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CHINA'S EXPORTS SLUMP SEEN EXTENDING TO MARCH



P10

BACK TO NATURE AMID COVID-19 CRISIS



P12

FOOTBALL LEAGUES AWAIT DECISION ON LOCKDOWN



HOUSE-TO-HOUSE VIRUS PROBE FROM TODAY

TWO MORE COVID-19 TESTING CENTRES TO BE SET UP AS OMAN REPORTS RECORD 128 FRESH CASES IN A SINGLE DAY

KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, APRIL 13

House-to house testing will start in the Wilayat of Muttrah, the focal point of COVID-19 in the Sultanate, on Tuesday as the cases touched 128 on Monday — the highest in a single day since the first case on February 24. Screening is only for people with COVID-19 or flu symptoms.

To tackle the rising number of coronavirus patients, which is now at 727, the Ministry of Health has decided to open two more testing centres and enlist more volunteers to bring in more people for screening in the Wilayat.

“We have an extensive network of people and systems at all our four testing centres which are doing excellent job by screening hundreds of people,” Dr Azim al Manji, Head of Communicable Diseases Surveillance Department at the MoH, told the Observer.

Any citizen or expatriate with COVID-19 symptoms can walk into any of the four

testing centres, which offer free screening with or without ID proof.

“Residence card is not a must for anyone who walks into testing centres as we don’t want to deny medical assistance to any undocumented individuals in the country,” he said.

“Once the swabs are taken, it will be sent to the Central Lab in Bausher for examination. Those who have tested for COVID-19 must stay in an isolated room with an attached bathroom. This is to limit the spread of virus just in case if they the result is positive,” said Abdulla Ali al Sharji from the Communicable Diseases at Ports Department.

A total of 124 patients have been recovered from infection to date. Muscat continues to top the COVID-19 list with 490 cases and four deaths, followed by Al Dhakilyah with 34 cases, South Batinah 27, Musandam 3, Al Dhahirah 3, South Al Sharqiyah 3, North Al Sharqiyah 4, Buraimi 2, North Batinah 22 and Dhofar 8.



 OMAN OBSERVER

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TELEGRAM NEWS SERVICE

WEATHER TODAY

MUSCAT

MAX: 36°C

MIN: 26°C

SALALAH

MAX: 30°C

MIN: 26°C

NIZWA

MAX: 29°C

MIN: 22°C

SUNRISE **05.47 AM**

PRAYER TIMINGS

FAJR: 04:29

DHUHR: 12:12

ASR: 15:40

MAGHRIB: 18:33

ISHA: 19:45



Global death toll slows; WHO warns against lockdown ease

MADRID/ LONDON: The death toll from the coronavirus pandemic has slowed in some of the worst-hit countries, with Spain readying on Monday to reopen parts of its economy as governments grapple with a once-in-a-century recession. The number of people infected worldwide reached 1.85 million while death toll topped 114,000-mark.

Italy, France and the US have all reported a drop in COVID-19 deaths in the past 24 hours — with Italy, the European nation most afflicted by the disease, reporting its lowest toll in more than three weeks.

More than half of the planet’s population is staying home as part of efforts to stem the spread of the virus,

which emerged in China late last year and has now killed at least 114,000 people, overwhelming healthcare systems and crippling the world economy.

Spain’s death toll has fallen over recent days, but as a small bump in deaths was reported on Sunday, Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez warned that the locked-down country was “far from victory”.

In the US — the world’s worst-hit nation with a fifth of all deaths and more than half a million confirmed cases — the government’s top infectious disease expert added to cautious optimism that the pandemic may have reached its peak. Anthony Fauci said parts of the country could begin easing restrictions

in May, but warned that the world’s biggest economy would not turn back on like a “light switch”.

“We are hoping by the end of the month we can look around and say, OK, is there any element here that we can safely and cautiously start pulling back on?” Fauci said.

President Donald Trump had previously wanted the US to be back to normal by Easter. But most of the country remained at a standstill and churches took celebrations online.

In the UK, which has logged more than 10,000 deaths, Prime Minister Boris Johnson said on Sunday he had been discharged after “a week in which the NHS has saved my life, no question.” — AFP

OMAN JOINS OPEC+ IN OUTPUT CUT TO SHORE UP PRICE

MUSCAT: Non-Opec producer Oman has pledged to cut 200,000 barrels per day (bpd) of its crude output for May and June 2020 as part of an historic pact reached on Sunday night by Opec and its allies (together known as Opec+) to slash global production in a bid to shore up international oil prices battered by the coronavirus pandemic and a bruising oil price war waged by Saudi Arabia and Russia.

According to a high-level official of Oman’s Ministry of Oil and Gas, the Sultanate’s share of the cuts will decline to 161,000 bpd for the rest of this year,

before falling to 121,000 bpd for the remainder of the agreed timeframe of the pact, which runs till April 2022.

“During (Sunday’s) meeting, Oman had agreed together with other producing countries to participate in the Opec+ cuts,” said Ali Abdullah al Riyami, Director General of Oil & Gas Marketing. “Oman’s contribution for the first two months, viz May and June 2020, is 200,000 barrels, and from July onwards to December 2020, it will be 161,000 barrels. From January 2021 to April 2022, it will be 121,000 barrels.” **SEE P9**

More recovered COVID-19 patients test positive again

SEOUL: South Korea reported on Monday that at least 116 people initially cleared of the new coronavirus had tested positive again, although officials suggested they would soon look at easing strict recommendations aimed at preventing new outbreaks.

South Korea reported only 25 new cases overall on Monday, but the rise in “reactivated” patients has raised concerns as the country seeks to stamp out infections.

Officials are still investigating the cause of the apparent relapses. But Jeong Eun-Kyeong, Director of the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC), has said the virus may have been reactivated rather than

the patients being re-infected.

Other experts said faulty tests may be playing a role, or remnants of the virus may still be in patients’ systems but not be infectious or of danger to the host or others.

The 116 cases are more than double the 51 such cases South Korea reported a week earlier.

South Korea plans to send 600,000 coronavirus testing kits to the United States on Tuesday in the first such shipment following a request from US President Donald Trump, a Seoul official told Reuters on Monday.

Government leaders, meanwhile, called on South Koreans to continue to follow guidelines and restrictions



on social gatherings, but hinted that such measures could soon be eased.

South Korea has called on residents to follow strict social distancing until at least April 19, but as cases have dropped and the weather has improved, a growing number of people have been flouting the guidelines.

At a meeting on disaster management on Monday, Prime Minister Chung Sye-Kyun said the government would soon be looking to loosen the guidelines, which call for people to stay at home, avoid social gatherings of any type, and only go out for essential reasons.

“Later this week, we plan to review our intensive social distancing

campaign that we have carried out so far and discuss whether we will switch to routine safety measures”, he said.

Some local governments have imposed stricter measures, including closing bars and nightclubs, banning large demonstrations, and limiting church services.

Chung cautioned that even when the restrictions are eased, the country will not return to life as before the outbreak.

“We need a very cautious approach because any premature easing of social distancing could bring irreversible consequences, and have to ponder deeply about when and how we switch to the new system”, he said. — **Reuters**



180 shops closed, 200 violations in Seeb



SAMUEL KUTTY
MUSCAT, APRIL 13

As many as 180 shops were closed by Muscat Municipality and cases filed for 200 violations for non-compliance with the orders of the Supreme Committee.

According to a statement from the civic body, the action was taken following visits by the municipal teams to ensure that the commercial establishments follow the measures announced to combat the spread of COVID-19 virus.

"The violations were detected by the Seeb Directorate of the municipality during its field visits to different shops and industrial workshops in the wilayat", the statement said. Along with a number of measures to fight the dreaded virus, the Supreme Committee instructed mandatory closure of all shops in the commercial complexes, except foodstuff stores, clinics, pharmacies and optical outlets.

"The inspection teams in the directorate carried out 1,342 visits,

closed 180 commercial shops, recorded 200 violations and received 39 complaints", the statement said.

The Health Affairs Department in the Seeb directorate monitors and inspects public health activities such as food stores, restaurants, cafes, bakeries and water and food packaging factories.

According to the decisions, shops that do not follow the orders will be slapped with a fine of RO 300 in the first instance and repeat offence will attract a fine of RO 1,000 and cancellation of the licence.

ONLINE BUYING OF FRUITS

Meanwhile, the municipality has signed a memorandum of understanding with the Oman Technology Fund (OTF) to launch a platform on AthmarOm for online trading of fruits and vegetables from Central Market inMawaleh.

The agreement also offers scope for providing consultations to enhance the methods of service delivery to the local community.

Consumer Authority intensifies raids on outlets

MUSCAT: Omar bin Faisal al Jahdhami, Deputy Chairman of the Public Authority for Consumer Authority (PACP), said that since the onset of coronavirus pandemic, PACP has been keeping an eye on shops, commercial centres and other consumer service outlets in all parts of the Sultanate to ensure the outlets' non-exploitation of the situation by hiking prices in the wake of heavy demand on their products.

In a statement to Oman News Agency (ONA), Al Jahdhami pointed out that campaign team made visits to outlets selling medical items, including safety outfits and sanitizers to check their availability in abundance and in affordable prices.

PACP also visited outlets selling

farm products and made the same checks, said Al Jahdhami, noting that the consumer authority gave tickets to erring outlets that raised the prices of some goods whose supply went low due entry (or country-to-country) restrictions, and that the pre-corona market status has been reinstated.

Since late February, a total of 3,703 reports of violation were filed, leading to the handing over of 1,320 tickets to outlets that breached instructions that regulate commercial activity, Al Jahdhami said.

He added that PACP also follows up market activity through its 24-hour Call Centre which transfers violation reports immediately to its inspectors. — ONA

More testing centres, efforts inspire people to cooperate

COME FORWARD: Volunteers convince residents that no IDs are needed

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
MUSCAT, APRIL 13

The concerted efforts of the Ministry of Health and the Supreme Committee dealing with the COVID-19 situation are becoming successful and encouraging more and more people to come out for tests.

Since the Wilayat of Muttrah has two more testing centres, one at Hassan bin Thabit School and the other next to the Muttrah Wali Office building, there is good public response. These centres are in addition to two others in the area.

