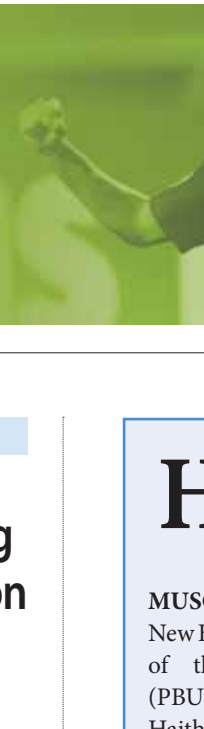


P12

NEYMAR, ATTACKING STARS POWER PSG INTO CHAMPIONS LEAGUE FINAL



P13

OMAN SECURES GLOBAL MARKETS FOR ITS UREA OUTPUT



P19

PRESERVING THE CLIFF HOUSES OF AL SUWJARA VILLAGE



OMAN

HM and Saudi King discuss cooperation

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik received a phone call from the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud. During which, the two leaders exchanged friendly talks and discussed aspects of fraternal cooperation. The Saudi King wished His Majesty the Sultan good health, wellness and long life, and the Omani people further progress and prosperity under the wise leadership of His Majesty. On his part, His Majesty expressed his utmost thanks and appreciation to King Salman for his noble feelings, wishing him good health, happiness and success in leading the brotherly Saudi people to further progress and development under his wise leadership. — **ONA**

HM greetings to Hungary

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Janos Ader of the Republic of Hungary on the occasion of his country's National Day. In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his sincere greetings and best wishes to President Ader and the Hungarian friendly people further progress and prosperity. — **ONA**

INSIDE



MAU COUP LEADERS PROMISE POLL IN 'REASONABLE' TIME FRAME **P6**



BRITAIN TO BRING IN MASS TESTING TO CURB SPREAD OF COVID-19 **P8**

WEATHER TODAY

MUSCAT

MAX: 34°C
MIN: 29°C

SALALAH

MAX: 27°C
MIN: 25°C

NIZWA

MAX: 44°C
MIN: 30°C

SUNRISE 05:45 AM

PRAYER TIMINGS

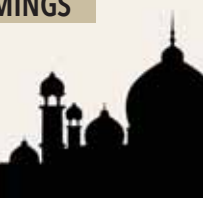
FAJR: 04:26

DHUHR: 12:15

ASR: 15:42

MAGHRIB: 18:41

ISHA: 19:55



HM exchanges New Hijri Year greetings with leaders

MUSCAT: On the occasion of the New Hijri Year and the anniversary of the Prophet Mohammed's (PBUH) Hijra, His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has exchanged cables of greetings with leaders of the sisterly and friendly Arab and Muslim countries.

In his cables, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his sincere greetings and best wishes of good health, happiness and long life for them, praying to Allah the Almighty for the return of this blessed occasion on them and make the New Year, a year of blessings for all peoples and for the Islamic nation further progress, welfare and prosperity.

In their cables to His Majesty the Sultan, the leaders of the sisterly and friendly countries



expressed their sincere greetings and best wishes of good health, happiness and long life to His Majesty the Sultan, praying to Allah the Almighty for the return of this blessed occasion on His Majesty for many years to come to achieve all aspirations of further progress, welfare and prosperity for his faithful people and all Muslims further welfare and progress.

His Majesty the Sultan exchanged greetings on this occasion with the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud of Saudi Arabia, Shaikh Khalifa bin Zayed al Nahyan, President of the United Arab Emirates, King Hamad bin Issa al Khalifa of Bahrain, Shaikh Tamim bin

Hamad al Thani, Emir of the State of Qatar, Shaikh Sabah Al Ahmed Al Jabir al Sabah, Emir of the State of Kuwait, King Abdallah II of Jordan, King Mohammed VI of Morocco, President Kais Saied of Tunisia, President Abdelmadjid Tebboune of Algeria, President Ismail Omar Guelleh of the Republic of Djibouti, General Abdel Fattah al Burhan, Head of the Sovereignty Military Council of Sudan, President Dr Bashar al Assad of Syria, President Mohamed Abdullahi Farmajo of Somalia, President Dr Barham Ahmed Salih of Iraq, President Mahmoud Abbas of the State of Palestine, Chairman of the Executive Committee of Palestine Liberation Organisation,

TURN TO P2

First day of Muharram on Friday; Sunday holiday

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs on Wednesday announced that the moon for the month of Muharram 1442 AH was not sighted. Therefore, Thursday will be the complementary day of the month of Dhul al Hijjah for the year 1441 AH, corresponding to August 20, 2020. Accordingly, the first of Muharram will fall on Friday (August 21).

