this variant is

spreading, fewer people are becoming infected at the moment. That shows that our measures are working," he said, urging Germans to continue wearing masks and respecting social distancing.

Spahn said this week that free antigen tests would be available to all from March, and is hoping to roll out self-administered antigen tests by early March after regulatory approval.

Self-administered tests in particular could play an important role as Germany eyes re-opening schools and some other facilities after more than two months of closures.

In that time, Europe's biggest economy has halved its daily infections rate.

Germany on Wednesday recorded 7,556 new cases of COVID-19 in the previous 24 hours and 560 deaths, according to the RKI.

AFP



Health workers unload the first shipment of Sputnik V vaccines, in the southern Gaza Strip on Wednesday (AFP)

First batch of vaccines arrives in Gaza Strip

Gaza City, Palestinian Territories - A first batch of coronavirus vaccines, enough to inoculate 1,000 people, arrived in Gaza on Wednesday, Palestinian and Israeli officials said, after Israel blocked a shipment earlier this week.

The Israeli military department responsible for civil affairs in the occupied Palestinian Territories said 1,000 Sputnik 'vaccines' had been sent to the coastal enclave, which has been under Israeli blockade since 2007.

The Palestinian Authority, which controls the occupied West Bank, and Hamas movement, which runs Gaza, later clarified that the shipment comprised 1,000 two-dose sets of the vaccine.

'Shipments of 1,000 Sputnik vaccines, donated by Russia and allocated by the Palestinian Authority to the Gaza Strip, have now moved to the Gaza Strip via the Kerem Shalom crossing,' a COGAT statement said.

The PA Health Ministry said that the initial consignment was for 'medical staff working in intensive care rooms designated for COVID-19 patients, and for the staff working in emergency departments'.

Hamas confirmed it had received the vaccines which were now being 'transported to the ministry's storage sites in Gaza City'.

The PA received an initial supply of Sputnik V earlier this month and has launched a campaign to inoculate frontline healthcare workers in the West Bank.

The PA has said it will share its supply with its Hamas rival, which took control of Gaza in 2007.

South Africa launches vaccine campaign

Cape Town, South Africa - President Cyril Ramaphosa was among the first to be inoculated on Wednesday as South Africa launched its coronavirus vaccine campaign using Johnson & Johnson jabs, after the rollout was delayed.

South Africa earlier this month received a million doses of the Oxford-AstraZeneca formula but halted administering it over concerns it would not protect against a widespread variant.

A nurse who works in a maternity ward at a hospital in Khayelitsha township in Cape Town was the first to be immunised, hours after the first batch of 80,000 doses landed in the country late on Tuesday.

She looked relaxed as she received the jab, which was broadcast on live television.

After five healthcare workers got their jabs, it was Ramaphosa's turn.



A health worker holds the Johnson and Johnson vaccine at a hospital in Soweto on Wednesday (AFP)

Before taking off his jacket and rolling up his white shirt's long sleeves for the injection, he asked the nurse who was administering the jab if there would be any side effects.

"This day represents a real milestone for us as South Africans that finally the vaccines are here and they are being administered," he said as he left the hospital to go to parliament. He was upbeat that the rollout will be 'flawless'. "This is a new era for us," he said.

AFP

Israel's 'green badge' plan to open services to vaccinated stirs concern

Jerusalem - Israel, the global leader in COVID vaccinations per capita, has launched a 'green badge' plan to re-open services to those fully inoculated, stirring controversy about unequal access for those who opt out of the jabs.

The country of about 9mn people on Tuesday delivered a shot of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine to its four millionth citizen. More than 2.6mn of them have already received the second jab recommended for maximum protection.

Due partly to the rapid vaccination push, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government has announced a timetable to lift lockdown restrictions and re-open long shuttered services such as swimming pools and restaurants.

But the privilege of accessing such joys of life won't immediately be given to everyone - only to those who hold a so-called 'green badge' as proof they have received both jabs, administered at least 21 days apart.

The badge, which will also be given to those who have recovered from the virus, will from Sunday also allow its holders to enter gyms, cultural events, houses of worship and hotels.



Women share a slice of Kunafa, traditional Middle Eastern dessert, after getting vaccinated against coronavirus in the Israeli coastal city of Tel Aviv-Jaffa, on Tuesday (AFP)

"We are moving ahead with the responsible reopening on the principle of 'you're vaccinated - you're in'," Defence Minister Benny Gantz said on Monday.

Some facilities, like malls and museums, will open Sunday to all citizens, with or without a green badge, under a so-called 'purple code', with crowd size limits and other restrictions that have applied through much of the pandemic.

'Delicate balance'

While many countries, both rich and poor, continue to struggle with vaccine supply, Israel has maintained a full stock of the Pfizer product thanks largely to an agreement to share data on its impact with the company.

A study from the country's largest healthcare provider Clalit of 600,000 people who received both Pfizer shots showed a 94 per cent reduction in symptomatic infections.

Those results have given the government confidence that it can begin to re-open while avoiding the disastrous missteps of last year, when a hasty lifting of a lockdown brought waves of new cases and longer, economically painful closures.

But Hagai Levine, a public health professor and researcher at Jerusalem's Hebrew University, stressed Israel's vaccination-dependent reopening plan required a 'delicate balance' between public health needs and individual freedoms.

There is also 'a right not to be vaccinated', he told AFP.

"I think people should do it, but you cannot force them," he added, noting that those who opt out inevitably risk being denied certain services.

'Backlash'

