

Oman’s message of tolerance and moderation appreciated

Shikh Dr Ahmed al Tayeb, Al Azhar’s Grand Imam, expressed his best wishes to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik. He also wished the Omani peoples further permanent welfare, prosperity and stability. He affirmed to Oman News Agency that Al Azhar appreciates the Sultanate’s continuous role in supporting moderation and tolerance in regional and international levels. This came after his meeting with Abdullah Nassir al Rahbi, Sultanate’s Ambassador and its Permanent Representative to the Arab League. — ONA



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TENDER FLOATED FOR CONSTRUCTION OF OMAN’S FIRST INTEGRATED VEHICLE HUB



MUSCAT

HM THANKED BY SAUDI KING

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has received a cable of thanks from the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud of Saudi Arabia, in reply to His Majesty’s condolences cable to him on the death of Princess Al Jawhara bint Mohammed bin Abdulaziz al Saud. In his cable, King Salman expressed his thanks for His Majesty the Sultan’s good feelings and sincere prayers, praying to the Almighty Allah to protect His Majesty against all harms. — ONA

APPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL BENEFITS

The Public Authority for Social Insurance (PASI) announced that it began receiving applications for social benefit from June 1 and the process will continue till December 31. The benefits will be paid at the end of each month. Pasi began implementing employment initiatives associated with the job security system including paying a monthly benefit of RO 202,500 for six months to the Omani insured small business owners and those in their category as well as Omanis working abroad and Omanis working in the GCC countries who were terminated for reasons beyond their control. DETAILS ON P2



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CHEMICAL CARGO SHIP SINKS OFF SRI LANKA

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LEBANON’S MEDICAL CRISIS SET TO GET EVEN WORSE

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OMAN, PALESTINE DISCUSS COOPERATION



Assigned by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, HH Sayyid Asaad bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for International Relations and Cooperation Affairs, Personal Representative of His Majesty the Sultan, received at his office Dr Mohammad Shtayyeh, Prime Minister of the State of

Palestine, and his delegation. The meeting exchanged cordial conversations and reviewed bilateral relations between Oman and Palestine. It also touched on aspects of the existing cooperation between the two sides to serve the common interests of the two countries and their brotherly peoples. SEE ALSO P2

MOSQUES TO REOPEN AS RESTRICTIONS EASED

TRAVEL BAN FROM INDIA AND OTHER COUNTRIES STAYS

MUSCAT: The Supreme Committee tasked with tackling developments resulting from coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic on Wednesday issued a set of new decisions to be enforced immediately.

Permission to re-open mosques whose capacity is not less than 100 worshippers, only to perform the five daily prayers and exclusive of Friday (Salat Al Jumaa). The re-opening takes place in accordance with procedures announced earlier by the Ministry of Awqaf and religious affairs along with the Ministry of Health.

Termination of the decision prohibiting all commercial activities in all governorates of the Sultanate from 8 pm to 4 am. The re-opening of business outlets should be made in accordance with the decision to allow 50 per cent of the number of shoppers at commercial outlets, restaurants and cafeterias. Children below 12 years old are hereby permitted to enter the business outlets.

Permission to open exhibition and wedding halls and similar

collective commercial activities provided attendance at the outlets does not exceed 30 per cent of their capacity and to a maximum of 300 people in the case of large halls. Precautionary health protection procedures have to be undertaken in all halls or gathering areas.

Omanis and GCC citizens who are resident in Oman are permitted to move across land borders between Oman and other GCC states to perform their daily tasks. These are required to show proof of the assignments entrusted to them by their respective places of work.

Permission to visit beaches and public parks. This decision bans gatherings of any kind and stresses commitment to precautionary protection procedures.

Permission to resume collective sports activities in open places, while at the same time adhering to protective health procedures.

Permission to open sports halls and downsize people’s attendance there to a maximum of 50 per cent of the halls’ capacities. TURN TO P2

Permission to resume sporting activities in open places, while adhering to protective health safeguards

1. Permission to re-open mosques for prayers
2. Business outlets to open beyond 8 pm
3. Children below 12 are permitted into outlets
4. Exhibition, wedding halls can open with 30% capacity
5. Omanis and GCC citizens can move across land borders for work
6. Beaches and public parks are open for public without crowds
7. Permission to open sports halls with 50% capacity
8. Ban on entry of travellers from certain countries stays

ASSIGNED BY HM



Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Saeedi

Sultanate rallies for vaccines to poor nations

Assigned by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Saeedi, Minister of Health, took part in the Gavi-Covax conference, a virtual international meeting organised by Gavi-Covax under the theme “One Protected World”.

Dr Al Saeedi commended the efforts taken by the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI) with the purpose of making the world more suitable for the billions living on it, despite the challenges that the alliance is facing. He said that the GAVI proved its ability to rally solidarity and fair global distribution of vaccines.

The minister called for supporting the Covax to help fill the gap of insufficient resources. In particular, he urged donating parties to take initiatives to save lives and ensure that the vaccines reach poor countries. The Sultanate has been chosen to participate in the conference due to its good international reputation in the field of health and due to its position as a linking point among countries of the region. The Gavi, acting under the leadership of the World Health Organization (WHO) and partners, seeks to accelerate the distribution of vaccines.

The conference, hosted by Japan, is working towards the arrival of 1.8 billion doses of Covid-19 vaccines to low-income countries through advance commitments of Covax, which eyes an additional \$2 billion-worth of grants from countries and private entities. — ONA

Dr Al Saeedi commended the efforts taken by the GAVI with the purpose of making the world safe, despite the challenges

National Museum opens ‘Oman Hall’ at Russian museum

ST PETERSBURG: The National Museum inaugurated on Wednesday the ‘Oman Gallery’ in the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg, Russia, with the participation of Prof Dr Mikhail Piotrovsky, Director-General of the State Hermitage Museum and member of the Board of Trustees of the National Museum of Oman, Yousef bin Issa al Zadjali, Sultanate’s Ambassador to the Russian Federation, and virtual participation of Jamal bin Hassan al Moosawi, Secretary-General of the National Museum.

Speaking on the occasion, the Sultanate’s ambassador said: “It gives me great pleasure to attend today the inauguration of Oman Hall, which hosts the exhibition “Oman: The Land of Frankincense”, organised by the National Museum of Oman. The exhibition is settled in the corridors of one of the largest and leading museums in the world. It has a wide reputation and fame among museum-goers for its archaeological findings and masterpieces that reflect the cultural and historical human heritage, whether of Russia or



various cultures globally - namely, the State Hermitage Museum in the picturesque and beautiful city of Saint Petersburg.

“Oman is widely known for its friendly and respect-based relations with the world. Here, I would like to commend the fruitful cooperation with our friends in the Russian Federation in various political, economic, humanitarian, scientific and educational fields, including our latest collaboration in the field of culture, heritage and museums.

TURN TO P4

WEATHER

MUSCAT: Max 42°C Min 33°C SALALAH: Max 31°C Min 27°C NIZWA: Max 46°C Min 29°C

PRAYER TIMINGS

SUNRISE: 05:20 FAJR: 03:53 DHUHR: 12:10 ASR: 15:29 MAGHRIB: 18:55 ISHA: 20:17

Palestinian PM thanks Sultanate for support

MUSCAT: Assigned by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, His Highness Sayyid Asaad bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for International Relations and Cooperation Affairs, Personal Representative of His Majesty the Sultan, received in his office here on Wednesday Dr Mohammad Shtayyeh, Prime Minister of the State of Palestine, and his accompanying delegation.

The meeting exchanged cordial conversations and reviewed bilateral relations between Oman and Palestine. It also touched on aspects of the existing cooperation between the two sides to serve the common interests of the two countries and their brotherly peoples.

The meeting was attended by Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, Riyad Najeeb al Maliki, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates of the State of Palestine, the two advisers at HH Sayyid Asaad's



Office, Under-Secretary of the Foreign Ministry for Diplomatic Affairs, Dr Tayseer Ali Farhat, Palestinian Ambassador to Oman, and the delegation accompanying the guest.

Also on Wednesday, Khalid Hilal al Maawali, Chairman of Majlis Ash'shura received Dr Mohammad Shtayyeh and his delegation.

The meeting reviewed the

bilateral relations between Oman and Palestine and aspects of the existing cooperation in several fields, particularly areas related to the Palestinian cause.

Al Maawali stressed that the Omani people stand side by side with the Palestinian people to recover all their legitimate rights. He also called for unity to overcome all obstacles and to achieve the demands of the

Palestinians.

In his turn, the Palestinian premier hailed the Sultanate's honourable stances towards the Palestinian cause, expressing his thanks to all efforts made by the Sultanate in supporting the Palestinian people in the current circumstances.

The meeting was attended by a number of officials from both sides.



Shaikh Abdulmalik bin Abdullah al Khalili, State Council Chairman, also received in his office Dr Mohammad Ibrahim Shtayyeh and his delegation.

The meetings reviewed the Omani-Palestinian relations and the Sultanate's constant stance that supports the Palestinian cause, in addition to the developments of the situation in the Palestinian lands.

During the meeting, the Palestinian Prime Minister underscored the strong relations binding the two countries and their brotherly peoples. He valued Oman's noble endeavours towards the Palestinian cause, as well as its sincere efforts to maintain peace in the region.

The meeting was attended by officials from both sides.

— ONA

■ RELATIONS WITH SWEDEN REVIEWED



MUSCAT: Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, received in his office here on Wednesday Anne Linde, Foreign Minister of the Kingdom of Sweden. The meeting reviewed the existing ties of cooperation in several fields between the two countries and the means of enhancing them. The two sides also exchanged views on developments in Yemen and the exerted efforts for peace and stability. They also exchanged views on regional and international issues of common interest. The meeting was attended by officials from both sides. — ONA

Mosques to reopen as restrictions eased

FROM PAGE 1

Permission to use swimming pools, sports halls and their facilities at hotel establishments, only for tenants and membership holders of the specific hotel establishments. Protective health procedures have to be undertaken in all cases.

The Supreme Committee extended the decision to prohibit entry to the Sultanate by travellers arriving from Sudan, Brazil, Nigeria, Tanzania, Sierra Leone, Ethiopia, the United Kingdom, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Egypt and the Philippines till further notice. The committee added to the above-mentioned ban list the following countries including Thailand, Malaysia and Vietnam and travellers arriving from any other country if they happen to have passed by any of the above-mentioned countries within a period of 14 days from applying to enter the Sultanate. This decision takes effect from 2 pm of June 5th till further notice. The committee advises Omani citizens not to visit the above-mentioned countries during this period.

The Supreme Committee hereby stresses that decisions related to commercial activities issued on Wednesday aim to alleviate the impact of the pandemic on the private sector and to stimulate different business activities without prejudice to procedures set to protect individuals and society against Covid-19.

The Supreme Committee urges all operators of economic activities to follow the approved precautionary measures announced by the departments concerned and to penalise anyone who breaches the precautionary measures. The committee reiterated that it will continue to monitor the situation and review its decisions in accordance with epidemiological developments. Accordingly, the committee will take appropriate decisions when deemed necessary, including the re-closure of activities or imposing a ban on movement, if necessary, to help secure public health from the disease.

May the Almighty Allah protect everyone against all harms. — ONA



PASI starts receiving social benefit applications

MUSCAT: The Public Authority for Social Insurance (PASI) announced that it has started receiving applications for social benefit from June 1 and the process will continue till December 31. The benefits will be paid at the end of each month.

The PASI began implementing employment initiatives associated with the job security system including paying a monthly benefit of RO 202,500 for six months to the Omani insured small business owners and those in their category as well as Omanis working abroad and Omanis working in the GCC countries who were terminated for reasons beyond their control.

Khalifa bin Salem al Ghufaili, head of the follow-up and supervisory committee at PASI, said that the experience proved that the job security system, since its inception in November 2020, has achieved its objectives in terms of providing benefits which indicates the financial strength of the system. Hence, it has become imperative to expand the package of benefits offered by the system based on the actual needs in the current

conditions. Consequently, the Royal directives were issued to pay two benefits for two categories that need the support of all society members.

Besides, the job security system has taken into consideration the Omanis working in embassies, consulates and the international organisations operating in the Sultanate who were affected by the current economic conditions, Al Ghufaili said.

Regarding eligibility conditions for the small business owners and workers abroad, Al Ghufaili said that these conditions were made flexible in order to broaden the beneficiaries' base. These are mainly regulatory conditions that contribute to securing a portion of the needs of these two categories. As per the conditions, the beneficiary should be registered at one of the social insurance systems until May 25, 2021. They should not be employed by the public or the private sector or affiliates to any military or security unit. They should not be receiving a pension from one of the pension funds of the Sultanate.

Mosques need to follow restrictions for prayers

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The Supreme Committee has decided to open mosques for group prayers with certain restrictions.

Accordingly, mosques with a capacity of not less than 100 people can reopen for the five times prayers only following the controls previously announced by the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs (MARA) and the Ministry of Health.

However, the Friday special prayers, Jumua prayers, wouldn't be allowed for the time being, and all other restrictions remain the same. Mosques and other prayer halls were closed in March 2020 as a measure against Covid-19. They opened after eight months of closure on November 14 last year, after the situation improved.

Supreme Committee on Covid-19 allowed mosques to open at its meeting held under



the chairmanship of Sayyid Hamoud bin Faisal al Busaidy, Minister of Interior.

Accordingly, mosques with a capacity of not less than 400 people are allowed to open from today. No Friday congregation is permitted for the time being.

Speaking to the Observer, Abdul Aziz al Ghafri, Assistant General Manager of Preaching and Guidance at the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs (MARA), said strict vigil on safety should be observed in accordance with the Covid-19

protocols.

"We are happy to announce that the Supreme Committee has ordered to open all mosques with a capacity not less than 100 people and without jumua prayers," he said.

"Mosques with not less than 100 people coming to perform prayers will be allowed to open but strict adherence to Covid-19 safety norms should be observed from the entry of believers till they leave after the mass congregations all five times of the day," Al Ghafri added.



The Royal Oman Police (ROP), in cooperation with the Ministry of Health, on Wednesday launched a field vaccination campaign for all its employees at the Police Hospital in Qurum, under the patronage of Brigadier General Doctor Abdul Malik bin Sulaiman al Kharusi, Director General of Services, ROP, in the presence of a number of officers. It is part of the national strategy for immunisation against the coronavirus.



SC keen to cover all aspects of pandemic: Health Minister

MUSCAT: Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Saeedi, Minister of Health, has said that the Supreme Committee tasked with tackling developments resulting from Covid-19 pandemic takes special care to study all aspects of life impacted by the epidemic, including economic, social and health aspects.



The minister told Oman News Agency (ONA), Oman Radio and TV that the pandemic is still persisting, though numbers decreased before Eid al Fitr holidays. However, gatherings held afterwards caused a sharp increase in infection cases, said Dr Ahmed, who hoped that this surge will be a temporary one.

The minister called for total adherence to precautionary procedures, noting that the Supreme Committee stated in its decisions issued on Wednesday that it might ban the activities again in case of non-abidance by precautionary procedures.

Dr Ahmed added that he looks forward to regular decline in infection cases now that a wide-scale immunisation drive has commenced, with the main objective of attaining 60 per cent to 70 per cent protection of citizens and residents.

REVIEW MEET

An expanded virtual meeting was held at the Ministry of Health on Wednesday to

review the National Strategy for Immunisation against Covid-19.

The virtual meeting was held under the chairmanship of Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Saeedi, Minister of Health.

The meeting was attended by the MoH's under-secretaries along with a number of senior officials of the ministry and from the governorates.

Dr Al Saeedi reviewed the general features of the National Strategy for Immunisation against Covid-19, saying that despite the community response to the vaccination campaign, the coverage rate in the governorates is varying due to the concerns of some elder people and parents.

Badr bin Saif al Rawahi, Director of Communicable Diseases Control, gave a presentation on vaccinating the target groups during the next weeks, as well as the number of received and under procurement vaccines. — ONA

Covid-19 cases on the rise again

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Covid-19 cases are rising after a brief fall in the beginning of May, the Ministry of Health announced on Wednesday.

With 1,258 new cases of the Covid-19, the total number of registered cases in the Sultanate went up to 218,271.

The ministry also announced 14 new deaths in 24 hours, bringing total deaths to 2,370 since the pandemic outbreak.

The number of admissions in hospitals is increasing every day. During the past 24 hours, the number of inpatients reached 124, bringing the number of

inpatients to 824 cases, including 265 in intensive care units.

The ministry called on all citizens and residents to constantly clean hands with soap and water, avoid touching the face, nose, mouth and eyes, follow healthy habits when sneezing and coughing, and fully adhere to the instructions for social and physical distancing issued by the Supreme Committee and the Ministry of Health. Meanwhile, the vaccination campaign for the general diploma students and teachers is in progress.

The ministry has decided to continue with vaccination campaigns in phases based on the availability of vaccines in

accordance with the National Strategy for Immunisation against Covid-19.