Added with this is the role of the volunteers who are visiting the households and convincing the residents that no IDs are needed for Covid-19 tests.

Abdullah al Sharji, Head of Ports Health, who is now stationed at Sablat Muttrah said, "We are not asking for resident card when people are coming here, but asking for contact numbers to inform them the test results so that we can give them more care in terms of health facilities. If they do not have separate accommodation then we are offering them accommodation at our institutions located in Ghala. If they have accommodation that can give them space for isolation then they are free to go back home".

The visitors coming for tests are greeted with hand sanitizer and a masks if needed, said Al Sharji commenting on precautions being taken at the centres.

All the time two ambulances are



parked along with buses at each of the centres. "It there are people coming from far off places, then we use the bus for transportation but the bus can accommodate only seven people at a time because we need to maintain social distancing. The ambulances are available just in case there are any emergencies", added Al Sharji.

Dr Salwa bint Nasser al Hashmi, HoD Emergency Crises, explained "We are encouraging everyone who has symptoms to get tested".

What could be those symptoms?

Explaining the symptoms, she said, "The symptoms related to the COVID-19 are headache, sore throat, running nose, chest pain, cough or diarrhoea. If anyone is suffering from any of these symptoms then please come and get tested. We do not need any identity card. All we need is for a person to come here and we will take

care of the rest".

The medication, according to Dr Salwa, is symptomatic. "If you have fever, we advise you to have paracetamol after being consulted by a doctor, but avoid as much as possible medications like anti-inflammatory drug brufen, which is not good in this case. If it is cough then we will give medication and the same when it is diarrhoea. That is how we are treating at this moment".

According to Dr Salwa, there has been excellent response from the community.

About 15 volunteers from the community are helping the medical teams by encouraging the nationals and residents to come forward to get tested.

"We have had people with different nationalities who come forward and took this test. We have lots of volunteers going around and knocking

the doors and inviting people to come for the test. The testing and medication is free here", added Dr Salwa.

Sister Badriya al Jabry, member of the medical team working at Muttrah Sablat said, "There are a few important questions that are asked, as 'what to do if anyone else in the family has any similar symptoms?'"

"We check the vitals and if there are any concerns the doctors here proceed to take the samples. That will be taken to the Central Public Health Laboratories. During that time until the results are determined, the individual will have to stay in isolation within their house (separate room with attached bathroom) if possible, or in the accommodation provided by the ministry".

The timing for COVID-19 testing at all the centres is from 9 am to 1 pm everyday.

Unmindful of the risk, many evade test

SAMUEL KUTTY
MUSCAT, APRIL 13

Even as the COVID-19 test is getting overwhelming response from both citizens and expatriates, there are many people, who are unwilling to approach the centres.

The reason, as the volunteers involved in the campaign point out, is "many of them have not realised the perils involved in the pandemic".

Other people, despite the government announcement that "the test is free and resident card is not required for the purpose", are still afraid of approaching the testing centres because "they do not possess valid documents to stay in the country".

According to a statement from the Ministry of Health, all people will be tested freely even if they do not have any identity cards with them. They need to give only name and basic information about them with a credible mobile number to inform results and follow-up.

"All those who have valid civil ID should provide it for ease of documentation and follow-up of symptoms. Not having ID card will not invite any action from authorities. After completion of medical check all people will be given a valid document for follow-up in health institutions and as reference for result", the statement said.

The people with COVID-19

symptoms who are unwilling to face screening, will not only hinder the campaign to control the contagion but also risk themselves and others too, according to medical experts.

They may not be potential carriers of the dreaded virus, but some of them have symptoms including sniffing, sneezing and even coughing.

Firoz (he did not reveal the full name) was spotted with same symptoms at the gate of a supermarket in Ruwi where a large number of people wander around.

On being asked, he said, "I do not want to go to the testing centre as it is likely that I may be caught for not having proper documents. I am taking some tablets bought from a

pharmacy".

Firoz is one among many expats who skip the test despite having symptoms similar to that of the COVID-19 virus.

Kamaruddin arrived in the Sultanate just a year ago on the so-called non-existing 'free visa' and has been working with a contractor on daily wages. Some others who evade tests are said to be those who have absconded from their sponsors.

"Life is becoming difficult for me. We are six people staying in one room. Others do not have even proper documents so that we can go to the testing centres. Now the situation is that we are left without any money", he said.



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Please Contact with our Team

Mohd Al Rashdi : Head Office	99841230	m.alrahdi86@yahoo.com
Ali Al Maashari : Head Office	99639264	wadialmeeh@yahoo.com
Bakhit Al Shihri : Salalah Office	92998577	bakhit.omandaily@gmail.com
Abdullah Al Abri : Nizwa Office	99429094	nizwaofc@omandaily.net.om
Musalam Al Saidi : Suhar Office	99429192	sohardaily@outlook.com



Oman Air revises reservation policy

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 13

Oman Air has revised the flight reservation policy to allow rebookings for travel up to 18 months from the date the ticket was originally issued.

It may be noted that Oman Air has suspended flights starting from March 29 as per the decisions of the Supreme Committee on COVID-19.

The new conditions include travel dates may be changed up to two times. No rebooking or change fees will be charged, but additional fare may be collected depending on the type of airfare purchased.

Amended travel dates can be up to 18 months from the date of original

ticket issuance.

Change to another Oman Air destination is allowed with no rebooking fees. However, if the fare to the new destination is higher than the original paid, then fare difference will apply.

Customers holding refundable tickets may opt to make changes to flight booking now or may choose to keep reservations open for rebooking at a future date when travel plans are finalised.

Bookings made directly through the Oman Air website may contact the Call Centre or our ticket offices.

Bookings made with a travel agency should contact the agent, the airline said.

EVALUATION:

Final assessment will be based on assignments during May 5-24

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 13

In view of the prevailing situations due to COVID-19 and the decisions taken by the Supreme Committee to suspend study at all educational institutions, the Ministry of Manpower has taken a number of alternative measures at technical colleges.

Firstly, they will start final assessments (final examinations) for the second semester, taking into account the importance of ongoing e-learning via educational platforms.

The final assessment will be based on students' assignments from May 5 till May 24 in all technical colleges.



Short tests to be replaced by short assignments or reports that to be submitted through e-educational platforms used in these colleges.

The ministry also decided to start the annual summer vacation

for foundation year students and for specialised programme students on June 8, 2020, provided that graduation project reports are delivered through e-mail or via platforms available in technical colleges.

It confirmed that the evaluation process of the foundation programme will be completed after the resumption of studies, in addition to the cancellation of the third semester of the academic year 2019/2020.

ROP clarifies on vehicle registration

MUSCAT: Royal Oman Police (ROP) has said that owners can renew their vehicle registration via the online application even if it requires a mandatory technical inspection.

It may be noted that as part of the national efforts to combat COVID-19, all ROP customer services have been suspended until further notice.

As per the ROP rules, all 10-year-old vehicles in Oman will undergo technical inspection before the renewal of vehicle registration.

3,746 citizens brought home since pandemic outbreak

MUSCAT: As many as 740 Omanis, constituting the last batch of those wishing to be repatriated from other countries in view of the coronavirus pandemic outbreak, returned to the Sultanate on Saturday and Sunday, bringing to 3,746 the total number of citizens to be brought home.

The repatriation of citizens was facilitated in implementation of decisions of the Supreme Committee tasked with studying scopes for tackling the spread of the global pandemic and alleviating its impacts.

The number of those who returned includes students studying

abroad, but some Omanis chose to stay abroad when flights were sent to bring them back along with their compatriots.

The flights were arranged by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in cooperation with other departments in the Sultanate. — ONA

Expat arrested for murder in Masirah

MUSCAT: The police in South Sharqiyah Governorate have arrested an Asian expatriate on charges of murdering a citizen in Masirah and seriously wounding a woman. Legal procedures are being completed against him, the ROP said.

CONDOLENCES

The Chairman and Board of
Rees Oil & Gas Services LLC

and the entire management team
offer their heartfelt condolences to

Brigadier (Retd.) Waleed Zawawi

and the entire Al Zawawi family on the sad demise of

Dr. Omar Al Zawawi.

May God the Almighty grant him forgiveness and Paradise.



LET HOBBIES FLOURISH THROUGH VIRTUAL LEARNING

SOME HOBBY-HONING
INSTITUTES AND
PROFESSIONAL SCHOOLS
OFFERING COURSES IN MUSIC
HAVE COME OUT WITH SMART
**SOLUTIONS TO ADDRESS
CHILDREN’S BOREDOM** BY
OFFERING ONLINE MUSIC AND
ART CLASSES



KAUSHALENDRA SINGH

If it is challenging for the working people to deliver their work from home or even from their offices while maintaining safe social distancing, it is more challenging for the children to stay at home all the time.

Some hobby learning schools and professional schools offering courses in music have come out with smart solutions

to address this issue by offering online music and art classes. This has helped not only the students pursue their hobbies, but their parents are equally relieved that their children are engaged somewhere and learning some skills when there is nothing to do outdoor for them.

Thanee Pachiyannaki, Manager of Classic Music and Arts Institute, which works under Tunes Oman, said the Institute has been offering online classes in piano,

guitar, drums, ukulele, theory classes in music as also aural training and vocal practices. “We send our students for music degrees and careers in music”, she said.

She admitted the challenge as something which came all of a sudden but said that the world is moving towards online education and it is good time to move forward.

“The response is good both from the parents and the students. Though we do not have same number of students as in

classroom sessions, but we have been receiving regular inquiries, which is a good sign”, she said.

She did admit that the students were genuinely missing being in the institute in front of their favourite teachers, but in the given situation when no one can venture out of home, “online classes are the best possible solution”.

Keren Palomo, academic adviser and teacher of vocals and piano, admitted

that she is genuinely missing her students but said at least something is happening through online classes.

Commenting on the challenges, both Thanee and Keren agreed that the switchover was so quick that many of their regular students and their parents were yet to understand the virtual platforms.

“But hopefully they will learn and things would become easy for the parents, students and teachers”, they said.