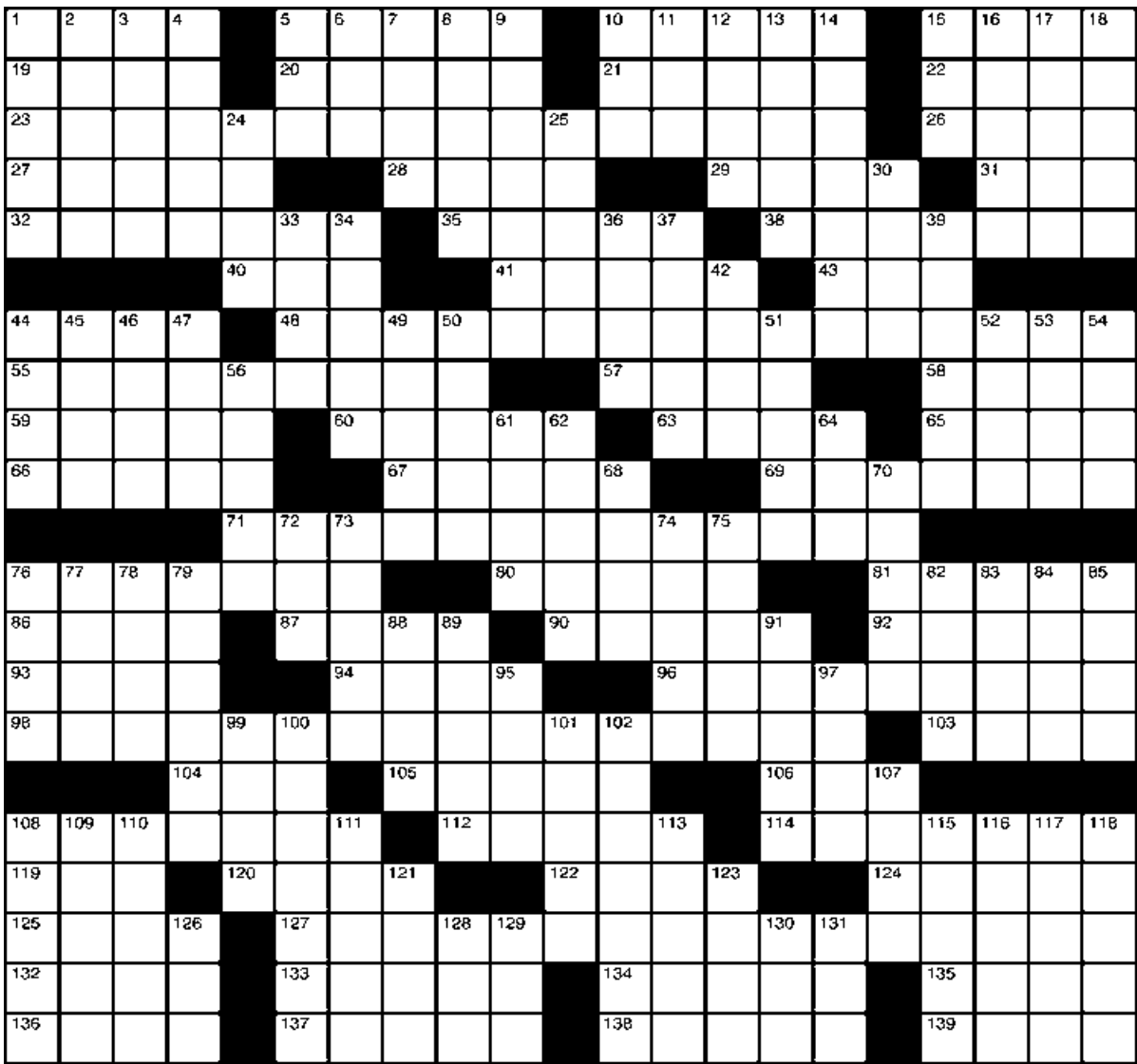
Levine also stressed that the vaccination push was playing a starring role in Netanyahu's re-election pitch ahead of a March 23 vote. Netanyahu's pandemic response has faced criticism, initially over his decision to re-open the economy too quickly as the first infection wave ebbed.

More recently he has come under pressure over failures to crack down on ultra-Orthodox Jews - the Prime Minister's political allies - many of whom have openly flouted lockdown rules. The veteran premier is hoping that his success in vaccine procurement and rollout will help him keep his job, even as polls suggest he may struggle to forge a majority.

Levine said the 'green badge' initiative and its possible economic benefits are clearly 'part of Netanyahu's campaign to get re-elected'.

AFP

DAILY CROSSWORD



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- ACROSS**

1 Beavers' features

5 Tract of land

10 Cults

15 ___-and-carry

19 Atop

20 Craftiness

21 See eye to eye

22 Out of town

23 Reggie Jackson's cohorts

26 Pianist Brubeck

27 Exchange

28 Pant

29 Other

31 Charged atom

32 Main and Elm

35 Fathered

38 Actor-singer Frank

40 ___ party

41 Land of cotton

43 Energy source

44 Catboat's spar

48 Andre Thornton's

55 Philharmonic ___

57 Principal

58 Merriment

59 Mites

60 "___ Marner"

63 Carson City

65 Spruce

66 Shoulder gesture

67 Fisherman

69 Pencil parts

71 Nolan Ryan's buddies

76 Ghost

80 Carrier

81 Peeling device

86 ___ mater

87 Expression of disgust

90 Electronic detector

92 Upper crust

93 Kennedy half dollar, e.g.

94 Buddhist monk

96 Estranged

98 Bruce Sutter's former crew

103 Talk back

104 U.K. member

105 Judge or juror

106 Greek letter

108 Jocular

112 Army vehicles

114 Lawmaker

119 Coal holder

120 Dashed

122 Believers: suffix

124 Follow closely

125 Leave out

127 Cal Ripken Jr.'s pals

132 Nullify a law

133 Spring flower

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135 Defensive ditch

136 Sir Anthony ___

137 Make joyous

138 Pitchers

139 Richards and Taylor

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1 Tubular passages

2 Separated

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5 Gone by

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13 Inform

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Bagnold

33 Sam Spade, et al.: sl.

34 Seasons

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37 Iranian coin

39 Arranges in rows

42 Actress Falco

44 Extinct birds

45 Curve

46 Steep cliff

47 New York ___ way

49 Great Lakes natives

50 Personal servant

51 Internal

52 Wrenchless side

53 Approach

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56 Behind the ___ ball

61 Numerous

62 Mister, in Málaga

64 Gold, to Pedro

68 Pro ___

70 Tree

72 Above, to Keats

73 Russian range

74 Type of auto

75 Songster's phrase

76 Anatomical pouches

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82 Woe is me!

83 Actress Hayworth

84 Parisian seasons

85 Johnny Bench's cohorts

88 Diplomacy

89 Clever

91 Irritates

95 Opera highlight

97 Noble Italian family

99 Single one

100 Base

101 Coarse cloth

102 Annoying

107 One opposed

108 Higher than

109 Aped

110 Bring together

111 "Holy ___"

113 Stalk

115 Perfume

116 Eagle's claw

117 "... gem of the ___"

118 Reposes

120 Scat singer

Fitzgerald

123 Withered

126 Large quantity

128 Make lace

129 Rink surface

130 Sculler's implement

131 Freeways: abbr.

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

You're not moving as quickly as you'd like, but there's more to life than speed. You may need to check in with your people for some assistance if you get too far behind, though. You and your partner are on the same page right now, and it should be pretty easy for the two of you to dream up some new plan that will make life easier or sweeter or both.

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

Your stubbornness is legendary, and on a day like today it may cause some issues with friends. Try to see their point of view, but put off any serious disputes for a few days. Hanging out with another person can be lovely, but it can also take a lot of energy. You need some TLC and lots of silence. Take time to commune with your soul before you plug yourself back into your relationship.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

Analyse today's big problem by breaking it down into little chunks. They won't look so scary, and you should be able to see at least one way to attack the problem more easily. Get closer by sharing fewer words and more quiet time. Silence feeds the soul and expands your notion of what a relationship should be. Afterward, you'll see that reality is so much more rewarding.

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

Your social relations are making life sweeter, and you can overcome old difficulties or renew dormant bonds with ease. It's a really good time for you to commune with friends and family. There's nothing like cuddling together to wipe away any blues. It's prime time for curling up and looking at the stars. Whatever you do, being together will help take your cares away.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Are you traveling now? Then you're at your best. If not, spend a little time plotting your next getaway. You need to escape your routines as soon as possible. Daydreams are occupying a lot of your mental airspace. This isn't like you, or is it? Give yourself a break. Everyone's allowed some downtime to drift every now and then. See if your partner can pick up the slack.

