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OMAN OBSERVER

www.omanobserver.om editor@omanobserver.om



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OMAN

HM CONDOLENCES TO PAKISTAN, URUGUAY

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of condolences to President Dr Arif Alvi of Pakistan on the death of the former Prime Minister of Pakistan Zafarullah Khan Jamali. His Majesty expressed his sincere condolences and sympathy, praying to Allah the Almighty to rest the departed's soul in peace and grant his family patience. His Majesty has also sent a cable of condolences to President Luis Alberto Lacalle Pou of Uruguay on the death of the former President of Uruguay Tabare Vazquez.

HM THANKED BY BRUNEI, CAMBODIA

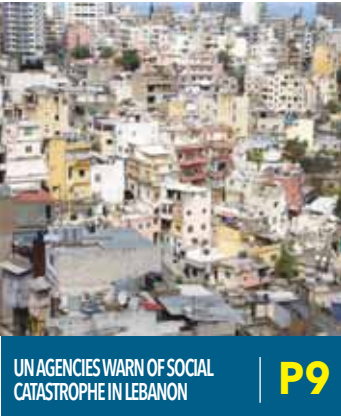
MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has received a cable of thanks from Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah of Brunei Darussalam in reply to His Majesty's condolences cable to him on the death of his son Prince Haji Abdul Azim. In the cable, Sultan Bolkiah expressed his thanks and appreciation for His Majesty the Sultan's condolences, good feelings and sincere prayers, praying to the Almighty Allah to protect His Majesty against all harms. His Majesty also received a cable of thanks from King Norodom Sihamoni of Cambodia in reply to His Majesty's cable of greetings to him on the occasion of his country's National Day. — ONA



INSIDE



CHINA CALLS FOR NEW TALKS WITH US AFTER BIDEN WIN



UN AGENCIES WARN OF SOCIAL CATASTROPHE IN LEBANON



Visa-free arrival, open skies to aid aviation sector

VINOD NAIR

The aviation sector in Oman and as well as across the world continue to bear the cost of worldwide restrictions to limit the spread of COVID-19 pandemic.

With the government likely to allow a 30-day visa-free entry to citizens from around 100 countries, the travel and tourism sector is expected to get a much needed boost.

“It may be noted that Sultanate has 111 agreements for air transport services, including 52 for open skies, with plans for concluding more agreements with a focus on open skies policy,” the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) said in a statement recently.

The CAA has also conducted rounds of negotiations with the European Union for a comprehensive air transport agreement between the Sultanate and the Union to regulate the

The Sultanate has 111 agreements for air transport services, including 52 for open skies, with plans for concluding more agreements

CIVIL AVIATION AUTHORITY

services.

According to the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI), the number of passengers departing through all airports in Oman saw a decrease of 70 per cent as of September 2020, compared to the same period the previous year. There was a drop of 71.9 per cent in total arrivals through these airports until the end of September, compared to the same period a year ago.

New list of endangered animals at Al Wusta Reserve

MUSCAT: The Office for Conservation of the Environment at the Diwan of Royal Court announced that it has added a new list of endangered wild animals and rare birds to the reproduction centre of Al Wusta Wildlife Reserve.

The step stems from the continued support by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to the preservation of nature and wildlife in cooperation with the Royal Gardens and Farms at the Royal Court Affairs. It is also a

confirmation of national efforts aimed at boosting specialised environmental research and the acquired expertise in the management of reserves and wildlife projects.

Dr Qais bin Abdullah al Rawahi, Director of Environmental Affairs and Arabian Oryx Department at the Office for Conservation of the Environment, said that at beginning of this year the office introduced rare animal species at the reproduction centre including antelope, Indian gazelle, wild

His Majesty and Qatar Emir discuss existing bilateral cooperation

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on Monday received a phone call from Shaikh Tamim bin Hamad al Thani, Emir of the sisterly State of Qatar.

The two leaders exchanged cordial conversations and reviewed aspects of the existing cooperation between the two

brotherly countries.

During the telephonic conversation, the Emir of Qatar expressed his sincere wishes of good health, wellbeing and long life to His Majesty the Sultan, and the Omani people progress and prosperity under the wise leadership of His Majesty.

On his turn, His Majesty the

Sultan expressed his thanks and appreciation for Shaikh Tamim's good gesture and noble feelings, wishing the Emir of Qatar good health, happiness and success in leading the brotherly Qatari people towards further progress and growth under the Emir's wise leadership.

— ONA

RESTORATION OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES



As part of its keenness to involve SMEs in restoration and maintenance of architectural heritage, the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism has invited an expression of interest from establishments specialised in consultancy works and providing maintenance, restoration, surveying, structural analysis, project management, and producing and manufacturing heritage items.

Johnson to decide on Brexit deal

BRUSSELS: British and European Union negotiators made a last-ditch effort on Monday to bridge stubborn differences standing in the way of a post-Brexit trade deal, but they had at best 48 hours to avoid a disorderly parting of ways at the end of this month.

“EU-UK negotiations have entered the endgame, time is running out quickly,” said an EU diplomat after the bloc's chief negotiator, Michel Barnier, gave member states' envoys to Brussels a downbeat assessment of the state of play.

With growing fears of no-deal

chaos after London finally leaves the EU's orbit on December 31, talks resumed before British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen review the situation in a call at 16:00 GMT.

SEE ALSO P8



sheep, ostrich, greyhound and kangaroo.

He said that these measures preserve and enrich the biological diversity of the protected species in Al Wusta Governorate and open horizons for specialised environmental research with support from experiences gained at the local and global environmental field, in addition to promoting the expansion of ecotourism fields and increasing environmental education among the community in the Sultanate. — ONA

ECONOMY MINISTER MEETS UAE MINISTERS



Dr Said al Saqri, Minister of Economy, and Dr Nasser al Maawali, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Economy, met on Monday via video-conferencing with UAE ministers. During the meeting, they discussed the bilateral relations between the two brotherly countries, and ways to enhance and support cooperation in the economic field. The meeting was attended from the UAE side by Abdullah al Marri, Minister of Economy; Dr Ahmed al Falasi, Minister of State for Entrepreneurship and Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), and Dr Thani al Zeyoudi, Minister of State for Foreign Trade. – ONA

State Council Committee hosts Haya Water officials

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 7

The Social Committee of the State Council hosted several officials of Haya Water on Monday to add value to its study of reviewing the “Law on Conservation of Environment and Prevention of Pollution.”

The session, which was presided over by Dr Ahmed bin Ali al Amri, Head of the Committee, discussed with the company officials several topics related to the study.

The discussion touched on the laws implemented by the company and internal regulations in the field of environmental preservation and combating pollution, the multiplicity of laws concerned with environmental pollution and the extent of this impact on environmental protection, in addition to

The committee also addressed, the challenges facing the company in the field of environmental protection and pollution control, the company’s proposals on current legislation and dealing with violations, the proposed legislation on these aspects, and the extent of coordination with agencies

identifying the types of pollution that the company deals with, and the effort that it makes to combat pollution and preserve the environment.

The committee also addressed,

during its hosting, the challenges facing the company in the field of environmental protection and pollution control, the company’s proposals on current legislation and dealing with violations, the proposed legislation on these aspects, and the extent of coordination with government agencies and entities and the specialisations that it deals with.

During the meeting, the committee hosted, Sulaiman bin Khamis al Qasimi, Acting CEO, Hamad bin Hamoud al Hashem, Director-General of the Institutional Support Department and Sukainah bint Hamad al Munjiya, Head of the Environment and Climate Affairs Department.

The meeting approved the minutes of the previous meeting and the decisions taken therein were followed up, in addition to reviewing of the new work.

Tender Announcement

The Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn) announces the following Tender:

Tender Number	Tender Name	Last date of Buying	Date of Submission	Type of Work	Register Degree	Fee (R.O)
11/2020/PEIE/HQ-11	MADAYN INSURANCE FOR 2021-2022	16-12-2020	31-12-2020	Services	First and Above	150

Interested Companies registered with Tender Board may obtain the Tender documents from the E-Tendering website: <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om> against non-refundable payment as mentioned above for each set of document. Tenders should be submitted on line on given website. The Tenderer should enclose scan copy of Bank Guarantee issued by any bank in the Sultanate of Oman for the value of 1% of the Tender value validity for (90) business days, and addressed to The Chairman of Tender Committee mentioned in above tenders.

1. **Tender Inquiry:** All correspondence pertaining to the TENDER Inquiry must be online at eTendering System.

2. **eTendering System Inquiry:** All correspondence pertaining to the eTendering System technical support must be directed to the following helpdesk email address and phone number: etenderhd@ita.gov.om and +968 24166670, 24166409 **Note: Bid Submission will be online only.**

No Document can be accepted as Manual except Original Tender Bond. Scan Copy of Tender Bond needs to be attached in system and original needs to be deposited before Bid Opening.

Madayn is not bound to accept the lowest or any other Offer and has the right to cancel these tenders and the tenderers have no right to claim for any compensations.

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New steps augur well for tourism sector

SAMUEL KUTTY
[@samkuttyvp](#)

With the Sultanate opening its borders to visitors after positive signs of recovery from COVID-19 pandemic, the tourism industry is set to see more people arriving in the country in the coming months. According to data from the National Centre for Statistics and Information, Oman received 7,000 visitors during October this year. Visitors from GCC countries topped the list with 5,500 people arriving in the same month.

“With the opening of the borders and issuance of tourist visas, Oman will have more in-bound travellers in addition to indigenous visitors to many tourist spots in the country,” said an official with the travel and tourism industry.

Since the breakout of the pandemic in March, like any other country in the world, Oman too was hit with its airports and seaports closed to visitors from abroad.

“Opening of markets for tourists and business visitors is a welcome move after such a long freeze in businesses. But the new initiative will move the cog in the wheel of economy slowly but steadily,” said Sunil D’Souza, CEO, TravelPoint.

The new move allows tourists beyond to plan a trip to Oman and apply for a tourist visa to enter the country, provided they have a hotel booking or sponsorship from a local travel agency.

Travellers are also required to present two negative COVID-19 PCR tests to become eligible to get entry into Oman — one with not more than 90 hours prior to departure and another at the airport on arrival.

For trips less than seven days, visitors will also be able to bypass the quarantine requirement and freely explore their destination.

However, D’Souza said that a few key points including the number of mandatory PCR tests and quarantine measures “need to be re-considered and reduced”.

According to the November



Opening of markets for tourists and business visitors is a welcome move after such a long freeze in businesses. But the new initiative will move the cog in the wheel of economy slowly but steadily

SUNIL D’SOUZA
CEO, TravelPoint

bulletin from NCSI, the number of visitors fell by 97.4 per cent by October compared to the corresponding period last year.

The total revenue of Omani hotels in the three-to-five-star category fell by 60.2 per cent to RO 70.70 million until the end of October 2020 compared to RO177.72 million for the same

associated with fresh winds, hail precipitation, and flash floods in the wadis of the Governorate of Musandam on Monday morning, extending gradually during the evening over North al Batinah and Al Buraimi governorates.

The governorates of South al Batinah, Muscat, Al Dakhiliyah, North al Sharqiyah, and South al Sharqiyah will be affected by the trough on Tuesday and Wednesday following the passage of the trough, a moderate to the fresh northeasterly wind is forecast to affect most of the Sultanate, leading to a noticeable drop in temperature. The Civil Aviation Authority has advised all to take precautions during rain and wadis and to check the visibility and sea state before sailing and follow the instruction.



Forum to showcase economic potential of genetic resources

ZAINAB AL NASSRI

@zainabalnasseri

The second edition of the Geno-Business Forum 2020 will kick off on Wednesday. The virtual event is being organised by the Oman Animal and Plant Genetic Resources Center (OAPGRC) in partnership with public and private sector stakeholders. The OAPGRC is affiliated to the Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research and Innovation.

The Forum will be conducted virtually under the auspices of the ministry's Under-Secretary for Research and Innovation Dr Saif bin Abdullah al Haddabi.

The event is aimed at showcasing business ideas of entrepreneurs related to original, investable genetic resources or products. It also has an objective to raise awareness among the public and private sector institutions and Oman's growing entrepreneur community highlighting the importance of the Sultanate's diversified genetic resources. It also has an inherent idea of promoting the use and conservation of genetic resources in a sustainable and profitable manner for the diversification of the Omani economy.

The two-day Forum will offer the participants access to lo-



cal and international scientists, entrepreneurs, agribusiness experts, agricultural producers, policymakers, marketing, packaging, branding and technology professionals, investors and industry thought leaders.

Commenting on the event, Abdullah bin Ali al Rawahi, Deputy Executive Director of the OAPGRC, said "The Forum is an extension to the success of the first edition that was held

two years ago. It also reflects the centre's keenness to highlight the large and increasing role that our various genetic resources play in various aspects of life, especially in commercial and economic areas. It will also prove beneficial for those who are looking for investment in these areas."

The Forum, according to him, will include several sessions highlighting various aspects of the natural and human resources

It reflects the center's keenness to highlight the large and increasing role that our various genetic resources play in various aspects of life, especially in commercial and economic areas. It will also prove beneficial for those who are looking for investment in these areas

**ABDULLAH
AL RAWAHI**
OAPGRC

with the participation of local and international speakers with their scientific and innovative experiences on how to benefit from the existing economic benefits.

The Forum will look into aspects like Exploring quality food from Oman's genetic resources; Food and nutritional security, Innovating Oman's genetic resources; Role of the 4th industrial revolution, and Genetic resources for sustainable economy.

BADR RECEIVES ENVOYS CREDENTIAL COPIES



Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister received credentials copies from Mizan Abdur Rahman, ambassador designate of the Republic of Bangladesh to the Sultanate, and Luis Manuel Fernandes de Almeida Ferraz, ambassador designate of the Portuguese Republic to the Sultanate. The foreign minister welcomed the two ambassadors wishing them success in performing their duties, and the Sultanate's bilateral relations with their countries more progress and development. The minister also received copies of credentials of Karl Kulesa, as a representative of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) to the GCC. The ambassador welcomed the official wishing him success in handling the duties undertaken by the organisation to assist the population and boost development in various fields.

GERMAN PRESIDENT RECEIVES OMAN ENVOY



President Frank-Walter Steinmeier of Germany with Yousuf bin Said al Amri, the Sultanate's extraordinary plenipotentiary ambassador to Germany, at the Presidential Palace in Berlin on Monday. - ONA

Faster cargo clearance

NOAH AL MAAMARI
MUSCAT, DEC 7

Brigadier Khalifa bin Ali al Siyabi, Director-General of Customs at Royal Oman Police (ROP) said the fastest cargo clearance process via sea ports in this year took one minute and nine seconds, while the fastest process through airports took 1 minute and 8 seconds.

This, he said, was due to a quantum leap in the facilitating of customs clearance procedures and

the development of the ROP systems.

These developments in customs clearance systems and procedures have contributed greatly to the facilitation of trade and the reinforcement of the logistics sector and placed the Sultanate on top of the Cross-Border Trade Index as part of the Ease of Doing Business, 2020 Report published by the World Bank which ranked the Sultanate on top of the GCC in the Cross-Border Trade Index.