Officials said the expected number of vaccine doses to reach the Sultanate is 1.25 million. The ministry seeks to cover the entire target population with the anti-coronavirus vaccine, aged 12 years and above, equivalent to 70 per cent of the population by the end of the year.

By the beginning of next week, new groups will be vaccinated, according to an integrated implementation plan for immunisation during June, the ministry stated.

The Sultanate will receive one million doses of the Pfizer

vaccine, and 148,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine, noting that the vaccination campaign aims to immunise all employees of the state's administrative apparatus, security and military authorities, and all groups of society over 45 years old, during June.

Badr bin Saif al Rawahi, Director of the Department of Infectious Diseases Control at the Ministry of Health, confirmed during a TV interview that "the ministry buys vaccines, which have been proven safe."

He ruled out any delay in vaccine arrival in the Sultanate. "By the end of June, the Sultanate will succeed in vaccinating 30 per cent of the population," he said.

■ RESCUED FROM A MOUNTAIN



Rescue teams from the Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority of Muscat Governorate rescued a man of an Arab nationality, who experienced a health problem in a mountainous village in the Wilayat of Bausher, on Wednesday. He was transferred to hospital in a moderate health condition.

Oman Air launches direct seasonal flights to Tbilisi in Georgia

MUSCAT: Oman Air has launched seasonal service between Muscat and Tbilisi, Georgia, with two weekly direct flights (Wednesdays and Sundays), operated with Boeing 737 aircraft. Flights will operate from June 16 to September 16, subject to government approvals.

The Wednesday flight from Muscat will depart at 20:15 and

arrive in Tbilisi at 00:15. The flight from Tbilisi will depart on Thursday at 01:15 and arrive in Muscat at 05:00. The Sunday flight from Muscat will depart at 03:30 and arrive in Tbilisi at 07:30. The flight from Tbilisi will depart at 08:55 and arrive in Muscat at 12:40.

Oman Air will maintain its comprehensive safety

programme throughout all elements of the travel journey to ensure that guests fly confidently. Masks are required when guests are on board the aircraft and in Oman's airports. Distancing is maintained while guests board and exit the aircraft, which are carefully cleaned after each flight and at the end of every day.

WHO validates Sinovac vaccine for emergency use

KABEER YOUSUF

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The World Health Organization (WHO) has validated Sinovac vaccine against Covid-19 for emergency use and issued interim policy recommendations on its administration.

Oman received 100,000 units of Sinovac vaccines as a gift from China last month and is all set to give them to the people of Oman and the Chinese citizens in the country.

Earlier, the Sultanate had received 100,000 doses of Oxford AstraZeneca vaccine as a gift from India which Serum Institute of India manufactures.

The WHO validation of the Sinovac-CoronaVac vaccine for emergency use also gives countries, funders, procuring agencies and communities the assurance that Sinovac meets international standards for safety, efficacy and manufacturing. The vaccine is produced by the Beijing-based pharmaceutical company Sinovac.

"The world desperately needs multiple Covid-19 vaccines to address the huge access inequity across the globe," Dr Mariangela Simao, WHO Assistant-Director General for Access to Health Products, said, adding that all manufacturers should participate in the COVAX facility, share their knowhow and data and contribute to bringing the pandemic under control.



The Emergency Use Listing (EUL) assesses the quality, safety and efficacy of Covid-19 vaccines and risk management plans and programmatic suitability, such as cold chain requirements.

The assessment is performed by the product evaluation group, composed by regulatory experts from around the world and a Technical Advisory Group (TAG), in charge of performing the risk-benefit assessment for an independent recommendation on whether a vaccine can be listed for emergency use and, if so, under which conditions.

China has successfully provided vaccine assistance to more than 80 countries and exported vaccines to more than 50 countries. The international community, including the WHO, have recognised the safety and effectiveness of Chinese vaccines.

The Sinovac-CoronaVac vaccine's WHO assessment included on-site inspections of the production facility.

The Sinovac-CoronaVac product is an inactivated vaccine. Its easy storage requirements make it very manageable and particularly suitable for low-resource settings.

The Emergency Use Listing (EUL) procedure assesses the suitability of novel health products during public health emergencies. The objective is to make medicines, vaccines and diagnostics available as rapidly as possible to address the emergency while adhering to stringent safety, efficacy and quality standards. The assessment weighs the threat posed by the emergency as well as the benefit that would accrue from the use of the product against any potential risks.

Pfizer / BioNTech, Astrazeneca-SK Bio, Serum Institute of India, Astra Zeneca EU, Janssen, Moderna and Sinopharm are other vaccines that the WHO has already listed the for emergency use.

National Museum opens ‘Oman Hall’ at State Hermitage Museum

FROM PAGE 1

The “Oman Hall” inauguration is the second event organised in the Hermitage Museum during the past three years. The first event titled “Oman’s Day”, organised on July 23, 2018, and was dedicated to celebrating the blessed Renaissance Day of the Sultanate of Oman.

“It is firm evidence of the close and intense cooperation, which aims, in the first place, to acknowledge the citizens of our two friendly countries with their human, historical and civilisational heritage. As you know, the Sultanate was and still is a country with a unique history and ancient civilisational traditions, a crossroads of many cultures and civilisations, and a centre point for international trade routes from India to the Mediterranean and then to various parts of the world.”

The exhibition “Oman, The Land of Frankincense” is hosted in the State Hermitage. Its archaeological exhibits cover a long period of the history of Oman, including the third millennium BC until the first centuries CE. They all are telling us not only about the National Museum of Oman, but about Oman, the country, its civilisation, a great empire, the land of frankincense and fragrance, and about the trade evolution.

The exhibition “Oman, The Land of Frankincense” sheds light on a group of carefully selected archaeological findings. They are bearing an archaeological dimension to Oman through ages, as it was the beating heart of the frankincense trade and a joint point for traders from other lands between Mesopotamia, the Indus Valley and Paranoiac Egypt.

The objects displayed in this exhibition also embody that global communication since the Bronze Age (4th century BC) until the first establishment of the Majan civilisation, which was famous for its copper smelting and the building of pitch-coated solid ships (2nd century BC). The artefacts highlight the manifestations of language and culture. Here, I would like to highly appreciate the close relations between the National Museum of Oman and the State Hermitage Museum. Their regular organisation of events, museum activities and exhibitions, whether in Muscat or St Petersburg. Senior officials are participating and frequented by large numbers of visitors and lovers of history and antiquities.

“As we celebrate the inauguration of the extraordinary “Oman Hall” in the State Hermitage Museum building, I would like to express my thanks as an accredited ambassador of the Sultanate to the Russian Federation to the Director of the Museum, Professor Mikhail Petrovsky and his employees for their effective contribution to the development of Omani-Russian relations. At the same time, I take this good occasion to express my sincere thanks as well to Jamal al Mousawi for his efforts in developing the National Museum and strengthening its relations with leading museums in various countries around the world. I also express my sincere gratitude to the attendees, with my hope that this exhibition will turn into an archaeological and historical forum for all lovers of Oman, its culture, history and authenticity.”



The exhibition “Oman, The Land of frankincense” sheds light on a group of carefully selected archaeological findings, bearing an archaeological dimension to Oman through ages, as it was the beating heart of the frankincense trade. It was a joint point for traders from other lands between Mesopotamia, the Indus Valley and Paranoiac Egypt. The trade extended through time has played an active role in shaping archaeological findings recently discovered in Oman, which came to Oman either by sea or by land. The objects displayed in this hall embody that global communication since the Bronze Age, the period of

the first emergence of the Majan civilisation, which was famous for its ingenuity in copper smelting and building sea-going ships.

This hall takes us on a journey full of the great diversity of life in ancient Oman and depicts a beautiful view of the history of a land that warmly welcomed merchants and travellers. The display is presented in three main sections: Majan civilisation, which focuses on the site of Ras al Jinz, and deals with several significant archaeological findings, such as the seal that dates back to the period (2,300-2,000 BC), made from the cover of a bowl of steatite, and contains two circular inscriptions

with dots, still visible on the back face of the seal, and the flat face has an inscription of two men standing next to a branch erect vertically, these drawings can be translated as a direct depiction of a tribal alliance, and may refer to the sign of “twin” in Sindhi; which are often used in Gulf seals; to denote kinship and lineage.

In addition to a burner (mjamar), that was discovered at the site of Ras al Jinz (South Al Sharqiyah Governorate) during the period (2500-2000 BC). This locally made incense burner indicates the importance of incense in Oman since the Middle Bronze Age. This incense burner still had traces of the

last combustion mixture in it when it was discovered. Beside it, another broken incense burner; indicates that incense burners were common possessions in daily life.

The second section is “Oman the Land of Frankincense”; represented in the Wadi Dawka Protectorate, Al Baleed, Samharam (Khor Rori), as well as the archaeological caravan oasis in Al Shisr (the city of Ubar). This section displays a plaque with inscriptions in the Musnad script (Al Himyari). This liturgical bronze panel bears ten lines inscribed with the Musnad script and the inscription symbols in ancient southern Arabic. Also, a bowl made of bronze with

inscriptions (of vows) dating back to the third century (Iron Age), with a hemispherical shape and an unfinished edge.

The third section is about: the site of Salut (a stronghold of Arab history), which dates back to the Iron Age. Several archaeological artefacts are displayed in this section: gutter made of copper mixes in its design between human and animal forms dating back to the late Iron Age (250-100 BC), a ring-shaped refinery with a hand that depicts an animal head made of copper dating back to the late Iron Age (250-100 BC) and a soapstone bowl dating back to the early Iron Age (800-1200 BC).

In addition to some bows and arrows made of bronze and copper dating back to the period (900-600 BC), and statues of snakes made of bronze dating back to the same period and other distinctive findings.

The establishment of “Oman Corner” is an initiative launched by the National Museum to achieve the museum’s objectives according to the Royal Decree No 62/2013, issued on November 20, 2013, which includes: highlighting the civilisational, historical, cultural and scientific heritage of the Sultanate on regional and international levels.

The initiative aims to highlight the civilisational dimensions of Oman and manifestations of its unique cultural heritage across ages. Also, it aims at introducing visitors to the Sultanate and building a reputation as an outstanding destination for cultural tourism. The initiative represented in signing contracts for the loan of medium-term museum objects - renewable - with several leading and ancient museum institutions in the world, to allocate specialised corners or exhibition halls within the context of the story of the museum’s fixed narration in these museums bearing the name “Oman”.

Since 2014, Hermitage Director Mikhail Piotrovsky has been a member of the board of trustees of the museum in Muscat. Days of Oman in the Hermitage and Hermitage Days in Oman, collaboration between restorers and researchers have evolved into joint restoration projects and the long-term exchange of exhibits. The Hermitage has become the first international venue for the Corner of Oman project, under which the exhibition “Oman, The Land of Frankincense” will run for over a year. A reciprocal year-long exhibition devoted to Islam in Russia is going off to Muscat and will be presented in the National Museum of Oman as the first “Corner of the State Hermitage” in the Middle East. Also, an agreement was signed between the two parties to display the manuscript of Ahmed bin Majid in the Maritime History Gallery at the National Museum of Oman. The manuscript is on loan from the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences in St Petersburg. The agreement was signed between the two museums in the training and qualification of staff of the National Museum in Russia.

And last year, the “Oman Hall” was the soft opening in the Hermitage and is officially inaugurated on June 2, 2021.



Impact of behavioural economics on FDI

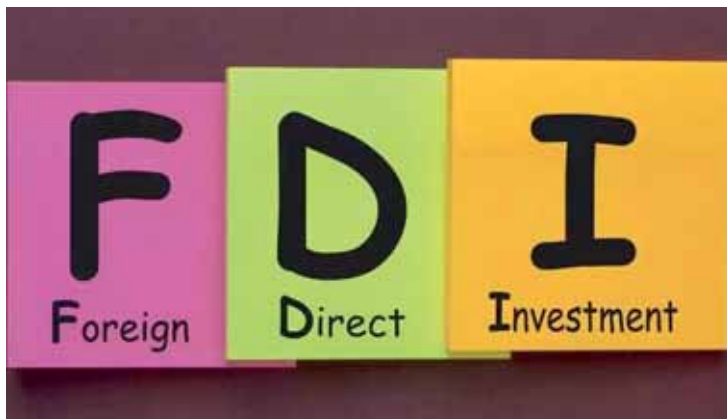
LAKSHMI KOTHANETH

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Foreign investment is often seen as an economic development stimulant known to create employment opportunities and bring in technology know-how amongst many other benefits such as human resources development and exchange rate stability.

In Oman, FDI could be one of the main tools for diversifying the economy, which is a major focus of Oman Vision 2040.

However, foreign investment has had its challenges. It has been the focus of a study by the Behavioural Economics Unit at the Ministry of Economy. According to Mariam al Shihi, a Global Political Scientist, their recently conducted research with the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion on why some people hesitate to invest in Oman indicated the challenges faced by foreign investment.



“We did a study of comparison on how Chinese became China and how we can learn from them as well identify our problems to find out is it behavioural, policy or is it different struggles? We found out, first of all, it is the policy itself, such as not knowing where to go once they arrive in Oman, the second reason was the global pandemic – Covid-19 and its impact on the economy and the third reason that some people do not accept the concept of globalisation here in Oman.

Some of them do not like the ideas that come from

outside of Oman. So we aim to change this behaviour, not the investors themselves,” explained Al Shihi.

Their study is proving to be important for potential foreign investors. The team was formed in 2020, and they provide free consultancy to government organisations as well as private sector companies. The Behavioural Economics Unit is a combination of different sciences – policy, economy and psychology, and part of sociology.

“While attitude cannot be changed we can work on the

behavioural changes. People can leave their old behaviour. It is just a matter of the environment and how they learnt that behaviour in the first place. As has been proven in the study of electricity consumption in the US, there are many choices, which gave an analysis through a chart on each individual consumption rate from month to month as well as a comparison to the whole neighbourhood as in who saved the most. It did have an impact,” she explained. The Behavioural Economics Unit is currently working on water consumption.

“People take a step back when they hear about behavioural economics and say we do not want anyone to change our economy. But in reality, behavioural economics is about choices. We do not force you to take up a certain behaviour but give you choices that are simple and easy to be implemented,” explained Arwa Zaabi, Psychologist, Behavioural Economics Unit.

Oman's revenues at RO 2.8 bn in 4 months

MUSCAT: The Sultanate's revenues fell by 27.68 per cent to RO 2.769 billion in the first four months of 2021 compared with the same period of last year, according to the monthly data released by the Ministry of Finance.

Net oil and gas revenues amounted to RO 1.347 billion, a 36.82 per cent decrease due to the fall in oil prices and the reduction in the average production as a result of the Sultanate's commitment to the Opec+ agreement to cut oil production and the continuing impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the Sultanate's economy.

Meanwhile, current revenues soared by 14.43 per cent including the collection of RO 313 million as dividend from the government investments.

The Ministry of Finance's

monthly bulletin affirmed that public spending continues to drop as a result of the policies and measures aimed to rationalise spending. The total spending by the end of April amounted to RO 3.596 billion, a decrease of 2.65 per cent from last year's figure of RO 3.694 billion. The investment spending (development and capital spending) of the civil ministries stood at RO 143 million.

The budget deficit in the period between January and the end of April stood at RO 827.4 million while the repaid external and domestic debt amounted to RO 668.1 million.

The government has continued to pay the expenditure of the oil and gas sectors which amounted to RO 554.5 million by the end of April. — ONA



Ministry of Higher Education, Research & Innovation

ELECTRONIC TENDER

The Internal Tenders Committee of the Ministry of Higher Education Research & Innovation announced the following tender:

Tender No.	Tender Name	Company that are entitled to participate	Tender Price	Last Date for purchasing Tender	The deadline for submission of Tenders
16/2020	Annual Maintenance contract for non-comprehensive of cctv, access control & intrusion alarm system	Specialized in providing Same service and registered with the Tender Board with Grade: Excellent and first	(25/= R.O)	10/06/2021	20/06/2021

please visit the following link in E-Tendering system for purchasing the tender documents:

<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om/>

All companies that are bidding must provide a bank guarantee or a certified cheque from a bank operating in the Sultanate for at least (1%) of the tender value on behalf of His Excellency Dr. / Chairman of the Internal Tender Committee.

Preference will be given to companies' or small and medium enterprises registered with the General Authority for the development of Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) that includes the largest proportion of its tender Omanization. **Ministry is not bound to accept the lowest or any other tender.**

Chairman of tender committee
Ministry of Higher Education Research & Innovation



TRA grants postal service licence to 3 companies

MUSCAT: The Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA) on Wednesday announced that it granted three local companies licence to provide postal services and related activities after the firms met the prescribed regulatory conditions.

The services include receiving, clearing, sorting and distributing courier, as well as all types of postal letters, including documents, parcels, packs and packages weighing not more than 25 kilograms.

The licence aims to enhance further chances for investment and employment and it will generate more than 200 jobs, besides promoting services and offering additional options to beneficiaries in terms of prices and quality.