BEIJING EXPORTS CHINA MODEL OF VIRUS MANAGEMENT

SINGAPORE/BELGRADE: Last month, six Chinese medical professionals stepped off an Air Serbia jet in Belgrade to a red-carpet welcome from President Aleksandar Vucic and an array of cabinet ministers. After elbow-bump greetings, Vucic kissed Serbia's flag, then China's.

In Serbia, one of Beijing's closest European allies, and a handful of other friendly countries, China is providing on-the-ground guidance to help battle the coronavirus that has swept around the world.

These efforts by Beijing come as western governments, already wary of China's rising influence around the world, including through its Belt and Road infrastructure initiative, are struggling with their own mounting coronavirus death tolls.

They are part of a long-running effort by China to strike a benevolent posture abroad to offset worries about its growing economic and military might, while presenting alternatives - such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank it set up in 2016 - to Western dominance of global institutions.

"There is no doubt that China will use the COVID-19 outbreak to further what China views as acting in its own national interest," said Gordon Houlden, a former Canadian diplomat and the director of the University of Alberta's China Institute.

"That will include pushing its own governance model, in this case its methodology of epidemiology," he said. That methodology is based on the aggressive and comprehensive approach China took to combat the virus, including the lockdown of Wuhan, and the know-how it has built as the first country to suffer an outbreak of the disease.

China's foreign ministry did not immediately respond to a request for comment. But ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian, at a press conference on Thursday, said the aim of sending medical teams was to share China's experiences combatting the virus, not to export its governance model



The text on the billboard reads "Thanks, brother Xi". — Reuters

abroad.

In addition to Serbia, Beijing has sent medical teams to Cambodia, Iran, Iraq, Laos, Pakistan, Venezuela and Italy, the only G7 nation to join the Belt and Road Initiative and which has been devastated by the coronavirus. Last week, a 12-member Chinese medical team arrived in the Philippines to aid in the fight against the virus.

The outreach is on top of the donation or sale of supplies to some 90 countries, including rivals such as the United States, as well as numerous videoconferences with countries and international organisations to share its know-how, according to the China International Development Cooperation Agency.

"We hope that other countries will not repeat China's tragedies," Peng Zhiqiang, a specialist from the

Guangdong Provincial Centre for Disease Control and Prevention and head of the Chinese team in Serbia, said by phone from Belgrade.

'TRUST CHINESE EXPERTS'

Chinese medical teams are advising some host countries on building makeshift hospitals - evoking the 1,000 bed hospital China built from scratch in eight days in Wuhan — and rolling out virus management measures similar to those that helped it slash new infections at home, according to Peng and Liang Wenbin, a member of a Chinese team sent to Cambodia last month.

Those practices include the quarantine or isolation of people with mild symptoms to curb the early spread of the virus, methods of treating complications and widespread temperature checking for

entry into public places.

On the Chinese team's advice, Serbia began quarantining people with mild symptoms and deploying troops to build field hospitals for patients with mild symptoms.

Serbian officials said they welcomed the input, which they say has helped slow the spread of the virus.

"We changed our approach, and with the support of Chinese experts, we went for more widespread testing," said a source close to the Serbian presidency, who was not authorised to speak with media and declined to be named.

"Chinese doctors have welcomed the measures taken by Serbia, and we have embraced the Chinese model, which is to reach and treat as many people as possible — all who are infected," the person said.

QUARANTINES AND VISA CURBS

In Cambodia, which has been a loyal supporter of Beijing in Southeast Asia, the issuance of visas for international visitors was sharply curtailed at the suggestion of the team. The country is bracing for an influx of returnees for the Khmer new year this month.

Cambodia is also considering the team's advice to refit hotels and schools for possible quarantine of returnees, said Liang, the member of the Chinese team.

"The latest restrictions to limit the mobility of personnel and to ban foreigners from coming to the country are the control measures China used," she said.

The Cambodian government did not reply to requests for comment.

— Reuters

Indonesia study warns Ramadhan exodus would fuel coronavirus

JAKARTA: Indonesian researchers have warned the government that plans to allow millions of people to leave for their home villages at the end of Ramadhan next month could send coronavirus infections soaring.

Meanwhile, a separate study showed the health system in the world's fourth most populous country was likely to be overwhelmed by demand for intensive care units even with strong efforts to suppress the outbreak.

President Joko Widodo has resisted pressure for a total ban on the Ramadhan exodus, known in Indonesia as "mudik", citing tradition and economic factors, instead seeking to persuade people to stay put and using only limited curbs on transport.

Health experts have already said that Indonesia faces a sharp rise in cases after a slow government response masked the scale of infections in a country that has already suffered 399 dead - more than any Asian country except China.

In a new model seen by Reuters, the University of Indonesia's public health faculty forecast that if mudik proceeds, there could be one million infections by July on Java, the country's most populous island and home to the capital Jakarta.

"If we don't have mudik, we can keep the numbers from reaching that high," said reasearcher Pandu Riono, adding that the model still forecast another 750,000 even without mudik.

Asked to comment, Abraham Wiratomo, an expert in the presidential office, said it invited input from researchers and would base its policymaking on the research. — Reuters

Protect women from domestic violence during coronavirus lockdowns: Pope

VATICAN CITY: Pope Francis said on Monday society had to stand behind women victims of domestic violence, as abuse increased around the world during coronavirus lockdowns.

Francis praised women in frontline roles in helping society weather the crisis, mentioning doctors, nurses, police officers, prison guards and sales staff in stores selling essential goods.

The pope, speaking on a religious and national holiday in Italy and other countries, also praised the many women at home helping children, the elderly and the disabled.

But, speaking from his official library rather than from a window overlooking St. Peter's Square, Francis said: "Sometimes they (women) risk being victims of violence in a cohabitation that they bear like a weight that is far too heavy."

"Let us pray for them, so the Lord grants them strength and that our communities support them along with their families," he said.

Domestic violence has risen as many countries imposed tougher restrictions on people leaving their homes to halt the spread of the coronavirus.

In Italy, support groups said they were concerned that a sharp fall in official reports of domestic violence was a signal that women risked being even more exposed to control and aggression by a partner because victims have more difficulty communicating during a lockdown.

Domestic violence programmes across the United States have cited increases in calls for help. The YWCA of Northern New Jersey said domestic violence calls have risen by up to 24 per cent.

In Spain, calls to a helpline for victims of violence increased by 12.4 per cent in the first two weeks of the lockdown compared to the same fortnight last year.

Online consultations of the helpline's website grew by 270 per cent, the Equality Ministry said.

Gun control advocates in the United States, where gun stores have been allowed to remain open, have said they feared increased ownership of firearms during the pandemic could lead to more domestic violence.

In Italy, support groups said they were concerned that a sharp fall in official reports of domestic violence was a signal that women risked being even more exposed to control and aggression by a partner because victims have more difficulty communicating during a lockdown.

Because of restrictions against gatherings, all of Francis' Holy Week services that culminated on Easter Sunday were held without public participation in either St. Peter's Basilica or St. Peter's Square.

Nearly 19,500 people have died of the coronavirus as of Sunday in Italy, the second-highest toll behind the United States.

Francis said he was praying for all countries affected by the pandemic but particularly for those with many victims, mentioning the United States, Italy, Spain and France before stopping himself, saying "the list is long".

— Reuters

'Medibot' to do rounds on Malaysian virus wards



The Medibot is aimed at helping nurses and doctors working on the wards with social distancing. — AFP

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysian scientists have created a barrel-shaped robot on wheels that they hope will make the rounds on hospital wards to check on coronavirus patients, reducing health workers' risk of infection.

"Medibot" is a 1.5 metre tall (five foot) white robot, equipped with a camera and screen via which patients can communicate remotely with medics.

The invention, built by scientists at the International Islamic University Malaysia, is also fitted with a device to

check patients' temperatures remotely.

The robot was built by scientists at the International Islamic University Malaysia.

It is aimed at helping nurses and doctors working on the wards with social distancing, Zulkifli Zainal Abidin, a member of the team behind the invention, said.

It cost about 15,000 ringgit (\$3,500) to develop, and the university plans to trial it soon in their own private hospital, which does not treat virus patients, said Zulkifli.

If that proves a success, the

scientists hope it can be used in government hospitals where people with COVID-19 are sent.

Malaysia has reported 4,683 coronavirus cases, including 76 deaths. The invention is also fitted with a device to check patients' temperatures remotely. From Thailand to Israel, robots are being used in the fight against the coronavirus, which has killed over 110,000 people worldwide.

They are being increasingly relied on as fast, efficient, contagion-proof champions in the war against the virus. — AFP



Russian border turns China’s frontline in virus fight

YEW LUN TIAN, HUIZHONG WU

China’s northeastern border with Russia has become a frontline in the fight against a resurgence of the coronavirus epidemic as new daily cases rose to the highest in nearly six weeks - with more than 90 per cent involving people coming from abroad.

Having largely stamped out domestic transmission of the disease, China has been slowly easing curbs on movement as it tries to get its economy back on track, but there are fears that a rise in imported cases could spark a second wave of COVID-19.

A total of 108 new coronavirus cases were reported in mainland China on Sunday, up from 99 a day earlier, marking the highest daily tally since March 5.

Imported cases accounted for a record 98. Half involved Chinese nationals returning from Russia’s Far Eastern Federal District, home to the city of

Vladivostok, who re-entered China through border crossings in Heilongjiang province.

“Our little town here, we thought it was the safest place,” said a resident of the border city of Suifenhe, who only gave his surname as Zhu.

“Some Chinese citizens - they want to come back, but it’s not very sensible, what are you doing coming here for?”

The border is closed, except to Chinese nationals, and the land route through the city had become one of few options available for people trying to return home after Russia stopped flights to China except for those evacuating people.

Streets in Suifenhe were virtually empty on Sunday evening due to restrictions on movement and gatherings announced last week, when authorities took preventative measures similar to those imposed in Wuhan, the central Chinese city where the pandemic ripping round the world

Having largely stamped out domestic transmission of the disease, China has been slowly easing curbs on movement as it tries to get its economy back on track, but there are fears that a rise in imported cases could spark a second wave of COVID-19

first emerged late last year.