Disabled people can try sailing

STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT, DEC 7

In partnership with BP Oman, Oman Paralympic Committee and Oman Sail marked the International Day of Persons with Disabilities on Monday by unveiling the RS Venture Connect boats, specifically-designed for the region's first para-sailing initiative programme, SailFree. The event was held under the auspices of Rashad bin Ahmed al Hinai, Under-Secretary, Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, for Sports and Youth at Oman Sail's Headquarters at Al Mouj Muscat Marina.

On the occasion, Chief Executive Officer of Oman Sail, Dr Khamis al Jabri, said: "SailFree aims to make sailing accessible to all and will introduce people with physical impairment to sailing. The programme, targeting both men and women aged between 16 and 30 years to train at Oman Sail's sailing schools in Al Mouj Muscat and Sur under



guidance from the Oman Paralympic Committee. Participants will learn sailing, leadership, teamwork and communication skills using the highly-adaptable RS Venture Connect SCS sailing dinghy which can be quickly configured to suit sailors with a wide range of physical impairments and has been adopted by World Sailing for the Paralympic double-handed class."

Yousuf al Ojaili, President of BP Oman, said: "We are proud to support and sponsor this programme, which is the first of its

kind in our region and we hope that to re-enter this sport in the Paralympic Games through this programme and to establish a national team to represent the nation at the 2022 Para Sailing World Championships. We wish the participants all the success and we are proud of their efforts."

Dr Mansoor al Touqi, President of the Oman Paralympic Committee, commented: "This programme has great potential to change the lifestyles of hundreds of people with disabilities in the Sultanate."

POLYCLINIC WITH DIALYSIS CENTRE FOR SALE IN AL KHUWAIR, MUSCAT

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FASCINATING COMBO OF NATURE AND HISTORY



Mad'ha



Mad'ha is one of the splendid wilayats in the Governorate of Musandam. A settlement of approximately 2,000 people, it is situated on a 75-hectare landlocked island of Oman, surrounded on all sides by the emirates of Sharjah, Fujairah and Ras Al Khaimah. Inside the Mad'ha settlement is yet another tiny settlement, the village of Nahwa. Mad'ha is about 370 km away from Muscat, 40 km from Shinas, and it has 16 villages including the Al Ghona and Saad.

The wilayat combines a fascinating nature and ancient civilisation that is evident from its forts and unique inscriptions. Unlike any other Omani wilayat, Mad'ha borders the United Arab Emirates on four sides without overlooking the sea from any side. As a result, its people have taken up agriculture as their main occupation, which has led to its fragmentation and divisions of its unique aflaj. In fact, there are 24 aflaj in Mad'ha including Falaj Saruj, Falaj Sodqo and Adaier.

The wilayat is also noted for hot springs like Ain A'smai, Lashma and Hajer Bani Hamid, where the warm water with sulphur content has a healing

effect on many people who have skin diseases.

Mad'ha has a number of forts used as monitoring towers which include Fort of Al Ghona, Fort of Mad'ha and Fort of Hajer Bani Hamid, that also have secret underground rooms.

Due to its mountainous location, people of Mad'ha mainly work in agriculture and livestock breeding. Its main products are dates, fruits and vegetables. Mad'ha is known for traditional industries, particularly for the production of articles such as ropes and mats made of palm fronds, in addition to sewing, embroidery and making of swords and agricultural tools.

Adherence to Islamic instructions and solidarity are the main characteristics of the people of the wilayat. Mad'ha embraces the meaning of social solidarity.

The wilayat has richly benefited from government care and as a result enjoys various services and facilities including schools, health centre, water and electricity networks, telecommunication services and administration building of Mad'ha's club, dams, low-income social residences and public park.

Masirah Island's beaches, coral reefs cleaned

STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT, DEC 7

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources organised a campaign to clean the beaches and coral reefs of Masirah Island on Monday. "The Ministry of Agricultural, Fisheries and Water Resources on Monday organised an expanded campaign to clean the beaches and coral reefs of Masirah Island to preserve the marine environment, in cooperation with the Oman Environment Society and with the participation of private sector institutions, civil institutions and volunteers." The participants asserted that organising beach cleaning campaigns is a message to all sea goers about the problem of waste and its damage to the environment and the difficulty of collecting it, hoping that everyone will preserve the beaches and throw waste in the designated places.

The campaign was inaugurated by Shaikh Saeed bin Muhammad al Harsosi, Deputy Wali of Masirah, who said that the campaign is one of the national initiatives that seek to preserve the beaches and their beauty and most importantly, create a spirit of participation and cooperation from everyone of different age groups in preserving nature.

Youssef bin Hamad al Nahdi, Head of the Fisheries Development Center in Masirah, said the ministry is keen to organise this two-day campaign to preserve the beautiful beaches in the island, which attract tourists and also to preserve the marine environment

from waste.

Al Nahdi thanked the Omani diving team who removed the waste from the sea bed and the Omani Women Association in Masirah for their active participation in the campaign, and also thanked the institutions sponsoring the campaign, considering their sponsorship as the best evidence of the great awareness of the importance of the marine environment and the keenness to take care of it.

Diver Ali bin Saleh al Ajmi said due to the careless behaviour piles of waste ends up on the seabed causing great harm to marine life. It requires community awareness to highlight the harm to the marine environment and a directive not to throw waste at sea.

Diver Hussain bin Ali al Ajmi said he was happy to participate in this campaign. Suad al Harithiya, Executive Director of the Oman Environment Society, said the association is keen to implement joint community initiatives that provide an opportunity for all segments of society to contribute to conservation efforts and to spread awareness about the importance of protecting and preserving the environment.

She added that the safety marine environment is among the society's priorities and ESO is honoured to cooperate with the Fisheries Development Center in Masirah to clean up the main beaches on Masirah Island, especially the turtle nesting beaches.

The campaign's participants strictly adhered to COVID-19 protocol.



Open data portal to boost innovation wins Arab award

STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT, DEC 7

A portal aimed at students of higher education institutions in Oman has won the Arab Government Excellence Award for the best Arab government project instituted by the Arab League. The project was chosen out of 5,000 entries from various Arab countries.

The portal offers an integrated environment for innovation, to launch competitions among innovators, to provide incentive benefits in order to protect intellectual property rights, to encourage the use of technology, to find supportive bodies, and to establish new start-up companies based on innovations with added value to the national economy.

The innovation system, which was launched by the Ministry of Labour, aimed to support the higher education sector represented by the technical and vocational colleges through an open data portal linked to the Sultanate's digital transformation strategies and the National Innova-

tion Strategy.

The portal has been designed to provide services to beneficiaries, bringing the number of beneficiaries to 174,000. The portal includes an open data hackathon, an innovation acceleration programme, an innovation lab and an innovation registration service, which includes 104 ideas aimed at enhancing students' participation with their entrepreneurial ideas and registering innovation requests that reached 63 applications. The portal has also ensured the sustainability of innovation by training more than 3,000 innovation specialists and holding 100 workshops. There are also innovation units that have been established in technical colleges with the provision of the required resources, the use of big data, and the spread of the culture of innovation for 15 colleges and 45 thousand students. The innovation system has achieved the registration of 670 innovative ideas and the protection of 63 innovative projects, including the transformation of some of these innovations into 48 start-



up companies as well as funding 8 start-up projects.

The ministry made great efforts in fostering innovation to diversify sources of income, create new jobs, and contribute to building a knowledge-based economy by preparing students of technical and vocational colleges and the ministry's employees and encouraging them to highlight their talents and ideas.

The ministry also contributed to building a knowledge economy through technical education programmes in seven technical colleges and education and vocational training programmes in eight vocational colleges across the Sultanate, as the sustainable knowledge economy is based primarily on

knowledge creation and encouraging and embracing innovation and leadership.

The ministry implemented policies and strategies to encourage the innovations of students and employees, and this is evident by the formation of innovation and entrepreneurship units in all technical and vocational colleges that are responsible for spreading the culture of innovation among students as well as encouraging them to present and develop their ideas and innovations, helping and directing them with registering their innovations through the portal, educating them on ways to protect their innovations, and assisting them in drafting a patent application.

The open data portal on the ministry's website has included a number of initiatives that aim to provide accurate data for the present and future needs of the labour market and demonstrate the experiences of the beneficiaries. It includes 56 data bases in 8 different fields and the number of beneficiaries of the data is about 225 thousand people until April 2020.



Muscat Municipality
Advertisement No. 55/2020

Companies specialized in the field and registered with **Tender Board**, may obtain tender documents for the website through the following link:
(<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>)
against non-refundable fees as mentioned below starting from the date of this announcement and until the end of deadline stipulated below.

Tender No.	E- Tender No.	Description of Tender	Tender Fee	Last date to collect the tender	Tender return date	Grade
PRE/20/102	2020/MM/Q5-51 (Re Call)	RFP FOR RENEWING IBM FILENET & CMS LICENSES FOR RECORD AND DOCUMENT MANAGEMENT SYSTEM (E- TENDER) (RE CALL)	Rial 25	20/12/2020	22/12/2020	Specialized
PRE/20/092	2020/MM/Q5-45 (Re Call)	SUPPLY OF ROAD MARKING MATERIALS FOR ROAD MAINTENANCE 2020 (E- TENDER) (RE CALL)	Rial 25	07/01/2021	17/01/2021	First

Tender Conditions :-

- Bidders shall submit their offers electronically accompanied with an electronic copy of bond issued by any local bank in Oman addressed to Muscat municipality. The bond shall be (1%) of the tender value valid for ninety (90) days starting from the date of bids submission. Any tenders which do not meet the required bond shall not be accepted.
- Original Tender Bonds are to be placed in the Tender Box at Muscat Municipality HQ, Third Floor.
- For any inquiries regarding tenders, please visit e-tendering website: (<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>).
- For technical support of e-tendering system please send an email to (etenderhd@ita.gov.om) or call (+96824166670).

Pope plans historic Iraq trip in March

VATICAN CITY/BAGHDAD: Pope Francis will make a historic visit to Iraq in March, the Vatican said on Monday, the first ever by a pontiff and which will include a trip to Mosul.

The 83-year-old has long spoken of his desire to visit the Middle Eastern country.

Between March 5 and 8 next year, Francis will “visit Baghdad, the plain of Ur... the city of Erbil, as well as Mosul and Qaraqosh in the plain of Nineveh,” spokesman Matteo Brunni said in a statement.

The pope’s visit to the ancient city of Mosul in northern Iraq will be particularly significant, as the former stronghold of the IS group.

Iraq’s historic and diverse Christian communities have been devastated in the bloody sectarian warfare that followed the 2003 US-led invasion and the IS group’s sweep through a third of the country in 2014.

Communities of Assyrians, Armenians, Chaldeans, Protestants and more have all been directly targeted.

MESSAGE OF PEACE

The trip will be the pope’s first abroad since the coronavirus outbreak hit Italy, and the Vatican said the programme would “take into consideration the evolution of the worldwide health emergency”.

Francis said last year that Iraq



Pope Francis will make the first visit by a pope to Iraq in March. — Reuters

was on his list for 2020, but he was forced to cancel all foreign trips in June as coronavirus swept across the globe.

At the time, he said he hoped Iraq could “face the future through the peaceful and shared pursuit of the common good on the part of all elements of society, including the religious, and not fall back into hostilities sparked by the simmering conflicts of the regional powers.”

President Barham Saleh had officially invited the pope to visit Iraq in July 2019, hoping it would help the country “heal” after years of strife.

The Iraqi foreign ministry on Monday welcomed news of his trip, saying: “It symbolises a message of peace to Iraq and the whole region.”

The late pope, John Paul II, had also hoped to visit Iraq, but never made the trip. — AFP

Gaza runs out of virus testing kit, appeals for outside help

GAZA CITY: Hamas said on Monday it could no longer carry out novel coronavirus tests in the Gaza Strip due to a lack of kits, amid a spike in cases in the Palestinian territory.

The health ministry of the movement called for urgent action “to provide the necessary equipment” to screen the population for the virus.

The only laboratory in the territory able to analyse COVID-19 test samples had ceased its work “due to a lack of equipment”, the ministry said in a statement.

Senior Hamas official and former health minister Bassem Naim said separately that authorities usually carry out “between 2,500 and 3,000 tests per day, at a cost of between \$75,000 and \$100,000”.

“There is an urgent need to take measures to save the lives of Gaza’s citizens and contain the crisis,” he said.

The tiny, densely populated enclave is home to two million people and has been under Israeli blockade since 2007.

Authorities closed Gaza’s borders early in the pandemic, only allowing entry to a limited number of people, who were then required to isolate for three weeks in quarantine centres.



A technician handles PCR (polymerase chain reaction) swab samples collected as part of coronavirus disease testing in the Gaza Strip. — AFP

In mid-August, Gaza had recorded only around 100 COVID-19 cases, but the past two weeks have seen a steep deterioration in containment.

Hamas on Thursday announced a lockdown on weekends lasting from December 11 to the end of the month. It also closed schools, universities, kindergartens and mosques.

In the Israeli-occupied West Bank, separated from Gaza by Israeli territory, the Palestinian Authority said it would reimpose

a week-long lockdown in four out of 11 provinces.

“The governorates of Nablus, Hebron, Bethlehem and Tulkarem will be completely closed from the evening of Thursday, December 10 for a period of seven days,” Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammed Shtayyeh said on Monday.

“All commercial and service activities will be shut down, except for pharmacies, bakeries, supermarkets and grocery stores.”

The move comes after a two-

week long weekend and evening curfew was enforced across the West Bank in late November to fight a “worrying spread” of the virus. The curfew was extended until December 17.

In total, the Palestinian health ministry has recorded more than 74,160 COVID-19 cases, including nearly 700 deaths, in the West Bank.

In Gaza, nearly 25,600 infections have been officially registered, including around 150 deaths. — AFP

RUSSIA, TURKEY PATROL IN SYRIA



A Russian Mil Mi-17 military helicopter flies by soldiers and military vehicles during a joint Russian-Turkish patrol in the eastern countryside of the town of Darbasayah near the border with Turkey in Syria’s northeastern Hasakah province on Monday. — AFP

Iran hosts Syrian FM in first visit abroad

TEHRAN: Iran’s Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif on Monday hosted his Syrian counterpart Faisal Mekdad in Tehran, in the top diplomat’s first official visit abroad.

During their meeting, the two discussed “bilateral, regional and international issues, as well as the joint fight against terrorism”, Iran’s foreign ministry said in a statement.

Zarif emphasised the “necessity of vigilance and consultation” between Iran and Syria due to the “recent regional developments and condition”, it added.

Mekdad arrived in Tehran on Sunday night and is expected to meet Iran’s top officials in the next few days, according to the ministry.



He succeeded Wallid Muallem as Syria’s foreign minister on November 22, after the veteran diplomat died days before.

Iran has been a staunch supporter of Syria’s President Bashar al-Assad in the civil war that has ravaged the country since 2011.

“Iran stands alongside the people and government of Syria in the fight against terrorism,” Iran’s foreign ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said in a tweet.

“A political solution is the only possible choice to end the current crisis,” he added. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

CAIRO

President Sisi begins visit to France

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi begins on Monday a visit to France to underscore close ties.

With both countries concerned by the political vacuum in Libya, instability across the region and the threat from militant groups in Egypt, they have cultivated closer economic and military ties during Sisi’s rise to power.

Sisi was received with great pomp on Monday morning with a military welcome ceremony.