It is worth noting that 19 companies operate in the field of postal services. On its website, the TRA publishes updates about existing postal service firms. — ONA

TENDER ANNOUNCEMENT

Nama Shared Services Company LLC (NSS) invites the specialized companies to participate and submit their best offers for the tender.

Tender Number	Tender Name	Last Date for Collection of Tender Documents	Time & Last Date for Proposal Submission	Tender Fee (OMR)
NSS/2021/8	IT HARDWARE/ SOFTWARE SUPPORT AND SERVICES	14 June 2021	12 July 2021	100/- *VAT not included

Terms and conditions:

- Bids shall be submitted in a red wax sealed envelope, addressed to the "Chairman of the Internal Tender Committee" titled by the tender name and number.
- 3 separate envelopes shall be included inside the sealed envelope, and each must be marked with a tender name & tender number as per the below:
 - Envelope number 1: Commercial Proposal.
 - Envelope number 2: Technical Proposal.
 - Envelope number 3: Bid Bond.
- Bids should be dropped in the tender box at NSS's reception before 01:00 pm, (time of the Sultanate), on Monday 12 July 2021.
- Each bid should be accompanied with a temporary insurance, in the form of a bank guarantee or a certified cheque from one of the banks operating in the Sultanate that covering (1%) of the total bid value. It should be valid for a period of (90) days from the last date for submission of offers and addressed to the "Chairman of the Internal Tender Committee".

Note: If the temporary insurance is not submitted, tenders will not be considered.
- NSS is not obliged to accept the lowest or any other bid.
- Registration of the bidders to be done through the company Tender website (www.nama.om).
- Interested party to deposit Tender Fee (Non-Refundable) on: Account Name: Nama Shared Services, Bank Muscat: 0423-048027270-017 Corporate Branch (Bidder name and Tender Number to be clearly mentioned). Tender Documents will be shared by email.
- The deposit at the last day of purchasing should be before 01:00 pm.
- If the tender document is planned to be received by some on behalf of another company, the interested purchasers should provide details of the person's name and the company details.


نماء للخدمات المشتركة
Nama Shared Services

Al Muzn Mall
R - Floor - Al Mawaleh North, Al Seeb
P.O Box C9740, Post Code 900, Sultanate of Oman.
Phone Number: +968 24559200 / 217
E-Mail: Ibrahim.AlHinai@Holding.nama.om

Vacancies

Majan Electricity Company, S.A.O.C. (MJEC) is one of Oman's leading electricity distribution companies with operations in North Batinah, Dhahirah and Al Buraimi seeks to employ highly motivated, qualify and dynamic Omanis to join the ranks of its workforce.

You can apply for the position of:

SR	Vacancy Title	Work Location
1	Testing and Commissioning Protection Engineer	AL Dhahirah, and concession areas
2	Assist material engineer	North Al Batinah and concession areas

Interested candidates who meet the requirements of the above mentioned position should apply at careers in the website www.majanco.co.om . Last Day for submission 19/06/2021



Majan Electricity Company S.A.O.C
P.O Box 286, Sohar
PC 311, Sultanate of Oman
Tel: +968 2694 4444 | Fax: +968 2694 4222
Information@majanco.nama.om | www.majanco.co.om

Looking for job, car, flat and furniture? Check out the Observer classified page. It's where buyers meet sellers.

SULTANATE OF OMAN MINISTRY OF HEALTH ANNOUNCEMENT

The Ministry of Health invites specialized companies to participate in the following Tender:-

Tender Ref.	Description	Last Date for Collection of Tender Document	Closing Time/ Day/Date	Eligibility	Tender Fee (Non-Refundable)
MOH/HQ-70/2021	Construction of Renal Dialysis Unit at Al-Khabourah Polyclinic in North Al-Batinah Governorate	17/June/2021	Before 08 am on Wednesday 14/July/2021	Specialized Companies Registered with Tender Board in The First Grade	R.O 100.000 Per set

- All Specialized and interested Companies registered with Tender Board on the above mentioned Grade may obtain 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 the given website signed and sealed. The Tenderer should enclose scan copy of Bank Guarantee or a certified Cheque issued by a Local bank for not less than One percent (1%) for the Tender value validity for (90) days from the Tender Submission date, addressed to The Chairman of the Tender Committee before one day of date submission.
- The Original Bank Guarantee should be submitted to the office of Director of Purchase and Tenders one day before the submission date for all Tenders.
- Ministry is not bound to accept the lowest tender and reserves the right to accepts or reject any tender.

(<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>)

Any Clarification, you may contact via
Telephone: 24166670 Email id etenderhd@ita.gov.om

Red Cross chief: End cycle of violence

GAZA: The head of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) urged Israel and the Palestinians on Wednesday to find a political solution so violence like last month's hostilities over the Gaza Strip border might be prevented.

On his first visit to Gaza in four years, Robert Mardini toured areas devastated by Israeli bombardments during the 11 days of fighting, including a road where 42 people were killed.

"It is really heart-breaking to see and to hear about the people who paid the ultimate cost of this escalation — women, children, civilians who were living safely in their apartments and were caught in this rubble that we see behind us," he said.

"I hope this is the last time I am coming to witness yet again the results and the humanitarian impact of yet again another cycle of violence and escalation."

Gaza medical officials said Israeli air strikes killed 253 Palestinians. Rockets and missiles fired by Palestinian factions killed 13 people in Israel.

"What is really needed is political leadership on all sides to avoid that people yet again are in the line of fire because of yet again another round of escalation," Mardini said.

"Political leadership to find a sustainable solution that is more sustainable than what we have been witnessing over the past



A Palestinian boy carries a mattress as he walks amid the debris of a house destroyed in Israeli air strikes in Gaza City on Wednesday. — Reuters

decade and more."

Asked whether he would discuss the prospects of a new prisoners' swap deal while the region, Mardini said the ICRC stood ready to help the parties should there be a deal.

"We have repeatedly offered our services as a neutral intermediary, so we will be renewing this offer yet again," he said.



It is really heart-breaking to see and to hear about the people who paid the ultimate cost of this escalation — women, children, civilians who were living safely in their apartments and were caught in this rubble that we see behind us

ROBERT MARDINI

Head of ICRC

Standing by the rubble of the houses of Kolak family, which lost 22 members in Israeli air strikes, Mardini spoke to some survivors.

"My grandfather died, my father died, his (father's) son died, his grandchild died, a dynasty was martyred," said Wasim Al Kolak, 31, urging international prosecution of Israel.

— Reuters

Lebanon special tribunal 'risks closure over funding'

THE HAGUE: The Special Tribunal for Lebanon, which tries suspects over the 2005 Beirut bombing that killed former premier Rafic Hariri and 21 others, risks closure over severe funding shortfalls, it warned on Wednesday.

"Without immediate funding, the Tribunal will not be able to operate beyond July 2021," the Netherlands-based court said in a statement, describing its current financial crisis as "unprecedented".

The shutdown would affect the court's ability to conclude the two cases currently before it, the STL said.

The tribunal, which draws 51 per cent of its budget from donor countries and the rest from Lebanon, said that "the challenging circumstances generated by the global Covid-19 pandemic and the concerning situation in Lebanon" had already forced it to slash its 2021 budget by 37 per cent compared to previous years. — AFP

Iran navy ship sinks after fire, crew sustain light injuries

TEHRAN: One of Iran's largest naval ships sank on Wednesday after catching fire while on a "training mission" off a strategic port near the head of the Gulf, the navy said.

The British-built fleet replenishment vessel *Kharg*, which measured more than 200 metres (more than 650 feet) long, caught fire on Tuesday off the port of Jask, the navy said.

Footage aired by state television showed a massive column of smoke rising from what it said was the burning vessel.

The fire broke out in "one of the systems" of the ship, a navy statement said without elaborating.

Firefighting efforts continued "for 20 hours" before the ship went down.

"Considering the spread of the fire, the mission to save the *Kharg* failed and it sank in waters off

Jask," the navy said.

The ship caught fire at 11 am (0630 GMT) on Tuesday as it was in "domestic waters" during "a training mission", Iran's Tasnim news agency quoted the navy's head of public relations Behzad Jahanian as saying.

It sank at around 8:30 am (0400 GMT) on Wednesday. All 400 cadets and crew disembarked safely, with 20 sustaining light injuries or burns. Jahanian said the cause of the fire was "still not clear".

The vessel was ordered from Britain in 1976 when the pro-Western shah was still in power.

It was not delivered until 1984 after years of wrangling between Britain and the government that took power after the Islamic revolution of 1979.

Jeremy Binnie of open-source defence intelligence provider Janes said the *Kharg* was important to



Smoke rises from Iran navy's largest ship in Jask on Wednesday. — AFP

Iran as its only dedicated vessel able to resupply warships at sea.

"The Iranians often describe it as a 'helicopter carrier' but it is actually a replenishment ship — a

useful asset nonetheless as it was the Islamic Republic of Iran Navy's only dedicated ship serving this role," Binnie said.

"It is not the IRIN's largest ves-

sel any more after they commissioned *Makran*, a converted oil tanker, in January," he added.

Iran's ISNA news agency said the vessel had left for a mission

focused on "training, intelligence and combat" alongside the destroyer *Alborz* on May 19.

The port city of Jask, near which the *Kharg* went down, lies close to the Strait of Hormuz, the strategic chokepoint at the head of the Gulf through which a fifth of world oil output passes.

Jask is strategically important to Iran as the government plans to make it the site of the country's second-largest oil export terminal.

An approximately 1,000-kilometre pipeline from Bushehr province on the Gulf to Jask was put into service a few days ago, the government said.

It provides a new bypass route for Iranian oil exports that avoids the Strait of Hormuz.

Last year, an Iranian warship was hit by friendly fire during a naval exercise off Jask, killing the 19 sailors onboard. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

TEL AVIV

Herzog elected new president of Israel

Israel's parliament has elected former opposition leader Isaac Herzog as president of the country. The 60-year-old won on Wednesday by 87 votes to 26 against 67-year-old teacher and activist Miriam Peretz. Herzog takes over the presidency from Reuven Rivlin on July 9.

Herzog announced he would be "president of all Israelis" and work towards uniting the divided country.

"Now is the time to build bridges," he said, adding he would



fight against anti-Semitism and hatred of Israel worldwide.

Herzog is secular, was born in Tel Aviv and has long been involved in politics. He had led the Labour Party since 2013. — AFP

ANKARA

Erdogan woos Egypt, Gulf states try repair ties

Turkey hopes to maximise its cooperation with Egypt and Gulf nations "on a win-win basis", President Tayyip Erdogan said on Tuesday, as Ankara works to repair its strained ties with Cairo and some Gulf nations.

Ankara's ties with Egypt and Saudi Arabia have been strained over several issues, from the Libyan conflict and the eastern Mediterranean.

Turkey has in recent months been pushing to repair ties with the estranged regional powers.



"We have serious potential for cooperation with Egypt in a wide spectrum of areas from the eastern Mediterranean to Libya," he said, adding he "loved" the Egyptian people. — Reuters

KHARTOUM

Naval base deal with Russia under review: Sudan

Sudan is reviewing a deal its ousted strongman negotiated with Russia allowing construction of a naval base after some clauses were found to be "somewhat harmful", a top military official has said.

For decades, Sudan was dependent militarily on Russia because of crippling sanctions imposed by Washington against the government of now removed president Omar al Bashir.

But since his 2019 overthrow, Sudan has moved closer to the



US which removed Khartoum from its crippling blacklist last year. "This deal was signed under the former National Salvation Government," armed forces chief of staff General Mohamed Othman al Hussein said. — AFP

In brief

■ GENEVA



WHO APPROVES CHINA'S SINOVAC COVID JAB

The World Health Organization on Tuesday approved the Sinovac Covid-19 vaccine for emergency use — the second Chinese jab to receive the WHO's green light.

The UN health agency signed off on the two-dose vaccine, which is already being deployed in several countries around the world.

"WHO today validated the Sinovac-CoronaVac Covid-19 vaccine for emergency use," it said in a statement.

The move gives countries, funders, procuring agencies and communities "assurance that it meets international standards for safety, efficacy and manufacturing".

■ ISLAMABAD



PAKISTAN TO REOPEN SCHOOLS FROM NEXT WEEK

Educational institutions in Pakistan will reopen from next week, the government announced on Wednesday, as the third wave of the pandemic slowed down and a vaccination drive picked up.

Students would return to schools, colleges and universities from Monday, Education Minister Shafqat Mahmood said in the capital Islamabad.

The government had already ordered the partial reopening of colleges and universities last week, but has now decided to reopen all the institutions, said Mahmood. The decision was announced as Pakistan reported fewer than 3,000 new coronavirus infections for the second consecutive day on Wednesday.

■ MANILA



DUTERTE URGES VACCINE UPTAKE AFTER MISSING TARGETS

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte appealed to the public on Wednesday to get vaccinated against Covid-19, after data showed the government was far behind its immunisation targets as it battles one of Asia's worst and longest-running outbreaks.

"I invite all our countrymen to be vaccinated at the earliest possible opportunity because this is the most, if not the only way, effective way, to defeat the Covid-19 pandemic," Duterte said in a televised address.

"Let us all keep in mind that the vaccine will not only protect you from the virus, it will also protect your loved ones, especially the sick and elderly."

Chemical cargo ship sinks off Sri Lanka

COLOMBO: A burnt-out container ship that has already caused Sri Lanka's worst maritime environmental disaster was sinking on Wednesday with nearly 350 tonnes of oil in its fuel tanks.

The *MV X-Press Pearl*, carrying hundreds of containers of chemicals and plastics, burned for 13 days just outside Colombo's harbour before rescue workers finally extinguished the blaze on Tuesday.

Dutch salvage firm SMIT attempted to pull the still-smoking wreckage of the 31,600-tonne vessel into deeper water on Wednesday but the effort stalled.

Navy spokesman Indika de Silva said that the stern had sunk to the bottom at a depth of 22 metres (72 feet), near Pamunugama, just north of Colombo.

"The bow is still afloat, but the stern is submerged and resting on the sea bed," de Silva said.

The 186-metre ship was still tethered to a powerful tug as experts mulled whether to attempt to refloat it, an official involved with the operation said.

A huge amount of plastic debris has already inundated beaches, and authorities now fear an even greater disaster should the ship's 297 tonnes of heavy fuel oil and 51 tonnes of marine fuel oil leak into the Indian Ocean.



Smoke rises from a fire onboard the *MV X-Press Pearl* vessel as it sinks while being towed into deep sea off the Colombo on Wednesday. — Reuters

An AFP photographer who reached the area by boat said he saw a narrow slick of oil coming from the stern of the Singapore-registered vessel.

Some oil was already visible near the beaches of Negombo, about 40 kilometres from Colombo, although it was not clear if it was from the stricken ship. International shipping expert and lawyer Dan Gunasekera said that divers could be used to pump out

the bunker oil safely.

"We can assume that since the ship is only three months old, it had good systems to ensure there is no leak from fuel tanks in an eventuality like this," Gunasekera said.

Navy spokesman de Silva said an Indian coastguard vessel was in the area with specialised equipment to deal with any oil leak.

Officials believe the blaze

destroyed most of the 1,486 containers onboard.

Eighty-one containers were carrying chemicals, including 25 tonnes of nitric acid which had been leaking since May 11, nine days before the fire broke out.

The inundation of microplastic granules from the cargo has already forced a fishing ban and prompted concern for wildlife and the marine environment.

Marine Environment

Protection Authority chief Dharshani Lahandapura said the ecological damage was still being assessed but believed it was the "worst ever in my lifetime".

President Gotabaya Rajapaksa asked Australia on Monday to help evaluate the ecological damage to the island, one of the most bio-diverse countries in South Asia.

The head of Sri Lanka's Roman Catholic church, Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith, called for legal action against authorities for allowing the ship into local waters.

He said the livelihoods of thousands of fishermen, most from the country's Catholic minority, were now under threat.

Sri Lanka has already launched a criminal investigation.

Authorities suspect the crew knew about the acid leak from May 11.

Police said three officers from the ship, two Russians and an Indian, had been questioned and their passports impounded.

The ship was heading to Colombo from Gujarat in India when the blaze started, having previously visited Qatar and Dubai where the containers of 25 tonnes of nitric acid were loaded.

The 25-strong crew was evacuated last week. One was admitted to hospital with minor injuries. — Agencies

Elephants on tour in China guzzle crops and wreak havoc



A herd of elephants walk along a road in Eshan, Yunnan, China.

BEIJING: A herd of 15 wandering elephants on an epic trek through southwestern China have entered villages to gorge on crops, broken into barns and caused a million dollars of losses.

Over the past week, the animals drained a water tank, helped themselves to a corn field, and guzzled supplies after crashing into a barn, state broadcaster CCTV said.

It is unclear why the wild Asian elephants, a protected species in China, strayed from the Xishuangbanna National Nature Reserve in Yunnan province.

Their destination so far is unknown as well.