On the occasion of the New Hijri year, the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs is pleased to extend its sincere greetings to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, praying to the Almighty Allah for the return of this occasion on His Majesty for many years to come, and bestow happiness and long life, and to bless the Omani people with progress and safety. — **ONA**



MORE RELIEF FLIGHTS TO LEBANON

In implementation of the directives of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, the Sultanate will continue to operate relief aid flights to Lebanon from today. An official at Oman Charitable Organisation said this batch of relief includes 15 varieties of foodstuff, weighing 28 tonnes, and will be transported on two RAFO flights. — **ONA**

SEE ALSO P2

MORE ECONOMIC INCENTIVES LIKELY FOR TENANTS, LANDLORDS

VINOD NAIR
MUSCAT, AUG 19

Economic incentives hold the key to meet the challenges faced by landlords and tenants and all commercial activities in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic situation.

These issues were discussed during the virtual meeting of the Small and Medium Enterprises Committee of the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI), in cooperation with the Real Estate Development and Contracting Committee, held to identify challenges, regulations and proposals for property owners and tenants.

The workshop was attended by associations and institutions related to the real estate sector, including those from Majlis Ashshura, Muscat Municipality, Oman Real Estate Association, members of the two committees of the chamber and business owners.

The meeting reviewed the challenges being faced by business owners and ways to support them by reducing their burden in terms



of rents.

It touched upon the need to distinguish the issues faced by landlords from the difficulties faced by tenants, in addition to the incentives provided to both groups. The workshop sought to come up with clear and practical solutions

and tools to counter the negative impacts in the real estate sector.

The meeting developed comprehensive recommendations for both real estate owners and tenants, the first of which was about setting a criteria for identifying various segments of the landlords, which will be implemented while granting incentives to this category.

The various types of landlords include individuals, institutions, commercial centres and malls, government or endowments, as well as those in residential, commercial, industrial, tourism, agricultural, and other sectors which were impacted by the precautionary measures.

In the coming days, OCCI will prepare an integrated report of proposals and solutions which will be submitted to the Supreme Committee on COVID-19.

It may be noted that several businesses, including salons, beauty parlours and restaurants (only take-aways allowed), are still not allowed to resume activities, which means nearly five months of little or no income.

Stem cell treatment offers new hope for diabetics

TOKYO: A new method to create insulin-producing pancreatic cells from stem cells and protect them from the body's immune system could pave the way for improving an experimental diabetes treatment.

In type-1 diabetes, the body turns on itself and attacks the so-called beta cells inside clusters in the pancreas called "islets".

These beta cells are responsible for gauging sugar levels in the blood and releasing insulin to keep them stable. When they are depleted, a person is at risk for either high or low blood sugar and has to rely on insulin injections.

One treatment devised to end that reliance involves transplanting donor islets into diabetics, but the process is complicated by several obstacles.

There are not enough donors, especially as one transplant generally requires several to ensure enough islets are available.

Islets also often fail to connect with blood supply, and even when they do, like other transplants, they risk attack from the immune system of the recipient, which sees it as an invasion. As a result, patients have to take drugs that suppress their immune systems, protecting their



transplant but exposing the rest of their body to other illness.

In a bid to overcome some of these challenges, a team looked to find another source for islets, by coaxing induced pluripotent stem cells (iPS) to produce what the team called HILOs, or human islet-like organoids.

These HILOs, when grown in a 3D environment mimicking the pancreas and then turbocharged with a "genetic switch", successfully produced insulin and were able to regulate blood glucose function after being transplanted into diabetic mice. — **AFP**





Segment Prizes

1st Prize: 1,000 OMR	2nd Prize: 500 OMR	3rd Prize: 1,000 OMR	4th Prize: 1,000 OMR	5th Prize: 100 OMR
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making life easy



His Majesty
exchanges
New Hijri
Year greetings
with leaders

FROM PAGE 1

President Othman Ghazali of the Union of the Comoros, Fayez al Sarraj, Chairman of the Presidential Council of the Government of National Accord of Libya.