Between 2013-2017, France



was the main weapons supplier to Egypt. Those contracts have dried up, including deals for more Rafale fighter jets and warships that had been at an advanced stage. — Reuters

TUNIS

Night-time curfew extended until end of year

Tunisia has extended a night-time curfew until the end of the year in a bid to tackle spiking novel coronavirus cases, amid growing discontent and protests in the North African country.

Following a meeting of its anti-coronavirus taskforce, the government decided to “maintain the curfew from 8 pm until 5 am in all governorates, every day of the week,” the health ministry said in a statement on Facebook.

Under the new measures,



which take effect on Monday, masks “remain mandatory in all open spaces”, the statement said, adding that private parties will be allowed with up to 30 people. — AFP

DUBAI

Cyber attacks increase after Israel deal

The United Arab Emirates was the target of cyber attacks after establishing formal ties with Israel, the Gulf Arab state’s cyber security head said.

The UAE in August broke with decades of Arab policy when it agreed to forge ties with Israel. Bahrain and Sudan have followed suit. “Our relationship, for example, with the normalisation with Israel really opened a whole huge attacks from some other activists against the UAE,” Mohamed Hamad al-Kuwaiti said during



an onstage interview at a conference in Dubai. Kuwaiti said the financial sector was targeted but did not elaborate. He did not say if any of the attacks were successful or provide details on who the perpetrators were. — Reuters



In brief

■ HONG KONG

**POLICE MAKE ARRESTS OVER CAMPUS PROTEST**

Hong Kong police arrested three people on Monday for chanting banned slogans at a university campus last month, accusing them of violating a draconian national security law imposed by China.

The arrests illustrate how Beijing's new law has created a host of new speech crimes as it moves to crush dissent in the international finance hub following months of huge and often violent protests last year.

Li Kwai-wah, a senior officer in Hong Kong's new national security unit, said the three had been arrested for unlawful assembly and "inciting secession", a crime under the national security law. — AFP

■ SYDNEY

**SURFER SURVIVES GREAT WHITE SHARK ATTACK**

An Australian surfer told on Monday how he managed to paddle back to shore and walk hundreds of meters to get help after being attacked by a great white shark.

The 29-year-old said he had been enjoying a "normal days surfing" on Sunday on Kangaroo Island when he had a sensation of "being hit by a truck" on his left side. "It bit me around my back, buttock and elbow and took a chunk out of my board," the surfer said in a statement.

Police said a member of the public took the man from D'Estrees Bay and was met by paramedics while on route to the island's main city of Kingscote. — AFP

■ JAKARTA

**MILLION COVID-19 VACCINE DOSES RECEIVED**

Indonesia has received 1.2 million doses of a COVID-19 vaccine made by China's Sinovac, officials said, as the world's fourth most populous nation struggles to get soaring case rates under control.

The doses arrived in Jakarta late on Sunday on a flight from Beijing, with another 1.8 million expected to be sent again next month.

On Monday, Indonesia's COVID-19 response team chief Airlangga Hartarto said the first batch of doses will be examined by the food and drug agency, with plans to distribute them to medical workers and other high-risk groups. — AFP

China calls for new talks with incoming US administration

BEIJING: China's top diplomat on Monday called for the resumption of talks with the incoming US administration of president-elect Joe Biden, as relations between the world's two largest economies continued to nosedive.

Beijing and Washington have locked horns over issues from trade and China's human rights record to its expansionist ambitions in the South China Sea.

But speaking during a video call with the board of the US-China Business Council (USCBC) on Monday, foreign minister Wang Yi said "the two sides should work together."

"We need to strive to restart the dialogue, get back on the right track, and rebuild mutual trust in the next phase of China-US relations," he said, according to



Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi.

a readout of his remarks on the foreign ministry website.

His comments come days after Washington unveiled travel restrictions for members of the Chinese Communist Party over human rights abuses in the restive region of Xinjiang, as relations between the two tumble to the lowest point in decades.

More sanctions are expected

this week, with Bloomberg reporting on Monday that the US was set to slap at least a dozen officials with asset freezes over their role in the disqualification of pro-democracy lawmakers in Hong Kong.

China's relations with US allies, most notably Australia, have also plummeted in recent weeks.

Amid a growing spat between Beijing and Canberra, a senior Chinese official sparked outrage last Monday when he tweeted a staged image of an Australian soldier with a knife in Afghanistan.

But China's top diplomat appeared to strike a more conciliatory tone from his so-called "Wolf Warrior" colleagues on Monday, saying the two sides should work to "expand consensus" and co-operation.

"For problems that cannot be immediately resolved, we need to maintain a constructive attitude to manage the situation to avoid intensifying and escalating the overall situation of China-US relations," Wang said.

Biden is set to assume the presidency on January 20, succeeding Donald Trump, who launched a bruising trade war against China and targeted the global ambitions of groups including telecoms giant Huawei.

The president-elect is expected to be more measured in tone and knit back together tattered alliances on the global stage.

But he has told US media that he will keep Donald Trump's trade war tariffs on China for the time being when he moves into the Oval Office. — AFP

■ INDIA GOVT-FARMERS DEADLOCK CONTINUES



Security personnel sit next to farmers as they continue a demonstration to protest against the recent agricultural reforms at the Delhi-Uttar Pradesh state border in Ghazipur on Monday. — AFP

Mystery illness sickens hundreds in south India

NEW DELHI: Some 340 people have been hospitalised due to an unidentified illness in India's southern state of Andhra Pradesh.

The outbreak in Eluru city on Saturday saw patients develop nausea, headaches and suffer fits causing many to fall unconscious, state health spokesman Manikyala Rao said by phone.

Health authorities have not yet established the cause of the mystery disease. Blood tests have not revealed any evidence of viral infection.

Domestic media reported that in addition to the hundreds

Couple marry at COVID-19 centre

NEW DELHI: A couple in northern India decided to get married at a COVID-19 care centre, donning protective suits for the ceremony, after the bride tested positive on their wedding day, with visuals of the event going viral on social media.

Photos shared by health authorities shows the couple, the priest and three close relatives wearing personal



protection equipment (PPE) gear at the ceremony, where the pair took marital vows in a traditional Hindu ceremony.

of people who had fallen sick, a 45-year-old man had died of the disease.

Rao insisted however that the death was due to a heart attack and not related to the illness.

168 of the 340 hospitalised since Saturday night had been discharged, he added. "All patients tested negative for COVID-19. Air pollution, water or food contamination is also ruled out after tests were carried out. It is some mystery illness and more lab tests are being carried out to find out what it is," Rao said.

— dpa

60,000 koalas impacted by Australia's bush fires

SYDNEY: More than 60,000 koalas were among the animals impacted by Australia's devastating 2019-2020 summer bush fires, according to a report released on Monday.

The final bush fire impact report by the World Wide Fund (WWF) for Nature-Australia found that overall nearly 3 billion animals were in the path of the fires that burned up to 19 million hectares across the south and east of Australia.

Koalas in the states of New South Wales and Queensland were in rapid decline before the fires.

The "Black Summer"

impacts on the native species included death, injury, trauma, smoke inhalation, heat stress, dehydration and loss of habitat.

The report also revealed that around 143 million mammals, 2.46 billion reptiles, 181 million birds, and 51 million frogs were in areas hit by the blazes.

The figures remain unchanged from July's interim report.

WWF-Australia CEO Dermot O'Gorman said nearly 3 billion animals being impacted is "off the charts."

He announced that the organisation is working on a "Regenerate Australia" plan, which includes "a bold vision to



A koala is being rescued from a burning forest near Cape Borda on Kangaroo Island. — Reuters

Pakistan suspends staff after oxygen shortage kills Covid patients

PESHAWAR: Seven workers at a Pakistan hospital who left scores of COVID-19 patients without sufficient oxygen for hours have been suspended after several of their charges died, authorities said.

Five patients in the COVID isolation ward and one in the intensive care unit at the government-run hospital in Peshawar died due to the delay in sourcing oxygen, a preliminary report said on Sunday.

The chronic oxygen deficiency "went unnoticed, unsupervised and unchecked," the report said, adding that no backup oxygen supply had been put in place.

The hospital director was among those suspended with immediate effect.

Taimur Saleem Jhagra, a provincial health minister, said the authorities will hold a second detailed inquiry over the next five days.

"The hospital was low on oxygen from around 8 pm in the evening, how come they couldn't manage to solve the issue until after 12 pm?" Jhagra said.

"Some of the staff were off, some were absent and there wasn't any alternate arrangements, even the emergency squad was not available," he added.

Hospital spokesman Farhad Khan said a disruption in oxygen supplies affected some 200 people, including nearly 100 with coronavirus.

Pakistan has reported more than 400,000 cases of coronavirus — including over 8,000 deaths — since it arrived in late February.

Intensive care units in hospitals across the country are now almost full, with provincial governments struggling to deal with the soaring caseload. — AFP

double the number of koalas in eastern Australia by 2050."

"WWF is determined to help restore wildlife and habitats, rejuvenate communities impacted by the bush fires, boost sustainable agriculture and future-proof our country," O'Gorman said.

He said the number of koalas impacted was "deeply disturbing" for a species already in trouble.

Under the "Koalas Forever" plan, WWF-Australia will be trialling seed dispersing drones to create koala corridors and setting up a fund to encourage landowners to create koala safe havens. — dpa

Southern California goes into virus lockdown

LOS ANGELES: Southern California went into a strict lockdown on Monday, with more than 20 million people under stay-at-home orders triggered after hospitals faced being overwhelmed by record COVID-19 cases.

Governor Gavin Newsom last week announced new statewide bans on gatherings and “non-essential” activities would come into effect once 85 per cent of intensive care unit beds have been filled.

Under the lockdown, most of offices will close and gatherings of people from different households are banned. Bars and personal services such as hair salons will be temporarily closed, and restaurants will only be allowed to offer take-out and delivery.

“We are at a tipping point in our fight against the virus and we need to take decisive action now to prevent California’s hospital system from being overwhelmed in the coming weeks,” Newsom said.

By implementing stay-at-home orders when ICU capacity falls below 15 per cent, “we can flatten the curve as we’ve done before and reduce stress on our healthcare system.” California’s Department of Public Health said on Sunday that ICU capacity in Southern California and San Joaquin Valley had fallen below 15 per cent.

“The regional stay at home order will take effect in those two regions tonight at 11:59 pm and will remain in effect for at least three weeks,” it said.

California is experiencing record new cases of COVID-19 in a third wave of the virus, with two days last week in which 113



California governor Gavin Newsom said the state was at a ‘tipping point in the our fight against the virus’. — AFP

deaths were recorded, up from around 14 daily fatalities in early November.

Non-essential travel is also temporarily restricted statewide and hotels will no longer be allowed to cater to tourists. Offices must close, except for critical infrastructure sectors where remote working is not possible.

Shops will be limited at 20 per cent capacity, while only schools with waivers will be allowed to remain open. California, the most populous US state, has seen more than 1.3 million cases and nearly 20,000 deaths. It recorded 30,075 new infections on Saturday.

Newsom said there would be new grants and tax relief to help

we can flatten the curve as we’ve done before and reduce stress on our healthcare system

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH

California

small business owners who have been hard-hit.

The measures follow similar bans on gatherings that went into place this week in densely populated and badly hit Los Angeles

County. They extend upon a near-statewide nighttime curfew introduced last month.

But the new, stricter measures still fall short of California’s first lockdown in March, which saw most outdoor activities including beach access and hiking banned.

In northern California, San Francisco has also implemented a stay at home order, which went into effect Sunday night due to a sharp increase in COVID-19 cases and hospitalisations. “Within weeks we may not be able to care for people at our hospitals if we don’t take action NOW,” the San Francisco Department of Emergency Management tweeted as it announced the lockdown. — AFP

BIDEN NAMES HEALTH TEAM TO TACKLE SPIRALING COVID CRISIS



California Attorney General Xavier Becerra

WASHINGTON: President-elect Joe Biden on Monday named the team tasked with turning around the United States’ floundering efforts to quell the COVID-19 pandemic, nominating Xavier Becerra as his secretary of health.

When Biden takes office on January 20, his health team will be immediately responsible for rolling out a historic immunisation drive — set to launch later this month in a bid to gain control of a pandemic that has killed 280,000 people in the country.

Along with California attorney general Becerra, Biden named Vivek Murthy as surgeon general — a role he previously held under Barack Obama — and Harvard infectious disease expert Rochelle Walensky as director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. — AFP

GIULIANI TESTS POSITIVE FOR COVID-19



Giuliani latest COVID-19 case in Trump inner circle

WASHINGTON: Donald Trump said on Sunday his personal lawyer Rudy Giuliani has tested positive for COVID-19, the latest member of the president’s inner circle — where mask wearing is rare — to contract the disease. The 76-year-old former New York City mayor’s age puts him in a high-risk group, and the *New York Times* and ABC reported he was hospitalised on Sunday in Washington as the US faces a record surge in coronavirus cases. Giuliani’s diagnosis comes after he had been crisscrossing the country, leading the president’s defiant — and unsuccessful — effort to undo Joe Biden’s victory in the November 3 presidential election. During his travels, Giuliani has been seen frequently without a mask: on Wednesday, he was at the Michigan state assembly in Lansing with his face uncovered for a hearing that lasted more than four hours. — AFP

Brexit talks hit the wall

BRUSSELS: Post-Brexit trade talks between the EU and UK neared a decisive point on Monday as Europe pushed a leaders summit later in the week as the final chance for a deal.

Chief EU negotiator Michel Barnier told MEPs that Wednesday was the effective deadline for a breakthrough as talks with his UK counterpart David Frost dragged on in Brussels.

Barnier and Frost were wrangling once more on Monday before reporting back to their respective bosses, EU chief Ursula von der Leyen and UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson.

Barnier told a briefing of EU envoys that negotiations were still blocked over fishing rights, rules for fair trade and an enforcement mechanism, still the thorniest problems since talks began eight months ago.

All eyes are on an EU summit on Thursday, when the outline of a deal — or an admission of the failure to find one — will be put to the bloc’s 27 leaders.

A senior EU diplomat said the leaders would either “welcome a deal” if there was one there, or demand for the urgent preparation of contingency measures in the event talks failed.

“These are going to be decisive hours for the future of our UK relations, and I guess we are at the make it or break it moment,” the diplomat told reporters. Ratcheting up the drama, Michael Gove, a top UK minister and close ally of Johnson was sent to Brussels for separate talks to discuss implementing the existing divorce treaty, which Britain has threatened to redraw. — AFP

William and Kate begin UK tour to thank workers for COVID efforts

LONDON: Prince William and his wife Kate arrived in Edinburgh on Monday at the start of a nationwide train tour of Britain to meet and thank frontline workers, care home staff and teachers for their efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic.

William, Queen Elizabeth’s grandson and second-in-line to the throne, and Kate are travelling 1,250 miles across England, Scotland and Wales on board the Royal Train as part of their three-day trip.

They kicked off the tour at London’s Euston Station on Sunday evening where they were serenaded by Welsh pop star



Shakin’ Stevens singing his 1980s hit “Merry Christmas Everyone” before leaving for Scotland. “Thank you to all transport

workers everywhere for keeping the country moving throughout this difficult year,” they wrote on a train information board before

they set off. Britain has been the hardest hit country in Europe by COVID-19, with more than 60,000 deaths.

“The Duke and Duchess are very much looking forward to shining a spotlight on the incredible work that has been done across the country throughout this difficult year,” Kensington Palace said in a statement.