But since April, the large animals have embarked on a 500-km journey, closely monitored by residents and authorities, with hundreds of people mobilised to ensure public safety.

On Tuesday, Yunnan authorities said the herd was

in a city just 20 km from its provincial capital where millions live.

Experts believe the leader of the group might have led it astray, adding that it is rare for them to trek so far.

Since mid-April, the elephants have wrecked around 56 hectares of crops, causing an estimated 6.8 million yuan (\$1.07 million) in losses, CCTV said.

No casualties have been reported so far, with locals attempting to guide the animals with food and by blocking roads with trucks.

The wild elephant population in Yunnan is around 300, up from 193 in the 1980s, reported Xinhua.

But there have been more reports of such elephants wandering into villages and harming crops in recent years, with the plants they usually eat gradually replaced by non-edible varieties amid forest expansion, said local officials. — AFP

'One strain of Covid delta variant risky'

GENEVA: The WHO said on Tuesday that one strain of a Covid-19 variant first detected in India was now considered "of concern" and had been dubbed "Delta", while two other strains had been downgraded.

The B.1.617 variant of the virus, which has in part been blamed for India's explosive outbreak, has been called a triple mutant variant since it is split into three lineages.

The UN health agency last month declared the entire strain a

"variant of concern", or VOC, but on Tuesday, it said only one of the sub-lineages deserved that label.

"It has become evident that greater public health risks are currently associated with B.1.617.2, while lower rates of transmission of other lineages have been observed," the World Health Organization said in its weekly epidemiological update on the pandemic.

The B.1.617.2 variant remains a VOC, along with three other variants of the virus that are

seen as more dangerous than the original version because they are more transmissible, deadly or have the potential to get past some vaccine protections.

In line with a decision announced on Monday to refer to variants of concern and interest using Greek letters — aimed to avoid the possible stigmatisation associated with referring to them with the name of the countries where they were first detected — the B.1.617.2 variant has now been dubbed Delta. — AFP



Ministry of
Higher Education,
Research &
Innovation

ELECTRONIC TENDERS

The Internal Tenders Committee of the Ministry of Higher Education Research & Innovation announced the following tenders:

Tender No.	Tender Name	Company that are entitled to participate	Tender Price	Last Date for purchasing Tender	The deadline for submission of tenders
04/2021	Rectification works at MOHERI Headquarters and carpark structure	Specialized in providing Same service and registered with the Tender Board with Grade: first	26 /200 RO	21/06/2021	11/07/2021
05/2021	Providing cleaning services for the buildings of Seeb vocational college	Specialized in providing Same service and registered with the Tender Board with Grade first- second- third	25 RO	22/06/2021	12/07/2021
06/2021	Providing cleaning services for buildings of Sur vocational college	Specialized in providing Same service and registered with the Tender Board with Grade first	25 RO	22/06/2021	12/07/2021
07/2021	Providing maintenance services for Al Buraimi Vocational college buildings	Specialized in providing Same service and registered with the Tender Board with Grade - second	25 RO	22/06/2021	12/7/2012

please visit the following link in E-Tendering system for purchasing the tender documents:

<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om/>

All companies that are bidding must provide a bank guarantee or a certified cheque from a bank operating in the Sultanate for at least (1%) of the tender value on behalf of His Excellency Dr. / Chairman of the Internal Tender Committee.

Preference will be given to companies' or small and medium enterprises registered with the General Authority for the development of Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) that includes the largest proportion of its tender Omanization.

Ministry is not bound to accept the lowest or any other tender.

Chairman of tender committee

Ministry of Higher Education Research & Innovation



■ COLOURS OF THE REPUBLIC



The aerobatic demonstration team of the Italian Air Force, the Freccie Tricolori (Tricolor Arrows), perform over the city on Republic Day in Rome on Wednesday. In the 1946 referendum, a majority of Italians voted to introduce the republic and rejected the monarchy as a form of government. — Reuters

Germany to build up reserve vaccine capacity to fight future pandemics

BERLIN: Germany plans to pay vaccine manufacturers an annual reservation fee to build up reserve capacity of around 600-700 million doses per year to help it fight future pandemics, Health Minister Jens Spahn (pictured) said on Wednesday.

The government plans to launch a call for tenders for so-called pandemic preparedness contracts with a five-year term so that vaccine doses “can be activated quickly if the worst comes to the worst,” Spahn told a news conference.

Manufacturing setbacks and an over-reliance on European Union approval for supplies slowed Germany’s rollout of Covid-19 vaccines. It wants to boost domestic production to ensure it is not deprived of shots in future pandemics.

To that end, it set up a vaccine task force in February that aims to reduce bottlenecks by ensuring production of vital products in the supply chain like glass vials and lipids.

The stand-by contracts will help maintain know-how acquired during the Covid-19 crisis so that next time “we

don’t have to ramp up production from zero to 100,” Christoph Krupp, head of the vaccine production task force, told reporters.

“We want to bet on several companies and several vaccine types and not just one,” Krupp said.

The contract terms include having production capacity in Germany and being able to manufacture active ingredients as well as converting them into drug substance for a fast scale-up of vaccines, he added.

The contracts will be activated if necessary, in which case they will become supply deals, and Germany expects to be able to deliver vaccines to Europe and the rest of the world, he said.

Germany is home to BioNTech and CureVac, two of the leading developers of mRNA vaccines for Covid-19, as well as pharmaceutical giants Bayer and Merck and many small-and-medium-sized suppliers.

The German plan is one of more than half a dozen by governments around the world to avert shortages by supporting drug companies’ local production. — Reuters



Summit secures \$2.4 bn for Covid shots for poor countries

GENEVA/ZURICH: Dozens of countries on Wednesday pledged nearly \$2.4 billion to the COVAX vaccine-sharing plan to widen availability of Covid-19 shots to people in poorer nations who have so far come up short.

The announcements, ranging from \$2,500 from island nation Mauritius to millions of dollars and doses from larger, wealthier countries, came during a video summit hosted by Japan and the GAVI Vaccine Alliance, which leads the COVAX facility alongside the World Health Organization.

“We have taken a big step towards ‘one world protected,’” said Jose Manuel Barroso, GAVI vaccine alliance chairman. The fresh funds brought total COVAX financing to \$9.6 billion, he added.

Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, whose government pledged \$800 million, called the result “an extremely significant and meaningful step” towards equitable vaccine access.

The COVAX mechanism, which has distributed 77 million doses to 127 countries, aims to accelerate access to 1.8 billion vaccine doses, covering nearly 30 per cent of poorer nations’ populations.

United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres described the pledge drive as

‘Data supports easing of travel curbs’

PARIS: Global airline body IATA stepped up its pressure on governments to ease travel restrictions on Wednesday, pointing to UK testing data that showed low incidence of Covid-19 in arriving passengers.

“These data tell us we can do better,” IATA Director-General Willie Walsh said, citing a 2.2-per cent positive rate among 365,895 tests carried out in February-May, according to Britain’s National Health Service.

“Universal restrictions on people are no longer needed,” Walsh added. Excluding passengers arriving from countries on Britain’s higher-risk red list, the positive rate fell to 1.46 per cent, according to the data cited by the International Air Transport Association.

Most international air travel remains depressed almost 18



Passengers wait to check-in at an Air France counter for a flight to Paris at Algiers’ Houari Boumediene Airport on Tuesday, after Algeria reopened its borders following a 15-month closure due to the Covid-19 pandemic. — AFP

months into the pandemic because of continuing restrictions.

Walsh, who took the top job at IATA in April, said last month that governments were being too risk-averse and needed to change rules to reflect data showing that vaccinated travel or travel with

testing poses little risk to a country’s infection rate.

“The crisis in the airline industry, which was initially caused by a health pandemic, is now really a crisis caused by restrictions being imposed by government,” Walsh had said. — Reuters

Covid-19

World toll Wednesday, June 2 at 1000 GMT

Deaths	New	Cases	New
3,681,985	14,742	171,096,695	478,460

New: 24-hour increase on Tuesday, June 1

Hardest-hit countries

	Deaths	New (latest report)	Cases
UNITED STATES	595,213	640	33,287,577
BRAZIL	465,199	2,408	16,624,480
INDIA	335,102	3,207	28,307,832
MEXICO*	227,840	4,272	2,420,659
PERU*	184,507	-	1,961,087
UNITED KINGDOM	127,782	0	4,490,438
ITALY	126,221	93	4,220,304
RUSSIA	122,267	394	5,090,249
FRANCE	109,691	134	5,677,172
COLOMBIA	89,297	523	3,432,422
GERMANY	88,774	179	3,687,828
IRAN	80,327	171	2,923,823

*Tolls revised by authorities. Mexico includes reclassified deaths, no death toll reported in Peru in the last 24 hours

Increases over 24 hours may not tally exactly with previous day’s total due to inavailability or late publication of data or corrections made by authorities

Source: AFP count based on official tolls



Of the 1.8 billion vaccines administered globally just 0.4 per cent have been administered in low-income countries. This is ethically, epidemiologically and economically unacceptable

TEDROS GHEBREYESUS
WHO Director-General

year and \$2 billion earmarked for next year, but made no specific announcements on fresh US funding.

WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus reiterated long-running concerns that Western nations have vaccinated high percentages of their people, while health workers in places like Africa remain unprotected.

“Of the 1.8 billion vaccines administered globally just 0.4 per cent have been administered in low-income countries,” he said. “This is ethically, epidemiologically and economically unacceptable.” — Reuters

WASHINGTON

Harris will lead push on voting rights

President Joe Biden on Tuesday announced that Vice-President Kamala Harris would steer the administration’s efforts to bolster voting rights, a daunting task that Democrats and voting rights advocates say is urgent in the face of a barrage of Republican-led efforts to change state voting laws.

The issue is one of the most difficult the administration faces. Democrats in the House passed a sweeping voting rights bill in early March, but it faces a dim future in the evenly divided Senate.



Biden announced Harris’ new role during a speech in Tulsa, Oklahoma, to mark the 100-year anniversary of a massacre there, in which a white mob wiped out a prosperous Black community.

PARIS

Macron starts a ‘Tour de France’

French President Emmanuel Macron begins a nationwide tour on Wednesday ahead of next year’s presidential election, in a risky repeat of previous meet-and-greet initiatives that saw him heckled by angry voters.

The 43-year-old centrist, widely expected to seek a second term in polls next April and May, will begin what he calls the task of “measuring the country’s pulse” in picturesque villages in southwest France.

Around a dozen stops are



planned over the next two months, in a sign that the former investment banker has an eye on regional elections on June 20 and 27, as well as his own personal political test next year.

LONDON

Nato considering further steps on Belarus

Nato wants to see sanctions fully implemented against Belarus following the forced landing of a flight in May to arrest a journalist and its secretary-general, Jens Stoltenberg, said some allies were looking at taking further action on the issue.

“I think the most important thing now is to make sure that those sanctions that are agreed are fully implemented,” he said, standing alongside British Prime Minister Boris Johnson during a visit to London. “And



I also know that other allies are looking to whether they can step up further.”

Johnson said it was important that the allies stand together in protest.

Teach commerce to build future...

A funny clip of a student from one of the Gulf countries has gone viral these days. This clip says why students do not study commerce and entrepreneurship from the primary level till they get general diploma. In fact, this is not a problem for any country. Instead, it is the dilemma of all our Arab countries. It is a real problem that cannot be ignored. This is because it develops lots of other complex issues in the later stages of the lives of the students and particularly when they enter into practical world after completing studies.

While discussing this let us raise the most important question. Why our curricula do not include entrepreneurship from primary level to university level so that our children learn at least basic principles of business and entrepreneurship from the very beginning. If this is done it will open their minds to broad horizons. This will qualify them to become entrepreneurs.

The Ministry of Education can take serious and real steps in this direction. Following the old approach does not have any importance keeping in view the challenges ahead. When everything is changing in the world, the preparation to match its pace is highly required.

The importance of instilling the knowledge of principles of commerce and business in the hearts of young



Ali Al Matani
ali.matani2@gmail.com

OUR CURRICULA SHOULD INCLUDE ENTREPRENEURSHIP FROM PRIMARY LEVEL TO UNIVERSITY LEVEL

people even when they are in schools cannot be denied. Gradually, they should also be made familiar with the sciences of financial project management and marketing etc. Such subjects have become a necessity of life and should be part of the curriculum in schools and universities as they are responsible for building the future of the society and the nation.

We need e-commerce experts who can reap millions of dollars that are reaching other continents, and we are unable to pick up even a single dollar from it due to the lack of knowledge of these easy and complex electronic commercial developments.

We all know that Prophet Zakariya was a carpenter and the last Prophet Mohammad (PBUH), was himself a businessman trading between Mecca and Al Shaam. This is enough to prove the virtues of commercial activities, thus preparing ourselves for this from early stages of our education.

One of my colleagues said that there is an expatriate community school that teaches commerce and its principles from the very beginning, theoretically, and practically.

This is because they realise the importance of the subject. For this purpose, they have a lot of innovative ideas which they implement as part of their curriculum and extra-curricular activities.

At Sultan Qaboos University, there is a compulsory subject, which is repeated at this level and it is the same as what we studied in middle school and high school. Instead of repeating it, the university and colleges should have taught entrepreneurship as a university course till the end of university studies. This could have given students an opportunity to learn business skills and how to manage it.

Because there is a lot of ignorance of such sciences, we face obstacles in the way of entrepreneurship of small and medium enterprises. New entrepreneurs lack familiarity with the principles of accounting, marketing and finance.

The natural result is that many beneficiaries of development finances and loans fail to manage their businesses.

We hope that the ministries of education and higher education, colleges, universities, other institutions of higher education and training centres, will begin preparing such curricula for the levels starting from the school till the university. It is important that the new generations learn these sciences.

When we plan an educational curriculum, we should not ignore the current and future requirements.

These are expectations from schools and universities because they are responsible for producing leaders of tomorrow.

FROM WHERE?

Covid origins mystery continues to spark speculation

JULIE CHARPENTRAT

The coronavirus Sars-CoV-2 has scorched its way across the world killing millions and bringing economies to a standstill. But where exactly did it come from?

With few clear answers, speculation has persisted since the beginning of the pandemic, spawning misinformation and conspiracy theories as well as sharp diplomatic tensions.

Bats were identified early on as the probable origin of Covid-19.

But scientists think the virus would have passed from the winged mammals to another species before reaching humans. The pangolin was singled out as a suspect because it is one of the wild animal species sold at the market in the Chinese city of Wuhan, which was linked to most of the first known cases of coronavirus.

However, uncertainty about this theory persists.

A joint investigation by World Health Organization (WHO) experts and Chinese scientists who visited Wuhan in January 2021 was supposed to help shed light on the theory but did not find the missing link.

Other animal intermediaries have come under suspicion, including minks and the ferret-badger.

Another idea floated early on was that the virus did not reach people through animals but was engineered.

This idea often went hand-in-hand with the theory that the virus had leaked from a secure biolab in Wuhan. The idea spread widely online with some help from former US President Donald Trump.

One version of this theory alleges that the virus was created and spread on purpose.

Some Internet publications have claimed that the existence of coronavirus patents offer “proof” of this, although in reality, they are pointing to patented research on other coronaviruses.

The idea that the other pathogens had been spiced into the virus has also proved popular, even though scientists say such genetic manipulation would be visible in the Sars-CoV-2 genome.

Professor Olivier Schwartz of the Pasteur institute calls such ideas “completely unfounded”.

The idea that a virus of natural origins — taken from a bat, for example — could have escaped from a secure biolab has been under increased consideration in recent weeks.

The WHO team that travelled to Wuhan in January said in their report that animal transmission was “likely to very likely” while a lab leak was “extremely unlikely”.

But WHO chief Tedros Ghebreyesus has said the laboratory leak theory “requires further investigation, potentially with additional missions involving specialist experts, which I am ready to deploy”.

In May, a group of 18 experts echoed the sentiment in an editorial that appeared in the journal Science.

“We must take hypotheses about both natural and laboratory spillovers seriously until we have sufficient data,” they wrote. — AFP

“The laboratory leak theory requires further investigation, potentially with additional missions involving specialist experts, which I am ready to deploy”.

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“We must take hypotheses about both natural and laboratory spillovers seriously until we have sufficient data,” they wrote. — AFP

A BITTER PILL

Lebanon’s medical crisis set to get even worse as funds dry up

MAHA EL DAHAN AND ALAA KANAAN

For Mira Hasbini, Lebanon’s disastrous financial crisis came down to something very basic: surgeons couldn’t find enough screws to fix her aged mother’s broken bones.

After a fall that broke her elbow and leg, Hasbini’s mother Sahar was rushed to hospital where surgeons wanted to insert six screws. But there was a shortage. “It was a disaster, she was in a lot of pain,” Hasbini said.

Her mother was put on morphine and the hospital, which Hasbini did not want to name, found the screws a day later. “Is it possible that a whole hospital doesn’t have even six screws in stock? What if someone has a car accident?”