President Abdel Fattah el Sisi of Egypt, President Mohamed Ould Ghazouani of Mauritania, Field Marshal Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, President of Yemen, Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah of Brunei Darussalam, Sultan Abdullah Ahmad Shah, King of Malaysia, President Dr Ilham Heydar Aliyev of Azerbaijan, President Dr Mohammed Ashraf Ghani of Afghanistan, President Joko Widodo of Indonesia, President Dr Shavkat Mirziyoyev of Uzbekistan, President Dr Hassan Rouhani of Iran, President Dr Arif Alvi of Pakistan, President Mohammad Abdul Hamid of Bangladesh, President Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov of Turkmenistan, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey, President Idriss Deby of the Republic of Chad, President Ali Bongo Ondimba of the Gabonese Republic, President Adama Barrow of the Republic of Gambia, President Macky Sall of the Republic of Senegal, President Emomali Rahmon of Tajikistan, President Sooronbay Jeenbekov of the Kyrgyz Republic, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev of Kazakhstan, President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih of the Maldives, President Mahamadou Issoufou of the Republic of Niger and President Muhammadu Buhari of Nigeria. — ONA

68 per cent Omanisation rate at MoH

ANNUAL HEALTH REPORT: Road accidents are major factor in the increasing numbers of injuries, disabilities and deaths

VINOD NAIR
MUSCAT, AUG 19

Road accidents are major factor in the increasing numbers of injuries, disabilities, and deaths in the Sultanate, said the latest official figures on Tuesday.

The statistics released by the Ministry of Health (MoH) said that the problem is still serious because, despite the decrease in the number of road accidents in recent years, the number of injuries and deaths remains high. MoH institutions received 346 deaths due to traffic accidents before reaching the health institution or before admission to the internal departments; also, 74 deaths reported in hospitals among the inpatients were the accident victims.

MoH has issued the annual health report for 2019, which highlighted the most important achievements in the Sultanate in the health sector.

The total number of employees in the Ministry of Health by

the end of December 2019 was 39,413, with an Omanisation rate of 68 per cent.

The report says there has been an increase in the expenditures of the Ministry of Health compared to previous three years (2016-2018) due to the fluctuation in global oil prices and the accompanying economic changes, as the report indicated that the total recurrent expenditures at MoH amounted to RO 793.3 million in 2019, compared to RO 674 million in 2018, an increase of 17.7 per cent.

The development expenses decreased from RO 25.5 million to RO 21.6 million during the same period. Four health centres were opened in each of the Governorate of Muscat, Al Dakhiliyah, Al Dhahirah, and Al Wusta, bringing the and thus the total number of health centres and complexes run by MoH to 211, in addition to 50 hospitals with

Four health centres were opened in Muscat, Al Dakhiliyah, Al Dhahirah and Al Wusta, bringing the total number of health centres and complexes run by MoH to 211, in addition to 50 hospitals with 5,049 beds by the end of 2019

5,049 beds. Several services have been added to these institutions to improve the quality of health services provided at all levels.

About vital indicators, the birth rate among Omanis was 30.3 per 1,000 population in 2019 and the death rate among Omanis was 2.7 per 1,000 population for the same period.

The death rate among children less than five years of age decreased to reach 10.2 per 1,000 live births in 2019, compared to 11 per thousand live births in 2018, the infant mortality rate (less than one year) per 1000 live births decreased from 8.5 to 8 for the same period. The calculation of these indicators is based on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) approved by the World Health Organisation.

The report showed that measles was controlled, as only 22 cases were recorded in 2019 after the number of cases reached 133 and 97 cases in 2016 and 2017 respectively. The Sultanate has remained free of polio since 1993 and diphtheria since 1991.

Data of inpatients at the MoH hospitals indicate that three out of every 10,000 of the population are hospitalised due to high blood pressure diseases and six per 10,000 of the population due to diabetes. The data also showed that about 25 per cent of

all hospital deaths were due to heart disease and the circulatory system and that about 13 per cent were due to cancer-related diseases. The report indicates a steady increase in the incidence of non-communicable diseases, as the rate reached 44.2 per cent among outpatients and 39.8 per cent among inpatients.

The expansion of health services has led to a steady increase in the use of these services over the years, as the year 2019 witnessed a slight decrease in the number of visitors' visits to outpatient clinics, reaching 15.7 million, a slight increase of 1.3 per cent compared to last year.