The total number of confirmed cases in mainland China stood at 82,160 as of Sunday. At the peak of the first wave of the

epidemic on February 12 there were over 15,000 new cases, though that was a one-off spike following the deployment of new testing methods.

Though the number of daily infections across China has dropped sharply from that peak, China has seen the daily toll creep higher after hitting a trough on March 12 because of the rise in imported cases.

Chinese cities near the Russian frontier are tightening border controls and imposing stricter quarantines in response.

Suifenhe and Harbin, the capital of Heilongjiang, are now mandating 28 days of quarantine as well as nucleic acid and antibody tests for all arrivals from abroad.

In Shanghai, authorities found that 60 people who arrived on Aeroflot flight SU208 from Moscow on April 10 have the coronavirus, Zheng Jin, a spokeswoman for the Shanghai Municipal Health Commission, told a press conference on

Monday.

Pang Xinghuo, deputy director of the Center for Diseases Prevention and Control in Beijing, said the trend for local transmission of the disease in the capital was low.

“Imported cases are still the highest risk in Beijing in the second half of April,” Pang said, adding that nearly 8 per cent of the 40,000 nucleic acid tests carried out in the city since April 1 had been conducted on people who had come from abroad.

China has cut the number of people crossing its borders by 90 per cent and has tried to stop all non-essential journeys, said Liu Haitao, an immigration official, at a separate briefing.

“Our border is long, and apart from the border crossings and passages, there are a large number of mountain passes, paths, ferry crossings and small roads, and the situation is very complicated,” he said.

— Reuters



The Mekong river supports 60 million people as it flows past Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and through Cambodia and Vietnam. - Reuters

Chinese dams held back Mekong waters

KAY JOHNSON

China’s Mekong River dams held back large amounts of water during a damaging drought in downstream countries last year despite China having higher-than-average water levels upstream, a US research company said in a study.

China’s government disputed the findings, saying there was low rainfall during last year’s monsoon season on its portion of the 4,350-km (2,700-mile) river.

The findings by Eyes on Earth Inc, a research and consulting company specialising in water, published in a US-government funded study, could complicate tricky discussions between China and other Mekong countries on how to manage the river that supports 60 million people as it flows past Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and through Cambodia and Vietnam.

Last year’s drought, which saw the Lower Mekong at its lowest levels in more than 50 years, devastated farmers and fishermen and saw the massive river recede to expose sandbanks along some stretches and at others turned from its usual murky brown to bright blue here because waters were so shallow and lacking in sediment.

“If the Chinese are stating that they were not contributing to the drought, the data does not support that position,” said Alan Basist, a meteorologist and president of Eyes on Earth, which conducted the study with funding from the US State Department’s Lower Mekong Initiative.

Instead, satellite measurements of “surface wetness” in China’s Yunnan province, through which the Upper Mekong flows, suggest the region

US study finds large volume of water held back during 2019 when downstream flows were at their lowest level in 50 years. China disputes findings as ‘unreasonable’ and says drought also affected its portion of the river

in 2019 actually had slightly above-average combined rainfall and snowmelt during the May to October wet season. But water levels measured downstream from China along the Thai-Lao border were at times up to 3 metres (10 feet) lower than they should have been, the group said in the study.

That suggests China is “not letting the water out during the wet season, even when the restriction of water from China has a severe impact of the drought experienced downstream”, Basist said.

The effect of China’s 11 dams on the upper Mekong has long been debated, but data has been scarce because China does not release detailed records of how much water the dams are using to fill their reservoirs, which Eyes on Earth says have a combined capacity of more than 47 billion cubic metres.

China, which has no formal water

treaties with the lower Mekong countries, promised to cooperate here on management of the river and also to investigate the causes of last year’s record drought.

But the United States, which has been challenging China’s growing influence in Southeast Asia, has said that Beijing essentially controls the Mekong. Last year in Bangkok, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo blamed the drought on “China’s decision to shut off water upstream”.

In the early years of the data, from 1992, the predictive model and the river measurements tracked generally closely.

But starting in 2012, when the larger of China’s upper Mekong hydropower dams came online, the model and the river level readings started to diverge most years, coinciding with periods of the Chinese dams’ reservoirs filling up during rainy seasons and releasing water during the dry season.

The difference was especially pronounced in 2019, Basist said.

The study focused only on waters flowing out of China, and did not look further downstream, where Laos here opened two new mainstream Mekong dams in late 2019.

China dismissed the findings. “The explanation that China’s dam building on the Lancang River is causing downstream droughts is unreasonable,” the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a statement to Reuters, referring to the river by its Chinese name.

The ministry said Yunnan province saw serious drought last year and reservoir volumes at China’s dams on the river fell to their historically lowest levels. — Reuters

Paris accord under threat if virus trumps climate change

KIYOSHI TAKENAKA, RITSUKO SHIMIZU

Japan’s Environment Minister Shinjiro Koizumi warned on Monday that the Paris climate accord could face death if steps to fight global warming were put on the backburner to facilitate the economic recovery from the coronavirus pandemic.

Many economists and policymakers are forecasting a steep global recession this year as countries are forced into lockdowns to contain the spread of the coronavirus, curtailing business activity in a major blow to jobs and incomes.

“It would virtually mean the death of the Paris accord if we gave priority unconditionally to economic recovery, while neglecting the environment,” Koizumi said in an interview.

Under the landmark 2015 Paris accord, nearly 200 nations agreed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in a bid to prevent catastrophic planetary warming.

“No one at the environment ministry disagrees that the economy is important. We just would like to behave in a way that ensures the environment will never be left behind,” said Koizumi.

Japan last month submitted to the United Nations its closely watched target to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in a five-year review.

The goal of a 26 per cent reduction by the fiscal year ending March 2031 from levels seen in fiscal 2013 was unchanged from five years ago, disappointing climate change campaigners, although the country said it will pursue effort for further cuts.

Koizumi, who turns 39 on Tuesday, said in the interview that he aims to submit a more aggressive target by the next climate summit due to take place in Glasgow next year.

The conference, known as COP26, was originally scheduled for November, but has been postponed to 2021 because of the coronavirus outbreak.

“Japan takes (the postponement) as a positive development and will strive to create a situation where we can take part in COP26 with our heads held high,” Koizumi said.

Koizumi, speaking via teleconference from his Tokyo home in his first such interview as environment minister, is the son of former prime minister Junichiro Koizumi, and is seen as a potential future leader himself. He said his ministry intends to take the lead in the country’s shift towards teleworking, which has accelerated as a result of the coronavirus.

“The environment ministry will cut its commuters by 70 per cent. I would like to show to the people that we are leading the way,” he said. — Reuters

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HEAD OFFICE

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

SALALAH OFFICE

Tel: 23292633
Fax: 23293909

NIZWA OFFICE

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

ADVERTISING

AL OMANEYA ADVERTISING & PUBLIC RELATIONS, P.O. Box 3303,
P.C. 112, Ruwi, Sultanate of Oman

Tel: SWITCHBOARD: 24649444

DIRECT: 24649430/24649437/24649401

Fax: 24649434

DISTRIBUTION AGENT

AL OMANEYA for Distribution & Marketing, P.O. Box 974,
P.C. 100, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman

Tel: 24649351/24649360

Fax: 24649379

Website: omanobserver.om

e-mail: editor@omanobserver.om

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subscribe@oeppa.om

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HISTORIC DEAL

Oman joins Opec+ pact to boost oil prices

SULTANATE COMMITTED TO SLASHING 200,000 BPD OF OUTPUT DURING MAY-JUNE 2020, WHICH DECLINES TO 161,000 BPD FOR THE REST OF THIS YEAR, BEFORE FALLING TO 121,000 BPD FOR THE REMAINDER OF THE AGREED TIMEFRAME OF THE PACT, WHICH RUNS TILL APRIL 2022



CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, APRIL 13

Non-Opec producer Oman has pledged to cut 200,000 barrels per day (bpd) of its crude output for May and June 2020 as part of an historic pact reached on Sunday night by Opec and its allies (together known

as Opec+) to slash global production in a bid to shore up international oil prices battered by the coronavirus pandemic and a bruising oil price war waged by Saudi Arabia and Russia.

According to a high-level official of Oman's Ministry of Oil and Gas, the Sultanate's share of the cuts will

decline to 161,000 bpd for the rest of this year, before falling to 121,000 bpd for the remainder of the agreed timeframe of the pact, which runs till April 2022.

"During (Sunday's) meeting, Oman had agreed together with other producing countries to participate in



Dr Mohammed al Rumhy (*left*), Minister of Oil and Gas, and (*right*) Ali Abdullah al Riyami, Director General of Oil & Gas Marketing.



the Opec+ cuts," said Ali Abdullah al Riyami, Director General of Oil & Gas Marketing.

"Oman's contribution for the first two months, viz May and June 2020, is 200,000 barrels, and from July onwards to December 2020, it will be 161,000 barrels. From January 2021 to April 2022, it will be 121,000 barrels."

The groundbreaking deal came late on Sunday night with Opec's 13 members joining forces with 10 non-

member producers including Russia, to cut output by 9.7 million bpd during May – June 2020. The cuts will be further eased to 7.7 million bpd between July and December 2020, and then to 5.8 million bpd between January 2021 and April 2022.

Speaking to the *Observer*, Al Riyami – who participated in the latest round of Opec+ talks alongside Dr Mohammed bin Hamad al Rumhy, Minister of Oil and Gas – said the baseline for Oman's production cuts

will be October 2018.

"Our reference production for October 2018 was 883,000 bpd of crude, which was determined by secondary sources appointed by Opec, and not by us. Also starting from December 2019, the condensate production is not part of the cuts, which means that the production cuts will come from crude oil output alone."

Despite the landmark pact, major benchmarks registered modest increases when markets opened on Monday. Brent futures rose 3.43 per cent to reach \$32.56 per barrel, while West Texas Intermediate climbed 3.56 per cent to \$23.57 per barrel.