The financial crisis that is gripping Lebanon, described by the World Bank as one of the deepest depressions in modern history, is taking its toll on the healthcare system.

Hospitals are cutting down on elective surgeries to reserve what is left of anaesthetics and other medical supplies for emergency procedures.

“We are concerned of course because you know hospitals can’t stop operating, at the end of the day when the life of the patient is in danger we have to do something,” Firass Abiad, who runs Beirut’s Rafik Hariri University Hospital, said.

“What is most worrying is that we don’t know until when this will continue, if you know you can plan but when you don’t there is a problem.”

The shortage is set to deepen as the



Mazen Bsat, a pharmacy owner, points at medication shelves during an interview in Beirut, Lebanon. — Reuters

THE FINANCIAL CRISIS THAT IS GRIPPING LEBANON, DESCRIBED BY THE WORLD BANK AS ONE OF THE DEEPEST DEPRESSIONS IN MODERN HISTORY, IS TAKING ITS TOLL ON THE HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

government, which is politically paralysed, deeply indebted and struggling to raise funds from potential donors, warned in early April that money for subsidies would run out in about two months. The country has been subsidising fuel, wheat, medicine and other basic goods since last year, which costs the state around \$6 billion a year.

The programme has drained reserves, which dipped from over \$30 billion before the start of the crisis to around \$15 billion in March. The Central Bank did not give an updated figure on reserves when asked by Reuters.

The bank said last week it would not dip into its mandatory reserves to pay

around \$1.3 billion it owes in medical supply costs, asking the government to find a solution to the shortage.

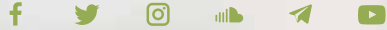
Karim Gebara, who heads Lebanon’s Pharmaceutical Importers Association, says the situation is set to get even worse in June, with stocks completely depleted as suppliers abroad demand payment and cancel orders.

“Lebanon owes the pharmaceutical exporters around \$600 million,” Gebara said.

“In other words, all the medicine that we have received in the past six months and (which has been) consumed by Lebanese patients is not paid for,” he said. — Reuters

sport

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Switzerland's Henri Laaksonen plays a return to Spain's Roberto Bautista Agut. – AFP

Laaksonen emerges from Federer shadow

Z V E R E V E D G E S R U S S I A N Q U A L I F I E R T O E N T E R T H I R D R O U N D

PARIS: Switzerland's Henri Laaksonen stepped out of the giant shadow of Roger Federer at the French Open on Wednesday, at least for a day, when he reached the third round of a Grand Slam for the first time and cast his mind back to playing clay court tennis on snow.

The late-blooming Laaksonen defeated 11th seed Roberto Bautista Agut 6-3, 2-6, 6-3, 6-2 to finally etch his name into a headline, which when it comes to Swiss tennis usually features Federer and occasionally Stan Wawrinka.

It took until Paris for the 29-year-old to win his first main draw match of this year.

That he should he snap his drought in the French capital makes sense as it was on clay in his native Finland where he mastered his technique.

"They opened the clay courts really early, sometimes like the end of March, beginning of April already," he recalled Wednesday of his boyhood.

"Yeah, sometimes we were playing when it was snowing a little bit but we always had a quite long clay season actually."

Laaksonen lost in qualifying at Roland Garros in his first four visits before finally making it to the main draw in 2019 when Novak Djokovic ended his run in the second round.

Last year, he qualified again only to lose to Uruguayan dirt-baller Pablo Cuevas.

Ranked at 150 in the world, he was back in qualifying again this year before seeing off Germany's Yannick Hanfmann in his opener.

His run to the third round



Germany's Alexander Zverev plays a return to Russia's Roman Safiullin at the Roland Garros 2021. – AFP

has already guaranteed him a paycheck of over \$136,000. In the whole of last year, he made \$126,000.

"Last year was tough because we didn't have tournaments. So, there was no income. I was lucky to qualify also to Australian Open main draw, so that helped me a little bit," he added.

His goal now is now to return to the top 100 and hopefully better his career-high of 93 achieved in August 2017.

Next up is either Russian 23rd seed Karen Khachanov or Japan's Kei Nishikori.

"To be honest, I wasn't expecting that I win today, so first I have to enjoy this one and then I think I

have a day off tomorrow.

"I do my practice, and then when I have the next match, I try to continue from there where I left today. I want to improve my game and trying to get better."

ZVEREV ADVANCES

German sixth seed Alexander Zverev blew hot and cold with his serve but had enough artillery to take down Russian qualifier Roman Safiullin 7-6(4), 6-3, 7-6(1) to reach the third round of the French Open on Wednesday.

Zverev and Safiullin never contested a Tour-level match before Wednesday but met three times as juniors with the German winning all three in straight sets.

But the 182nd-ranked Russian, who mostly plies his trade on the Challenger circuit, went toe-to-toe with Zverev in the baseline battle in the opening set before the German got the crucial break in the 11th game.

Serving for the set, Zverev committed two double-faults to give away the advantage and had another in the tie-breaker but he recovered to take the lead with back-to-back aces in the first match of the day on Suzanne Lenglen court.

"First week you play against guys, some of them play first, second, third time of a Grand Slam," Zverev said. "They're very motivated. They're excited to play

on the big courts like I thought today.

"I think he played a fantastic match. I'm happy to be through in three sets. The match definitely wasn't easy."

Double faults continued to haunt the 24-year-old German in the second set as he smashed his racquet on the court in frustration and suffered a service break. But he recovered spectacularly to take the set by winning five games in a row.

Safiullin continued to trouble Zverev in the third set and forced the German, who rallied from two sets down to defeat qualifier Oscar Otte in Sunday's opening round, to dig deep.

Zverev, who served 15 aces against 10 double faults, was once again forced to overcome a 4-1 deficit to take the third set into a tiebreaker.

But the US Open finalist served strongly and outplayed Safiullin in the tiebreaker to set up a clash against Serbia's Laslo Djere, who came back from a two-set deficit to beat countryman Miomir Kecmanovic 4-6, 4-6, 6-3, 6-2, 6-3.

"Today, especially last two sets, they could have gone both ways, especially the third. The second I thought I was in control more," said Zverev, who is considered one of the title contenders at Roland Garros this time after his win in Madrid.

"But, yeah, I'm happy to be through in three sets. I'm happy not to have played another five-setter. I think it's going to be important for me during the course of this tournament." — **Agencies**

FRENCH OPEN RESULTS

MEN (SECOND ROUND):
Alexander Zverev (GER x6) bt Roman Safiullin (RUS) 7-6 (7/4), 6-3, 7-6 (7/1); Laslo Djere (SRB) bt Miomir Kecmanovic (SRB) 4-6, 4-6, 6-3, 6-2, 6-3; Henri Laaksonen (SUI) bt Roberto Bautista Agut (ESP x11) 6-3, 2-6, 6-3, 6-2; Casper Ruud (NOR x15) bt Kamil Majchrzak (POL) 6-3, 6-2, 6-4; Federico Delbonis (ARG) bt Pablo Andujar (ESP) 4-6, 6-1, 3-6, 6-3, 6-2

WOMEN (SECOND ROUND):
Elena Vesnina (RUS) bt Petra Kvitova (CZE x11) - walkover; Tamara Kasatkina (SLO) bt Madison Brengle (USA) 6-4, 6-1; Katerina Siniakova (CZE) bt Veronika Kudermetova (RUS x29) 7-6 (9/7), 5-7, 7-5; Sorana Cirstea (ROM) bt Martina Trevisan (ITA) 6-4, 3-6, 6-4; Daria Kasatkina (RUS) bt Belinda Bencic (SUI x10) 6-2, 6-2; Polona Hercog (SLO) bt Caroline Garcia (FRA) 7-5, 6-4; Marketa Vondrousova (CZE x20) bt Harmony Tan (FRA) 6-1, 6-3; Ana Bogdan (ROM) bt Naomi Osaka (JPN x2) - walkover



ICC mulls moving 2021 T20 WC from India to UAE

LONDON: This year's men's T20 World Cup could be moved from India to the United Arab Emirates, the International Cricket Council said on Tuesday.

The move appears to have been prompted by the rising number of Covid-19 cases in India, although this was not mentioned directly in a statement issued by the global governing body.

"The ICC board has requested management focus its planning efforts for the ICC men's T20 World Cup 2021 on the event being staged in the UAE with the possibility of including another venue in the Middle East," the statement said.

The ICC added that a final decision on the host country for the October-November event would be taken later this month.

It also said the Board of Control for Cricket in India

(BCCI) would remain the hosts of the tournament, regardless of where it is played.

The statement came just two days after Indian cricket chiefs announced that the lucrative Indian Premier League T20 franchise tournament, suspended after a new Covid-19 wave hit India, would be finished in the UAE in September and October.

Meanwhile, the BCCI said it would ask the ICC for more time to make a decision on whether India, the sport's economic powerhouse and one of the leading on-field nations, could still stage the T20 World Cup.

The IPL, the world's richest cricket tournament, was half-finished when it was halted on May 4 after a number of players and team officials caught the coronavirus despite being based in bio-secure bubbles, prompting

It also said the BCCI would remain the hosts of the tournament, regardless of where it is played

an exodus of foreign stars.

About 160,000 people have died in India since April 1 in a devastating wave.

There are fears the country could be hit by another surge later this year that may coincide with the current T20 World Cup schedule.

The BCCI said, however, that

it was moving the remaining matches to the UAE — which staged all of last year's IPL — because of the monsoon season and did not mention the pandemic.

In April, ICC acting chief executive Geoff Allardice said he hoped the increasing use of vaccines around the world was "going to be an important step for us to head back toward some normality in the way cricket is run".

In particular, he was concerned by the cumulative effects on players' mental health as of months spent playing and quarantining in bio-secure bubbles around the world.

"Moving forward, we would be trying to wind back (the bubbles) but continue to provide a safe environment," Allardice said.

— AFP

Cricket World Cup to revert to 14 teams from 2027

LONDON: The men's Cricket World Cup will once again become a 14-team tournament in 2027 and 2031, the International Cricket Council said on Tuesday.

The changes were announced as the ICC, cricket's global governing body, unveiled its global schedule of events from 2024-2031.

Meanwhile, the Champions Trophy, a 'mini' World Cup last staged in 2017, when Pakistan won in England, is to be revived again in 2025 and 2029 as an event for the top-ranked eight one-day international teams.

Only 10 sides contested the 2019 World Cup, won by hosts England, compared to 14 four years earlier.

But a statement issued by the ICC board said: "The ICC Men's Cricket World Cup will become a 14 team, 54-match event in 2027 and 2031, whilst the ICC Men's T20 World Cup will be expanded to a 20-team, 55-match event in 2024, 2026, 2028 and 2030."

The board, however, has retained the format for the World Test Championship in the next cycle, with nine teams playing six series each to compete in the final every two years.

India and New Zealand will contest the inaugural WTC final in Southampton, England, later this month.

The expanded men's World Cup, which traditionally takes place every four years, will follow the same format used for the 2003 edition when South Africa were the

main hosts of a tournament won by Australia.

This will see the 14 teams split into two groups of seven, with the top three in each group progressing to a Super Six stage, followed by semifinals and a final.

The men's T20 World Cup will consist of four groups of five, with the top two from each group going through to a Super Eights stage, followed by the knockout stages of semifinals and a final.

The Champions Trophy, in keeping with its history as a slimmed-down event, will follow previous editions with two groups of four, semifinals and a final.

Reducing the number of sides involved in the 2011 World Cup in Australia and New Zealand to just 10 was a controversial decision by the ICC, with critics arguing it frustrated the global growth of the game.

Officials defended the move at the time by saying a streamlined format reduced the risk of mismatches and was preferred by broadcasters.

But it appears the current ICC hierarchy value the overall benefit of global expansion, with the T20 World Cup now taking place every two years from 2024 and increased to 20 teams from 16.

Following the fall-out from the ICC's decision to cut the number of teams at the 50-over World Cup to 10, it launched the 13-team ODI Super League.

The top eight teams will qualify directly for the 2023 World Cup in India. — AFP



ICC, Oman Cricket look to boost fan engagement

VAISHALI TO PLAY ROLE IN ICC FUTURE LEADERS PROGRAMME

SHAHZAD RAZA
MUSCAT, JUNE 2

Having been picked by International Cricket Council (ICC) for its 100 per cent Future Leaders Programme on Tuesday, Oman's Vaishali Jesrani, captain of women's team, feels the Sultanate will do well to increase fan engagement as it looks to host international sports events in future.

To facilitate this aspect of women's cricket development, ICC has appointed Anthony Everard, Cricket Australia's Executive General Manager, to work as Vaishali's mentor as the

six-month programme starts next week.

"I look forward to serve women's cricket on a major platform in a much bigger way. The new role is extremely motivating after all the years of playing and establishing women's cricket in Oman. Getting into the ICC Future Leaders Programme is a great honour. I believe I have many more levels to reach in cricket and develop myself. I am working with Anthony which is going to be a great learning experience as Cricket Australia is one of the best organisations to work with as it takes women's cricket equally serious to any



Vaishali Jesrani

international sport around the world," said Vaishali, who is also Oman Cricket's Lady Coordinator for Women's Cricket Development.

Wishing her success, Duleep

Mendis, Chief Development Officer, Oman Cricket (OC), said Vaishali's selection was an honour for OC and a rare opportunity for her.

Talking about the top-class cricket infrastructure in Oman and the wonderful support Oman Cricket Board provided to develop women's cricket over the years, Vaishali said ICC and Oman Cricket were looking to see how they can have more fans engaged when it comes to international events in future.

"ICC is not only looking to expand its TV audience, but is also trying to see the game growing internationally. Looking

back, things did not look good for women's cricket in Oman initially. A lot of girls were even questioning themselves whether they had any real prospects to grow as international sportswomen but things started changing. It's quite clear now that women can definitely meet their ambitions and have a career in sport. There is a big platform open to them now and many opportunities are going to come their way. It's all about how their family or society looks at each and every daughter or girl who picks up her cricket kit and goes out there to perform," she added.

She was all praise for the

parents, schools and Oman's media for helping women's cricket develop and grow.

The six-month programme will include a kick-off workshop with Belinda Clark, followed by monthly check-ins and a three-month review with the mentees and mentors agreeing the frequency and method of communication.

The role of a mentor is to unlock their mentee's potential and help them to be at their best. This could include being a confidential sounding-board, providing advice, guidance and connections to reach their potential.

Registrations open for 2021 world sailing

MUSANNAH TO HOST 49ER, 49ERFX AND NACRA 17 WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS FROM NOV 16-21

MUSCAT: Registration is now open for the upcoming 2021 49er, 49erFX and Nacra 17 World Championships, to be held at Musannah from 16-21 November 2021. Oman Sail will welcome a 400-strong fleet of the world's best sailors in three Olympic Classes when the championships, being held in Asia for the first time in its history, kick off later this year.

The six-day event will be the first stop on the road to the Paris 2024 Olympic Games for sailors in the 49er, 49erFX and Nacra 17 class and offers another chance for the international sailing community to experience Oman's famed hospitality. Conditions in November are likely to be perfect for sailing with wind averaging between 10 and 14 knots, an average temperature of 23 degrees Celsius, meaning



Rashid al Kindi

the powerful sea breezes and pleasant waves will power the sailors to top speed and allow for thrilling action out on the water.

Rashid bin Ibrahim al Kindi, Oman Sail's Director of Sailing, said, "This is a chance for the Sultanate of Oman to make history as the first Asian hosts of the World Championships and welcome the world's best sailors in all three classes to our shores. The championships will mark the first global sailing event post-Tokyo 2020 and the start of the next qualification campaign building towards the 2024 Games in three years' time. With such a high calibre of sailing talent on show, we anticipate an exciting return to the water for the 49er, 49erFX and Nacra 17 classes, and everyone at

Oman Sail is looking forward to welcoming the world's best sailors for what promises to be another excellent major tournament hosted in Oman."

The race will be managed by Oman Sail's professional

The six-day event will be the first stop on the road to the Paris 2024 Olympic Games for sailors in the 49er, 49erFX and Nacra 17 class

race management team in collaboration with World Sailing and 49er Class officials. As the world begins to reopen following the pandemic, there will be opportunities for visitors to stay longer in the Sultanate familiarise themselves with the country's natural

beauty. Personalised city tours, cultural visits and adventuring into the mountains, the sea and the desert will also be available through Oman Sail.

The Sultanate of Oman has garnered a well-deserved reputation in international sailing as an impressive host venue, complete with excellent sailing conditions and world-class facilities. Past successes include the 2010 Asian Beach Games, for which Al Musannah Sports City was purpose-built, the 2013 Laser World Championships, the 2015 RSX world Championships, the 2019 Asian and Oceanian Optimist Championships, and most recently the 2021 Musannah Open Championship, a Tokyo 2020 qualification event for African and Asian nations.

Oman will also host the 2021 Asian Windsurfing Championships in October 2021 and is currently bidding for the Youth World Championships due to take place in December 2021.