Queen Victoria was the first reigning monarch to use the Royal Train in 1842, to travel from Slough to London’s Paddington station, although critics have questioned its purpose in recent years, saying it is expensive and little used. — Reuters

PARIS

Last month the hottest on record: EU

Last month was the hottest November on record as Europe basked in its highest Autumn temperatures in history, the European Union’s satellite monitoring service said on Monday.

The Copernicus Climate Change Service (C3S) analysis of surface and air temperatures found that November 2020 was 0.8C warmer than the 30-year average of 1981-2010 — more than 0.1C hotter than the previous record.

For boreal autumn (Septem-



ber-November) temperatures in Europe were 1.9C above the standard reference period, 0.4C higher than the average temperature in 2006, which was the previous warmest. — AFP

MONTREAL

Homeless camp evacuated over safety concerns

Montreal has ordered an “emergency evacuation” of a homeless camp that formed over the summer, citing safety reasons after a fire broke out.

“Following several fires and in light of a large number of dangers on the site, including a lot of flammable material,” it was determined that “the safety of the occupants is seriously threatened,” the city said in a statement.

All along the edges of Notre-Dame Street, in the east of the city, the camp — the first of its



kind in Montreal — has dozens of tents for homeless people, some of whom were thrown out of their homes because of the coronavirus pandemic. — AFP

BOGOTA

Maduro claims victory in elections

Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro has claimed a sweeping victory in parliamentary elections that were boycotted by a weakened opposition.

With more than 82 per cent of the votes counted, Maduro and his Socialist allies won just over 67 per cent, according to the Venezuelan broadcaster Telesur. Opposition parties received nearly 32 per cent.

A win for Maduro’s Socialist Party would place the country’s only opposition-controlled



government institution into his hands. The main opposition parties boycotted the elections, headed by opposition leader and parliamentary speaker Juan Guaido who entered a power struggle with Maduro in January 2019.

A mask is a must – our new reality

Everyone is back to work with full strength at the offices and it is after nine months.

In these nine months, we have had to bring in lifestyle changes from greetings to personal space. So this week is going to be all about silencing the small fears and doubts by taking practical steps.

The steps are easy and that would mean continuing to be masked and practising hand hygiene. The fear that has been placed in has to be slowly changed into having confidence in being surrounded by people. At every business door, you find, “Mask is a Must.”

Strangely there is a sense of wariness when we move about our old familiar places but the fact is life must move on. Women have eased into the fact that beauty parlours have reopened and they have gotten busy. Staycations have become a norm and staycation deals in Oman are growing. Now technically staycation can mean a holiday spent in one’s home country rather than abroad, or one spent at home and involving day trips to local attractions. This month, December, will see the peak as people get ready for the season of Christmas and New Year.

Throughout these days we have also seen that there has been tremendous growth in people exploring the homeland. It has been the ideal year for domestic tourism. It goes on



Lakshmi Kothaneth
lakshmiobserver@gmail.com

STRANGELY
THERE IS A SENSE
OF WARINESS
WHEN WE MOVE
ABOUT OUR OLD
FAMILIAR PLACES

to prove that although we have all become COVID conscious, the virus has not touched the human spirit.

It is not to say families have not faced tragedies and people struggled to breathe and oxygen, something we had been taking for granted for so long has brought in a new understanding. People in some nations waited for the oxygen cylinders and at times the cylinders never arrived due to the high demand.

In many ways, COVID-19 brought us to think of ways we can improve on our daily life and how we plan for our future. Now in our thoughts is also the vaccination. Some feel that is the only way forward while others feel they would rather just wait and watch.

Meanwhile many have found their ways to bring a set pattern to life and that is exercising regularly, practising yoga, inhalation regularly. People have become more conscious about vitamins too and what they consume as food. Most importantly we have begun to appreciate nature and that was visible in our urge to rush to the beach until they were closed.

Now with all the facilities reopened it is interesting to observe people’s reactions. The fact is if we are cautious we can keep them all, the facilities and services, open. The next few days are crucial according to health experts as we come out in full force and explore the facilities.

The hospitality industry has taken

the biggest hit in terms of loss and trying to stay afloat while going through the lockdown and the lean period during the pandemic period. It is not to say that it is all over yet as this is being written people are still battling it out in hospital rooms to bring up the oxygen saturation level and healthcare workers continue to work around the clock. There were others who were lucky to go through the isolation, follow the instructions and managed to heal at home. So at no point should we let our guard down whatever we choose to do – in outings or leisure.

We are ready to go back to life how it used to be and the best thing is to abide by what the health experts have to say as we get back to the routine. December being the month of festivities it is important to remember the protocol for the prevention of COVID-19.

But let us not forget the number of people who have lost their jobs due to the impact of COVID-19 on the economy. The challenging times, however, did bring the best in some people. Les Brown, motivational speaker, speaking about opportunities said - “When opportunity doesn’t knock on your door, build a new door.”

The most important factor in the current situation is not to lose hope and confidence. If you have done it before you can do it again and most importantly the crisis is an opportunity to do things differently.

MORE YEARS

Ghana set for close vote as rivals square off

KENT MENSAH AND LOUISE DEWAST

Ghanaians voted on Monday in an election seen as a close fight between President Nana Akufo-Addo and his longtime rival John Mahama, vying to lead the country long viewed a beacon of stability in a troubled region.

From the oceanside capital Accra to the northern city of Tamale, voters lined up at polling stations at the crack of dawn to pick a president among 12 candidates and members of parliament for 275 constituencies.

Crowds cheered and chanted “four more years!” as the incumbent of the New Patriotic Party (NPP) cast his vote in Kyebi, a town in the eastern region. “I’m feeling fine, happy that the process is going well and peacefully,” 76-year-old Akufo-Addo said.

A November survey by the University of Ghana put Akufo-Addo ahead with 51.7 per cent of support, while Ghanaian pollster Ben Ephson estimated the incumbent would garner 52.6 per cent.

His challenger Mahama, 62, of the National Democratic Congress party (NDC) was surrounded by his supporters as he voted in Bole, in the northern Savannah Region. A few polling stations opened late and long queues were seen by AFP journalists in Accra, with voters waiting for hours in the glaring sun.

But by midday, election observers had signalled no major incidents across the 38,000 polling stations, which will remain open until 17:00 GMT.

NANA AKUFO-ADDO
President

“It’s too early to make an assessment, but I understand there have been a few hitches,” Mahama said after casting his vote. “I hope that there will be no incidents and I hope that voting will go smoothly,” he added.

The duo have faced each other at the ballot box twice before. Mahama was president for four years until 2016, when his rival succeeded him. Key issues in this year’s vote include unemployment, infrastructure, education and health.

Ghana has made giant strides over the past two decades, becoming the world’s second-largest cocoa-producing country, but many still live in extreme poverty with scarce access to clean water or electricity.

Growth in the nation of 30 million people, hit hard by the coronavirus pandemic, is expected to fall this year to 0.9 per cent — its lowest in three decades — according to the International Monetary Fund.

At the Bawalshie primary school in a wealthy neighbourhood of Accra, 47-year-old businessman Ben Nikoi said he was voting for “a change of government,” adding: “I want more improvements.”

But Vida Agyakumaa, 44, who works at the forestry commission, said she was backing the incumbent.

“We don’t want change. We need (President) Nana because of free education. We want him to win.”

Akufo-Addo has been given high marks for his handling of the pandemic and his record on free education and improving access to electricity.

But he has disappointed some with his performance on tackling graft — the key issue on which he was elected four years ago. However, Mahama has found it hard to highlight this, as he himself left office under a cloud of corruption allegations.

Mahama has also been criticised for poor economic decisions and racking up unsustainable debts — a key issue that will severely affect growth and limit the next government’s spending. — AFP

FINANCIAL CRISIS

As Lebanon subsidy crunch looms, UN warns of social catastrophe

TOM PERRY

The removal of subsidies in Lebanon without guarantees to protect the vulnerable would amount to a social catastrophe, two UN agencies said on Monday, warning there is no parachute to soften the blow.

With Lebanon deep in financial crisis, the central bank has been subsidising basic goods by providing hard currency to importers at the old exchange rate of 1,500 Lebanese pounds to the dollar even as the currency fell by 80 per cent from the peg.

Central bank Governor Riad Salameh said last week the subsidies could be kept for only two more months, urging the state should come up with a plan. Though Lebanon faces the gravest crisis since the 1975-90 civil war, policymaking has been crippled by old rivalries between fractious politicians.

Saad al Hariri was nominated to form a new government in October but one has yet to be agreed. “The impact of removing price subsidies on the country’s most vulnerable households will be tremendous and yet there is almost nothing in place to help soften the fall,” the Unicef’s Lebanon country representative and the ILO’s regional director wrote in an op-ed.

“It is critical to realise that for Lebanon to fly off another cliff now,



A general view shows buildings, during a countrywide lockdown to combat the spread of coronavirus disease in Beirut, Lebanon. – Reuters

CENTRAL BANK
GOVERNOR SAID
THE SUBSIDIES
COULD BE KEPT FOR
ONLY TWO MORE
MONTHS

without first putting in place an inclusive system of social guarantees, would be to inflict a social catastrophe on the country’s most vulnerable people, sacrificing their well-being, and that of the country as a whole, for many years to come,” they wrote.

The universal way in which Lebanon has been subsidising basic goods including fuel, wheat and medicine has been widely criticised, including by senior politicians from ruling parties, because it does not target those most in need. A rough

analysis shows up to 80 per cent of the subsidies may actually be benefiting the wealthiest 50 per cent with only 20 per cent going to the poorer half, Unicef Representative Yukie Mokuo and ILO Regional Director Ruba Jaradat wrote in their op-ed.

The caretaker government is due to meet Salameh to discuss the subsidies. The World Bank has said poverty is likely to continue to worsen and engulf more than half the population by 2021.

— Reuters

HEAD OFFICE

Tel: 24649444, 24649450,
24649451, 24604563,
24699437
Fax: 24699643

SALALAH OFFICE

Tel: 23292633
Fax: 23293909

NIZWA OFFICE

Tel: 25411099
P.O. Box 955, P.C. 611

ADVERTISING

AL OMANEYA ADVERTISING &
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112, Ruwi, Sultanate of Oman
Tel: SWITCHBOARD: 24649444,
24649430/24649437/24649401
Fax: 24649434

DISTRIBUTION AGENT

AL OMANEYA for Distribution &
Marketing, P.O. Box 974, P.C. 100,
Muscat, Sultanate of Oman
Tel: 24649351/24649360
Fax: 24649379

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Sultanate of Oman

sport

- Heartbreak for super-sub Russell in Sakhir
- Russell 9th after pit-stop mix-up, puncture
- Ocon second for Renault
- Stroll takes third

PEREZ

TAKES MAIDEN F1 WIN

MANAMA: Sergio Perez took his maiden Formula One victory for Racing Point after a Mercedes pit-stop mix-up and puncture denied super-sub George Russell an almost certain first win on his debut for the world champions.

The 22-year-old Briton, parachuted in to replace Lewis Hamilton after the seven-time world champion tested positive for COVID-19, looked comfortably in control having wrestled the lead from his pole-sitting teammate at the first corner.

But a pit stop bungle, which initially dropped him to fifth, and then a puncture that struck while he was back up to second and hunting Perez down for the lead, ended his hopes. That left Perez, who found himself at the back of the field at the end of the first lap after contact with Ferrari's Charles Leclerc, free to cruise across the line 10.5 seconds clear of Renault's Esteban Ocon.

The Mexican's team-mate Lance Stroll was third giving the podium an unfamiliar feel.

"I'm speechless," said Perez, who is out of a drive after next weekend's Abu Dhabi Grand Prix and hoping to land the seat alongside Max Verstappen at Red Bull for 2021.

"I hope I'm not dreaming... ten years it took me. I don't know what to say, after the first lap, the race was gone."



Perez, who vaulted to fourth in the overall standings after Sunday's race, is the first Mexican driver to win a race since Pedro Rodriguez took victory in the 1970 Belgian Grand Prix.

It was also Silverstone-based Racing Point's first win since the 2003 Brazilian Grand Prix when the team raced as Jordan.

The 30-year-old also becomes the second first time winner this season after Pierre Gasly scored his first Formula One triumph for AlphaTauri at the Italian Grand Prix in September.

If Perez's drive from 18th to first was the stuff of fantasy, Russell's race had the makings of a nightmare.

The Briton seemed to easily have the measure of Bottas who appeared to be his only real challenger after Leclerc

and Verstappen crashed out on the opening lap.

Contact with Perez broke Leclerc's suspension while Verstappen, trying to avoid them, ran off the track and into the barriers. But hopes of a fairytale first win for the Briton, who otherwise drivers for back of the grid pits together in a 'double-stack' under the safety car. But Mercedes brought both Russell's car forcing them back into the pits a lap later. That dropped Russell behind Bottas despite a slow stop for the Finn but the 22-year-old barged past the restart for fourth.

Three laps later he was past Ocon for second and with a bold move at the pit stop for the Finn but the chasing Perez when a puncture forced him to pit for a fourth time, finally putting paid to any chance he might have had.

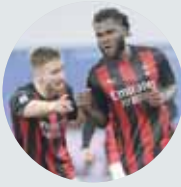
Nevertheless, voted driver of the day, he charged back through the field to score his first Formula One career points with ninth one place behind Bottas. He also took the point on offer for fastest lap.

The Briton is, however, under investigation by stewards for the tyre mix up. Bottas finished an overwhelming race in eighth.

Mercedes have already won both championships for the seventh year in a row, with Hamilton clinching his title in Turkey last month. The race was interrupted by two safety cars and one virtual safety car. — Reuters

SAKHIR GRAND PRIX RESULTS

1. Sergio Perez (MEX/Racing Point) 1hr 31min 15.114sec,
2. Esteban Ocon (FRA/Renault) at 10.518sec, 3. Lance Stroll (CAN/Racing Point) 11.869, 4. Carlos Sainz Jr (ESP/McLaren) 12.580, 5. Daniel Ricciardo (AUS/Renault) 13.330, 6. Alexander Albon (THA/Red Bull) 13.842, 7. Daniil Kvyat (RUS/AlphaTauri) 14.534, 8. Valtteri Bottas (FIN/Mercedes) 15.389, 9. George Russell (GBR/Mercedes) 18.556, 10. Lando Norris (GBR/McLaren) 19.541, 11. Pierre Gasly (FRA/AlphaTauri) 20.527, 12. Sebastian Vettel (GER/Ferrari) 22.611, 13. Antonio Giovinazzi (ITA/Alfa Romeo Racing) 24.111, 14. Kimi Raikkonen (FIN/Alfa Romeo Racing) 26.153, 15. Kevin Magnussen (DEN/Haas) 32.370



AC Milan retain safe lead, take three points

Franck Kessie and substitute Samuel Castillejo clinched AC Milan's 2-1 win at Sampdoria on Sunday and kept the Serie A front-runners five points clear of second-placed city rivals Inter Milan. Kessie converted a spot kick late into a fairly slow first half.



Green smashes century but Warner stand-ins fail

Fast-rising star Cameron Green (114 off 173 balls) plundered a century but the pair tipped to open for Australia in the first Test against India both failed in a warm-up against the tourists on Monday. Australia 'A' made 286/8 at stumps in response to India 'A' declared first innings total of 247/9.