Oman Crude Oil Futures Contract, the Sultanate's crude benchmark, lost \$1.61 per barrel in trading on the Dubai Mercantile Exchange (DME) on Monday to settle at \$25.05 per barrel. The average price of Oman crude (April 2020 delivery) stabilized at \$54.61 per barrel, which was lower by \$10.28 per barrel than the corresponding average for the March 2020 delivery month, said DME in a statement.

Sohar International, Tageer Finance reveal exposure to NMC Healthcare

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 13

Omani lender Sohar International Bank and Muscat-based financial services firm Tageer Finance Company announced on Monday exposures totalling around RO 4.7 million to NMC Healthcare LLC, the UAE based healthcare services provider, which is the subject of international court action amid allegations of financial fraud.



Sohar International Bank (formerly Bank Sohar) said in a filing to the Capital Market Authority (CMA) that it has direct exposure to Abu Dhabi headquartered NMC with an outstanding amount of RO 3.45 million in the form of a syndicated facility sanctioned in May 2018.

Ahmed al Musalmi, CEO, said the Bank had spurned multiple applications for further credit from NMC. "During 2019, the Bank had rejected multiple requests from the company for additional credit facilities worth RO 43 million, including rejecting to roll over the maturing loan, which was instead paid in December 2019. The prudent and diligent measures taken by the Bank not only significantly reduced the exposure, but also avoided a substantial increase of exposure to the company."

Sohar International Bank is considering all options and measures, including enforcement of legal rights to ensure the realisation of the outstanding amount, he added.

Tageer Finance, which is engaged in the business of providing leasing, debt factoring, bridge loan and construction loans, said it has outstandings to date to the tune of RO 1.228 million owed by NMC Healthcare.

Significantly, a total of four Oman-based publicly traded firms have come forward to disclose varying degrees of exposure to the troubled UAE based healthcare services provider. On Sunday, HSBC Bank Oman SAOG (HBON) announced it had exposure to NMC Healthcare LLC to the tune of \$16 million. Earlier, Bank Nizwa, the first sharia-compliant Islamic bank in the Sultanate, had revealed that it had extended RO 5 million in direct financing to Elegant Medical Centre LLC, which is 34.3 per cent indirectly owned by NMC Healthcare UAE through its subsidiaries, for sole operation in the Sultanate.

Last week, a High Court judge in the UK placed HMC Healthcare, which is listed on the London Stock Exchange (LSE), into administration, citing serious financial and management irregularities in the running of the group. NMC, which had a market value of \$10 billion at its peak, is being run by administrators Alvarez & Marsal Inc following demands by an array of creditors. It has revealed more than \$4 billion of undisclosed borrowings, pushing its total of debt to \$6.6 billion.

UNFAIR COMPETITION

Incentives necessary for Omani SMEs to compete against 'hidden trade'

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, APRIL 13

Omani entrepreneurs, as well as owners of small and medium businesses (SMEs), should be given incentives to offset "unfair competition" from expatriates involved in 'hidden trade' practices, according to a well-known authority on SME development.

Shaikh Salah Hilal al Maawali (*pictured*), CEO – SME Development Fund, warned that small Omani businesses face "huge barriers" in a market skewed by expatriates running 'shadow businesses' that contribute little to the national economy.

He underlined in this regard the need for Omani entrepreneurs to be suitably incentivised to pursue their own self-employment opportunities and thereby ease the dependence on the government and private sectors for job creation.

He explained: "For example, an Omani university graduate will receive a minimum wage of around RO 900 per month in government service or RO 700 in private service. But if he chooses to start his own business, he should be able to earn at least RO 1000 per month for his effort.



(For illustration only)

SHADOW BUSINESSES RUN BY EXPATS SKEW THE MARKET TO THE DISADVANTAGE OF OMANI ENTREPRENEURS



But he faces unfair competition from expatriates operating hidden businesses. Many in the latter category have no educational or professional qualifications, but use the services of a hidden (Omani) partner or sleeping partner to front the business.

To all intents, the expatriate owns the business, pays no taxes and fails to provide a proper service to the nation (in the form of job

creation). Yet, they compete with Omani university graduates running legitimately small businesses."

Al Maawali made the comments in the context of the immense challenges being faced by Omani SMEs amid the lockdown ordered by the authorities to stem the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19).

"We cannot encourage entrepreneurship without suitable incentives to support Omani SMEs," said the official.

The hidden trade menace is currently the subject of a draft legislation which is being discussed by various legislative agencies before it is enacted into law. Last month, the government revealed that the draft law had reached the State Council for deliberation.

"Hidden trade occurs when a company is owned on paper by an Omani national but, in truth, is run by someone else. Such a person does not create employment for the workers of this company and instead tells them to go out and find their own jobs, while still being contracted to this company. It is a process that sees the company owner reaping profit at the expense of the workers," said the government in a statement issued on the occasion.



Stay alert, stay safe from EMI Moratorium Fraud

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 13

Bank Muscat, the flagship financial services provider in the Sultanate, has requested all its customers to use digital banking channels for their banking and transactional needs during the current challenge posed by COVID-19. The bank's digital servicing channels are available 24/7 so that customers can transact from the safety of their homes.

However, it must be kept in mind that times of global emergencies are often exploited by fraudsters to defraud the general public. The bank has requested all its customers to stay alert and follow safe banking practices including not divulging their banking details to others.

The bank has especially warned the public against falling prey to a new type of fraud – the EMI Moratorium Fraud. Fraudsters may contact the general public and pose as bank officials who can help postpone their EMIs or loan payments. To commit this fraud, a fraudster will request the victim to share OTPs, CVV numbers, passwords and PINs of bank accounts and credit/debit cards. If these details are shared, the fraudster may be able to access a victim's banking details and commit fraud. The bank has reminded all its customers that it never asks for any of these details. It has requested everyone not to fall



prey to such scam calls, messages or emails and to never share details like their debit/credit card number, the expiry date, the CVV number or OTPs with anybody who gets in touch with them for these.

Cases of electronic financial fraud have been increasing globally over the last few years and can often cause tremendous financial and psychological damage to both businesses as well as individuals. In 2019, a special anti-fraud awareness campaign was launched by the Royal Oman Police and Bank Muscat. A number of awareness activities and lectures on fraud have already been held in the Sultanate as part of the campaign and more are being planned for the future. Giving top priority to its role as the Sultanate's flagship financial institution and its key role in supporting the National Economy, Bank Muscat has been part of a number of anti-fraud awareness campaigns over the past few years whereby the bank has sought to sensitise and educate the general public with information that will enable them to easily recognise and avoid fraud.

Port of Duqm receives project cargo for Duqm Refinery

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 13

Port of Duqm has announced the discharged of a large consignment of project cargo for the multibillion dollar Duqm Refinery under construction at the adjoining Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Duqm.

SAL heavy lift vessel MV Anne Sofie, carrying over-dimensional shipments for the flagship Duqm Refinery project, called at the port earlier this week.

The vessel had on board air coolers and accessories as part of the EPC 1 package whose lead contractor is the Spanish based company Technicas Reunidas.

The highlight of the shipment is the discharge of one single heavy lift piece weighing almost 800 metric tonnes and measuring 73 metres in length, a width of 12.6 metres and a height of 13 metres. Mammoet, a global market leader in heavy lift transportation, is overseeing the safe pickup and delivery to the Duqm Refinery site.

"This is the second such heavy lift cargo in the recent times. Two months back, the port received nine massive LPG storage tanks for the same



THE PORT RECEIVED NINE MASSIVE LPG STORAGE TANKS FOR THE SAME PROJECT, EACH OF THEM WEIGHING AROUND 780 METRIC TONNES

project, each of them weighing around 780 metric tonnes," said Port of Duqm

in a statement.

"The Port of Duqm is proud to

facilitate the construction of this key anchor project for the Duqm development and continuously prove its readiness and capabilities to all relevant stakeholders by successfully managing the discharge operations for such landmark projects," it added.

NBO customers enjoy seamless experience

MUSCAT: Keeping the safety and wellbeing of customers as its highest priority, National Bank of Oman (NBO) has taken a number of measures to ensure uninterrupted banking in light of the evolving Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Customers can now renew their expiring NBO's cards from instant issuance machines located in 24 of its branches, eliminating the need of multiple visits to receive new

ones.

The bank has also waived the reload fees for its contactless "Tap and Go" Badeel prepaid card, which is available to both NBO and non-NBO customers, in an effort to reduce handling cash. Additionally, NBO's mobile app scan & pay feature allows customers to pay through QR



payment enabled terminals located across the Sultanate to further decrease the need to utilize cash. NBO has also tied-up with online shopping mobile app, MarkeetEx, granting customers 7 per cent discount when buying using one of the bank's debit, credit, and prepaid cards.

With cutting edge digital banking technology, NBO is well prepared to provide seamless services through its internet banking platform for personal and corporates, mobile app, and 24/7 call centre. NBO's MarketZone app is also available to meet investors different requirements and needs. The bank's branches remain operational with working hours starting from 8am to 12pm, Sunday to Thursday.

Sohar Aluminium funds COVID-19 protection gear

MUSCAT: Furthering its commitment and as a pioneer in supporting national causes, and fulfilling the directives of the National Supreme Committee to deal with the developments of COVID-19, Sohar Aluminium announced the extension of its support to the Ministry of Health to fund the purchase of medical equipment in the form of 50,000 protective N95 face masks and 20,000 disposable protective goggles.

This follows discussions between Sohar Aluminium and the Ministry of Health during which the Ministry defined these much-needed items at this critical period. The company also announced a financial

donation of RO 100,000 to the recently formed Job Security Fund.

"Sohar Aluminium believes that collaboration between government, private and social sectors during these uncertain times is essential to overcome this challenging situation while standing committed to its role, expressing solidarity with and continuing to support all the efforts in this field.

Sohar Aluminium also appreciates all the endeavours and hard work exerted by the Health Sector and other concerned entities in the Sultanate towards combating this pandemic," it said in a statement.



CHEN BING

POINT of VIEW

Why a 5G network is more important than ever for Oman

The advantages of 5G infrastructure in Oman are increasing clear — particularly with the demand for connectivity rising in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

5G not only provides faster connection speeds and lower latency to the public, but it is helping the world to transform emergency healthcare response, provide remote monitoring and diagnosis during patient transfers, and enhance pandemic monitoring platforms.