Brazil names Rio among host venues for Copa America

BRASILIA: Brazil named Rio de Janeiro and three other cities as host venues for the Copa America on Tuesday in a move that appeared to strengthen the likelihood of the tournament taking place, even as a Supreme Court judge asked President Jair Bolsonaro to explain his surprise decision.

The demand by Justice Ricardo Lewandowski came in response to a suit filed by the opposition Workers' Party, which objected to Brazil hosting the tournament given the current public health situation.

Bolsonaro said earlier on Tuesday his government had agreed Brazil would host the regional tournament from June 13 to July 10, after planned host Argentina pulled out due to a dramatic worsening of the coronavirus pandemic there.

The capital Brasilia, Rio de Janeiro, Cuiaba and Goiania were confirmed as host cities by Alejandro Dominguez, President of the South American Football Confederation (Conmebol).

"We have chosen the hosts in agreement, obviously, with the governors," Bolsonaro said. "So, everything suggests... that Brazil will host the Copa America."

Rio's Maracana stadium and the Mane Garrincha stadium in Brasilia will be favourites to host the opening match and the final.



A man rides a bike near a graffiti depicting a soccer player in Sao Paulo, Brazil. — Reuters

The decision to host football's oldest international tournament comes as Brazil struggles to cope with the ravages of a virus that has killed over 465,000 people, according to government figures, the second-highest tally in the world.

Brazil offered to host the tournament played by 10 South American nations in a surprise decision taken jointly with Conmebol on Monday, and is now racing against time to provide

flights, transport, accommodation and training facilities for the visiting delegations.

The tournament is set to feature some of the greatest names in world football, including Argentines Lionel Messi and Sergio Aguero, Neymar from Brazil, and Uruguayans Luis Suarez and Edinson Cavani.

Conmebol has promised all players will be vaccinated before the tournament begins.

However, not everyone was

happy with the move, with Peru coach Ricardo Gareca complaining that Brazil was getting to host the tournament twice in succession.

"It doesn't seem fair to me that Brazil is hosting the Copa America again because it was the host last time (in 2019)," Gareca said. "I think the fair thing would be to see other options."

The union of Colombian footballers also expressed their misgivings about the sudden shift of host nation. — Reuters



Ancelotti returns to Real for second spell as coach

MADRID: Carlo Ancelotti returned to Real Madrid for a second spell as coach on Tuesday, re-joining the club from Everton, after agreeing a three-year deal at the Bernabeu.

The Italian was previously in charge of Real between 2013 and 2015, and replaces Zinedine Zidane, who left the La Liga club last month.

"While I have enjoyed being at Everton, I have been presented with an unexpected opportunity which I believe is the right move for me and my family at this time," Ancelotti said in a statement on the Everton website.

Ancelotti has one of the most-decorated CVs in world football and won the Champions League with Real in 2014, helping the Spaniards to their fabled 'Decima' (10th) European crown, before being sacked 12 months later.

The 61-year-old is one of three coaches, along with former Liverpool manager Bob Paisley and Zidane, to have won the European Cup or Champions League on three occasions, having also led AC Milan to glory in 2003 and 2007.

His honours list includes league titles in four different countries at Milan, Chelsea, Paris St Germain and Bayern Munich over a 26-year managerial career. "Carlo Ancelotti will be the new first team coach for the next three seasons," a brief Real Madrid statement read.

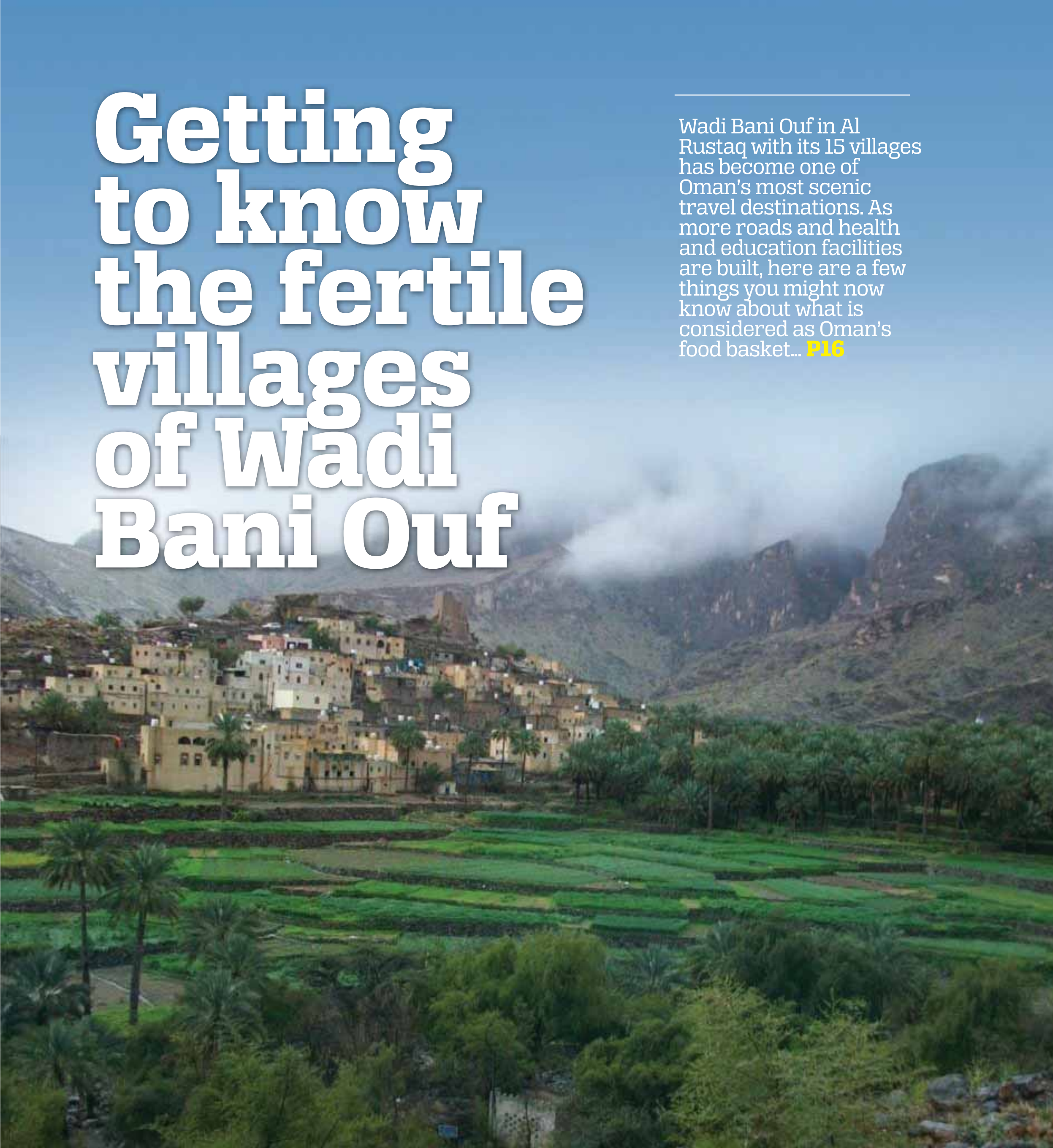
Ancelotti will sign his contract and be presented to the media on Wednesday. The move comes following Zidane's decision to step down five days after his team were pipped to the La Liga title by city rivals Atletico Madrid.

— Reuters

features

Getting to know the fertile villages of Wadi Bani Ouf

Wadi Bani Ouf in Al Rustaq with its 15 villages has become one of Oman's most scenic travel destinations. As more roads and health and education facilities are built, here are a few things you might now know about what is considered as Oman's food basket... **P16**



INSIDE STORIES

LOCAL TRAVEL



VISITING ADAM? MAKE A DETOUR TO ADAM FORT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT HISTORY

To the sound of drums and flutes, a freshly coiffed Palestinian groom dances with his brothers, cousins and friends, anxiously waiting for his veiled bride to arrive in her shimmering gown... **Story on Page 14**

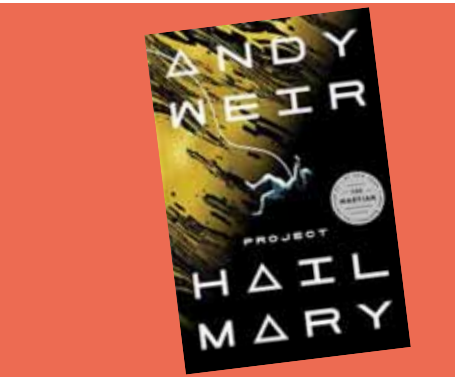
CHANGING WORLD



NEW STUDIES TO IMPROVE BANANA STRAINS

Agricultural and animal research represents the progress and development of agriculture, both in plant and animal areas, as this sector received great attention in the Sultanate, which contributed to the improvement of agricultural and livestock production... **Story on Page 14**

READ



PROJECT HAIL MARY

BY ANDY WEIR

Ryland Grace awakes from a long sleep alone and far from home, and the fate of humanity rests on his shoulders.

ENTERTAINMENT



BALLET LEAPS BACK IN UK WITH ACOSTA WORLD PREMIERES

Cuban ballet star Carlos Acosta is staging world dance premieres at one of Britain's top ballet companies to welcome audiences back after the "nightmare" of the pandemic lockdowns... **Story on Page 15**

HERITAGE



NATIVE AMERICAN TRIBES REVIVE HORSE HERITAGE WITH BAREBACK RACES IN OKLAHOMA

Native American tribes from the United States and Canada converged on Oklahoma for the Indian Relay Horse Race this weekend, helping to revive horse heritage in the state and symbolising a return to normal after pandemic restrictions... **Story on Page 15**



Visiting Adam? Make a detour to Adam Fort to learn more about history

The imposing Adam Fort is one of the historical and archaeological monuments in the Wilayat of Adam in al Dakhiliyah Governorate, along with the mosques, castles, forts, old neighbourhoods and other tourist attractions scattered in the villages and regions of the wilayat.

The fort, with its ancient glory, rooted for hundreds of years, is located in the heart of the wilayat. It was established to be the headquarter of government and the residence of the wali, where the wali and the judge were sitting in Barzeh al Husn (the main room) in the morning and evening, with some notables of the wilayat to discuss the demands and needs of the people, solve litigation issues, and generally consider everything related to the social, judicial and religious aspects of society, in addition to receiving guests.

Dr Salem al Busaidy, a researcher in Omani history, says that the fortress of Adam was built by Imam Ahmed bin Said al Busaidy (according to the dictionary of the towns and tribes, volume one, p. 104) to be the headquarter of the Wali of Said bin Salem al Barashdi and some believe that it was built before that) and then restored by Imam Azzan bin Qais al Busaidy in 1869 AD the last wali and judge in this fort was Sayyid Hamad bin Saif al Busaidy.

He added that the fort is surrounded by palm groves, and near it is the archaeological Al Rahba Mosque, the Al Rahba School for Teaching the Holy Quran and Falaj Al Ain. It includes several facilities for serving the wali, such as the



barza, guards' rooms, multiple rooms for housing, stores and a well. It has one gate located on the southwestern side and two towers. The first tower is circular and located on the eastern side and is consists of two floors. On the first floor, there are holes for drainage of water and waste, while the second tower is located on the northern side, also circular, and has three floors.

Al Busaidy pointed out that the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism recently restored the fort as part of its plan to preserve the Omani heritage for future generations.

The parts that were once destroyed were restored to their original glory with the intention of the fort becoming a destination for visitors and researchers in Omani history and architecture.



DISCOVZERY

New studies to improve banana strains



AGRICULTURAL AND ANIMAL research represents the progress and development of agriculture, both in plant and animal areas, as this sector received great attention in the Sultanate, which contributed to the improvement of agricultural and livestock production.

The General Directorate of Agricultural Research and Livestock in Al Rumais, Barka of the Ministry of Agricultural, Fisheries and Water Resources implemented some research projects through major programmes based on the research strategy developed following government directives in the fields of agricultural and animal research.

Banana crop is one of the important crops, as it ranks second after palm trees in the areas planted with fruit trees in the Sultanate, and there are many vital and abiotic factors caused by climate changes, hurricanes and drought, in addition to salinity and groundwater depletion.

The Agricultural Research Centre has studied all the local banana strains available in the Sultanate to preserve them from extinction. Local banana varieties were surveyed in the Sultanate, covering different geographical areas, such as the Governorate of Dhofar, North and South Al Sharqiyah, Al Dakhiliyah, Al Dhahirah, Musandam and Al Buraimi, in cooperation with specialists in the Agricultural Development Department. Banana strains and their local names were collected and used by farmers, in addition to collecting field phenotypic data, which includes vegetative and fruiting growth data.



Until the end of 2019, (235) shoot of bananas were collected from (6) governorates representing about (97) strains, where there are (44) strains in the Governorate of Dhofar, which is the highest from the rest of the governorates in the number of strains, followed by the governorates of North and South Al Sharqiyah with (24), and Al Dakhiliyah with (13) strains, (6) strains from Muscat Governorate, (5) strains from Al Dhahirah Governorate and (5) strains from Musandam Governorate. The centre preserved these strains under greenhouse conditions until they were ready to be planted in the field genetic bank at Sohar Agricultural Research Station. The next phase of the study will include the collection and characterisation of banana varieties from the North and South Al Batinah Governorates, in addition to the phenotypic and genetic characterisation of the banana strains collected from the surveys. The Directorate General of Agricultural and Animal Research continues to conduct various research and studies related to crops to increase their production, and to conduct soil and water research and plant nutrition. It works to diversify vegetable cultivation and control of agricultural pests using modern technologies, and to use biotechnology agriculture, as well as to conduct research, preserve and manufacture agricultural products, improve, protect and increase Production of local breeds of goats, lamb and cows. .



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INSTAGRAM TOP PICKS



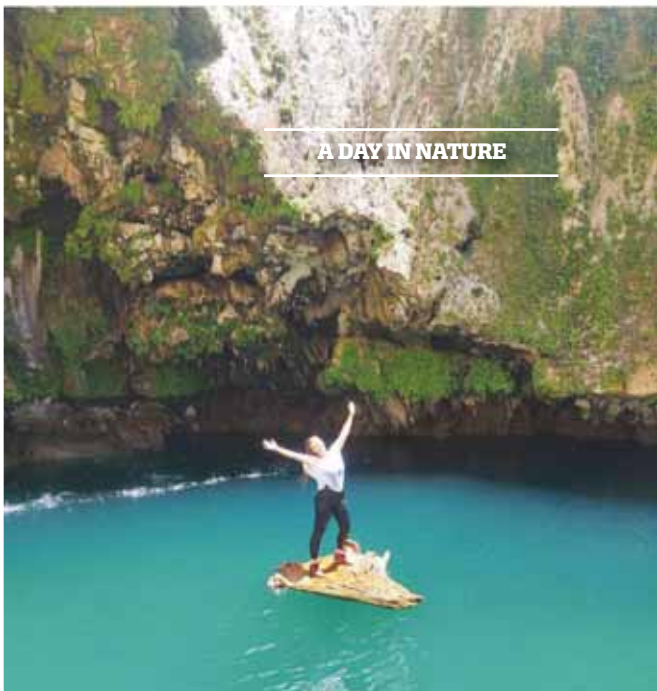
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HUMAN INTEREST



Thai museum unveils 1,000-year-old artefacts returned from US

Two ancient sandstone artefacts believed to have been stolen from Thailand during the Vietnam War were unveiled on Monday at a Bangkok museum, greeted with a fanfare of traditional dancers and an elaborate worship ceremony.

The temple support beams — which were returned on Friday — boast exquisite carvings of the Hindu deities Indra and Yama that date back to the late 10th or 11th century.

They had been on display for decades at the San Francisco Asian Art Museum, and their repatriation to Thailand followed a year-long investigation by the US Department of Homeland Security.

On Monday, museum staff carefully unpacked the artefacts under the watchful gaze of Culture Minister Itthiphol Khunpluem as Thai traditional music played.

"These two lintels are evidence of our rich and prosperous history dating back many centuries ago," he said, thanking US authorities and the Thai Foreign Affairs Ministry for the "relentless pursuit of the sandstones".

Itthiphol also said the government is still deliberating whether they would be taken to smaller, local museums in the provinces of Buriram and Sa Kaeo, which border neighbouring Cambodia.

The lintels have features that mirror famed Cambodian temples — showing the influence and reach of the ancient Khmer Kingdom — and are believed to have been stolen out of Thailand between 1958 and 1969.

As music blared, Thai traditional dancers in gold-flecked dresses donning plastic face shields performed during the unveiling ceremony for the artefacts.

Massive towers of fruit were also on display around flower wreaths — an offering to the gods to protect the lintels.

Itthiphol said there are still "13 more Buddha statues and engraved artefacts waiting to be repatriated from the US".

The California museum had disputed investigators' allegations that the artefacts were stolen, and insisted it had long planned to return them.

US museums are not the only ones to be embroiled in art provenance scandals in recent years.

Australia has repatriated at least eight looted statues to India since 2014.