SON, KANE COMBINE TO SINK ARSENAL

ANDY JALIL

LONDON: Tottenham are back leading the Premier League after a thoroughly efficient performance which saw their bitter rivals Arsenal go down 2-0 in defeat.

Both goals came from the combined efforts of Son Heung-Min and Harry Kane who have now combined for 31 goals, the second most of any duo in the league.

Their manager, Jose Mourinho said: "They are world-class. They work together brilliantly for each other and also for the team. We controlled the game by being defensively solid. And Sonny and Harry, their finishing was amazing." He added: "They work like animals, with all the respect to animals. I love animals, don't get me wrong, but they were working amazingly hard when they didn't

have the ball. This isn't just about scoring goals and being world-class — they are great guys and great pros who give everything for the team."

Arsenal did in fact make a good start and were not outplayed. They kept pushing forward and yet that was their undoing as they committed too many players and were caught short in defence. Spurs took advantage with counter attacking in which they were so effective. The first goal came in the 13th minute when Kane picked up a ball out from defence and sent a beautiful pass to Son who beat his man cutting inside to hit a superb curling shot from 25 yards into the far corner of the net.

Spurs defence remained solid giving little chance to the opposition. Striker Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang, terribly out of form

“
They are world-class. They work together brilliantly for each other and also for the team. We controlled the game by being defensively solid. And Sonny and Harry, their finishing was amazing

JOSE MOURINHO
Tottenham Hotspur manager

this season, did have a chance but put his header over the bar and Alex Lacazette too missed later but such chances were few and far between. On the other hand, Spurs added to their lead on the stroke of half-time just as Arsenal's Thomas

Partey, with a thigh injury, was coming off the field.

The build-up began with Giovanni Lo Celso making good ground with the ball from deep defence and passing to Son on the left. The understanding between Son and Kane is such that the South Korean knew where Kane would be and slipped a pass wide on the left for him to powerfully drive the ball in after hitting the underside of the bar. It was Kane's 11th goal against Arsenal, most by any player in the north London derby. It was also his 100th home goal for Spurs and 250th of his career for clubs and country.

While Spurs took their chances to score, Arsenal, despite having two-thirds of the possession failed to penetrate Spur's defence. Mourinho's strategy of solid defence and counter attacking keeps bringing favourable results.



Kenya's Kandie smashes half marathon world record



VALENCIA: Kenya's Kibiwott Kandie smashed the half marathon world record by 29 seconds on Sunday, becoming the first person to break 58 minutes at the Valencia Half Marathon. Kandie, who finished second at the world half marathon championships in Gdynia in October, finished the Spanish annual race in 57 minutes and 32 seconds, breaking the previous record of 58:01 set by compatriot Geoffrey Kamworor in September 2019.

"I can't believe it, I have beaten Kamworor's world record by half a minute," Kandie said.

"Today is a great day for me and also for

“
I can't believe it, I have beaten Kamworor's world record by half a minute

KIBIWOTT KANDIE
Kenyan runner

Kenya." The top four men all ran under the previous world best, with Jacob Kiplimo of Uganda finishing second in 57:37, Kenyan Rhonex Kipruto third in 57:49 and Kenyan Alexander Mutiso taking fourth place in 57:59. — Reuters

Victories for Al Rehwan, Al Jadidi, Mazoon and Danmark

MUSCAT: Jibin Kunumpurath's superb 74 off 44 powered Al Rehwan to an emphatic 6-wicket win over Spanio & VDD in a D Division T20 League game at Muscat Municipality ground 4 in Al Amerat on Friday.

An 88-run fourth wicket partnership between Sajeev Sebastian (51) and Ranjith Kumar (49) was the highlight of Spanio's robust 176 for 5. Mohammed Shanid took two wickets.

Al Rehwan overhauled the total in less than 18 overs thanks to a

splendid opening stand between Jibin Kunumpurath (74) and Purayil Puthen (50), scoring 178 for 4 for a sweet victory. Santhosh Varikkath bagged two wickets.

FEROZ GUIDES AL JADIDI

In another D Division match at Muscat Municipality ground 4, Al Jadidi Engineering and Contracting eased past Jotun CT for a 6-wicket win due largely to a magnificent 82 off 51 by Feroz Oliyath.

Al Jadidi did well to restrict Jotun to 173 for 9 despite a smashing

BRIEF SCORES

D Division: Spanio & VDD 176 for 5 in 20 overs (Sajeev Sebastian 51 - 5x4, Ranjith Kumar 49 - 5x4, Mohammed Shanid 2-33) lost to Al Rehwan 178 for 4 in 17.4 overs (Jibin Kunumpurath 74 - 15x4, Purayil Puthen 50 - 6x4, 1x6, Santhosh Varikkath 2-38) by 6 wickets.

D Division: Jotun CT 173 for 9 in 20 overs (Vineesh Raj 94 - 10x4, 4x6, Shahzad Ahmed 3-21, Gopinath Gokul 2-27) lost to Al Jadidi Engineering and Contracting 174 for 4 in 18.2 overs (Feroz Oliyath 82 - 8x4, 2x6, Rajagopal Manikandan 32 not out - 3x4, Renju Pillai 3-20) by 6 wickets.

E Division: Aflag Group CT 178 for 6 in 20 overs (Junaid Iqbal 59 - 13x4, Haris Alam 35 - 4x4, Mohammed Ali 2-37) lost to Mazoon Up 179 for 3 in 19.3 overs (Mohammed Ali 68 - 11x4, Kunnu Thaye 59 - 8x4) by 7 wickets.

E Division: Sam Royals 173 for 8 in 20 overs (Shahas Venmadathiyl 51 - 5x4, Abraham Kochumon 45 - 6x4, Mohammed Wasim 2-23, Sajeev Kathiresan 2-24) lt to Danmark CT 176 for 5 in 16.5 overs

94 off 52 by opener Vineesh Raj who struck 10 fours and 4 sixes. Shahzad Ahmed bowled well, taking 3 for 21 in his four-over spell.

Opening bat Feroz led the chase with a brilliant knock as Al Jadidi sealed an exciting win in the 19th over, scoring 174 for 4. Rajagopal

Manikandan was the next main scorer with a solid 32 not out. Renju Pillai was quite impressive, taking 3 for 20 in four overs.

ALI STEERS MAZOOON TO THRILLING WIN

A brilliant all-round show by Mohammed Ali helped Mazoon Up to a thrilling 7-wicket victory against Aflag Group in a C Division T20 League game at Muscat Municipality ground 3 on Friday.

Junaid Iqbal top-scored with a fluent 59 as Aflag scored 178 for

6. Mohammed Ali bagged two wickets.

SHANKARLAL STARS IN DANMARK VICTORY

A whirlwind 62 off only 25 balls by opener Shankarlal powered Danmark CT to a thumping 5-wicket win against Sam Royals in another C Division match at Muscat Municipality ground 4.

Royals posted 173 for 8 on the board thanks to major contributions from Shahas Vebmadathiyl (51) and Abraham Kochmon (45).



Omani athletes gearing up for busy 2021 season

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DEC 7

Oman's national athletics team in different categories are gearing up for the busy year of 2021 as many top regional and international athletics events will be organised after the postponement of many championships due to the impact of COVID-19 pandemic.

The Sultanate sprinters and athletes will take part at the 24th Asian Athletics Championships in Hangzhou in China during May, the GCC Games in Kuwait in March, Asian Beach Games in Sanya city in China, South East Asia Youth Athletics Championships in Malaysia, Asian Indoor (Athletics) in Bangkok, World Athletics Indoor championships, the Arabian Athletics championships and the Summer Olympic Games Tokyo 2020.

Mohammed al Asmi, the board member of the OAA told *Oman Daily Observer* that the technical staff of the national athletics teams are monitoring the existing domestic camps.

"The plan was to provide external camps for the sprinters and athletes. Unfortunately, due to the current situation, the association could not arrange for overseas participation. We are depending on the local warm-up camps and will move to the external meets once the situation gets stable," he said.

Al Asmi affirmed in his statement the association will have an internal gathering for all the players on January 8, 2021 where the top sprinters and potential faces will be selected for the overseas events. "Moreover, during January we will stand in the

status of each players and will do the right evaluation. The technical staff will select the top candidates and move forward with the development plan," he ended.

The national teams panel at Oman Athletics Association (OAA) is underway in different intensive domestic camps to monitor the athletes shaping to the forthcoming events. They had visited the camps in Muscat and Suhar. The training programmes began since November in Muscat and Suhar. The national experienced coach Mohammed al Hooti is supervising the national athletics team training in Suhar.

The team in Suhar comprised the top star national sprinter Barakat al Harthy, Mazoon al Alawi, Osama al Ghilani, Ammar al Sefi, Khalid al Ghilani, Mohammed al Saadi, Khamis al Hadabi and Mohammed al Mabsali. The training period was divided into two parts morning and evening sessions. The young sprinter Ali Anwar al Balushi is taking part with Muscat training team which is under supervision of Coach Fahad al Mashaikhi, Hamood al Dalhami and Ibrahim al Kharousi.

The team in Muscat comprised of the following members: Wael al Shandudi, Othman al Busaidy, Hussain Hatim, Nawaf al Izki, Yousef al Harthy, Ammar al Shibli, Sameer al Riyami, and Rashid al Asmi.

The Sultanate women athletics team is underway in the domestic training camp in Muscat as well under direct coaching of Laila Abdul Karim. The squad has Lamya al Masfari, Rima al Mughairi, Maittha al Amri and Raghad al Hajri.

England ODI series in SA postponed over mental health fears

CAPE TOWN: England's One-Day International series against South Africa has been postponed amid concerns over the mental and physical health of the players, Cricket South Africa (CSA) and the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) said in a joint statement on Monday.

The announcement comes after the players were subjected to a number of COVID-19 scares with potentially five cases inside the teams' bio-secure environment in Cape Town, with one South Africa player and two hotel staff confirmed as positive.

Two members of the England tour party also have "unconfirmed positive results"

that require further investigation, the ECB said on Sunday.

"The decision (to postpone the series) was taken jointly by the two Boards to ensure the mental and physical health and welfare of players from both teams," the statement added.

"The CSA and ECB will now work together to determine when the three-match series, which forms part of the ICC Cricket Men's Super League, can take place in the future."

The 50-over matches had been scheduled to get underway last Friday, with the final game in the series set for Wednesday. The news will be a massive financial blow to embattled Cricket South



Africa and also casts doubt on their ability to host the planned future tours, with Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Australia all set to play in the country in the coming months.

MENTAL HEALTH

"The concern over the mental health impact of recent events on all involved is not one that we as CSA or the ECB take lightly, and the decision to postpone the

tour is the most responsible and reasonable course of action for us," CSA Acting chief executive Kugandrie Govender said.

"I would like to thank the ECB for the continued positive relations, and we look forward to hosting the England men's team in the near future."

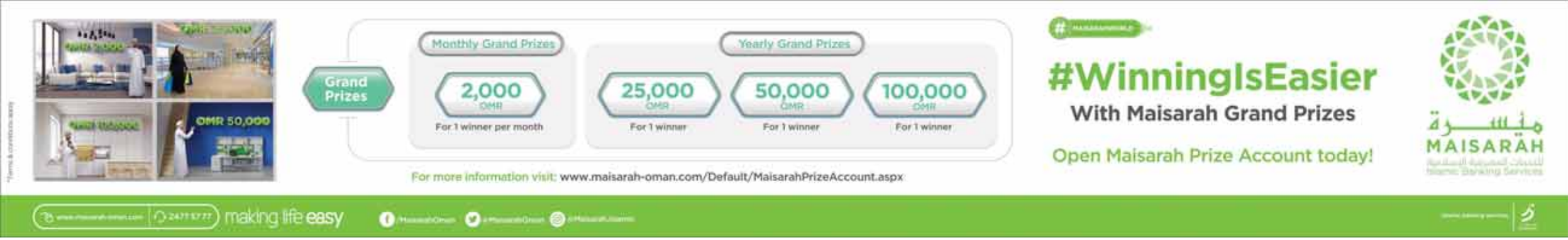
Her thoughts were echoed by ECB chief executive Tom Harrison. "We were concerned about the potential impact that recent developments might have on the well being of the touring party, and so after consultation with Cricket South Africa we have jointly made the decision to postpone the remaining matches in this Series, in the best interest

of the players' welfare," Harrison said.

Cricinfo reported on Monday that England had been accused by Western Province Cricket Association officials of having used nets not authorised within the bio-secure environment for practice at Newlands on Thursday.

But the ECB have denied any wrongdoing, saying they were given permission to use the nets and that a security cordon around them had been set up. The teams did manage to play a three-match Twenty20 series prior to the ODI games, which England won 3-0.

— Reuters



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Continued stress on achieving primary fiscal balance: CBO

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 7

A landmark strategy enshrined in the recently unveiled Medium Term Plan for Achieving Fiscal Balance will help deliver on the government's goal to reduce public debt and narrow the unsustainable chasm between national revenues and expenditure trends, according to the Central Bank of Oman (CBO).

"The government is committed to achieving primary fiscal balance in the medium term while also strengthening its institutional and governance structures and enhancing its operational capacity to ensure effective planning and timely implementation of its fiscal policy over the medium term," the apex bank stated in its 2019 Annual Report issued here on Monday.

The National Programme for Fiscal Balance (Tawazun), constituted in September 2019, is working out a medium-term fiscal consolidation plan, the report said.

"Tawazun works in concert with the Ministry of Finance to assess the challenges and opportunities the government faces over the medium term. Tawazun has been empowered by the Government through



fast-tracked decision-making processes and reports directly to His Majesty; it has also been granted unrestricted access to any required data and information from any government entity as well as its full integration into the preparation and formulation of future state budgets," it stated.

Despite efforts to push expenditure rationalisation during 2019, the fiscal position continued to reflect the evolving conditions in the economy.

Notwithstanding a substantial decline, the fiscal deficit remained elevated due to lower oil prices and expenditure rationalisation constrained by socio-economic priorities and higher proportion share of committed expenditure (such as wages, pensions, interest payments, and so on).

In response to the challenges posed by the economic downturn and the pandemic, the government implemented urgent fiscal measures such as a cut in

the budgeted expenditure by a minimum of 10 per cent across ministries/departments as well as a reduction in spending of state-owned enterprises (SOEs), according to the Central Bank.

The recovery in oil prices from the plunge, on the back of extension of Opec+ agreement on production cut coupled with a resumption of some economic activities globally, would also provide some fiscal support during 2020.

Nevertheless, the fiscal position remained under stress in 2019 despite continued expenditure rationalisation and some boost in non-hydrocarbon revenues. The hydrocarbon revenues (Oil & Gas) declined reflecting lower oil prices as well as crude production, while non-hydrocarbon revenues got a fillip mainly due to the improvement in the 'income tax on companies and establishments' at the same rate of 15 per cent of profits and 'fees on licenses' items, and so on, implemented in the last few years and the diversification of the economy gaining traction.

The budget deficit improved marginally during 2019 reflecting a spur in non-hydrocarbon revenues and cut in expenditure, despite hydrocarbon revenues witnessing a decline.