Connected societies like those in Oman clearly stand to benefit from the continued roll-out of 5G infrastructure. It is also why network security is now being brought under the spotlight.

For example, traditional security design focused on the protection of individuals' voice and data. Yet 5G goes beyond serving individuals to empower vertical industries, all of which have diverse security demands. 5G is also different from earlier networks in that it is an ecosystem.

Many links are involved for one piece of information to flow from one consumer to another, including devices, transmission equipment, routers, and more.



Thankfully 5G networks are not only faster and more agile than 4G, but they have enhanced security features to ensure that industries and communities are more protected than ever before.

We see this security as a necessity for a world that relies increasingly upon the Internet of Things (IoT), AI, big data analysis, and more. For instance, while 5G alone is an upgrade to our communications infrastructure, AI provides us with

more powerful computing engines. It is the applications built on both of these platforms that will truly change the way we work and live. We have already begun collaborating with telecom operators and partners in the region to explore such applications in dozens of industries—from healthcare to intelligent connected vehicles, smart factories, smart grids, and so on.

In particular, we see how COVID-19 is putting tremendous

pressure on city systems. The need for digitization of industries and stronger collaboration systems has never been greater.

The power and security afforded by 5G is thus supporting telecom operators to manage a rapid surge in data traffic for applications such as online education and work-from-home policies.

In the healthcare domain, the availability of 5G-equipped solutions is also proving vital to managing the

COVID-19 pandemic. Real-time collaboration between healthcare authorities is just one example. As case studies and medical data need to be shared promptly, providing a valuable reference for other hospitals and scientific research institutions, 5G networks make this happen in a stable and efficient manner.

While 4G can meet basic data transmission needs, with rapid increases in data volume and mounting demand for remote, HD-video based treatment, there is a need for upgraded networks with faster connections and more bandwidth.

In the end, all of this technology really comes down to one thing: supporting people.

Oman is already combining the power of 5G, AI, and other technologies for this goal. Moving forward and in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, we must focus on how new applications can bring value to local communities in times of crisis. By actively tackling the challenges of today through alliances with governments, customers, and partners, Oman telecommunications industry can deliver the standard of service and security that users not only demand, but deserve.

(Chen Bing, CEO of Huawei Tech Investment, Oman)

Connected societies like those in Oman clearly stand to benefit from the continued roll-out of 5G infrastructure. It is also why network security is now being brought under the spotlight.

OPEC, RUSSIA APPROVE BIGGEST-EVER OIL CUT

LONDON: Opec and allies led by Russia agreed on Sunday to a record cut in output to prop up oil prices amid the coronavirus pandemic in an unprecedented deal with fellow oil nations, including the United States, that could curb global oil supply by 20 per cent.

Measures to slow the spread of the coronavirus have destroyed demand for fuel and driven down oil prices, straining budgets of oil producers and hammering the US shale industry, which is more vulnerable to low prices due to its higher costs.

The group, known as Opec+, said it had agreed to reduce output by 9.7 million barrels per day (bpd) for May and June, after four days of talks and following pressure from US President Donald Trump to arrest the price decline.

Opec+ sources said they expected total global oil cuts to amount to more than 20 million bpd, or 20 per cent of global supply, effective May 1. Opec had the same figure in its draft statement but removed it from the final version.

The biggest oil cut ever is more than four times deeper than the previous record cut in 2008. Producers will slowly relax curbs after June, although reductions in production will stay in place until April 2022.

In a statement from the White House, Trump welcomed the commitment by Saudi Arabia and Russia “to return oil production to levels consistent with global energy and financial market stability.”

Earlier on Twitter, Trump wrote: “The big Oil Deal with Opec+ is done. This will save hundreds of thousands of energy jobs in the United States.”

Thanking Russian President Vladimir Putin and Saudi King Salman for pushing the deal through, Trump added: “I just spoke to them... Great deal for all,”

Oil demand has dropped by around a third because of the coronavirus pandemic. Oil prices jumped more than \$1 a barrel in Monday trading after the agreement, but gains were capped amid concern that it would not be enough to head off oversupply with the coronavirus pandemic hammering demand.

Total global cuts will include contributions from non-members, steeper voluntary cuts by some Opec+ members and strategic stocks purchases by the world’s largest consumers.

Saudi Energy Minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman said that real effective cuts by Opec+ would total 12.5 million bpd because Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait would cut supplies steeper



A man adjusts the Mexican flag at the meeting room before the Opec 14th Meeting of the Joint Ministerial Monitoring Committee in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. – Reuters

MEASURES TO SLOW THE SPREAD OF THE CORONAVIRUS HAVE DESTROYED DEMAND FOR FUEL AND DRIVEN DOWN OIL PRICES, STRAINING BUDGETS OF OIL PRODUCERS AND HAMMERING THE US SHALE INDUSTRY, WHICH IS MORE VULNERABLE TO LOW PRICES DUE TO ITS HIGHER COSTS.

said they could buy oil to replenish reserves.

Trump had threatened Opec leader Saudi Arabia with oil tariffs and other measures if it did not fix the market’s oversupply problem as low prices have put the US oil industry, the world’s largest, in severe distress.

Canada and Norway had signalled a willingness to cut and the United States, where legislation makes it hard to act in tandem with cartels such as Opec, said its output would fall steeply by itself this year because of low prices.

The Canadian government said in a statement it welcomed the Opec+ deal, saying it was committed to achieving price certainty and economic stability.

The deal had been delayed since Thursday, however, after Mexico, worried about derailing its plans to revive heavily indebted state oil company Pemex, balked at the production cuts it was asked to make.

Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador said on Friday that Trump had offered to make extra US cuts on his behalf, an unusual offer by the US leader, who has long railed against Opec.

Trump said Washington would help Mexico by picking up “some of the slack” and being reimbursed later. He did not say how that would work.

A previous agreement by Opec+ to cut production this year fell apart because of a dispute between Russia and Saudi Arabia, triggering a price war that brought a flood of supply just as demand for fuel was crushed by the coronavirus pandemic.

Global oil demand is estimated to have fallen by around 30 million bpd as more than 3 billion people are locked down in their homes due to the outbreak.

Banks Goldman Sachs and UBS predicted last week that Brent prices would fall back to \$20 per barrel as cuts would not be enough to help offset severe demand destruction because of the restrictions to curb the coronavirus outbreak. — Reuters

Oil gains on Opec+ deal, stocks stymied by virus worries

SINGAPORE: Global equities weakened on Monday as investors braced for more indications of economic damage from the coronavirus pandemic while oil prices rose in choppy trade following a landmark deal by Opec and its allies to cut output.

US West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude futures were up 3.9 per cent at \$23.6 per barrel in a volatile session, having fallen more than 3 per cent to \$22.03 earlier in the day.

Those moves came after a group of oil producing countries known as Opec+, which includes Russia, agreed to reduce production by 9.7 million barrels per day (bpd) for May-June, after four days of marathon talks.

MSCI’s broadest index of Asia-Pacific shares outside Japan lost 0.3 per cent. The Nikkei fell 1.9 per cent, South Korean shares dropped 1.3 per cent while China’s index lost 0.5 per cent.

“The combined Opec+ and G-20 cuts should set in place a bottoming process for oil prices and significantly limit the tail risk of free-falling into the single digits in our view,” Bank of Singapore, the private banking arm of OCBC, said in a report.

International benchmark Brent futures rose 2.7 per cent to \$32.65 per barrel but were trading below the day’s highs.

Oil prices have slumped more than 50 per cent from their January peak as the novel coronavirus pandemic brought the global economy to a standstill and hit fuel demand.



A pedestrian wearing a face mask walks near an overpass with an electronic board showing stock information in Shanghai, China. – Reuters

Investors are now looking to see if the novel coronavirus pandemic, which has battered global economic growth, will soon peak in the United States and Europe, as had been initially expected.

“While panic selling we saw last month has faded, not many investors would want to chase stock prices higher given we are about to see more evidence of economic downturns,” said Masahiro Ichikawa, senior strategist at Sumitomo Mitsui DS Asset Management.

US S&P 500 mini futures dropped 1.4 per cent, erasing a brief gain to a one-month high hit earlier in the Asian session.

Financial markets in Australia, New Zealand and

Hong Kong were closed for a public holiday on Monday as are European markets such as Britain, Germany and France.

Asia’s main ex-Japan stocks gauge is up 18 per cent from a four-year low struck around mid-March following unprecedented global stimulus. But the index is off about 18 per cent so far this year as investors are unconvinced that the worst is over for the markets.

Earnings scorecards from US companies are in focus this week, with banks among the first to report, while China releases its trade data on Tuesday and closely watched gross domestic product figures on Friday.

Companies are only now adjusting their behaviour to deal with an expected global recession, which the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has said will be “way worse” than the global financial crisis a decade ago.

Kia Motors Corp told its labour union in South Korea that it wants to suspend operations at three of its domestic factories as the outbreak weighs on exports to Europe and the United States.

In foreign exchange markets, commodity currencies were softer while the safe-haven yen strengthened.

The Australian dollar fell 0.2 per cent to \$0.63337. The euro stood steady at \$1.0937 and the yen gained 0.5 per cent to 107.91 to the dollar.

— Reuters

India plans to resume some manufacturing amid lockdown

NEW DELHI: India is planning to restart some manufacturing after April 15 to help offset the economic damage of a nationwide coronavirus lockdown, two government sources said, even as it weighs extending the lockdown.

The 21-day lockdown of India’s more than 1.3 billion people is due to end on Tuesday, but the government is widely expected to extend it until the end of the month, with the number of coronavirus cases rising to 9,152 and the domestic death toll reaching 308, on Monday.

One of the sources said Prime Minister Narendra Modi had directed some ministries to come up with plans to open up some crucial industries as the livelihoods of the poor were being hit.

The source said the government was considering allowing the resumption of some operations under guidelines that were being drawn up.