France has vowed to return items taken from Senegal and Benin, while the Netherlands is moving to repatriate artefacts stolen from its former colonies. — **AFP**

ENTERTAINMENT

Ballet leaps back in UK with Acosta world premieres



CUBAN BALLET STAR Carlos Acosta is staging world dance premieres at one of Britain's top ballet companies to welcome audiences back after the "nightmare" of the pandemic lockdowns.

The 47-year-old, who took over as director of the Birmingham Royal Ballet early last year, said that he could not wait to "connect" with ballet-goers again through a mixed programme of both modern and classical dance.

Acosta grew up in poverty in Cuba but his prodigious talent propelled him into major roles at dance companies, including The Royal Ballet in London.

He hung up his ballet shoes in 2016 and in January 2020 took over the reins of the Birmingham company, based in the UK's second largest city.

However, soon after his appointment, the country was plunged into a series of lengthy lockdowns due to the coronavirus pandemic.

VERY TRAUMATIC

"It was very traumatic," Acosta said, after leading a class at his studio. "This institution is very large. It was all new to me."

He had the task of keeping the company's finances afloat and chose to reduce his own salary so all 60 dancers could be paid in full.

The Birmingham Royal Ballet was one of the first British companies to go back to live performances in October, between two lockdowns.

The first live show programmed by Acosta was a one-act ballet called "Lazuli Sky".

Dancers obeyed rules on social distancing by performing in voluminous skirts, inspired by the crinolines worn in the 19th century when this was believed to prevent cholera transmission.

"I wanted to leave a record behind of the pandemic," Acosta said, of the show's concept.

But the lockdown rules on dancers not touching each other were "very unnatural", he admitted.

"With no contact, there are limited things that you can do."

FALSE HOPE

Later, the company started rehearsing with dancers in "bubbles" to reduce the risk of the entire company having to self-isolate if one fell ill.

Soon afterwards, the UK locked down again, with theatres only briefly reopening in December before closing again until early this month.

"It was like a false sense of hope," said Rosanna Ely, a 25-year-old dancer at the company.

The pandemic "has been a nightmare for everyone", Acosta agreed.

For dancers, "the body suffers" but the lockdowns and reopenings were also "very damaging" psychologically, he said.

For the company, closing down during the normally lucrative festive season was financially disastrous, too.

The cancellation of Christmas performances of "The Nutcracker" meant it lost around £1 million (1.2 million euros, \$1.4 million), Acosta said.

To welcome audiences back, Acosta is putting on "Curated by Carlos: Triple Bill", a performance made up of three short ballets, two of which are world premieres, from June 10.

One of the premieres — "City of a Thousand Trades" from Havana-born choreographer Miguel Altunaga — celebrates Birmingham's industrial heritage.

The other, "Imminent", by Brazilian-British choreographer Daniela Cardim, is inspired by themes including climate change.

"It's very eclectic, it's fresh... it's what I think is the way forward for a ballet company of the 21st century," Acosta said.

The company will also be staging a traditional favourite, "Cinderella", later in June. — **AFP**

HERITAGE

Native American tribes revive horse heritage with bareback races in Oklahoma



NATIVE AMERICAN tribes from the United States and Canada converged on Oklahoma for the Indian Relay Horse Race this weekend, helping to revive horse heritage in the state and symbolising a return to normal after pandemic restrictions.

The setting in Oklahoma was particularly apt, given the state's Native American population of nearly 10 per cent and the 2020 US Supreme Court ruling re-affirming that about half the state's territory falls under American Indian jurisdiction.

Competitors race three different horses bareback around a one-mile track, jumping off one horse and onto another between laps, often in tribal regalia including war bonnets, with the horses painted in traditional style.

Horse relays are one of the most popular pastimes in Native American culture to have survived the US genocide, and horse heritage remains strong with many tribes in the western United States.

But equine traditions have been less durable in Oklahoma, where many Native Americans were resettled in the Trail of Tears of the 1830s, when indigenous people were forced from their lands in the southeast onto specially designated territories further west.

Organiser Jim Stevens called the relay the biggest in the known history of Indian Relay races in terms of tribes, people and vendors signed up to participate. About 40 tribes competed for \$140,000 in prize money.

"This was the first big event for the Native Americans since the Covid shutdown and everybody was ready to get off the reservation," Stevens said.

The individual and team races have separate classes of competition for chiefs, warriors, elders and women. Each rider is paired with a mugger, the name for the person who holds the horse still during the transition. Little kids learn by riding sheep.

The host town of Pawhuska, named after a 19th century Osage chief, is on the Osage reservation. Pawhuska is also hosting the film crew making "Killers of the Flower Moon," adapted from the book by David Grann about white people who murdered Osage tribal members to get their land rights. The Martin Scorsese movie stars Leonardo DiCaprio.

The five-day Indian Relay, held at the Osage County Fairgrounds, ended with a stirring finish to the men's championship relay, the premier event. The War Chiefs team from Wyoming was leading until the final exchange, when its rider slipped off his horse and into mud during a rainstorm, enabling the Abrahamson team from Washington state to overtake the lead and claim the prize. — **Reuters**



Getting to know the fertile villages of Wadi Bani Ouf

By Staff Reporter



Wadi Bani Ouf in the Wilayat of Al Rustaq in the Governorate of South Al Batinah is one of the main wadis and a tourist destination throughout the year.

The wadi, which is about 15 km away from the centre, is distinguished by its beautiful mountain villages that are distributed on the sides of the wadi and between its steep mountains. It is also the link between Wilayat of Al Hamra in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate and the Wilayat of Al Rustaq, Al Batinah South Governorate.

Shaikh Ibrahim al Oufi said that Wadi Bani Ouf is one of the beautiful wadis in the Wilayat of Al Rustaq, and the wadi witnesses tourism movement throughout the year due to its rich geographical nature in the steep mountain heights, which differ in their colours and types.

The number of villages in the wadi is about 15 villages, which are: Al Fara, Al Tikha, Al Qasmatain, Al Bardeh, Al Hawit, Al Zama, Al Eer, Al Bir your Al Jafr, Al Heil, Salma, Bema, Balad Seet and Hatt.

He added that the village of Al Fara is considered the gateway to Wadi Bani Ouf from the Rustaq side, as it is located at the entrance to the wadi. The Fara tower, parts of which have disappeared, gives a unique view to the place along with al Furs tower (Persian Tower) built of stones on the top of the mountain, in addition to its farms extending on the banks of the wadi and irrigated by the waters of the western falaj by 80 per cent).

The Al Aqq / Al Sharqi Falaj irrigates the rest of the farms, and in the middle of the wadi is Ain Al Hawit, which is one of the most famous water springs frequented by tourists.

He explained that the village

of Balad Seet, which is located at the head of the wadi mountains, is one of the most famous tourist villages and is characterised by its mild climate in summer and cold in winter, and by its agricultural terraces that paint a beautiful painting with the bright colours of its ancient architectural houses, as well as the diversity of its agricultural crops of fruits and vegetables. The village is visited by tourists from inside and outside the Sultanate during holidays and official holidays, to enjoy the tourist attractions.

As for the village of Hatt, it represents the link between Al Rustaq and Al Hamra, as it is located at the bottom of the eastern mountain in Al Hamra. It is known for its beautiful scenery, charming nature, and green farms that are irrigated by its falaj that flows from the peak of the mountain to the surrounding village.

He pointed out that the villages had their share of the achievements of the blessed Renaissance, as three schools were established at different levels of education, namely Wadi Bani Ouf School, Balad Seet School, Hatt School, and the Wadi Bani Ouf Health Centre, which provides primary health care to the people. The Wadi Road was paved for a distance of 11 km from the entrance to the wadi on the Al Rustaq / Al Awabi road to the village of Al Tikha, which contributed to the ease of movement of people in those villages.

He indicated that the inhabitants of the villages of Wadi Bani Ouf are interested in cultivating date palms and seasonal crops such as onions, garlic, and other crops, in addition to raising livestock and raising honey bees. There are lots of wild plants in the mountains of the wadi like acacia and the locally called boot trees, al Jaada, Zatar (thyme), among others.



business

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EU deficit rules to remain suspended through 2022

BRUSSELS: Rules against overspending by EU governments will remain suspended through 2022, leaving more time for stimulus plans to boost the economy to pre-crisis levels, the European Commission said on Wednesday. “The recovery remains uneven and uncertainty is still high, so economic policy must remain supportive in both 2021 and 2022,” EU Executive Vice-President Valdis Dombrovskis said.

The EU executive suspended the public spending rules for national governments in March 2020 as the European Union sank into its deepest recession since World War II, thanks to Covid-19 restrictions.

Based on current forecasts, “the general escape clause will stay activated in 2022 but no longer so as of 2023.”

Trailing the strong recoveries in the US and China, the economy in Europe fell into a second recession early this year and is not expected to regain its pre-crisis form until later in 2022. The EU has been criticised for doing less to boost its economy than other powers, but has pinned its hopes on a 750 billion euro recovery programme, whose effects should begin to kick in later this year.

“A bleak winter is giving way to a bright spring for the European economy,” EU economic affairs commissioner Paolo Gentiloni said.

Known as the Stability and Growth Pact, the EU’s spending rules limit deficit spending at



“The recovery remains uneven and uncertainty is still high, so economic policy must remain supportive in both 2021 and 2022

VALDIS DOMBROVSKIS
EU Executive Vice-President

three per cent of the overall economy and debt at 60 per cent. The rules are often violated but, while countries in theory risk penalties for ignoring them, no government has ever been sanctioned. The limit on debt is often overshoot even in normal times and 13 countries are currently above the limit including Italy, Spain and France where debt is over 100 per cent of GDP.

The pact mainly empowers the EU executive and fellow member states to keep a careful eye on how national governments run their budgets. — AFP

Tender floated for construction of Oman’s first integrated vehicle hub

PROMISING POTENTIAL: Dedicated zone for automotive-related commercial services to cover 1-million square metre site in Suhar Industrial City

CONRAD PRABHU
[@conradprabhu](https://twitter.com/conradprabhu)

The Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn) is pressing ahead with plans for the development of Oman’s first integrated vehicle hub at Suhar Industrial City on the Sultanate’s North Al Batinah coast. The project, formally known as Madayn Vehicle Complex (‘Motcar’), is proposed to be established on a roughly one million sq metre site within Suhar Industrial City.

As an integrated hub for investments centring around the automotive industry, chiefly trading in vehicles, auto parts and accessories, and related services, Motcar is expected to position the Sultanate as a regional centre for automotive related commercial services, according to Madayn.

Earlier this week, Madayn – which oversees an expanding network of manufacturing zones in the Sultanate – invited suitably qualified construction firms to bid for its contract to build the basic infrastructure for the



(Image for illustration only)

proposed Motcar project. The infrastructure elements, along with utilities and support facilities, will be implemented based on a master-plan setting out a long-term strategy for its development.

Plans for a dedicated zone for automotive commercial services were first unveiled earlier this year as part of Madayn’s 2040 Vision strategy for growth.

Motcar, it noted, would serve as a regional centre for the import and re-export of cars, machinery and related services to and from various countries with a focus on the Middle East and North Africa region. By locating the Vehicle Complex in the industrial port city of Suhar, Madayn hopes to capitalise on

synergies offered by the presence – existing and proposed – of a string of automotive related enterprises in the North Al Batinah region. Sohar Freezone, which adjoins

Sohar Port, already hosts a major warehousing and distribution hub for new cars imported and transshipped via the nearby port.

Phase 2 of Sohar Freezone, which was recently opened up for investment, is also being promoted as an attractive destination for investment in, among other things, automotive spares and parts. Following the recent commissioning of the multibillion-dollar Liwa Plastics Complex within the industrial port, the abundance of

locally available polymers – key ingredients in the manufacture of automotive parts – bodes well for the growth of a major industry in the area.

The Motcar project is expected to give rise to, among other activities, the growth of a large-scale pre-owned car market in Suhar, catering primarily to overseas markets. This will inevitably also spawn the growth of ancillary services around car parts and accessories, tyres, lubricants, upholstery works, automotive repair equipment, and vehicle scrapping and recycling, among other activities. Interested bidders have until July 14, 2021 to submit their offers for the Motcar construction tender.

FDI balloons to RO 15.86 bn



BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JUNE 2

Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) into the Sultanate soared to a total of RO 15.86 billion by the end of Q3 2020, bolstered by inflows of around RO 1.27 billion over the previous 12 months, according to the Ministry of Economy.

The lion’s share of the FDI, totalling around RO 12.28 billion, flowed into Oil & Gas exploration activities, followed by the manufacturing and industrial sector (RO 1.63 billion) and financial brokerage (RO 1.47 billion) as of September 30, 2020.

The growth in FDI was achieved despite challenging contracts attributed to the global pandemic, the Ministry added in a post.

Galfar announces steps to pare losses

Financial restructuring: Capital reduction, along with utilisation of legal reserve and share premium, to offset losses

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JUNE 2

Leading Omani contractor Galfar Engineering and Contracting SAOG has approved a major financial restructuring of the company aimed at substantially eliminating accumulating losses amounting to RO 32.177 million.

The decision was taken at an Extraordinary General Meeting (EGM) of the company’s shareholders on Tuesday. In a filing to the Capital Market Authority (CMA), the publicly traded firm said the EGM approved the utilisation of the entire legal reserve of RO 13.840



million, as well as the entire share premium of RO 18.337 million to extinguish part of the accumulated losses totalling RO 32.177 million.

Additionally, the EGM approve the reduction of the share capital from RO 41.521 million by 30 per cent to RO 29.065 million to extinguish another part of the accumulated losses to the tune of RO 12.456 million.

Galfar had announced last year that it was evaluating

various options with regard to financial restructuring with a view to improving the financial position and liquidity situation of the company and set in on a “forward-looking path” The Group posted a net loss of RO 28.3 million for the 2020 financial year, against a net loss of RO 6.2 million in 2019.

“The performance was substantially impacted due to the Covid-19 pandemic, related idling of resources and additional costs, time and cost

overruns in major projects. Management and Board are confident to collect the long outstanding receivables of RO 42 million against which provision is created in the books of account, which will result in reversal of these provisions in the near future,” the company said in its 2020 Directors’ report. “The liquidity issues of the Company continued on account of delay in receipt of certified payment from the government and its related entities.

The unpaid certified receivables were at RO 64 million at closing of the year. This has impacted ability to do business and has impacted our profitability,” the report further stated.

Despite the accumulating losses, Galfar continued to maintain significant order book of jobs in hand at above RO 370 million (as against RO 401 million in 2019) out of which RO 43 million was related to oil and gas sector.

ILO: Global labour market recovery to start slowly this year

GENEVA: Millions of people worldwide have lost their jobs or had to reduce their working hours due to the coronavirus crisis.

If the pandemic does not worsen, labour markets should start to recover in the second half of the year, the International Labour Organization (ILO) reported in an outlook released on Wednesday.

But even the return to old jobs and the creation of new ones associated with an economic upswing would not be enough to make up for the lack of paid work in the coming year.

In addition to the returnees, millions of young people enter the labour market every year.

In 2020, 8.8 per cent of global working hours were lost relative to the fourth-quarter of 2019, equivalent to 255 million full-time jobs. — dpa

Why effective governance is critical to the banking sector

Governance mechanisms have been created to combat administrative and financial corruption in any institution. They are effectively deployed by organisations and enterprises in supervisory operational processes.

Governance is the system by which the rights and responsibilities of an organisation are distributed among the various key shareholder in the way how they transaction their business, and also regulate the relationship with all their other stakeholders involved.

Banks are considered among the institutions that millions of individuals deal with in a personal capacity or as

representatives of companies and commercial establishments.

Now, the status of banks is measured through their success in their dealings — corruption-free — thanks to the application of various governance mechanisms.

Today, banks are among the most modern institutions that use the latest systems — knowledge and technology-based — to enable their customers to conduct transactions effectively and conveniently using e-banking services to transact with parties locally and internationally.

These e-banking channels in the banking world are growing rapidly at a time when cyberattacks continue to give cause for confusion both for



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THESE E-BANKING CHANNELS IN THE BANKING WORLD ARE GROWING RAPIDLY AT A TIME WHEN CYBERATTACKS CONTINUE TO GIVE CAUSE FOR CONFUSION BOTH FOR BANKS AND THEIR CUSTOMERS.

banks and their customers.

Effective supervision, thus, such as 'Know Your Customer' procedures, is imperative to curb hacking and other cyberattacks by criminals.

Today, with electronic banking services becoming mainstream globally, banking governance has become even more critical in addressing any shortcomings that may result in a disruption of services.

Regular audits of banking and governance processes are a must. It's clear that there is a strong relationship between the application of governance mechanisms and the responsibilities of individuals.

This requires that the responsibilities of the board of directors and the executive

management are clearly defined to ensure efficient oversight of internal controls and audit processes.

The goal should be to enhance the quality of reporting and financial and accounting information within institutions.