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

Your kids are the centre of your life today, if you've got kids, that is. If not, you may be drawn to consider it or to help out with a friend or relative who's got more than they can handle. You're feeling a little vague and fuzzy around the edges, but it's actually a nice change of pace from being so directed and focused, as you are most of the time. Couple time today may involve a nap.

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

This is not a good time for you to flit from person to person. You need to focus your energy on someone important. That could mean that you're in a good space for relationship work. Knowing everything about your partner would be a bit of a bore, no matter what you sometimes think. You can't even know all of yourself. Be grateful that the two of you have such profound depths to explore.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Your cultural leanings are making life sweeter than ever, so enjoy music, art, or whatever else comes your way. Steer a friend or family member in the same direction for added fun. For this round, the stars deal you and your partner a unique hand in the card game of life. You both know how to keep a poker face. Your ability to roll with the punches will turn this odd deal into a royal flush.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

If you're bored today, that's no surprise. There are no surprises coming your way! Try to just focus on whatever is right in front of you and make your way through the day. At times, you don't even know where these big emotions come from, but do you have to? Remind yourself that you don't have to "solve" them or push them away. Just know you can handle them.

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

You've got a natural charm that makes people feel fully at ease, so make the most of it. You should be able to work wonders in any situation, so much so that you win big! Casting disapproving glances isn't going to get the message across, and you'll seem passive-aggressive. Figure out why this is bothering you. Chances are the underlying reasons aren't what you think they are.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

You should find that someone you thought would be a weak opponent turns out to be stronger than they appear. Roll with it and see if you can turn circumstances to your advantage. Be kind and give yourself a pep talk, the kind you'd give to your partner. While your significant other's support is important, self-belief is the critical factor needed to get to the next level.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

Your love life is still bubbling with great energy, so make the most of it. Spend some quality time with your partner, or if you're single, look for someone new. You can't be everything to your partner, and vice versa. Family, friends, co-workers, professional networks, community service, these are all areas that can help you satisfy your wide and varied emotional needs.

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

1. The term which denotes that each side has made equal point at game point, in Tennis, is referred to as

a. baseline
b. deuce
c. fault
d. grand slam

2. The telescope is used for viewing

a. distant objects
b. near objects
c. small objects
d. living cells

3. The term butterfly is associated with

a. kabaddi
b. swimming
c. boxing
d. wrestling

Answers: 1: b 2: a 3: b

KIDS COLOURING

DO YOU SUDOKU?

LEVEL EASY: Fill in the grid so that every row, every column and every 3x3 box contains the digits 1 to 9 and only one instance of each number

1		2						9
	8				3			1
			1	7				5
	1		4	2	7	5		
		4	9		8	6		
		8	3	6	5			9
3				5	2			
	4		6					5
2						3		7

BOGGLER

E	A	R	B
E	U	R	Y
L	S	E	K
Y	P	E	M

Each game will present you with a matrix filled with letters. The objective is to form words by linking adjacent letters - to the left, right, on top, bottom, or diagonal to each other. The Boggles Classic game uses a 4 x 4 matrix. Words are valued at one point for each letter in excess of two letters. A three letter word is worth one point, a four letter word is worth two points, and so on. Valid words must be at least three letters long.

Solution 20-25 words: Excellent, 15-20 words: Very good, 10-15 words: Good, 5-10 words: Average

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

7	9	8	1	4	8	6	9	2
1	5	2	6	8	9	7	4	8
8	4	6	2	5	7	1	9	3
4	6	1	5	9	8	2	7	3
2	7	9	8	1	6	4	5	9
5	8	9	7	2	4	9	1	6
6	2	8	4	7	1	5	6	9
9	1	7	5	6	2	9	8	4
6	5	4	9	8	2	7	1	3

ABABA	AMOL	PAIRE		THAW
RAISON	VIARIA	TESTS	THAIA	
CHUCK	KWAGON	GHOP	HOUSES	
ALLINE	YOKIES	EMIS		
SIL	ENI	SALTIS	ORISLY	
ADOLPH	BERLIN	FRONT	UAW	
ATINES	PHOTO	OGSTAND	NNE	
VOCE	POLIO	NESS	ACCIT	
UTR	BATHING	ROOMS	RICHER	
SCRAPED	RABBIT	OLIVER		
DOZES	JUNES	PLATO		
PULED	DAFFES	PRATING		
BENES	COFFEE	HOUSE	ELF	
ROTS	DAFF	ARMS	STAR	
ARE	RESTAURANTS	GETTER		
SIR	BAIRS	PONDS	PURIES	
ASMAHS	TATTOO	AAH	BSH	
ICH	QUILTY	PASTIR		
GAFFER	HATS	HASH	HOUSES	
AVERS	ENNE	ISSO	UDINE	
TEES	BOSH	BAINT	BENDS	

WORD BUILDER

You have three minutes to find all the words contained in this word.

Rules: Words should be at least four letters long, proper nouns and duplicates don't count

HAND PAIN

Exercises for Carpal Tunnel Syndrome

The carpal tunnel is a narrow passageway at the base of your hand where tendons and nerves, including the median nerve, pass through. The median nerve controls sensation to the palm side of the thumb and index, middle and ring fingers. Tingling sensations and pain - wrist upwards - in the palm and fingers can be a sure sign of carpal tunnel syndrome, if not accompanied by pain radiating from the neck.

Solutions:

Use splint/brace/gloves - Try wearing splints/braces to keep your wrists in a neutral position at night or while typing or doing other tasks with your hands. If you're working in a cold environment, gloves can prevent stiffness in the fingers.

Change work setup - If you work on an assembly line, see if you can ease stress on your wrists and hands. If working on a computer, sit up straight and keep your elbows near your sides. Adjust the height of your keyboard so your forearms are parallel to the floor. Make sure your monitor is centred in front of you and adjust it's level with your eyes.

Take breaks when working - Try to take a break every 20-30 minutes to stretch your hands. Try shaking your hands and stretching them out. And every hour or so, get up and walk around.



Exercises

The shake

This is as straightforward as it sounds - shake hands like you've just washed them and are trying to air dry them. Do this for a minute every hour to keep flexor muscles of your hands and its median nerve from getting cramped and tight during the day.

Fist to stop sign

Make a fist. Slide your fingers up until they point toward the ceiling, like you're telling someone to stop. Repeat 5-10 times.

Thumb touches

One at a time, touch the tip of each finger to the tip of your thumb so they make an O-shape. Repeat a few times.

Fist to fan

Make a fist. Fan your fingers out - stretch them as far as you can. Repeat 5-10 times.