The trade and industries ministry did not reply to an email seeking comment. The government’s principal spokesman, K S Dhatwalia, declined to comment

Separately, in a letter seen by Reuters, the industries ministry has recommended restarting some manufacturing in the autos, textiles, defence, electronics and other sectors.

The ministry said in the letter, addressed to the home ministry, that this could be achieved via reduced shifts with lower staff numbers to ensure social distancing.

“We believe some industries could be allowed with reasonable safeguards as long as social distancing norms are maintained,” the second official, from the industries department, said. — Reuters



Daily wage labourers stand in a queue for free food at a construction site where activity has been halted due to 21-day nationwide lockdown in New Delhi. – Reuters

China’s exports slump seen extending to March

BEIJING: The slump in China’s exports is expected to have extended into March while a collapse in oil price likely deepened a decline in imports, a poll showed, as the coronavirus cripples the global economy and overall demand.

The pandemic’s sweeping impact on businesses and consumers has triggered an unprecedented burst of stimulus from policymakers around the world in the past two months, but the widespread lockdowns in many economies is seen delaying a recovery in trade both in China and globally.

The grim trade report is likely to reinforce views that China’s economy sharply contracted in the first quarter for the first time since at least 1992. Analysts are already forecasting a steep global recession this year as the virus has prompted worldwide restrictions on movement of people and goods.

Exports from the world’s second-largest economy are expected to have fallen 14 per cent in March from a year earlier, according to a median estimate from the survey of 31 economists, slowing the downturn somewhat from a 17.2 per cent contraction in January-February period.



Containers are seen at Yantian port in Shenzhen, Guangdong, China. – Reuters

Imports, meanwhile, are set to have shrunk 9.5 per cent from a year earlier, the sharpest drop since July 2016 and versus a 4.0 per cent decline in January-February.

The World Trade Organization last week forecast that goods trade would shrink more steeply this year than in

the global financial crisis a decade ago before rebounding in 2021 as the COVID-19 pandemic recedes.

Early in the outbreak, China imposed tough travel restrictions and factory suspensions to curb the spread of the coronavirus, squeezing labour supplies and sending exporters

scrambling to fulfil orders.

But as the pandemic ravages the economies of China’s trading partners, overseas orders have been scrapped, with many privately-owned exporters firing workers and warning about factory closures in not too distant future.

“Foreign demand from European and US markets may have already significantly contracted in March,” said UBS Economist Tao Wang, noting an official survey of factories released earlier this month showed export orders continued to fall in March.

“Despite some possible improvements in economic activity in March, first-quarter GDP growth is expected to contract by 10 per cent from a year earlier,” said Wang.

Investment bank Nomura and ANZ even raised the prospect of a recession in the world’s second-biggest economy, forecasting second quarter GDP to dip below zero.

While China has managed to largely bring the virus under control, the country is facing rising risks of a second-wave infections from abroad, driven by a rise in infected travellers arriving from overseas. — Reuters

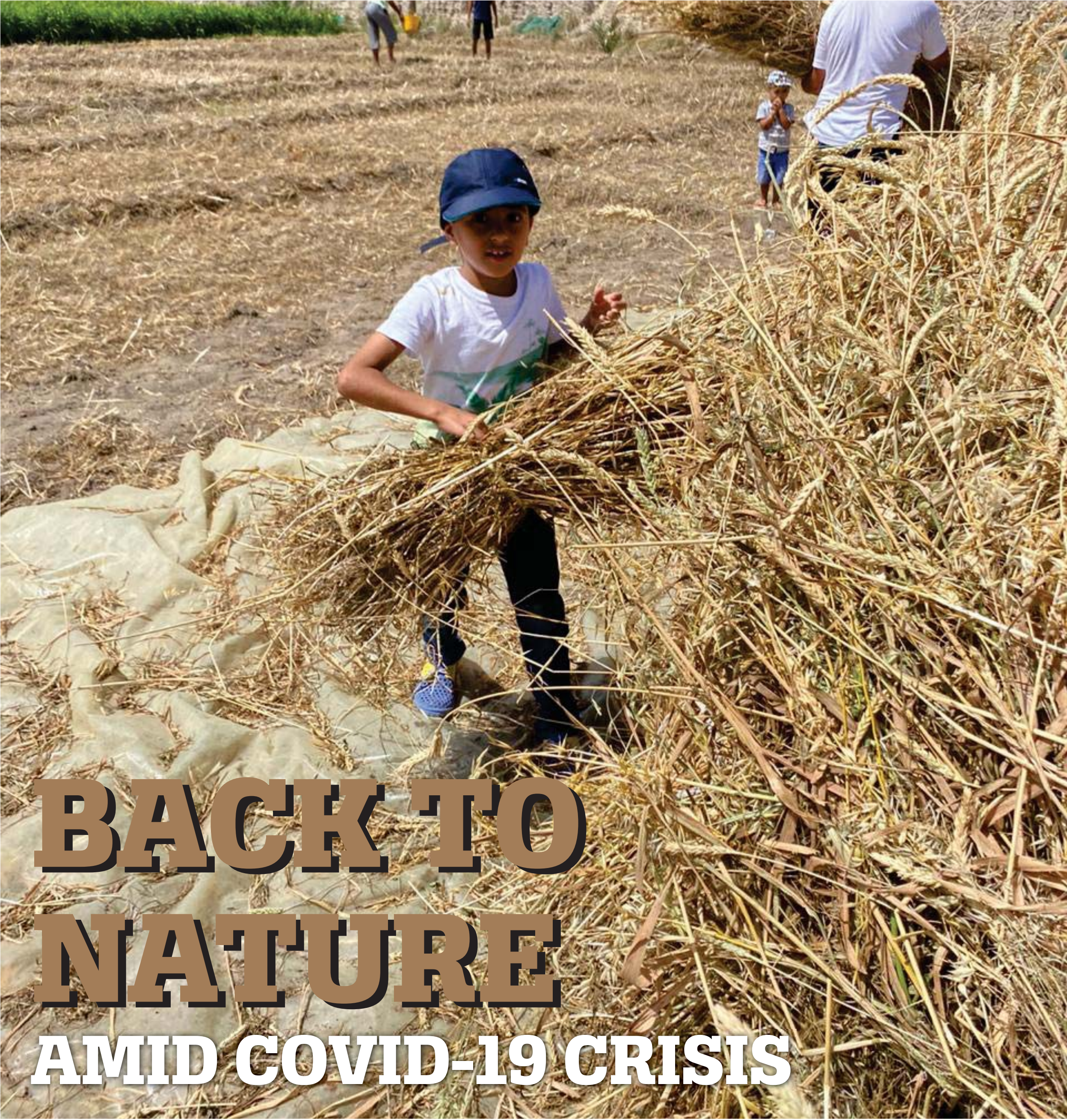
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BACK TO NATURE AMID COVID-19 CRISIS

KABEER YOUSUF

Amid the noise of coronavirus across the world, there are some families in the Wilayat of Bahla in the Sultanate who are into the harvesting of wheat crop, the seeds of which were sown prior to the COVID-19 outbreak.

The families, the older generations of which were farmers, are continuing with the passion and rejoice in the wheat cultivation.

Mohammed Hamed al Shuraiqi, Talent Development Supervisor at Oxy from Bahla, and his children are all excited to see the wheat harvesting and their subsequent storage in the storerooms.

The family uses the vast land spread over many acres to grow wheat because the climate here



is suitable for wheat farming and the soil is fertile for the crop.

"This year's cultivation has been good and we are busy processing the wheat. This will later be distributed among the relatives and friends for free. A small amount of wheat will be



kept at my dad's shops in Bahla souq" Mohammed, who came all the way from his house to the ancestral house, said.

He added, "We sowed the seeds some six months ago, and my father and others in the family have been observing the seeds grow".

The whole wheat grains contain the entire grain kernel, such as the bran, germ and endosperm. The refined grain is milled through a traditional method, a process that removes the bran and germ. After doing this, the grains get a finer texture and improve their shelf life.

Some families in the Wilayat of Bahla, the older generations of which were farmers, are continuing with the passion and rejoice in the wheat cultivation

"Wheat kernels are fed into the milling machine where they pass through several roller mills from which the bran, endosperm and germ are separated and removed from the kernel. After this process, the wheat is reduced to granular pieces free from bran and

germ", Fatma al Suraiqi detailed the process.

From the moment that the grain is harvested and transported to the ancestral processing facility, the intricate series of steps begin where the individual kernels are stored, separated, cleaned, ground, enriched and/or fortified before being stored for a longer period, for the rest of the year.

Apart from wheat cultivation, Al Shuraiqi family has a vast field of vegetables, fruits and you name it.

"We buy fish, and the spices that we don't cultivate, from the shops for an extensive lunch for the whole family most of the times in a year", adds Mohammed.

At a time when the whole world is worried about COVID-19, the earnest efforts of the family is to go back to the nature.



COACH FILIBOVIC AIMS TO BOOST OMAN'S SWIMMING TALENTS

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, APRIL 13

Oman's swimmers are undergoing intensive training programme through online to be ready for future participations. The training sessions which are done through 'Zoom' online application are under direct supervision of the national coach Srdan Filibovic.

The swimmers are focusing on strength and fitness trainings as they are away from the swimming pools.

Serbian coach Filibovic said the national team swimmers began their online training sessions. "Everybody is aware on the current situation of the world after the spread of COVID-19 pandemic. Many of the events and championships were postponed and cancelled due to this virus. However, we preferred to not stop the team training."

"The purpose of the online warm-up sessions is to keep the swimmers in right shape with proper fitness. There are no swimming pools in every home. But we are focusing on some strength and fitness exercises. Also, I informed the players to use different basic items and material like bottles of water which have some weights and support to perform many tactical training. The training period for each session is two hours. We start every day at 5:30 pm until 7:30 pm,"



the coach told *Oman Daily Observer*.

All the national team swimmers are taking part in the daily online warm-up sessions. "I would like to thank the swimmers for their discipline in attending the training. The training is essential to raise the spirit within the team and keep them feeling normal as all the team members are available," he said.

The Sultanate swimming team's programme was hit by the coronavirus crisis as the team was supposed to have some domestic and external camps in Al Buraimi Governorate and Thailand.