The average number of outpatient visits per capita was 5.6 during the year 2019. The total number of discharged patients reached 331,000 from hospitals affiliated with the Ministry of Health and the average length of hospital stay was about 3.1 days of hospital stay, with an occupancy rate of 60.9 per cent per family.



Humanitarian
aid to Lebanon

In implementation of the directives of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, the Sultanate will continue to operate relief aid flights to Lebanon from today. An official at Oman Charitable Organisation said this batch of relief includes 15 varieties of foodstuff, weighing 28 tonnes, and will be transported on two Rafo flights. — ONA

KASHIF DETECTOR APP

Keeping in the mind the health safety of employees and also of the visitors and inpatients, Royal Hospital has launched the Kashif detector app, with the aim of monitoring the daily health status of the hospital employees during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Visit visa holders should send renewal request

KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, AUG 19

Visit or express visa holders, who couldn't return home due to cancellation of flights due to COVID-19, can request an additional visa extension, according to the General Directorate of Passports and Residence at the Royal Oman Police (ROP).

This comes in the wake of a large number of people on visit still being not able to go back to their countries as scheduled air travel has not yet begun.

"Anyone who is stuck due to non-resumption of scheduled flights can request

for a visa extension via the electronic visa website," a senior official at the Directorate said.

Visa extension requests can be sent to info-omanevisa@rop.gov.om.

"And, if there are issues, technical or clerical, such visa holders must contact the call centre via the specified e-mail," he said.

Oman closed the main international gateway, the Muscat International Airport, on March 29 after spurt in COVID-19 cases, and the WHO declared it a pandemic.

Later, the Sultanate extended the expiry dates of visit and express visas by 15 days twice to enable tourists and visitors to stay in



Oman until further notice.

The Ministry of Tourism announced that "all tourist visas that were issued from March 1, 2020, until August 31, 2020, will be reissued with a new validity period up to March 31, 2021."

The DG of Passports and Residence facilitated both types of visa holders to request an extension electronically, from July 1 with a normal visa extension fee for this service.

Meanwhile, several charter flights are being operated by corporates as well as NGOs from May 9 till today as many are still waiting for their turn to go home.

Council of Oman takes part in IPU conference

MUSCAT: The Council of Oman, represented by the State Council and Majlis Ashshura, participated via videoconferencing in the 5th World Conference for Speakers of Parliaments affiliated to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU).

Shaikh Said bin Hamad al Saadi, Vice-Chairman of Majlis Ashshura, represented the Council of Oman in the Conference with the participation of Raya al Mantheri, member of the State Council.

The agenda of the conference included the opening speeches for Speaker of the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the UN Secretary-General, discussion of a number of issues related to



health, climate and economy, participation of the youth in parliaments and a report on the sustainable development plan for 2030 among other issues.



THREE ARRESTED FOR DRIFTING



The Dhofar Governorate Police Command arrested three citizens on charge of drifting and disturbing the public peace in the governorate. Legal measures have been taken against them.

COVID-19: Over 78,000 patients recovered

MUSCAT: The total number of positive COVID-19 cases in the Sultanate reached 83,606, while the number of recoveries stood at 78,188, comprising 93.5 per cent.

Meanwhile, the total number of COVID-19 related death cases stood at 603, the Ministry of

Health (MoH) said.

The Ministry also pointed out that 36 cases were hospitalised over the past 24 hours, adding that the total number of current hospitalised COVID-19 infected patients stands at 436, of them 158 are in intensive care units (ICU).

There will be no daily announcement of coronavirus cases during weekends and official holidays, MoH said on Wednesday. It also urged people to commit to wearing faces masks and social distancing at all times. — ONA



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Oman PHPS honours frontline volunteers

MUSCAT: On the occasion of the World Humanitarian Day, which falls August 19, the Oman Public Health Promotion Society (PHPS) on Wednesday honoured the volunteers of the AdLife Hospital in Al Amerat, which was established as part of Mu’afa initiative (Together for Oman) that has been launched by the Omani Medical Association.

HH Sayyida Mona bint Fahd al Said, Oman PHPS Honourary President, presided over the ceremony virtually. The honouring included the frontline volunteers; doctors,

nurses, students and administrators in the AdLife Hospital along with the medical cadres of the Ministry of Health.