Basic wrist stretches

Sit down at a table. Rest your elbow and arm on the table and let your wrist hang over the side, palm of your hand facing up. Start with your hand in a straight, neutral position. Bend your hand toward you so your fingers point up toward the ceiling. Hold for 5 seconds. Return to a straight, neutral position. Now, bend your hand away from you so your fingers point down toward the floor. Hold for 5 seconds. Return to a straight, neutral position. Repeat 10 times. Do this up to three times a day.



Warm-up stretches

Do the following warm-up stretches if you have recovered from carpal tunnel syndrome, do not have any pain or numbness, and want to prevent a recurrence.

- Rotate your wrist up, down, and from side to side. Repeat 4 times.
- Stretch your fingers far apart. Relax them, and then stretch them again. Repeat 4 times.
- Stretch your thumb by pulling it back gently, holding it, and then releasing it. Repeat 4 times.

CLASSIFIEDS

MARRIAGE NOTICE

I, Reshna Ullas (holder of Indian Passport No. T3962075) D/o Ullasan Cheriyan having permanent residence in Thirikkunna Keloth House Chorode Po Badagara, Kozhikode PIN: 673106, Kerala, India and presently residing at Muscat. Post Box. No. 427 Postal Code 611, Sultanate of Oman, intend to marry Mr. Kayne Philips (holder of Indian Passport bearing No. L3313951) S/o Slazzack Philips having permanent residence in 14-232 New Mirzalaguda Malkajgiri Hyderabad 47 AP India at Embassy of India, Muscat. I swear that I am marrying him at my own free will and not under any duress and intimidation. Any objection towards this marriage may please be communicated to Embassy of India, Muscat, Diplomatic Quarters, Al Khuwair, P.O.Box No. 1727, Postal Code No.112, Ruwi, Sultanate of Oman within 30(thirty) days of publication of this newspaper advertisement.

LOST MARK STATEMENT

- ♦ Indian School Darsait, Oman
- ♦ Lost CBSE Marks Statement of Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination, Year 2016
- ♦ Name - Diya Dinesh (Roll No. 9108046)
- ♦ Certificate No: 0466038

Please contact - 99477490

LOST PASSPORT

Name : NASSORO SALEHE
Tanzanian Passport holder: TAE324580
Date of issue : 18/03/2020
Date of expiry: 17/03/2030
Lost date: 10/01/2021
If found kindly contact: 95771535
or send it to the :Embassy of the United Republic of Tanzania Muscat, Sultanate of Oman

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BIRTHDAY WISHES



AGASTYA MANGESH YEROLKAR
February 19

Wishing you a Happy Birthday. From family and relatives

BIRTHDAY WISHES



HARSHIL SHETTY
February 19

Happy birthday dear Harshil. God bless you with healthy, wealthy and long life. Love from Papa, Mamma and Havish

BIRTHDAY WISHES



ADVIKA & AVNIKA
February 20

Happy Birthday to Advika & Avnika from Daddy (Sanoj) Mummy (Priyanka) and relatives

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WRIST WATCH



DR BISWAJIT DUTTA BARUAH
Consultant orthopaedic surgeon, KIMS Oman Hospital

Those professionally involved in repetitive wrist movements, as in typing on a keyboard or handling vibrating machines, are at risk of developing carpal tunnel syndrome, a condition which causes pain and numbness in the wrist, palm, and fingers. “Inactivity at night time, which causes fluid buildup, worsens the symptoms in the night or early mornings,” says **Dr Biswajit Dutta Baruah**, consultant orthopaedic surgeon, KIMS Oman hospital.

Amina had been visiting her obstetrician and was expecting their first child in a couple of months. But, of late, she had started feeling discomfort in her hands. This was associated with tingling and numbness in the fingers. It was maximum in the night time and kept her awake preventing her from getting her quota of sleep.

Amina looked very tired and worn out as she walked into my room. In fact, her husband, Junaid pleaded with me to do something about it fast. “I can’t see her suffer like this, doctor!” he exclaimed to me.

“How long has this been going on?” I queried, to find out it was over a month since Amina experienced the pain.

I proceeded to examine her. As I tapped on her wrist, her eyes lit up in surprise, “That is it! That current like tingling sensation in my fingers - that’s what I get often,” she said.

Fortunately, for a patient like Amina, often the diagnosis is straightforward and obvious. She had carpal tunnel syndrome (CTS). The hormones that are related to pregnancy cause fluid build up in the body. This was most noticeable in the swollen feet of the lady. Similarly, there was fluid build up in the carpal tunnel causing excess pressure on the contents of the tunnel.

There is a single major nerve - the median nerve - that passes through this tunnel in the structure of the palm. Excess pressure on the median nerve causes it to fire randomly causing the tingling sensation in the fingers. Unfortunately, in most patients the cause is not so obvious. We do not know why it occurs - idiopathic.

The carpal tunnel is located just over the wrist joint. Bones of the wrist joint make up the base while a thick fibrous sheath forms the roof. It is packed with tendons and the median nerve. Any fluid build up causes pressure on the nerve. Med-

ically, we term this as entrapment neuropathy - abnormal function of the nerve resulting from it being trapped in a tight enclosed space. It is the most common type of peripheral nerve compression disorder.

Professionals at risk of CTS

Individuals associated with certain professions have a higher risk of developing the condition although the cause is not very clear. Those who handle machines with hand-transmitted vibrations, like a drilling machine, or those at office who have repetitive wrist movements as in typing on a keyboard or using a mouse with the wrist in an abnormal position commonly develop CTS.

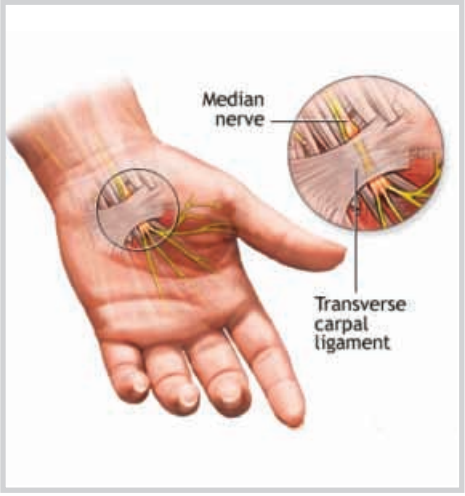
Some surgeons feel it should be classified as repetitive strain injury (RSI) - a term used to describe the pain felt in muscles, tendons or nerves caused by repetitive movements. It is an injury related to overuse. At times, it may follow fracture of the underlying bones or the lower end of the forearm bone (radius), or the development of ganglion cyst - ballooning of fluid from the joint or the tendons.

In addition to what Amina described, others may describe the need for flicking the hand to relieve symptoms (flick sign) or hanging the arms at the edge of the bed.

Why is it so bad at night?

During the daytime when one is active, muscle contraction associated with activity mobilises any fluid preventing build up at any site, including the wrist. Inactivity on the other hand causes fluid buildup. Inactivity at night time is the possible reason behind worsening symptoms in the night or early mornings. Plus, it is possible that the wrist gets into abnormal positions during sleep.