Notwithstanding non-hydrocarbon economic activities contracting marginally, non-hydrocarbon revenues increased reflecting improved compliance and measures undertaken to boost non-hydrocarbon revenues such as the introduction of excise tax. Along with improved tax compliance, the upcoming tax reforms, including implementation of Value Added Tax (VAT), would step up the tax buoyancy and decrease

the reliance on hydrocarbon revenues, it noted.

According to the CBO, the government's continued focus on diversification away from the hydrocarbon sector will also bolster the contribution of the nonhydrocarbon sector to government revenues.

The government revenues outperformed the budget estimates by 4.8 per cent and as a percentage of GDP increased marginally to 36.2 per cent in 2019. The non-hydrocarbon revenues as a percentage of non-hydrocarbon GDP inched up to 12.7 per cent in 2019 from 11.5 per cent in 2018. The contribution of non-hydrocarbon revenues in total government revenues increased from 40.3 per cent in 2018 to 42.4 per cent in 2019.

Although the share of hydrocarbon revenues in total government revenues declined in 2019, the completion of the second phase of the Khazzan project by 2021 would further boost hydrocarbon revenues, it said.

Total government expenditure declined on account of both current and capital spending, although participation and other expenses increased considerably.

TURN TO PAGE 14

Remittances from Oman slump to lowest in five years

CONRAD PRABHU
@conradprabhu

Remittances by expatriate workers in the Sultanate fell 8.3 per cent to RO 3.512 billion in 2019, mirroring the ongoing downturn that has gripped the Omani and the wider global economy.

According to the Central Bank of Oman (CBO), outflows in the form of remittances were the lowest in nearly five years.

However, 2020 is on track to hit a new low in remittance outflows following the departure of record numbers of expatriates hit by the economic crunch compounded by the pandemic.

"The current transfers (workers' remittances) fell significantly reflecting a decline in expatriate workers following Omanisation policies and the slowdown in some economic activities," the apex bank noted in its 2019 Annual Report issued on Monday.

Remittances have been on the downtrend since 2015 when it



hit an all-time high of RO 4.226 billion – a level the CBO had warned would add to the "leakage of savings in the form of current transfers".

Outflows have been steadily on the decline since then.

It declined to RO 3.965 billion in 2016, falling further to RO 3.774 billion a year later. In 2018, remittances climbed somewhat to RO 3.829 billion before slumping to RO 3.512 billion last year.

More than 400,000 expatriate workers and their dependents have exited the Sultanate over the first 10 months of this year (versus corresponding figures for 2019) in the wake of the economic slowdown triggered by low international oil prices and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Stand-off puts EU-UK trade agreement on a knife edge

BRUSSELS/LONDON: Post-Brexit trade talks hung in the balance on Monday as Britain and the European Union made a last-ditch attempt to bridge significant differences and reach a deal that would avoid a disorderly exit in just 24 days.

With growing fears of "no-deal" chaos after the United Kingdom finally leaves the EU's orbit on December 31, talks will resume in Brussels before British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen review the situation on Monday evening. Irish Prime Minister Micheal Martin said on Sunday the chances of a deal were 50-50.

Investment bank J P Morgan said odds of a no-trade deal exit had risen to one third from 20 per cent. The British pound tumbled on concerns that there would be no agreement covering annual trade worth nearly \$1 trillion.

EU chief negotiator Michel Barnier was "rather downbeat as to the prospects of agreement" when he spoke to national envoys



Belgium Foreign minister Sophie Wilmes (L) speaks with her Spanish counterpart Arancha Gonzalez Laya ahead of a meeting of EU's permanent representatives committee in Brussels. – AFP

over orange juice and pastries in Brussels on Monday morning, according to one diplomat who took part in the meeting. "EU-UK negotiations have entered the endgame, time is running out quickly," another EU diplomat said.

"It is for the UK to chose

between... a positive outcome or a no-deal outcome." In London, a lawmaker in Johnson's governing Conservative Party said France would have to make concessions on fishing, and the EU would have to drop what he said were new demands on fair competition known as the level playing field.

Irish Foreign Minister Simon Coveney told RTE News: "I'd like to be giving more positive news but at the moment these negotiations seem stalled, and the barriers to progress are still very much in place."

Britain, which joined the EU in 1973, formally left the bloc on January 31 but has been in a transition period since then under which rules on trade, travel and business remain unchanged.

For weeks, the two sides have been haggling - as yet without a result - over fishing rights in British waters, ensuring fair competition for companies and ways to solve future disputes.

The Sun newspaper reported that Johnson, was ready to pull out of the talks within hours unless the EU changed its demands.

Failure to secure a deal would clog borders, upset financial markets and disrupt delicate supply chains across Europe and beyond as the world tries to cope with the vast economic cost of the COVID-19 pandemic.

— Reuters/AFP

Pandemic leads to output loss in 2020: CBO

BUSINESS REPORTER

MUSCAT, DEC 7

The Omani economy witnessed a widespread contraction during 2019 on the back of lower oil prices and increased uncertainty due to a slowdown in global economic activities.

Despite Opec+ extending the production cut agreement, oil prices remained under pressure in 2019 and stood lower than those of the preceding year, the Central Bank of Oman noted in its newly published 2019 annual report.

The government, however, continued to pursue reforms to reinstate macroeconomic stability in the Sultanate. Consequently, fiscal and current accounts recorded some improvements during the year. While the Omani economy was already facing some pressure, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 inflicted dual shock of lockdown and a steep fall in oil prices, causing significant economic losses, it said.

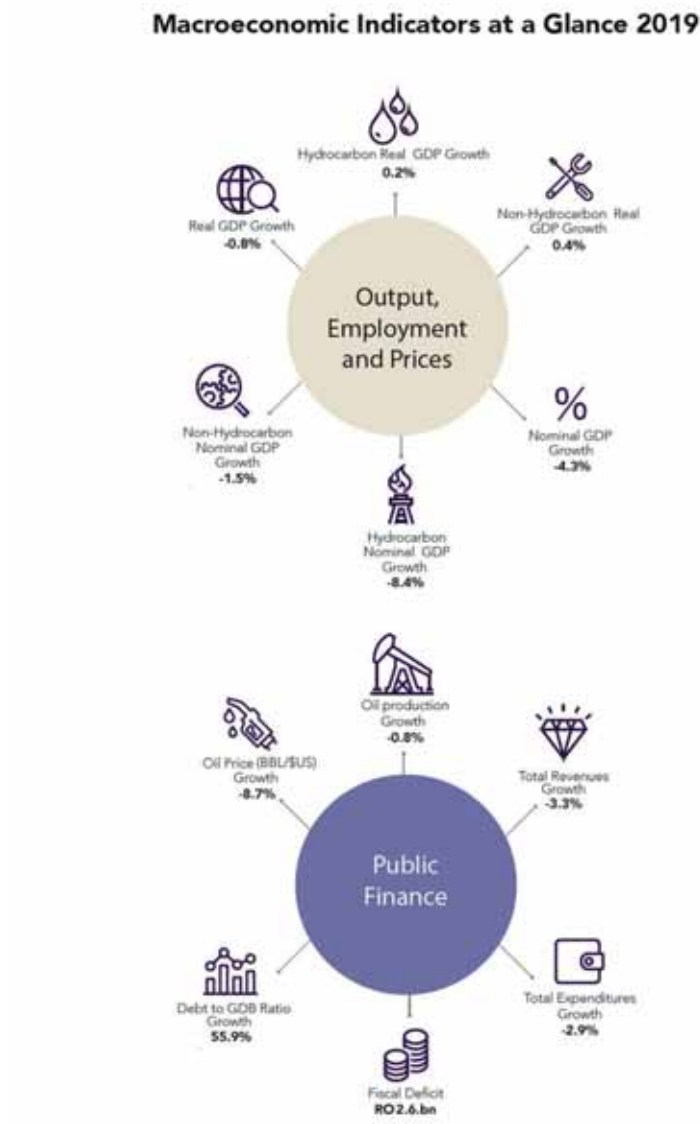
Macroeconomic conditions witnessed mixed trends in terms of various indicators during 2019. The economic slowdown in Oman was in line with the weakened momentum in the global economy. While the Omani economy experienced a contraction in nominal terms, the dual shock of the COVID-19 pandemic and a steep plunge in oil prices exacerbated economic vulnerabilities during 2020, it said.

“The near standstill of economic activities during the lockdown and requirement of social distancing after gradual opening up of the economy led to output loss during 2020,” it stated.

Nevertheless, the government continued to engage proactively and implement policy measures to improve the business environment and boost private sector led growth in the Omani economy, the Central Bank said.

The public policy is also striving to reinstate sustainable macroeconomic balance with policies aimed at boosting the participation of foreign investors and private sector in the economy, it stated.

Significantly, the Omani economy contracted by 4.3 per



cent in nominal terms during 2019 as compared to a nominal growth of 12.3 per cent in 2018, mainly led by a significant decline of 8.4 per cent in the hydrocarbon sector. The Omani oil price declined by 8.8 per cent to \$63.6 per barrel in 2019, while oil production dropped by 0.8 per cent during the year. The non-hydrocarbon sector shrank by a marginal 1.5 per cent in 2019, reflecting an environment of uncertainty, low external demand, and fiscal consolidation.

The manufacturing construction, wholesale and retail trade, and public administration and defence sectors primarily propelled the contraction in the non-hydrocarbon sector. But the agriculture and fisheries and financial intermediation real estate and business activities sectors grew and provided support to the non-hydrocarbon sector, it said.

Oman's real GDP at constant prices (Base year: 2010) also contracted by 0.8 per cent during 2019 compared to an expansion of 0.9 per cent in 2018, the report

said.

The downturn in the services sector was the main driver of contraction in real GDP during 2019, as all other major sectors witnessed a growth.

Several factors including economic and political, conditioned the performance of the international oil market during 2019, the Central Bank noted. “Although the Opec+ agreement helped in reducing sharp fluctuations, Brent price averaged \$64 per barrel in 2019, \$7/b lower than its 2018 average, reflecting reduced global demand. Oman exported 87.6 per cent of crude oil production in 2019, with China remaining as top destination. Oman's natural gas production registered a marginal increase of 1.1 per cent in 2019,” it stated.

GROSS CAPITAL FORMATION

Investment activities remained sluggish in 2019, though the pace of contraction moderated compared to the previous two years. Gross capital formation (GCF) declined by 4.0 per cent

during 2019 as against 4.2 per cent during the preceding year. The GFC to GDP ratio at 23.3 per cent in 2019 was marginally higher than 23.2 per cent in 2018.

The gross domestic savings to GDP ratio declined by 3.3 percentage points to 34.8 per cent during 2019, while gross national savings to GDP ratio declined by 4.2 percentage points to 14.5 per cent due to increased outflows of savings from the country. The investment savings gap remained large, indicating a continued requirement of external savings to finance domestic investment.

Despite economic challenges, the government has been actively providing employment opportunities to Omani nationals and expatriates over the years. However, overall employment in Oman declined by 2.6 per cent during 2019 as compared to a decline of 2.2 per cent in 2018.

The employment in the public sector decreased by 0.7 per cent in 2019, while that in the private sector dropped by 3.1 per cent. There has been an increase in the number of Omani nationals being employed in the private sector over the last few years and during 2019 as the employment of Omanis in the private sector increased by 4.0 per cent.

In order to address the unemployment problem, the government has recently set up the National Center for Employment (NCE) by merging a number of government entities and sub-entities with the mandate of providing employment to Omanis.

CURRENCY PEG

Due to the Sultanate's currency peg, open capital account and high dependence on imports of goods and services, imported inflation remains a dominating factor in domestic inflation, according to the CBO. The average consumer inflation in Oman decelerated to 0.1 per cent in 2019 from 0.9 per cent in the preceding year, in line with the trends prevailing in advanced countries.

“A combination of subdued domestic demand and lower pressure from the supply side led to benign inflationary conditions in the Sultanate. Import prices index, encompassing the impact

THE DOWNTURN IN THE SERVICES SECTOR WAS THE MAIN DRIVER OF CONTRACTION IN REAL GDP DURING 2019, AS ALL OTHER MAJOR SECTORS WITNESSED A GROWTH



of relative inflation, international commodity prices and changes in the NEER, dropped by 18.2 per cent,” the apex bank stated.

The fiscal position improved marginally during 2019 reflecting a spur in non-hydrocarbon revenues and cut in expenditure, despite hydrocarbon revenues witnessing a decline. Hydrocarbon revenues declined, reflecting lower oil prices as well as lower crude production, while non-hydrocarbon revenues got a boost due to the reform measures.

FISCAL CONSOLIDATION

The government continued to push expenditure rationalisation, showing strong resolve to achieve fiscal consolidation. During 2019, the government expenditure declined on account of both current and capital spending, although participation and other expenses increased considerably.

“Despite a decline in expenditure, the fiscal deficit declined marginally to RO 2,623 million in 2019 from RO 2,650 million in 2018. Furthermore, the National Programme for

Fiscal Balance (Tawazun) is working out a medium-term fiscal consolidation plan,” the apex bank noted.

The 2020 budget assumed an average oil price at \$58 per barrel and projected fiscal deficit at RO 2,500 million (lower by 4.7 per cent over actual in 2019). However, the dual shock of the COVID-19 pandemic and plunge in oil prices undermined various assumptions significantly with serious fiscal implications for the 2020 budget.

“Hence, the 2020 fiscal year will have to deal with even more overwhelming challenges. The government debt further burgeoned and stood at RO 16.4 billion at the end of 2019. The government debt to GDP ratio also increased to 55.9 per cent in 2019. Furthermore, as government has been raising the major part of the debt through external borrowings to avoid crowding out, the government's external debt constituted 79.3 per cent of the total government debt in 2019.”

■ FROM PAGE 13

Continued stress on achieving primary fiscal balance: CBO

The higher expenditure on participation and other expenses was necessitated by socio-economic compulsions. In terms of composition, the current expenditure constituted the highest share of 72.0 per cent in total expenditure during 2019, almost the same as last year's.

The share of investment expenditure decreased, while that of participation and other expenses increased.

Despite witnessing a decline, total government expenditure as a percentage of GDP increased marginally to 45.0 per cent in 2019, reflecting a higher drop in the denominator.

On the other hand, the ratio of non-hydrocarbon expenditure to the non-hydrocarbon GDP, after a steady and steep decline over the last few years, rose to about

The fiscal deficit as a percentage of GDP, however, inched up marginally to 9.0 per cent in 2019 from 8.7 per cent in 2018

60.0 per cent and remained at the same level in 2019, suggesting expenditure rationalisation constraint.

“Despite a decline in expenditure, the overall fiscal balance improved marginally with deficit lowering to RO 2,623 million in 2019 from RO 2,650 million in 2018.

The fiscal deficit as a percentage of GDP, however, inched up marginally to 9.0 per cent in 2019 from 8.7 per cent in 2018. Although the non-hydrocarbon

fiscal deficit declined by RO 288 million to RO 8,875 million in 2019, it remained at an elevated level.

The elevated non-hydrocarbon fiscal deficit also reflects in the fiscal break-even oil price persisting at a higher level, especially given the hydrocarbon production constraint.

“In view of the above, it becomes imperative that fiscal consolidation strategy should target reducing the non-hydrocarbon fiscal deficit over the medium term through a sustainable cut in non-development expenditure and boosting non-hydrocarbon revenues.

“The reduction in fiscal deficit is also critical to reduce the current account deficit and reinstate macroeconomic balance,” it added.