Dr Fannah AL Fannah al Araimi, Chairperson of Oman PHPS, stressed the importance of voluntary work and the great effort that has been exerted by these volunteers. She added that this initiative was launched to appreciate the volunteers providing the required health care for the infected cases in AdLife Hospital coming from various governorates.

Al Fannah pointed out that having these volunteers helped the health sector to perform its functions to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. Chairperson of Oman PHPS added that there is an intention to replicate this initiative in other hospitals over the Sultanate to honour the health workers, particularly those working in the ICUs.

Furthermore, Al Araimi thanked all the sponsors including enterprises, firms and individuals who provided the necessary support to make this initiative successful.



WADI GHUMDAH DAM PROJECT



With the aim of supplying water resources and providing protection from flood risks, the government has completed 67 per cent of Wadi Ghumdah in Wilayat of Bukha in Musandam governorate. – **ONA**

Muttrah souq comes to life

KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, AUG 19

After months of closure, Muttrah Souq, one of the oldest and largest traditional souqs in the country opened on Tuesday. It was closed due to COVID-19 spread.

The opening comes after the Supreme Committee on COVID-19 decided on Monday to open Muttrah Souq, including some more sectors.

The Souq that houses more than 5,000 vendors, salesmen and craftsmen from across the world, was full of life on the first day of opening with precautions being followed.

The Supreme Committee ordered to close the traditional souqs in the country on March 17 after Muttrah was known to be the focal point of the COVID-19.

“We lost two major business seasons, two Eid days, and Ramadhan evenings which would have given us relief. But getting together against a calamity is more important and we are happy that we could sacrifice what we could,” Mohammed Navas and Abdul Sathar, two of the vendors in the souq told the *Observer*.

Shopkeepers, sales staff and helpers who were seen in the souq from 6am, were gleefully doing the mandatory cleaning and sterilising of the premises. The civic officials who were tasked with the implementation of the Supreme Committee instruction were seen at every nook and



corner instructing the people inside the souq on how to run the show within the hygiene limits.

“Cruise season is truly crucial for people like me as it can fetch good international clients from Germany, France, the US, the UK and you name it,” Jignesh Surti, another tradesman said.

“We are grateful to the authorities, the Supreme Committee, the ROP, the MoFA and all other departments which facilitated the opening after five months,” said some traders.

Nonetheless, there are many challenges in front of people in the souq. Unpaid rents of shop and residence flats, dead and stale stock, rotten food items, damaged clothes, stocks of herbs and other medicines got wasted as there eas none to take care of these stuff. However, trades such as barbershops and beauty parlors will remain closed till further notice.

It is the resumption of life in this huge souq known globally for its varied artifacts and curios that is a must for international tourists who mostly come on cruise liners during the season. It is also the beginning of dreams of many who make a living on both sides of the souq and away from their home countries.



Hotels gearing up for new normal with health and hygiene protocol

KAUSHALENDRA SINGH
SALALAH, AUG 19

The Supreme Committee's decision on international restaurants came as a ray of hope for the star hotels. They are ready to adapt to the 'new normal' with all possible precautions in place.

They have changed the sitting arrangements in their restaurants to ensure social distancing and level of sanitation has been upgraded manifold. All the front desk staff are equipped with face masks and hand gloves. Some of the hotels have automated sanitiser kiosks where any kind of touch is not required to clean hands. The sensor fitted equipment takes the command just by putting the palm close to it.

Manuel Levonian, General

Manager of Crowne Plaza Salalah Resort, called the move a positive step that can gradually bring back normalcy in the sector.

"I am happy to see things moving. People are eager to dine out after a long break. We have all the necessary measures of social distancing, safety and hygiene protocols implemented to ensure guests dine with confidence and safety," he said.

He put stress on the general hygiene standards within the premises and said, "As the world adjusts to new travel norms and expectations, our IHG Clean Promise ensures that the hotel provides a safe and clean environment to the guests."

Carlota Alvaro, Assistant Director of Sales at Orascom Hotels

in Oman, appreciated the opening of the restaurants and called it a move that can ease the burden of the guests staying in the hotels.

"Since our restaurants were closed, it was difficult for the guests to manage their food. They were depending on online services and deliveries from local restaurants. Now everyone is relaxed. We can serve our guests in a better way," she said.

The hoteliers are expecting many changes, as many of them have already implemented those changes to ensure health safety to the guests and employees.