Often, the doctor will examine the neck to rule out a pinched nerve. Since the median nerve originates from the spinal cord at the level of the neck, tingling and numbness in the fingers can be a re-



sult of a herniated disc at the neck level. However, such patients often have neck pain or other symptoms, which Amina did not have.

Ruling out other symptoms

If the surgeon suspects abnormality in the bones that make up the wrist, he may order an x-ray of the wrist. More commonly, he will order an ultrasound to assess the contents of the carpal tunnel. But the gold standard is nerve conduction study (NCS). For this, the surgeon may refer the patient to a neurologist.

In NCS, small electrodes are taped to the skin above and beyond the carpal tunnel. A small electrical impulse is then passed between the two electrodes. The impulse strength and conduction through the median nerve is then measured.

If conduction is delayed or abnormal then that confirms that the median nerve at the level of the carpal tunnel is not relaying electrical impulses normally. This confirms CTS and virtually rules out a pinched nerve at the neck region. A visit to the neurologist is therefore necessary, and also because he will perform tests using monofilaments and a tuning fork to assess the severity of

median nerve conduction.

Treatment options

Often in mild to moderate afflictions, the surgeon may advise splinting the wrist. One of the few conditions, when night time splinting is very helpful. Splint helps to keep the wrist in a relaxed position - the so-called glass holding position and prevents abnormal positions.

Oral anti-inflammatories may be helpful as well. In severe cases oral steroids may be necessary, like in those affected by rheumatoid arthritis who have excessive inflammation around the joints or tendons. Ultrasound therapy has been found to be more effective than laser therapy. Myofascial massage and loading or manual thrusts have not shown results. Use of ergonomic keyboards or mouse pads can be helpful for those at the office or those who work long hours on the computer. Steroid injections into the carpal tunnel are also known to be effective in providing relief in some cases.

Surgical solutions

Surgery is resorted to when conservative therapy fails to provide relief. This involves incising the roof of the tunnel and converting the closed tunnel into an open one (roofless). Pressure on the median nerve is, thus, relieved relieving the patient of his/her symptoms.

A few surgeons perform the procedure through an endoscope - a special instrument that allows them to perform the procedure through a small incision over the wrist. Most surgeons do an open surgery where a regular incision of 3-4 cm is placed along the wrist. A majority of patients are relieved of their symptoms with such surgical intervention. Those with advanced stages may take a while for complete recovery, especially those with atrophy of the muscles preoperatively. Those with arthritic changes in the small joints of the hand close to the wrist may never get relief. Hence, surgical release may not be always advisable.

A few patients may also have recurrence, and so, identifying the cause and alleviating is an important part of the treatment process.

Amina was provided a splint and advised to use it during her sleep. Out of concern for the developing baby, only paracetamol was prescribed. Ultrasound therapy was also initiated. It took a while for her symptoms to disappear but, eventually, they did. Amina and Junaid went on to become proud parents of a beautiful baby.

Time right to walk into new chapter, says Du Plessis

South African great retires from Test cricket; to make T20 cricket the priority in the short-term

Johannesburg, South Africa - Faf du Plessis, the last survivor of South African cricket's golden age in Test cricket, announced on Wednesday that he had retired from Test matches with immediate effect.

Du Plessis, 36, said in a statement on his Instagram account that he would continue to be available for one-day and Twenty20 internationals.

"The next two years are ICC T20 World Cup years. Because of this, my focus is shifting to this format and I want to play as much of it as possible around the world so that I can be the best player I can possibly be," he said.

"I strongly believe that I have a lot to offer to the Proteas in this format."

Du Plessis, a veteran of 143 ODIs and 50 T20Is, will continue to be available for selection in both the limited-overs formats, and has said that he is keen to be a part of the action at the T20 World Cup, scheduled to be held later this year in India.

Du Plessis said he would be having discussions about his future with Cricket South Africa (CSA) in the next few months.

"My heart is clear and the time is right to walk into a new chapter," he said. "It has been an



A file photo of South African cricketer Faf du Plessis

honour to play for my country in all the formats of the game, but the time has come for me to retire from Test cricket."

He captained South Africa in 36 of his 69 Test matches, winning 18 and losing 15, the defeats piling up more towards the latter bit of his stint after South Africa had won 17 of the first 27 Tests he had led in.

Between the start of 2019 and the end of his tenure, South Africa lost eight Tests, a run that began with the 2-0 home defeat to Sri Lanka in February 2019.

South Africa were already ranked as the No 1 team in Test cricket when du Plessis made his

debut in the second Test against Australia in Adelaide in 2012.

He was playing alongside some of South Africa's greatest players, including Graeme Smith, Hashim Amla, Jacques Kallis, AB de Villiers, Dale Steyn and Morne Morkel.

But it was his man of the match performance that set up a second successive series win in Australia for the Proteas.

After making 78 in the first innings, du Plessis batted for more than seven-and-a-half hours and faced 376 balls in the second innings, scoring 110 not out and enabling South Africa to escape with a draw.

He made another half-century as South Africa won the next Test in Perth to clinch the series.

Du Plessis went on to score 4,163 runs in Test matches at an average of 40.02.

He hit ten centuries and made his highest score of 199 against Sri Lanka on his home ground at Centurion Park last December.

Twenty20 focus

He succeeded AB de Villiers as Test captain in 2016, initially on a temporary basis, and enjoyed significant early success, leading South Africa to victory in seven of his first eight series in charge, including away and home series

against Australia.

With a team weakened by retirements and natural attrition, the latter stages of his captaincy were less successful as South Africa lost away and at home against Sri Lanka and were well beaten in a home series against England.

He resigned as captain across all formats last February following the England series, but continued to be available as a player.

The COVID-19 pandemic drastically reduced South Africa's playing programme and he played in only four more Tests - the home series against Sri

Lanka in December and January and two recent Tests in Pakistan.

Despite stating his determination to be part of the next two Twenty20 World Cups, in India this year and Australia next year, du Plessis will not be playing in a domestic Twenty20 tournament starting on Friday.

But his statement indicated that he will be seeking to play in some of the major Twenty20 leagues in the world, including the Pakistan Super League this month and the Indian Premier League in April.

"Faf is a shining testimony of what one can achieve if they commit to it. His patriotism to cricket, impeccable leadership qualities, coupled with his insatiable commitment to imparting knowledge to budding cricketers speaks volumes of the rich legacy that he leaves behind," Pholetsi Moseki, CSA's acting chief executive, said in a statement.

CSA's director of cricket Graeme Smith, the former South Africa captain, played his last Test in March 2014, the last bit of his international career overlapping with the start of du Plessis'.

"Faf has been a prolific Test cricketer for the Proteas for a number of years now and to lose him in this format is going to leave another big gap in the team," Smith said. "His commitment to the team has always been undoubtable and his transparency with Cricket South Africa about his plans has always been appreciated and we respect his decision, knowing he would not have come by it easily.