BANK MUSCAT HOSTS NAJAH TALK ON STRENGTHENING MICRO AND SMALL BUSINESSES



Ishaq al Shariyani Abdullah al Jufaili

Bank Muscat's Retail Enterprises Unit (Najahi) recently hosted the well-known entrepreneurial adviser and CEO of Eghnaa Centre, Ishaq Hilal al Shariyani.

He has been a member of the National Youth Committee as well as a member of the Committee for SMEs at the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry. The Eghnaa Center specialises in training and qualifying entrepreneurs so that they can build their skills and business capabilities.

PRESS RELEASE



NISSAN OMAN'S 'HAPPY WEDNESDAY' SCHEME EXTENDS SPECIAL BENEFITS

Nissan Oman, from the house of Suhail Bahwan Automobiles (SBA), has announced an after-sales service scheme 'Happy Wednesday' during which Nissan customers can avail attractive discounts and special offers.

As part of the 'Happy Wednesday' scheme five customers will get the next upcoming 10,000 Kms Periodic Maintenance Service absolutely free. All service appointment customers are eligible for this draw.

The raffle draw will be held at 10 am on January 4, 2021 at SBA Service Centre Al Athaiba.

OAB ANNOUNCES WINNERS OF OCTOBER HASAAD SAVINGS DRAW



Oman Arab Bank (OAB) has announced the names of the 131 winners of its monthly Hasaad Savings Scheme for October.

This included 94 winners of the monthly branch draws of RO 1,000 each, ten winners of the Children's Account draw (RO 100 each), twenty winners of the Youth Account draw (RO 100 each), five winners of RO 500 of the Bank's Salary Transfer draw and two winners of RO 10,000 of the Elite draw from the Al Dhahirah and Muscat branches.

In brief

ITALY



ENI TO SPEED UP
RENEWABLES DRIVE
IN EUROPE, US

Italy's Eni will expand its renewable energy in Europe, the US and the Pacific by developing its own projects and making small acquisitions, the group's clean energy head said.

Eni, which currently has a renewable energy capacity of only 350 megawatts, has pledged to reach 15 gigawatts by 2030 and 55 GW by 2050 - mainly by building its own capacity.

"We're virtually starting from scratch so we'll need a lot of greenfield development along with some small M&A to get to our 2030 target," Massimo Mondazzi told Reuters.

"You'll see new projects coming through in the months to come."

FRANCE



FRANCE TO LAUNCH
WINDFARM OFF
NORMANDY COAST

France has identified a zone off the coast of Normandy for the construction of a 1 Gigawatt (GW) windfarm and launched the tender process for its development, Environment Minister Barbara Pompili said.

The planned windfarm will be located 32 km off the shore of Cotentin and generate the electricity needed to power 800,000 homes, Pompili said in a statement.

It will be France's eighth offshore wind farm.

The government's current multi-year energy plan targets tenders for wind farms to generate a combined 2.5 to 3 GW by 2024.

LONDON



GLENCORE BOSS
GLASENBERG TO
STEP DOWN

Glencore boss Ivan Glasenberg is to step down next year and Gary Nagle, head of coal assets at the mining and trading group, will become the new CEO.

Glasenberg's departure will mark a shift to a new, younger leadership for the business, which, along with other mining companies, has faced increasing pressure from investors to cut carbon emissions.

Glasenberg, 63, has been chief executive since 2002 and investors have been expecting a succession plan after several senior members of management retired in the last few years.

Glasenberg, who turns 64 in January, signalled the succession a year ago, telling investors he did not want to be an "old guy" running the company.

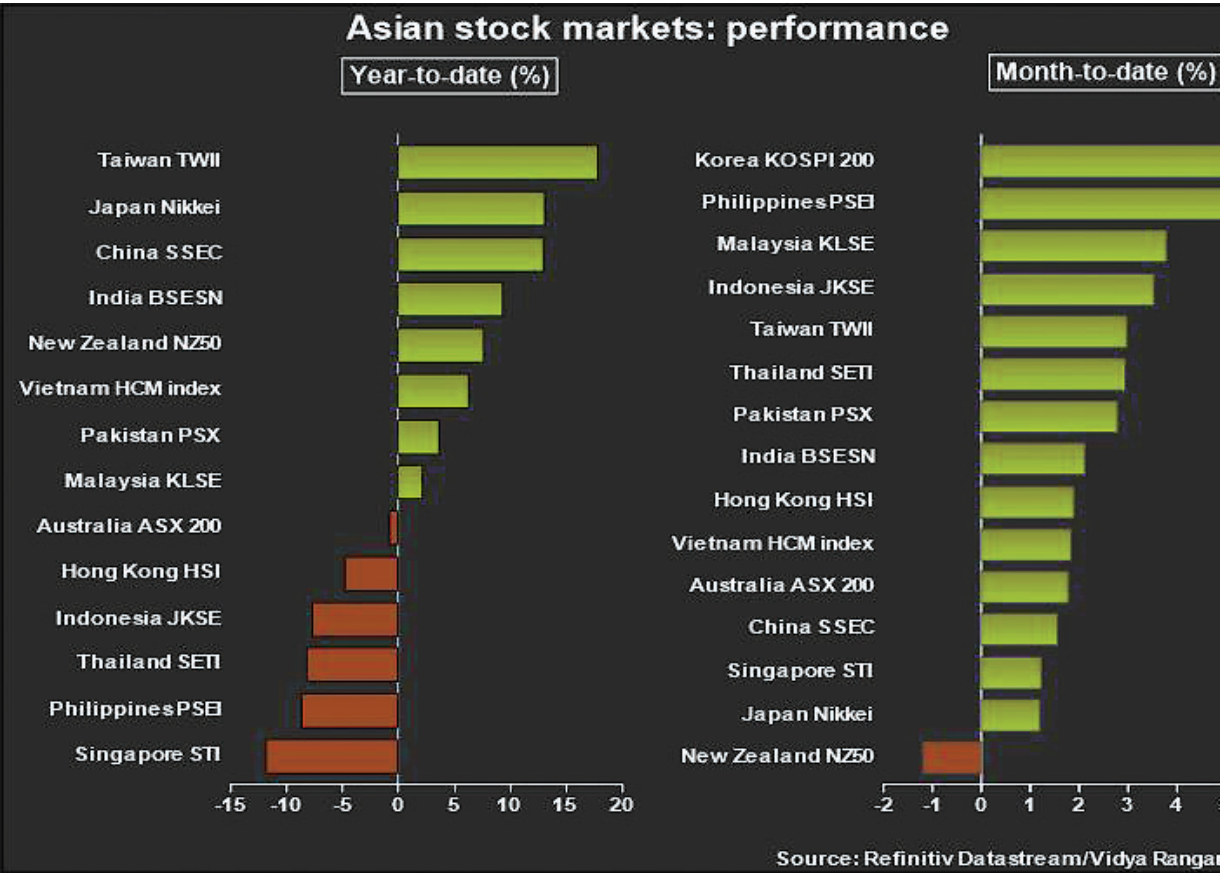
Asian shares slip from all-time
highs; oil falls on virus case surge

SYDNEY: Asian shares retreated from a record peak on Monday after a Reuters report the United States was preparing to impose sanctions on some Chinese officials highlighted geopolitical tensions, while oil prices fell on surging virus cases.

MSCI's broadest index of Asia-Pacific shares outside Japan fell 0.3 per cent following four straight sessions of gains. It is still up about 16% so far this year, the best since a 33 per cent jump in 2017. China's blue-chip index dropped 0.8 per cent, largely ignoring strong export data, while Hong Kong's Hang Seng was down 1.8 per cent.

Japan's Nikkei declined 0.4% while Australian shares were up 0.4 per cent. E-Mini futures for the S&P 500 were down 0.2 per cent after starting higher.

The sell-off began after Reuters exclusively reported, citing sources, that the United States was preparing sanctions on at least a dozen Chinese officials over their alleged role in Beijing's disqualification of elected opposition legislators in Hong Kong. The move comes as President Donald Trump's



administration keeps up pressure on Beijing in his final weeks in office.

"One thing that the market has been concerned about is that on his 'Out of office' Trump would look for some retribution on China. So this news speaks to that fear," said

Kyle Rodda, market strategist at IG Markets in Melbourne.

"At the end of the day, the market knows he only has six weeks left. The broader focus is still on vaccine roll-outs and US fiscal stimulus."

Asian markets had initially

started higher on hopes of a faster global recovery as coronavirus vaccines get rolled out, starting this week in Britain. US authorities will also this week discuss the programme before the expected first round of vaccinations this month. — AFP

German car sales jump nearly 10pc

BERLIN: Booming car sales drove a stronger-than-expected jump in German industrial output in October, in a further sign that the export-oriented manufacturing sector helped Europe's largest economy to get off to a solid start in the fourth quarter.

The German government has unleashed an unprecedented array of rescue and stimulus measures to help companies and consumers get through the COVID-19 pandemic as unscathed as possible, including incentives to buy electric and hybrid cars. Industrial output was up by 3.2 per cent on the month

after an upwardly revised increase of 2.3 per cent in the previous month, figures released by the Federal Statistics Office showed on Monday.

That was the biggest increase since June and easily beat a Reuters forecast for a rise of 1.6 per cent. Compared to February, the month before the COVID-19 pandemic reached Germany, industrial output was down by roughly 5 per cent, the office said.

In the car industry, Germany's biggest industrial sector, production rose by nearly 10 per cent on the month but was still roughly 6% below pre-pandemic

levels. "Industry had a very good start into the final quarter of 2020.

It's an extraordinarily strong increase," VP Bank economist Thomas Gitzel said.

The surprisingly bullish output figures chimed with data released on Friday that showed industrial orders rose more than expected on the month. Sentiment surveys and high-frequency data such as truck toll mileage have also pointed to relatively strong manufacturing activity in November despite a partial lockdown imposed to slow a second wave of coronavirus infections. — Reuters

Ex-HK lawmaker: some
bank accounts unfrozen



Former pro-democracy lawmaker Ted Hui Chi-fung appears outside West Kowloon Magistrates' Courts in Hong Kong. — Reuters

HONG KONG: Former Hong Kong democracy lawmaker and activist Ted Hui, who fled to Britain after facing criminal charges, said some of his bank accounts had been unfrozen and he had moved funds swiftly from HSBC, adding he no longer trusted the global bank.

Hui, who faces charges linked to anti-government demonstrations in the Chinese-ruled city last year, said on Sunday his Hong Kong bank accounts had been frozen after he left the city to seek exile in Britain with his family to continue his pro-democracy activities. "Due to complete distrust of HSBC in Hong Kong, my family has immediately transferred their savings to some safe places," Hui said on his Facebook page.

HSBC did not immediately respond to requests for comment. Hui, who was one of several opposition lawmakers who quit the Legislative Council last month in protest at the dismissal of four colleagues in what they called another push by Beijing to suppress democracy in the city, urged Hong Kong and international financial regulators to investigate his case.

China's exports
skyrocketed in
November

BEIJING: China's exports grew 21.1 per cent year-on-year in November while imports rose 4.5 per cent, as the Asian economy has largely recovered after the coronavirus crisis, customs data showed on Monday.

Altogether, China's foreign trade rose 13.6 per cent in November, with the trade surplus jumping 102.9 per cent, to \$75.4 billion. Chinese factories are humming along as Beijing has managed to contain the virus outbreak, which is still ravaging other parts of the world.

After reopening for business in March, Chinese manufacturers have benefitted from loans to help cope with the pandemic. China is also exporting a lot of the masks and medical equipment needed around the world, as well as consumer electronics sought by families who are isolating in their homes. In the first 11 months of the year, China's exports rose 2.5 per cent, while imports dropped 1.6 per cent. — dpa

Children in Brazil found
working for delivery apps

RIO DE JANEIRO: Cases of children working for food delivery apps in Brazil during the COVID-19 pandemic have been uncovered by the Thomson Reuters Foundation, with prosecutors vowing to investigate amid growing scrutiny of employment practices in the gig economy.

Videos and posts on YouTube and Facebook and interviews with underage workers and researchers showed how Rappi, iFood, 99Food and Uber Eats had failed to stop child labour, with under-18s using older relatives' accounts or signing up under their names.

School closures and job losses caused by the pandemic have driven more children to work in the informal economy, according to activists. A United Nations survey in Sao Paulo of about 52,745 families found child labour rose by 26 per cent from May to July.

A bicycle and a smartphone are all that are needed for children



to tap into the growing demand for food deliveries, while social media sites are awash with advice on how to sign up and work while circumventing the delivery apps' identity checks.

Brazil's top prosecutor on child labour, Ana Maria Villa Real, said the issue was "very serious" and officials planned to launch a rare investigation into underage delivery app workers.

In response to the findings, the four named delivery apps voiced their opposition to child

labour and outlined measures to identify fraudulent accounts. The companies said that children using other people's details to sign up amounted to fraud.

Uber Eats, a unit of ride-hailing app Uber Technologies, said it had deleted several accounts, notified authorities and would work with them to probe potential fraud.

99Food, controlled by China's Didi Chuxing Technology Co Ltd, said it was reviewing the documentation of its workforce. — Thomson Reuters Foundation

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features

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The reason why I love cooking?

Muath al Badi is an Omani chef who took it upon himself to explain Omani recipes to his followers on social media in simple yet amusing ways. Not only a career, he considers cooking as an art and promulgate the many different ways to do them. With the right imagination, for him cooking has an endless possibilities... **P18**

INSIDE STORIES

HUMAN INTEREST



TURKS BRISTLE AT BOTCHED HERITAGE RENOVATIONS

With sloppy restoration work and damaged or disfigured historical monuments, experts say a race for profits, ideological considerations and favouritism are leaving sensitive upkeep of cultural heritage by the wayside in Turkey... **Story on Page 20**

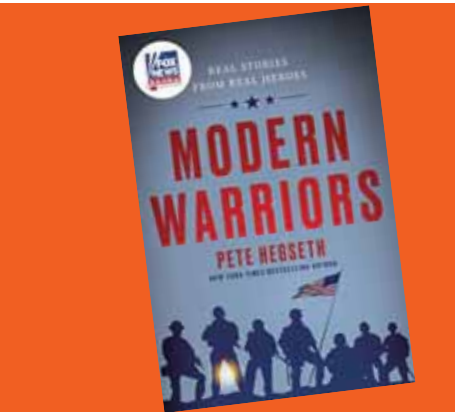
CONSERVATION



ENVIRONMENT SOCIETY OF OMAN CELEBRATES BAN OF DRUG POISONOUS TO VULTURES AND EAGLES

In line with the Sultanate's efforts to protect Oman's natural heritage, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources has banned the use of diclofenac in veterinary care, a move welcomed by the Environment Society of Oman (ESO)... **Story on Page 19**

READ



MODERN WARRIORS BY PETE HEGSETH

The Fox News host and former combat veteran interviews soldiers about the different kinds of battles they encountered.

ENTERTAINMENT



THE FIRST VIRTUAL SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL: HOW WILL IT WORK?

The Sundance Film Festival has unveiled what its first largely virtual edition will look like in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Organisers released the broad strokes for a shortened festival... **Story on Page 19**

CELEBRATE



FOOD SERVICE SAFETY MONTH

Food Service Safety Month is observed in December, and while it focuses on keeping food prepared in the service industry safe, it also serves to remind us at home to ensure we are doing the right things to make sure what we eat stays free of risks.