The financial problems faced by some banking and non-banking institutions around the world in recent years have led to the need to establish a set of rules, regulations, and ethical and professional principles to boost confidence and credibility in the information furnished in the financial statements of these institutions, which is of critical importance to clients, brokers and dealers in securities.

Governance plays a major role in enhancing the confidence of

investors and customers, and it works to stimulate investment and energise the financial market, in addition to improving the financial efficiency and economic management of companies and institutions.

Effective governance also help in evaluating the performance of senior management, enhancing accountability and raising the level of confidence among all, besides preempting accounting and financial problems occurring between the partners.

The aim of governance is to support and stabilise the activities of operating companies and to drive economic progress by attracting foreign investments, in addition to supporting and developing banking and financial institutions in the countries.

Toyota Gazoo Racing wins Croatia Rally



MUSCAT: Toyota Gazoo Racing team has once again stood out and made a mark with the thrilling performance at the first-ever Croatia Rally held as part of the FIA World Rally Championship. With this win, Toyota extends its lead in the FIA WRC Manufacturers' Championship to 138 points.

In a final-stage decider that went right down to the final meters, Sébastien Ogier and Julien Ingrassia raced to victory in the No. 1 Toyota Yaris WRC.

They ended the race just 0.6 seconds ahead of their teammates Elfyn Evans and Scott Martin in the No. 33 Toyota Yaris WRC, making it one of the WRC's closest-ever finishes.

Only 10.4 seconds separated the top three vehicles going into the final day of the rally, with Ogier 6.9 seconds in front of Evans. In the opening two stages of the fourth and final day, Evans was the fastest driver in No. 33 Toyota Yaris WRC and took the lead from Ogier in the No. 1 Toyota Yaris WRC.

The pair began the deciding Power Stage separated by just 3.9 seconds, and needed to push to secure the one-two result with only a narrow margin back to third place.

In the end, Ogier was fastest through the stage and claimed the victory in the No. 1 Toyota Yaris WRC, with Evans finishing 4.5 seconds slower in the No. 33 Toyota Yaris WRC — the third closest winning margin in WRC history.

Investcorp to delist from Bahrain Bourse

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JUNE 2

Investcorp, a leading global provider and manager of alternative investment products, announced on Wednesday, June 2, that its Extraordinary General Meeting has approved the board's recommendation to delist from the Bahrain Bourse and convert the company into a closed shareholding company.

This remains subject to receipt of regulatory approvals and completion of the required legal process and is expected to be completed during the third quarter of 2021. Over the past four decades, Investcorp has been on a remarkable growth journey and



has evolved into a genuinely global alternative investment manager with approximately \$35.4 billion in AUM, diversified by geography, asset class and client type.

Mohammed al Ardhi (pictured), Executive Chairman, said, "Delisting and becoming a private company is the most appropriate ownership structure at this stage in the continuing journey of Investcorp."

It will allow us to be agile, focused on investing for our long-term strategy and enables our senior leadership team to be dedicated to driving growth. Bahrain is Investcorp's birthplace, our hub in the Gulf region and we highly value the deep talent pool, the regulatory environment and geographical central position it offers in the GCC."

"Bahrain and the GCC region are part of the historical fabric of the company and will continue to be key markets for Investcorp both in terms of investment activity, whether in private equity or infrastructure, as well as with our clients, investors and other stakeholders. We also have a number of key Corporate Social

Responsibility and ESG initiatives currently underway in Bahrain.

We believe that the continuing shareholders in Bahrain and the region will benefit from this delisting by virtue of the Firm's longer term plans which are expected to create future value creation for all stakeholders. We remain fully committed to pursuing our global growth over the long term via both organic and inorganic initiatives and are excited about the future as we advance our ambitious, yet prudent, expansion strategy."

Investcorp specialises in alternative investments across private equity, real estate, credit, absolute return strategies, GP stakes and infrastructure.

GCC family businesses to be honoured for generational success

NEW PLATFORM: Special jury headed by Hind Bahwan, Chairperson of Bahwan CyberTek Group, to evaluate entries

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JUNE 2

The Family Business Council Gulf (FBCG) has unveiled the first 'Family Business Awards' in the GCC region to honour organisations for their continued success across generations. The awards highlight the contribution of family-owned businesses that add to about 60 per cent of the gross domestic product of the GCC and employ about 80 per cent of the labour force.

Open for all entities in the GCC that are part of a family-owned business and at least in the second generation, the awards are presented in four categories — SME Family Business, Non-Family Executive, NexGen Venture and NexGen Innovation.

The winners will receive their award at the FBCG Awards Ceremony and can attend FBCG's member-only Annual Summit and gala dinner. They will also have exclusive access to select FBCG events, activities, and



education programmes for one year. Businesses can nominate or self-nominate for the categories by June 30, 2021 through www.fbcgawards.com and learn more about the specific eligibility criteria.

While the SME Family Business and Non-Family Executive categories will be evaluated by a special jury headed by Hind Bahwan, Chairperson of Bahwan CyberTek Group, the NexGen Venture and NexGen Innovation will be chosen by the FBCG Board chaired by Omar K Alghanim and other Board members.

The other jury members include international and regional academics Dr Bridget Kustin, Research Fellow and Qualitative Lead, Oxford Ownership Project at University of Oxford and Dr Rodrigo Basco, Associate



Professor and Shaikh Saoud bin Khalid al Qassimi Chair in Family Business at AUS; Alexis Du Roy De Blicquy, CEO of FBN International; Fadi Hammadeh, General Counsel of Al-Futtaim Group and next generation family business leaders Lulwa Al Soudairy from Saudi Arabia and Rahma al Barwani from Oman.

Announcing the awards, Hind Bahwan (pictured) said: "The goal of the Family Business Awards programme is to recognise family business champions that have

navigated challenging times to continue to build their business and add value to the economy.

The awards recognise the importance of family business to the GCC and puts the spotlight on family groups and teams that address generational challenges through rigorous planning and foresight, family unity and innovation and creativity.

The awards serve as a perfect platform to take stock, benchmark and gain higher awareness strengths and areas of improvement validated by a panel of credible and knowledgeable family business academics and leaders. The Family Business Council — Gulf (FBCG) is a private not-for-profit organisation aiming to strengthen family business governance and ensure their continuity over generations.

The Council seeks to identify and address issues unique to the GCC region through research, education, capacity development and networking among peers.

FBCG is a member of a worldwide organisation — the Family Business Network International (FBN) — the largest global network "by families, for families together across generation" representing 4,000 business family and 17,000 individuals worldwide.

Dream offer with all new Nisan Sunny, now available at 0% interest



MUSCAT: Nissan Oman from the house of Suhail Bahwan Automobiles (SBA), is offering a wide range of benefits for the patrons of Nissan Sunny as part of its on-going offer which is valid till June 3, 2021. Nissan Sunny, with its modern, expressive design, fresh interiors and confidence-inspiring performance is much loved by its owners.

Customers of Nissan Sunny are being offered attractive benefits including special interest rate, cash gift, free service, insurance and more.

A spokesperson for Nissan Oman, from the house of Suhail Bahwan Automobiles (SBA) said, "With an attractive offer available, this is the ideal time to buy Nissan Sunny.

Its great design, smart technological upgrades and best-in-class spacious interiors make it a perfect car for customers looking for a sophisticated driving experience. The car continues to be a popular choice amongst customers in the segment because of its outstanding design, intelligent technology and remarkable performance."

A special interest rate is available for Nissan Sunny and customers can get at 2.99 per cent for six years on the model. For all tenures beyond six years, normal interest rates will apply for the full tenure of the loan. This rate is applicable for individual purchase with private registration only and is subject to finance/credit approval. Terms and conditions apply.



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ANNOUNCEMENT

Announcement of Capital Reduction
In accordance with the provisions of Article 150 of the Commercial Companies Law. The company RIAM SHINE TRADING, which is registered with the Commercial Registration No 1050346, hereby announces that it is going to reduce its capital from Omani Rials 100,000.000 to 20,000.000. Whoever has any objection to the foregoing shall present the reasons for such objection to the Secretariat of Commercial Registry at the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion within 30 days from the date hereof.

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IT: Powering Bank Muscat's Banking Services and Products

As the leading financial services provider in Oman, Bank Muscat invests millions of rials in state-of-the-art technology and solutions to provide the best services in the country



We are proud of the bank's various achievements in the IT field. At present, more than 85% of the IT team are Omani nationals

**AHMED OMAR
AL OJAILI**

*Group Deputy General Manager -
Technology, Bank Muscat*

MUSCAT: Information Technology (IT) has been an important enabler of the banking and financial services sector for decades. The digitalisation trend has been gathering pace globally over the last few years and the post-Covid-19 world has only further hastened this rapid change with banks receiving more and more customers globally through digital touchpoints.

As the leading financial services provider in Oman, Bank Muscat is proud to spearhead this change in the country wherein customers' expectations of a 'superior experience' and increased digitalisation have led to considerable investments in technology.

LEADING TECHNOLOGY IMPLEMENTATION

In continuation of Bank Muscat's endeavour to embrace the latest technology to serve our customers better, the bank has been undergoing a transformational journey over the past years by using state-of-the-art and best in class technologies to offer cutting edge products and services.

The bank has invested millions of rials in upgrading to the best in class technology, and widening its banking network across the country as part of the financial inclusion strategy. The bank is channelising investments in technology to deliver meaningful impact and return on investment (ROI) in alignment with the bank's overall strategy.

From having ATMs and CDMS across Oman to a feature-rich Mobile and Internet Banking platform, Bank Muscat has the best e-channels in the country, which are powered by cutting-edge technology.

It must be noted that the bank's achievements in IT are well

recognised on the international stage with the bank winning two awards for IT implementation in 2020.

Speaking about the implementation of the latest technologies, Ahmed bin Omar al Ojaili, Group Deputy General Manager — Technology, Bank Muscat, said: "As the leading financial services provider in the Sultanate of Oman and in line with our customer-centric vision, it is of prime importance to provide our customers with an excellent banking experience.

Our large investments in technology form the basis of this vital customer-centric experience that is currently driven by digital banking. The bank continues to successfully leverage its ongoing partnership with global leaders in next-generation digital services and consulting to ensure that we are able to implement the 'best in class' technological solutions for the benefit of our customers and other stakeholders."

Ahmed bin Omar al Ojaili added: "It is important to note that Bank Muscat has been consistently focusing on nurturing and supporting Omani youth in line with the long-term strategic plans of the country and also supporting the long-term growth strategy of the bank. We are proud of the fact that Omani youth have



taken up the challenge and are now excelling in the IT arena. At present over 85 per cent of the IT team at the bank are Omani nationals.

Digitalisation of banking services and solutions is in line with the goals of Oman Vision 2040 and will ensure continued economic growth in the next phase of Oman's Renaissance." The year 2020 saw an increase in the number of delivered projects by as much as 30 per cent from 2017.

This was despite the challenges brought about by the global Covid-19 pandemic including working at 50 per cent capacity to ensure social distancing. Though working in shifts made critical decision-making a longer process, the team successfully overcame the challenges and obstacles through perseverance and hard work even though it was running over 50 projects simultaneously.

The projects delivered in 2020 included those which improved Access Management, Robotic Process Automation and the delivery of internal IT services to ensure greater convenience for end users.

The adoption of smart and innovative payment technology has been a key area of the bank's focus in recent years. This provided timely help since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. Bank Muscat scaled up contactless credit and debit card production and distribution, which helped customers to conduct a safe electronic payment method for day-to-day transactions adhering to Covid-19 guidelines. The introduction of contactless wearables for retail payments has also been playing a role in ensuring public health and safety during the pandemic.

The bank has upgraded its Omni-channel Mobile and Internet banking with several new features to add further convenience and ease of banking for its retail customers. The online platforms meet the requirements of the bank's tech-savvy customers and further eases the delivery of services. Various features available such as bill payments, mobile top ups, payments within Bank Muscat, within Oman and international payments and transfers are being used by large numbers of bank customers on a

daily basis and has resulted in a significant increase of active users on these platforms, especially in the post pandemic phase.

The bank's 'B2B Connect' solution, which is digitising the corporate and government payment workflow was another game changer during the past year.

There is no doubt that scaling up the solution to address the needs of major corporate and government organisations helped the country to maintain economic activities. The B2B solution provides secure and seamless integration with the Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) systems of large institutions and corporates to provide an automated, two-way data transfer service for high volume online payments. This facilitated the corporates to implement an automated robust and efficient end-to-end digitised payment workflow processing system.

Smaller corporate customers are, meanwhile, well served by the online Corporate Banking platform, which averts the need for multiple branch visits and ensures secure payments and transactions through the online platform. A number of digital options such as these have been helping to avoid face-to-face interaction with bank employees and ensuring social distancing.

DEVELOPING OMANI IT SKILLS

Bank Muscat has been privileged to lead private sector institutions in creating job opportunities across its different departments. The IT department of the bank has been witnessing a steady rise in

the number of Omani cadre, who are also continuously offered new opportunities to further develop their expertise and skillsets.

It is a matter of great pride to the bank that Omani employees across all levels have been keenly putting in great efforts to develop national human resources in line with the goals envisaged by Oman Vision 2040.

The rate of Omanisation within the bank's IT department increased to over 85 per cent in 2020 and more and more opportunities continue to be created for young Omani IT professionals within the bank. Bank Muscat follows up on creation of job opportunities with a number of other initiatives.

The bank hosts an annual IT and Project Management Achievements event to award both individuals as well as project teams for their excellent performance across different aspects. These include categories for individual awards like Rising Star which are given to new employees to encourage initiative and hard work.

Awards for project teams include categories such as Most Complex Project, Smoothest Implementation and Best Governance Award.

It must also be noted that employees are given many opportunities to attend onsite and online trainings for different technology verticals such as Operating System, Database, and Security. Training is made continuously available for employees including those that enhance their hard skills and their soft skills.

With its continuous and well planned technology strategy, there is no doubt that Bank Muscat is setting a fine example for the private sector as it continuously builds capacity and creates rewarding career opportunities for the national cadre in the Sultanate.

The bank continues to innovate on a daily basis in response to its customer-centric vision and the overarching development goals of the Sultanate to persistently demonstrate its role as the leading financial services provider in the Sultanate that keeps the wheels of the economy rolling smoothly.

Oil extends gains on Opec+ supply discipline and demand prospects

WASHINGTON: Oil prices rose on Wednesday after Opec and its allies stuck to their plan to cautiously bring back oil supply to the markets in June and July while expecting a robust recovery in demand in the US and China, the world's two biggest oil consumers.

US West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude futures rose 18 cents, or 0.27 per cent, to \$67.90 as of 0642 GMT, extending a 2.1 per cent gain following the Memorial Day holiday in the US on Monday. Prices rose to their highest since October 2018. Brent crude futures climbed 22 cents, or 0.31 per cent, to \$70.47 a barrel, after rising 1.3 per cent overnight, when it hit its highest since March 8.

The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries



A man walks at a petrol station in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. — Reuters

(Opec) and its allies, together called Opec+, agreed on Tuesday to keep to their plan to gradually ease supply curbs through July.

Saudi Energy Minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman's comments after the meeting buoyed the

market. He said he saw a solid demand recovery in the United States and China and added that the pace of vaccine rollouts "can only lead to further rebalancing of the global oil market".

"The market appears focused

on the more constructive outlook for later this year, with Opec+ of the view that the market will see significant stock drawdowns between September and the end of the year," ING analysts said.

Including extra cuts by Saudi Arabia tapering off through July, the producer group will be returning 700,000 barrels per day (bpd) in June and 840,000 bpd in July, ING said.

Analysts also say the slow progress of Iran nuclear talks provides breathing room for demand to catch up before the return of Iranian barrels.

Two Western diplomats and an Iranian official said the talks would likely pause on Thursday, but it was unclear if talks would resume before Iran's June 18 presidential election. — Reuters

South Korea's inflation hits nine-year high

SEOUL: South Korea's consumer inflation accelerated to a more than nine-year high in May, reinforcing calls for gradual monetary tightening, though the increase was mainly due to a low base effect and rises in oil and agricultural prices.

Consumer prices rose 2.6 per cent in May from a year earlier, government data showed on Wednesday, logging the fastest growth since April 2012 and matching a median estimate for a 2.6 per cent increase in a survey.

It grew 2.3 per cent in April. In May 2020, South Korea fell into deflation as the coronavirus pandemic struck demand and supply chains.

The country's finance minister said that the impact from the low base and temporary supply disruptions for some agricultural products and oil prices will ease going forward. "The government



A student looks at oversized Korean won bank notes displayed inside Bank of Korea in Seoul. — Reuters

will prepare against the inflation risk from materialising, prevent excessive inflation expectations and take measures to stabilise living costs," Finance Minister Hong Nam-ki said.

Wednesday's data showed the cost of agricultural, livestock and fisheries products and petroleum surged 12.1 per cent and 23.3 per cent, respectively. Core CPI came at 1.2 per cent year-on-year, posting the sharpest increase since November 2018. — Reuters