Agencies

India select Umesh Yadav for last two England Tests

INDIA VS ENGLAND TEST SERIES

New Delhi, India - India on Wednesday brought in fast bowler Umesh Yadav for the last two Tests against England to be played at the world's biggest cricket stadium in the western city of Ahmedabad.

Umesh, 33, will undergo a fitness assessment before joining the squad led by Virat Kohli, the Board of Control for Cricket in India said in a news release.

The paceman is making a comeback after recovering from a calf injury he picked up during the Boxing Day Test against Australia.

He replaces Shardul Thakur who has been released to play for Mumbai in the domestic 50-over Vijay Hazare Trophy.

The revamped Sardar Patel stadium, which can seat 110,000 spectators, will be allowed to host 50 per cent of its capacity for the third Test keeping coronavirus restrictions in mind, the Times of India reported Wednesday. The third Test will be a day-night affair and will be played with the pink ball.

Squad: Virat Kohli (capt), Rohit Sharma, Mayank Agarwal, Shubman Gill, Cheteshwar Pujara, Ajinkya Rahane (vice-capt), Lokesh Rahul, Hardik Pandya, Rishabh Pant, Wriddhiman Saha, R Ashwin, Kuldeep Yadav, Axar Patel, Washington Sundar, Ishant Sharma, Jasprit Bumrah, Mohammed Siraj, Umesh Yadav.

AFP



A file photo of Sri Lanka batsman Lahiru Thirimanne

Sri Lanka to go ahead with West Indies tour

Colombo, Sri Lanka - Sri Lanka said on Tuesday that it will go ahead with a West Indies tour which had been thrown into doubt after opening batsman Lahiru Thirimanne and coach Mickey Arthur contracted coronavirus. The national board said that the squad will leave for the Caribbean on February 23 for a series which was originally due to start on Saturday.

Sri Lanka Cricket had been negotiating to delay the series since 52 year old coach Arthur and 31 year old Thirimanne tested positive. Sri Lanka will play

three T20s, three ODIs and two Test matches 'under a bio-secure environment in Antigua' from March 3 to April 2, the board said in a statement.

The three T20Is will be played on March 3, 5 and 7 at the Coolidge Cricket Ground, Antigua while the three ODIs will be at the Sir Vivian Richards Cricket Stadium on March 10, 12 and 14. The two Tests will also be at the Sir Vivian Richards Cricket Stadium with the first game starting on March 21 and the second on March 29.

AFP

Ashwin, Rohit, Pant move up in ICC Test rankings

Dubai, UAE - India opener Rohit Sharma, wicketkeeper Rishabh Pant and allrounder R Ashwin all made significant gains in the ICC Test player rankings for batsmen, following the hosts' win against England in Chennai.

Rohit, whose 161 in the first innings gave India the early advantage, jumped nine places to 14th on the list, his best ranking since November 2019 when he was tenth. Ashwin's century in the second innings, his fifth in Tests, lifted him 14 places to 81st in the batting list, while his eight-wicket match haul - including a five-for in the first innings - meant he occupied the seventh position in the bowlers rankings, just three points behind sixth-placed Stuart Broad.

Pant, who has struck at least one fifty in each of his last four Tests, was also rewarded for the rich vein of form with a career-best 11th rank in the batting list. Left-arm spinner Axar Patel, who marked his Test debut with a five-wicket haul in the second in-



L-R: Rohit Sharma, R Ashwin and Rishabh Pant

nings, entered the bowlers rankings in the 68th place.

For England, Jack Leach was the only player to make any notable jump, gaining six places to reach the 31st position in the bowlers rankings. Ben Stokes, who made a paltry return of just 26 across both innings in Chennai, lost his top spot in the Test allrounder rankings, falling to third behind Jason Holder and Ravindra Jadeja.

Meanwhile, West Indies, who sealed a memorable series win

against Bangladesh, saw several of their players get a boost in the rankings, most notably off-spinner Rahkeem Cornwall. His nine-wicket match haul in the second Test put him in the top-50 among bowlers for the first time in his career. Tamim Iqbal (32nd) and Liton Das (54th) were the only two Bangladesh batsmen to make any step up in the rankings, while left-arm spinner Taijul Islam gained five places to take the 22nd spot in the bowlers list.

AFP



A GREEK HERO

Tsitsipas ends Nadal's Grand Slam record bid; Barty's over for hosts

Melbourne, Australia - Stefanos Tsitsipas ended Rafael Nadal's Grand Slam record bid in five gripping sets on Wednesday as home hopes were dashed when top-ranked Ashleigh Barty was knocked out in the Australian Open quarterfinals.

Greece's Tsitsipas looked down and out after losing the first two sets but after edging the third he was a different player, taking the upper hand over a subdued Nadal to win 3-6, 2-6, 7-6 (7-4), 6-4, 7-5.

Tsitsipas, 22, stunned Roger Federer in the 2019 last-16 before being halted by Nadal in the semis, but he turned the tables to set up a last-four meeting with Russia's Daniil Medvedev.

Underlining the scale of the upset, it was only the second time Nadal has lost a Grand Slam five-setter from two sets to love after his defeat to Fabio Fognini at the 2015 US Open.

"I don't know what happened after the third set - I fly like a little bird, everything was working for me," the fifth seed said.

"The emotions at the end were indescribable, they were something else."

The defeat will sting for Nadal, who was drawing closer to a 21st major title and sole ownership of the all-time men's record he currently shares with the injury-sidelined Federer. Tsitsipas's reward is a meeting on Friday with Medvedev, his third Grand

Slam semi, with top-ranked Novak Djokovic or Russian qualifier Aslan Karatsev waiting in Sunday's final.

Earlier, Barty, the world No 1 dreams of ending Australia's 43-year wait for a domestic winner were dashed by the unlikely figure of Karolina Muchova.



'My head was spinning'

In hot conditions, Barty raced through the first set but Muchova dominated after a medical timeout for dizziness, winning 1-6, 6-3, 6-2 to reach her first Grand Slam semi-final as the Australian crumbled.

"I was a bit lost on the court and my head was spinning so I took a break," said Muchova, while Barty, a semifinalist last year, called her latest near-miss 'heartbreaking'. But the top seed added, "Will it deter me, will it ruin the fact we've had a really successful start to our season? Absolutely not."

Muchova will face Jennifer Brady in the last-four after the 22nd seed beat her fellow American and close friend Jessica Pegula 4-6, 6-2, 6-1.

Medvedev and Andrey Rublev were both unbeaten this year but their all-Russian quarterfinal was disappointing. Medvedev, older and higher-ranked, took control after a tight first set, winning 7-5, 6-3, 6-2 as his rival struggled in the intense afternoon heat.

AFP



Greece's Stefanos Tsitsipas celebrates after defeating Spain's Rafael Nadal in the Australian Open quarterfinals in Melbourne on Tuesday



Nadal not blaming quarantine

Melbourne, Australia - Spanish great Rafael Nadal said he wouldn't blame quarantine or look for other excuses on Wednesday after his Grand Slam record bid was torpedoed by Stefanos Tsitsipas. The 34 year old was playing his first tournament of the year after back tightness, following a stint in Australian quarantine, kept

him out of the ATP Cup team competition. But he refused to blame the unusual build-up to the coronavirus-disrupted Grand Slam for his loss.