The reason why I love cooking?

BY MAI AL ABRI

It's an art because it can be done in several ways. The possibilities are endless. You can use your imagination and creativity, play with the ingredients and innovate. It's also like creating a masterpiece. This is what Muath al Badi thinks of cooking. An emerging Omani chef who took it upon himself to explain Omani recipes to his followers in social media in a simple amusing way.

Unlike many of the chefs who cut corners, Muath decided to do things his way. The way he is talking about resembles his daily life.

"You get closer to people when you are not acting and being your genuine self. People get drawn to you when you show the real you without pretending to be someone else. The Omani dialects are varied and you can easily tell where I am from by the time you listen to how I talk. Someone who is always proud of his origin will always speak the accent and also use the Omani products, ingredients and botanicals around him," Muath shared.

Muath said, "When you're cooking you get to choose what you make and what goes into each dish. You also get to choose the quality of the ingredients. The Omani ingredients and products are also of high quality. When cooking, I like to support the Omani

product and sometimes products from the Gulf countries."

"It is who you are that makes you different. The Omani experience, products and botanicals are extremely trusted in the field of cooking. I want to encourage Omanis and others to trust the Omani product and consider it a priority," he advocated.

"I concentrate on the Omani traditional recipes. I would like to spread them to the whole world. 70% of my Instagram page (@m3lath) focuses on Omani meals and sometimes I give international recipes but I add the Omani touch," he said. "Cooking is my passion. I started to learn some basic recipes when I was around 10 years old, mostly by helping my mother in the kitchen. I remember asking her about all the details and the love for cooking grew up with me. I was given little tasks such as peeling the vegetables, slicing the ingredients and sometimes washing the dishes. I also enjoyed watching cooking shows on local TV," he recollected. While others think of it as a dreadful chore that only fits those with culinary skills, Muath vehemently disagrees.

"It is easy to learn and to love! As men, we sometimes think out of the box on the ways of execution and the additions we put in each dish but I still believe that the woman is the original teacher of everything in life, not only cooking," he said.

"I adore losing myself in the rituals of chopping, stirring and tasting. I forget myself when I start preparing a dish. Cooking always allowed me to show my creative side, to please people, and create something complex out of simple ingredients, although I try to make it simple all the time. I love to add flavours and this is what makes it different", he said.





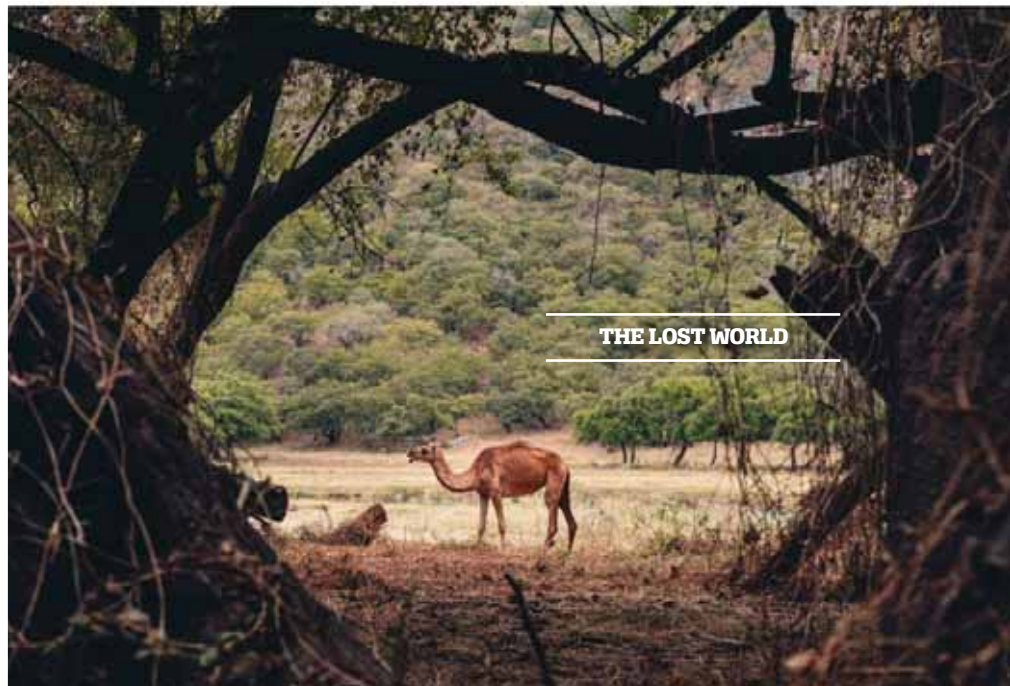
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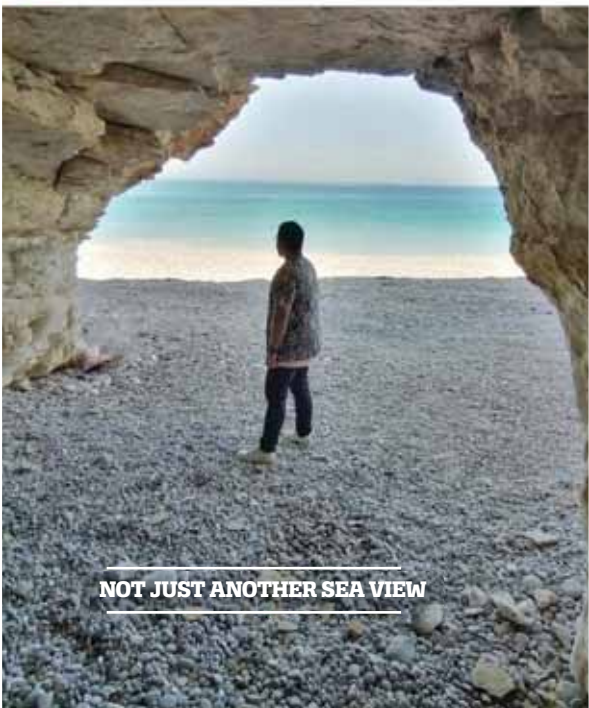
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CONSERVATION

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Environment Society of Oman celebrates ban of drug poisonous to vultures and eagles



In line with the Sultanate's efforts to protect Oman's natural heritage, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources has banned the use of diclofenac in veterinary care, a move welcomed by the Environment Society of Oman (ESO).

Given to domestic livestock to reduce inflammation and relieve pain, the drug is extremely poisonous to many species of raptor, particularly vultures and eagles. Issued by Ministerial decree No 81/2020 to show the country's commitment to the conservation of endangered animals like vultures and other birds of prey.

Dr Yahya al Maawali, Assistant Director-General of Animal Wealth at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, said, "Based on the overwhelming evidence that diclofenac is fatally poisonous to birds of prey, and the availability of safe alternatives, we decided to prohibit its use in veterinary care. We join a number of other countries, including Pakistan, India, Iran and Bangladesh, who have banned the import and uses of the drug due to its toxicity to vultures and eagles. By moving fast, it means that Oman has not had to face the consequences as other countries have."

The Sultanate is a stronghold for around 39 species of raptors whose declining populations are a cause for concern, including the Egyptian Vulture, Steppe Eagle, Lappet-faced Vulture, Golden Eagle, Sooty Falcon, Eastern

Imperial Eagle and Greater Spotted Eagle. Several of these are listed as endangered or vulnerable on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species, with vultures being among the most critical.

The reasons vultures are so widely threatened are numerous and include intentional and unintentional poisoning and electrocution on energy infrastructure, among others.

Unintentional poisoning can happen through poisoned baits, which aim to kill some invasive species and carnivores, or through secondary poisoning by veterinary drugs. Some veterinary drugs that are poisonous to raptors are known as Non-steroidal Anti-inflammatory Drugs (NSAIDs). Diclofenac is an NSAID used on domestic livestock, and has been used in Oman.

"This drug is the main cause of the collapse of at least three species of vulture in South Asia (over 90% of the population), particularly in India, over the last 25 years, where vultures that have fed on carcasses of animals treated with diclofenac have died. Diclofenac causes kidney failure in vultures, and has resulted in the collapse of populations. It, and other NSAIDs are also poisonous to other raptors, including globally endangered Steppe eagles that winter in Oman in large numbers." Dr Andrew Spalton, ESO Board Member, said, "As we continue to focus on ensuring their survival, the support of the

government is crucial and we are extremely grateful to them for this decision."

Dr Michael McGrady, Director of International Avian Research, also commented, "We commend the decision by Oman's Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, whose action could interrupt the potential damage such contaminants could cause in Oman's raptor populations. As nature's waste managers, avian scavengers provide no-cost disposal of biological waste, which can be a vector for diseases and can encourage the population expansion of other scavengers that can carry rabies. Scavenging birds benefit humans by providing this valuable ecosystem service, so conserving them is in our own best interest. Until now scavenging birds have enjoyed a relatively healthy conservation status in Oman, but efforts like this are crucial to keeping it this way. This is a great conservation success story."

ESO has been active in the research and conservation of Oman's raptors since 2012, including conducting field surveys, tagging, satellite tracking and initiating outreach activities. Most recently it released 'Raptors of Oman', a free online information booklet that engages the public and bolsters Oman's conservation commitment to the important raptors that live here seasonally or year-round.

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

ENTERTAINMENT

The first virtual Sundance Film Festival: How will it work?



THE SUNDANCE Film Festival has unveiled what its first largely virtual edition will look like in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Organisers released the broad strokes for a shortened festival, set to run January 28 through February 3.

With programming details to be announced at a later date, next year's festival will be accessible to audiences well beyond its usual home in Park City, Utah. All films in the festival will be available on a digital platform within the United States, with some films opting for global availability as well, while other festival events and talks will all be available globally.

The festival is planning to showcase 70-plus feature films, down from around 120 in its in-person 2020 edition. Each film will include a live Q&A after its scheduled premiere screening time, and will be available for subsequent streaming in limited windows. The festival program will have its usual four main competitions (including documentary and narrative features) as well as additional sections. Tickets and passes will go on sale January 7.

"We've spent eight or nine months scenario planning for 'if this, then that,' and moving the levers up and down," said Tabitha Jackson, in her first year as director of the festival, during a phone interview this week. "We are in a place where we know that we can have a festival. So there's not uncertainty about whether we can have a festival. The uncertainty is to what extent can we gather live."

"I think we're in a good

place with knowing what we have definitely got, and then having some options that can be dialled up or dialled down according to public safety," Jackson added.

The festival has also entered into partnerships with independent theatres in more than 20 states around the country to feature select Sundance titles where they are allowed to be open and additional events or outdoor screenings where indoor events are not possible.

In Los Angeles, two drive-in venues will be used: The Mission Tiki in Montclair and the Rose Bowl in Pasadena.

(In the festival's home base of Park City, the plan is to screen select films for locals at the Ray Theatre.) And although Jackson said the 2021 festival was "not a blueprint, it's a response to the moment," she also said that Sundance festival organizers had been watching and were in communication with other festivals that had put on virtual events since the beginning of the pandemic.

Both the Toronto International Film Festival and the NewYork Film Festival pulled off high-profile largely virtual events in the fall, while offering local in-person events as well.

"I think we, along with all our festival siblings, will be learning together and very fast about what the future of festivals might be," said Jackson.

"We're taking the expectation of perfection away this year to enable us to be adventurous and experiment all the time, keeping the mission as our North Star, which is artists, audiences and the work." —dpa



Turks bristle at botched heritage renovations

With sloppy restoration work and damaged or disfigured historical monuments, experts say a race for profits, ideological considerations and favouritism are leaving sensitive upkeep of cultural heritage by the wayside in Turkey.

In August the Galata Tower — an emblematic 14th-century Istanbul landmark — became the latest monument at the heart of a dispute.

Criticism from residents managed to narrowly block the demolition of one of its walls with a jackhammer as part of a restoration, only after a video of workers using the power tool leaked on social media.

Culture Minister Nuri Ersoy tried to smooth things over, saying that the destroyed section was not an original part of the tower and announcing “sanctions” against the construction chiefs for using the heavy-duty equipment.

But in recent years, the list of poorly renovated monuments has grown, ranging from Roman mosaics damaged by a botched restoration to concrete piled up in the middle of an ancient amphitheatre or unrecognisable mosques and citadels.

For Osman Koker, founder of the gallery “Birzamanlar” — a venue to display the country’s cultural diversity — a “harshness” towards ancient buildings has always existed in Turkey, aimed especially at erasing traces of non-Muslim minorities.

The picture was much brighter in the early 2000s, when Recep Tayyip Erdogan — now president — first became prime minister.

“Restoring buildings with high symbolic value was prioritised back then, as part of efforts to join the European Union,” Koker said.

In 2011, the highly successful restoration of the 10th-century Armenian church on Akdamar island in Lake Van in eastern Turkey received praise from many experts.

‘PROFIT ABOVE ALL’

But Ankara’s estrangement from the EU in recent years and

established a monopoly. And the projects are above all aimed at making profits,” he lamented.

“The renovations are managed entirely by construction calls for tenders, without prior reflection on their history,” Gumus said.

Rather than preserving “parts added by different civilisations”

For Osman Koker, founder of the gallery “Birzamanlar” — a venue to display the country’s cultural diversity — a “harshness” towards ancient buildings has always existed in Turkey, aimed especially at erasing traces of non-Muslim minorities.

a hardline turn in Erdogan’s policies have transformed the situation, said Korhan Gumus, an architect specialising in preservation of cultural heritage.

“Tenders for renovations are awarded to favoured companies which have

over the centuries or millennia, project specifications often call for “a restitution of the original, which leads to grotesque results,” he added.

It was Mahir Polat, cultural heritage director for Istanbul’s municipal government, who raised the alarm on the use of the jackhammer during the restoration work at Galata Tower.

The municipality, run by the main opposition CHP party since 2019, lodged an immediate complaint, only for the culture ministry to reject its appeal to inspect the project.

“When restoration is seen only as a construction activity and when we forget that the monument reflects the centuries it has passed through, we miss the objective of preservation. We then have brand-new reconstructions,” Polat said.

‘ARBITRARY DECISIONS’

“Arbitrary decisions” sometimes bypass those in charge of cultural heritage protection, Polat complains.

He said he discovered in July that a historic fountain in Uskudar on the Asian side of Istanbul had vanished overnight as part of a road-widening project.

The district municipality led by Erdogan’s ruling party, he said, had decided to “transport” the fountain without any authorisation.

“The historical value attributed to a monument only makes sense in the place it is located. You cannot transport it like any other object,” Polat said.

“We’ve heard nothing about this fountain since then”.

Tugba Tanyeri Erdemir, researcher at the University of Pittsburgh, argued that Turkey’s government favours “the domination of cultural heritage rather than its conservation,” highlighting recent decisions to convert Hagia Sophia cathedral and another church into mosques.

In August, Erdogan ordered the ancient Orthodox Kariye church that became a mosque and then a popular Istanbul museum to be turned back into a space for Muslim worship.

The decision came just a month after a similarly controversial conversion to transform the UNESCO World Heritage-recognised Hagia Sophia into a mosque for the first time since 1934.

With the erasure of cultural heritage, Polat fears the memory of Istanbul will disappear.

“The memory of a city is intimately linked to its living space. We failed to live together with ancient buildings in the past,” he deplored.

“I hope we will realise the treasure we have in our hands.”—AFP