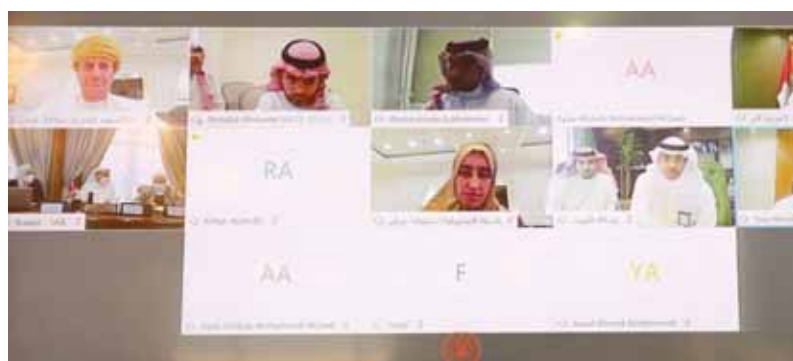
"We have removed the menu in hard copy form due to safety reasons. There are barcodes given to the guests which they scan and reach over to the soft menu in their

mobiles. The restaurant menus now land directly on the customer's mobile through some app or the other. This is convenient and no external touch is involved," said a hotelier in Muscat.

"To ensure social distancing we have stopped buffet for the time being. Based on our preparations and guidelines we will resume buffet again," he said.

The opening of restaurants in star hotels is good news for hoteliers in Salalah, as they are having many local guests during the Khareef season. In the absence of tourists from outside the locals are getting competitive rates in the hotels.

With the opening of restaurants, the hoteliers are expecting more and more footfall both in restaurants and hotel rooms.



Audit institution participates in GCC meet

MUSCAT: The State's Financial and Administrative Audit Institution took part in the 28th meeting of the GCC audit and accountancy diwans' training and development committee.

The meeting, held via virtual videoconferencing, reviewed the report of the Directorate-General about the Committee's Training Programme 2020 and the goals it achieved so far. It also looked into

proposals for the development of capabilities of member states' audit personnel. The meeting discussed a proposal on spreading awareness and knowledge about the significance of auditing for the realisation of goals of sustainable development. The concluding session shortlisted a number of topics for the 5th round of the GCC Audit and Accountancy Research Contest.

— ONA

Royal Cavalry wins six medals at Arabian Horse Show

PARIS: The Royal Cavalry won six medals, including 3 gold, two silver and one bronze in Vichy Arabian Horse Show with the participation of 71 horses. The two-day championship was held in France.

In the first day, the mare *Eliana RC* won the first place in the mare category for the age of 3 years. The colt *Labeeb RC* won the first place in the category of colt for the age of 2 years and the colt *Jawad RC* won the first place in the colt category for the age of 3 years. The mare *Mahera RC* won the second place in the mare category for ages from 4 to 6 years. The horse *Amjad al Adiyat* won first place in the gelding horse category.

In the second day, the colt *Jawad* won the first place and the gold medal of the colt championship for the age of 3 years and the colt *Labeeb RC* achieved the second place and the silver medal in the championship of colts for the age of 2 years. The mare *Rajaa RC*



achieved the second place and the silver medal in the championship of mare for the age of one year. The mare *Nassia RC* won the third place and the bronze medal for the one-year-old mare championship. The mare *Eliana RC* won the first place

and the gold medal for the three-year-old mare championship. The mare *Mahera RC* won first place and the gold medal of the mare championship.

The Royal Cavalry horses won three other prizes. The mare

Mahera RC won the best mare in the movement category, the mare *Raja RC* won the best head award in the championship, and the mare *Mahera* won the best mare award in the championship.

— ONA

Sultanate, Uzbekistan hold political consultations

MUSCAT: The Sultanate's government and the government of the Republic Uzbekistan on Wednesday held the 6th round of political consultations via videoconferencing.

The Sultanate's side was headed by Shaikh Khalifa bin Ali al Harthy, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for Diplomatic Affairs, while it was led from the Uzbek side by Furkat Sidikov, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs.

The session discussed means

of enhancing relations of bilateral cooperation in various fields of joint interests, as well as exchanging viewpoints on several regional and international issues.

The session also reviewed the growing relations between the two countries and their future in various political, economic, commercial, scientific and cultural fields and means of supporting the joint investments and activating trade exchange between the two friendly countries.