"We can find excuses or reasons, or maybe this quarantine that we need to be more time in the room than usual," he said.

"But I'm not the guy that's going to find excuses on that or

going to complain about what happened, no. "Just accept. I never considered myself an unlucky person at all. Doesn't matter the injuries that I had. I think I am a very lucky person."

Defending champion Novak Djokovic and Alexander Zverev both hit out at quarantine after their quarterfinal on Tuesday.

AFP

7,500 fans allowed on centre court

Melbourne, Australia - The Australian Open will allow 50 per cent capacity at Rod Laver Arena, the centre court, from Thursday after state authorities eased a five-day coronavirus lockdown, organisers of the Grand Slam tennis tournament said.

"We look forward to welcoming fans back to the Australian Open for the next four days and to finishing the event safely and on a high," tournament director Craig Tiley said in a statement.

A maximum of 7,477 fans will be allowed at each of the day and night sessions from Thursday, Tiley said. The announcement comes ahead of the five-day state-wide lockdown ending at midnight on Wednesday with state health authorities expressing confidence the snap restrictions had been enough to contain a coronavirus outbreak.

"Last week we had our first real experience of live sport with fans in the stands and the atmosphere was electric," said Tiley.

The restrictions were ordered last Friday after a small cluster of the UK coronavirus variant emerged.

The Australian Open's Melbourne Park complex had been operating on a restricted grounds capacity of 30,000 spectators per day in the first week of the tournament before the snap lockdown.

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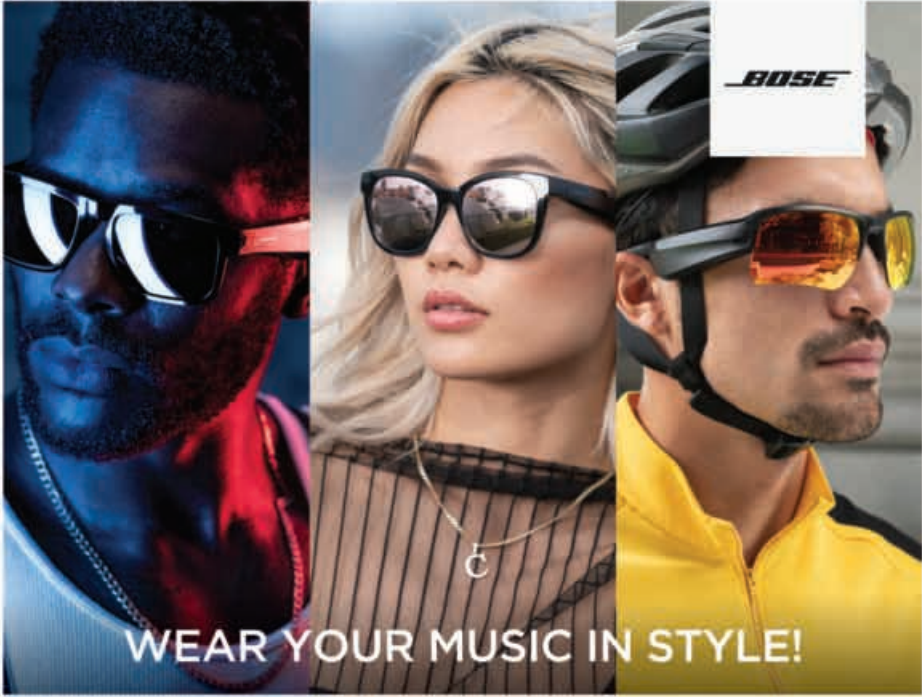
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A CLASH OF CHAMPIONS

HM's Cup semis: Holders Dhofar drawn against Omantel League winners Seeb; Suwaiq to face Ittihad

Ashok Purohit
Muscat

It was an encounter that fans hoped would decide the 2020-21 His Majesty's Cup title but on Wednesday, holders Dhofar were drawn against defending Omantel League champions Seeb in a mouthwatering double-leg semifinals of the His Majesty's Cup Football Championship. The other semi-final will pit three-time winners Al Suwaiq against another Salalah-based team, Al Ittihad.

The first-leg of the semifinals will be played on February 26 while the return-leg will be held on March 2 with the final scheduled on March 7.

Seeb hosts Dhofar in the first-leg while Ittihad will play at home their first-leg tie against Suwaiq.

The draw of the semifinals was held at the OFA headquarters on Wednesday in the presence of Faisal al Tamimi, general manager (Oman) of QNB, the tournament's main sponsor, Fahd al Raisi, OFA general secretary and CEO, Ahmed al Rashdi, OFA board member and club representatives.

Dhofar and Seeb have been the dominating teams in domestic football over the past couple of years and shared glory during the coronavirus pandemic-interrupted 2019-20 season with the Salalah powerhouse lifting the HM's Cup and Seeb ending their wait for over four decades with their maiden Omantel League title.



Action from the 2020-21 HM's Cup quarterfinal match between holders Dhofar and Al Mussanah

And the two clubs have continued from where they left last season in their 2020-21 campaign with Dhofar unbeaten in both Omantel League and HM's Cup so far and Seeb suffering only one defeat [against Bahla in Omantel League on February 11] in both the competitions.

Dhofar have an illustrious HM's Cup history and are nine-time winners, an achievement they share with Fanja Club, who have pulled out of the current domestic season. Under former national coach Rasheed Jaber, Dhofar are chasing a record tenth title. The season

began on the backfoot for the holders as they were slapped sanctions by the Oman Football Association (OFA) at the start of the 2020-21 Omantel League when they were docked six points along with Al Nahda and Saham clubs.

Despite the deficit of six



Seeb's Abdulaziz al Miqbali (L) vie with Saham's Luke during their quarterfinal



QNB's Faisal al Tamimi (R) and OFA's Ahmed al Rashdi on Wednesday

points, Dhofar, who have won the league a record 11 times, are currently second in the top-flight league, trailing Seeb by just three points after nine rounds. Both the teams have displayed good attacking form with Seeb, under Portuguese coach Bruno Pereira, outplaying former champions

Saham in the double-leg quarter-finals with a 4-0 aggregate score. Dhofar were even better, outplaying Al Mussanah with a 5-0 scoreline over two legs.

Seeb have the honour of winning the HM's Cup three times in a row, a record they share with Fanja and Ahli-Sidab,

HM'S CUP SEMIFINALS
February 26 (First-leg)
Seeb vs Dhofar
(5.45pm, Seeb Sports Complex)
Al Ittihad vs Al Suwaiq
(8.15pm, Al Saada Sports Complex)
March 2 (Second-leg)
Dhofar vs Seeb
(5.45pm, Al Saada Sports Complex)
Al Suwaiq vs Al Ittihad
(8.30pm, Al Rustaq Sports Complex)

but their last title came more than two decades back in 1998.