"Many of the preparatory plans were changed due to the



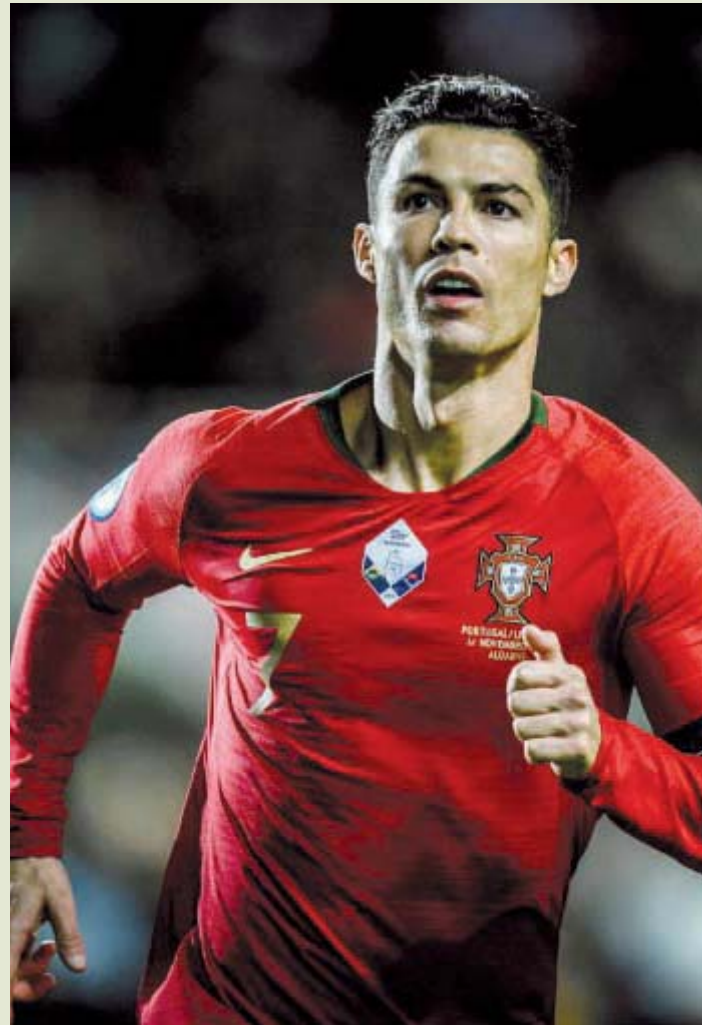
current situation. However, we will continue the training to keep them ready for future competitions. The national team will take part in many forthcoming events including the GCC swimming Championship end of this year. Also, we will participate in the Asian Swimming Championship in Philippines and we would like to be there with many talented swimmers. The GCC Beach Games is scheduled in Kuwait in December after it was postponed from April. Our target is to claim medals at the GCC meets," the 48-year-old added.

The head coach concluded his statement by thanking the national team swimmers. He advised them to utilise their time now to develop

their technical skills and manage their fitness level. The Serbian coach appreciated the efforts of Taha al Kishry, Chairman of Oman Swimming Association, for his continuous follow-up with the national teams plans.

Oman swimmers had impressed in the last edition of the GCC Swimming Championship 2019 in Kuwait in April. Khalid al Kulaibi claimed the GCC champion award in the individual category while his team-mate Ayman al Qasbi finished runner-up in the senior men's category for 5 km swimming. Muhannad Awlad Thani claimed bronze medal in the youth category (15-17 years).

Ronaldo, Portugal squad give financial boost to amateur clubs



LISBON: Cristiano Ronaldo and his Portugal teammates have donated half of their bonus for qualifying for the Euro 2020 finals to help amateur football in the country that has been hit by the coronavirus shutdown.

The Portuguese football federation said on Monday the money would go towards a fund that it hopes will reach 4.7 million euros (\$5.1 million) to help amateur clubs survive the crisis.

The federation last week decided to end the already-suspended amateur season with immediate effect, declaring the season null and void without champions, promotion or relegation.

No decision has been taken

on resuming professional football but the president of the Portuguese league said in late March he was determined the season should be completed.

"It is fundamental that the championships end because it would allow some sort of normality to be restored and we could prepare for next season knowing who has qualified for international competitions, who the champions are and who is relegated," Pedro Proenca said.

Portugal shocked host nation France to win Euro 2016 but Ronaldo and his teammates will have to wait another year to defend their title as Euro 2020 has been postponed by 12 months because of the coronavirus pandemic. — AFP

ITTF mulls scrapping individual world championships



ITTF CEO Steve Dainton

SYDNEY: International Table Tennis Federation (ITTF) CEO Steve Dainton has suggested the sport's annual individual world championships be scrapped, with champions instead decided by the winners of the new 'Grand Smash' mega tournaments.

The world championships were held for the first time in 1926 and individual titles have been decided every year since the team events were hived off into a separate tournament in 2003.

In a wide-ranging open letter, largely addressing the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the sport, Dainton suggested keeping the team championships and Olympic tournaments as they were but doing away with the individuals.



"The idea is simply that ... we plan to eventually have three to four 'Grand Smashes' per year," he wrote.

"These events will be equal to or larger than a world individual championships (so) we would be overstretching and confusing the calendar and market if we also have a world individual championships.

"The three to four major events held

on the international stage throughout each year will reach a larger audience and will perform much better than once every two years.

"From these events, we would also be able to define an individual world champion."

The 'Grand Smash' tournaments, with top class fields playing for purses of up to \$3 million at dedicated

venues, are part of the World Table Tennis initiative to make the sport more commercially successful.

Dainton said the pause to sport caused by the coronavirus crisis was an opportunity to "reflect and work on all the areas that we know have been underperforming, needed to change and adapt but were not tackled because priorities lay elsewhere".

Table tennis, as with all professional sports, has taken a big hit financially from the COVID-19 shutdown and despite ITTF staff agreeing to salary cuts Dainton said more savings would be needed to keep the sport going.

"Despite some tough sacrifices needed, we will ensure that the ITTF survives this difficult period," he added.

The Australian said that with the Tokyo Olympics now moved back to 2021 and the postponement of a raft of tournaments, it would probably be a couple of years before everything on the table tennis circuit settled down again. "At this stage, we expect that only by 2022 will we see some normality return to our calendars," he wrote. — Reuters

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WAITING GAME

UEFA HAS REMAINED OPTIMISTIC ABOUT THE PROSPECT OF FINISHING THE EUROPEAN SEASONS

PARIS: A month has now passed since the last football matches were played before packed stadiums in Europe, and the havoc wrought by the coronavirus pandemic means that nobody can say with any certainty when the sport might return.

A crowd of 50,000 filled Ibrox Stadium in Glasgow on Thursday, March 12 to see Rangers lose 3-1 to Bayer Leverkusen in the Europa League.

Other matches that night were played behind closed doors, or postponed altogether, as Italy announced its death toll from the virus had passed 1,000.

Fast forward 31 days and the figures make for grim reading throughout Europe, with Italy, Spain, France and the United Kingdom the worst hit. Countries across the continent are now weeks into restrictive lockdowns.

Nobody knows when sport will be allowed to restart behind closed doors let alone before crowds. The psychological impact of the current situation means many people may well now have second thoughts about mixing with vast crowds at a football match in future.

German football authorities are set to decide this week whether Bundesliga matches can resume behind closed doors next month, and players are already back in training.

Just 239 people would reportedly be allowed at each game, reports say, but resuming games would still require a significant testing operation.

"This must be possible," Wolfgang Kubicki, vice-president of Germany's Bundestag, or lower house of parliament, told Sky Sport.

"Especially if we can determine, by a quick test, that none of the players are infected and there is no danger of triggering a chain of infection."

'SAFE AND APPROPRIATE'

In any case, as Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp admitted when the Premier League season was suspended on March 13: "Today, football and football matches really aren't important at all."

Yet his club are among those



UEFA President
Aleksander Ceferin

who have been worst hit by the suspension, given that they stand on the brink of winning the English title for the first time in 30 years.

In England, authorities have said football will not return until it is "safe and appropriate" to do so.

However, Uefa has remained optimistic about the prospect of finishing the European seasons and is working on the possibility of playing in July and August if need be.

Aleksander Ceferin, Uefa president, has also said there is "no

way" runaway leaders Liverpool should be denied the Premier League title, and suggested that if the remaining matches cannot be played "we will need to find a way".

Scrapping a season that was close to its conclusion would not make

sense, but it remains to be seen if the campaign can resume.

'CRITICAL SITUATION'

"No match, no competition, no league is worth risking a single human life," Fifa president Gianni Infantino

has said. "It would be more than irresponsible to force competitions to resume if things are not 100 per cent safe."

The damage caused by COVID-19 has been dramatic. Even players are not worrying about returning to action.

"It's not the thing I am worrying about. I am thinking about my family first and foremost and then about getting this sorted. This is a critical situation," Paris Saint-Germain's Pablo Sarabia said.

Leading football players and figures — from Juventus and France star Blaise Matuidi to Arsenal coach Mikel Arteta — have tested positive for the virus. Former Real Madrid president Lorenzo Sanz died.

Euro 2020 was postponed by a year, as was the Copa America.

Players at top sides have taken pay cuts, of 70 per cent in the case of Barcelona. There has been an unseemly dispute in England after UK Health Secretary Matt Hancock called for Premier League players to accept wage cuts.

Wealthy English clubs have also faced a backlash for tapping into a government scheme allowing them to furlough non-playing staff. Liverpool performed a U-turn and apologised for having applied.

PROFOUND CHANGES?

However, those wealthy clubs cannot afford to do without the income they get from broadcasters. That is at the core of their desperation to complete this season.

In England, the cost to Premier League clubs of having to reimburse broadcasters for matches not played has been put at £762 million (\$951 million).

While idle players are stuck at home, trying to follow fitness programmes in their front rooms or gardens, many wonder if football will be profoundly changed because of the financial impact of this crisis.

"The economy will be different and so will football. Maybe it will be better," Everton manager Carlo Ancelotti told Italy's Corriere dello Sport.

That remains to be seen. — AFP