Following the win over Saham, Seeb's confidence will be on a high but with Dhofar on an unbeaten streak, an exciting and explosive semifinal is in store.

For Suwaiq, who came through a nervy win in a shootout against Ibri in the quarterfinals on Tuesday, Al Ittihad will provide a stern test with the Salalah-based club displaying determination in their 3-2 aggregate win over Al Nahda.

Ittihad was promoted to the top-flight league this season and the club has recorded one win in the league so far with six draws to be placed ninth. Suwaiq will bank on their winning experience to get past Ittihad. The three-time winners last won the crown in 2016-17 season. Under former Iraq coach Hakeem Shaker, who has previously led Suwaiq to domestic glory, the club will be the favourite to book a spot in the final but face a tricky first-leg game as they travel to Salalah.

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FOOTBALL ROUND-UP



PSG's Kylian Mbappe celebrates after scoring against Barcelona during the Champions League round-of-16 first-leg match at the Camp Nou stadium on Tuesday

Mbappe hat-trick stuns Barca to put PSG in sight of quarters

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE ROUND-OF-16: FIRST-LEG

Barcelona, Spain - Kylian Mbappe ripped Barcelona apart on Tuesday by scoring a stunning hat-trick in a 4-1 rout to put Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) on the brink of the Champions League quarterfinals.

Mbappe underlined his status as the rising superstar of world football with a ruthless display of finishing at Camp Nou that will go down as one this competition's most devastating individual performances. The 22 year old eclipsed Barca's Lionel Messi, whose opening goal from the penalty spot had been reduced to nothing more than a footnote by the final whistle.

Moise Kean also headed in midway through the second half, carelessly left unmarked from a free-kick as PSG pulled away to win this first leg, and perhaps the tie. Barcelona will no doubt draw upon the spirit of their astonishing 'Remontada' in 2017, when they won the second-leg 6-1 to overturn a 0-4 deficit from

the opening game in Paris.

It will certainly serve as a warning for PSG but without fans, and with Mbappe, any hopes of a repeat for Ronald Koeman's side from look faint at best. Mbappe ran them ragged all night long.

"The great footballers write their stories in the biggest matches," said Mauricio Pochettino. "We had no doubts before the game and even less now that we are seeing a top, top player."

Koeman had gambled on the fitness of Gerard Pique, who had not played a game in almost three months due to a knee ligament injury.

But to rub salt into the wounds, Pique trudged off late on just as PSG were running riot. Koeman was even asked if he wanted to continue as coach but was defiant.

"I accept a defeat and go to work. If I was a person who was very happy when we win and

then with a result like today said I have no desire to continue, that would be crazy. "I know where we are, we have to change, we are not at the end of this road, we are halfway through."

Even without the injured Neymar and Angel Di Maria, PSG were too strong, a breathless, entertaining first half giving way to a French obliteration in the second. PSG's new boss Pochettino pumped a fist at the end, after a huge early boost to his credibility.

Messi's pass led to Barca's opener, a clipped ball over the top attracting the gaze of Layvin Kurzawa as he tracked back and inadvertently tripped Frenkie de Jong in front of him. Messi slammed the penalty into the top corner.

Barca gained in confidence but also left gaps and PSG hit back. Mbappe had already seen a flicked finish blocked by Pique and moments later he made sure, taming Marco Verratti's

astute pull-back with one touch before feathering another expertly around Clement Lenglet in the six-yard box and unleashing past Ter Stegen.

Now the Parisians were on top, with Kurzawa thwarted by Ter Stegen's fingertips and Barca relieved to reach half-time.

But Mbappe was relentless, motoring past opponents every time he got the ball and never letting up. Ter Stegen had to save a deflected shot from Kean before PSG took charge with two goals in five minutes.

Pique could only hack away Alessandro Florenzi's cross to the feet of Mbappe, who clipped in his second, and then Kean headed home, left free at the back post by Lenglet.

Navas almost gifted Barcelona a lifeline when his clearance met Griezmann's left foot and the ball drifted just wide of his own post. Instead, Mbappe landed the knock-out blow, teed up on the counter-attack and curling beautifully in the corner.

AFP

Liverpool seize control over RB Leipzig in Budapest

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE ROUND-OF-16: FIRST-LEG

Budapest, Hungary - Liverpool rediscovered lost form and seized the initiative against RB Leipzig in the first-leg of their Champions League last-16 clash by cruising to a 2-0 win in a chilly Budapest on Tuesday.

Clinical early second-half strikes from Mohamed Salah and Sadio Mane, both courtesy of dreadful defensive errors, proved decisive and leave the German side facing a formidable task in the return-leg on March 10.

The win moves Jurgen Klopp's men to the brink of the Champions League quarterfinals and also ends a run of three straight defeats that has left the English champions 13 points behind leaders Manchester City in the English Premier League.

"It was a game we wanted it was a game we needed tonight," Klopp told *BT Sport* afterwards.

"Leipzig can be a real monster. The way they play in the Bundesliga they overrun teams, they can be really physical in everything and tonight we controlled them in an exceptional way.

"They had their moments because of the quality they have but we controlled the game so tonight I think we got the result we deserved," he said. The first-leg was moved from Leipzig to the Hungarian capital due to Germany's strict COVID-19 travel restrictions.

Despite the enforced relocation, Julian Nagelsmann's side, on a four-game winning streak at home where they are second behind Bayern Munich in the

Bundesliga, started briskly and almost went ahead on four minutes. Marauding left-back Angelino teed up fellow Spaniard Dani Olmo for a close-range diving header past Alisson but the effort only rattled the post.

Shortly before half-time, Andy Robertson shaved the crossbar when his lob from distance almost caught out the Budapest-born Gulacsi dashing back after making a clearance outside his box.

Although Leipzig perked up on the restart with Alisson Becker saving from Christopher Nkunku, the German side, were made to pay for two calamitous mistakes early in the second half.

In the 53rd minute, Salah pounced on a sloppy back-pass by Austrian midfielder Marcel Sabitzer and ran unchallenged to smoothly slot past Gulacsi.

Five minutes later, Mane doubled Liverpool's lead in similar fashion, smartly finishing after Mukiele had scuffed a clearance.

"We made two huge mistakes which would be punished at any level," Nagelsmann told DAZN.

"Mistakes happen, we didn't play badly and we have to live with the result, we have to score twice just to take the game (return leg) to extra time, but we will try to do our best," he said.

Liverpool were left to cruise to victory, keeping alive their hopes of silverware via Champions League glory this season despite their domestic woes.

"We were for two years really good and then this year we had some problems," said Klopp.

"That's absolutely normal and I have no problem with that. It's just a lot of people probably expected us to slip again because of the situation and the boys didn't," he said.

AFP



Liverpool's Sadio Mane (R) celebrates with his teammates after scoring against RB Leipzig during the Champions League round-of-16 first-leg match



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