The session discussed means of enhancing relations of bilateral cooperation in various fields of joint interests, as well as exchanging viewpoints on several regional and international issues

The session was attended from the Sultanate's side by Shaikh Yahya bin Abdullah al Fannah al Aaraimi, Head of the Economic Affairs Sector at the Foreign Affairs Ministry, and Ahmed bin Said al Kathiri, Sultanate's Ambassador to the Republic of Uzbekistan, while from the Uzbek side it was attended by Anwar Abdul Halimov, Ambassador of the Republic of Uzbekistan appointed to the Sultanate.

— ONA

CMYF's blood donation camp on Friday

MUSCAT: Chiru Mega Youth Force (CMYF), a voluntary organisation, is holding a blood donation camp on Friday at Basher Blood Bank on the occasion of film actor Chiranjeevi's birthday. Speaking on the occasion, CMYF founder-president Ramdas Chandaka said they

are organising blood camps for many years, and appealed to all humanitarians to participate in the noble cause of saving other's lives. The CMYF has been honoured by the Ministry of Health on various occasions in recognition of its continuous support in organising blood donation camps.



Mali's military promises election as region frets over coup crisis

BAMAKO: Soldiers who ousted Mali's president and government in a coup promised on Wednesday to oversee elections within a "reasonable" time, as calls abroad grew for a swift resolution to an acute political crisis.

President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita resigned and dissolved parliament on Tuesday after the mutineers detained him at gunpoint, further destabilising a country in the grip of an insurgency and plagued by recent civil unrest.

Fearing Keita's fall after nearly seven years in power could destabilise West Africa's entire Sahel region, the 15-nation Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) suspended Mali from its institutions. The African Union chairman, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, demanded an immediate return to civilian government.

As investors ditched shares in Mali-based gold mining companies, the mutineers had yet to identify their leader though the mood in the capital Bamako appeared calm.

A spokesman for the mutineers, calling themselves the National Committee for the Salvation of the People, said they had acted to prevent further "chaos, anarchy and insecurity."

"We are not keen on power, but we are keen on the stability of the country, which will allow us to organise general elections ...within the reasonable time limit," Colonel Ismael Wague said early on Wednesday on state television.

He called neighbouring armies and the country's UN and French peacekeeping forces the group's



Malian soldiers drive through the streets of Bamako on Wednesday, a day after rebel troops seized Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita and Prime Minister Boubou Cisse in a dramatic escalation of a months-long crisis. — AFP

"partners for stability and restoring security".

In Paris, a French military source said the French army has submitted several options in response to President Emmanuel Macron.

BURNED BRIDGES?

Wague also invited Mali's civil society and political movements to help create conditions for a political transition. There was no immediate reaction to that offer.

The presidency of the G5 Sahel group of neighbouring states urged Malians to resolve the crisis

peacefully, and demanded Keita's release, and European Union Industry Commissioner Thierry Breton said elections should be held reasonably quickly.

Landlocked Mali has struggled to regain stability since a Tuareg uprising in 2012 that was hijacked by militants.

Keita, 75, came to power in 2013 following a subsequent coup in Bamako, promising to bring peace and stability and fight corruption. He won a second five-year term in 2018.

In a violent run-up to Tuesday's

coup following months of protests against alleged corruption, at least 14 people were killed in July in demonstrations called by an anti-Keita coalition.

Referring to ECOWAS's inability to broker a solution during mediation efforts then, followed by its firm reaction to Tuesday's events, a diplomatic source working in the region said he feared the body had "burned its bridges".

"We need a negotiated solution. But who will negotiate with (the mutineers)," the source said.

— Reuters



IN BRIEF

Israeli warplanes bomb Gaza

TEL AVIV: Israeli warplanes bombed the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip overnight after Palestinians fired a rocket into southern Israel, the army said.

The latest exchange came as Israel warned Hamas it was risking "war" by failing to stop fire balloons being launched across the border.

Egyptian security officials shuttled between the two sides in a bid to end the flare-up, which has seen more than a week of rocket and fire balloon attacks from Gaza and nightly Israeli reprisals.

"Earlier tonight, a rocket was fired and during the day, explosive and arson balloons were launched from the Gaza Strip into Israeli territory," said a military statement released shortly before midnight (2100 GMT).

In response, "fighter jets and (other) aircraft struck additional Hamas military targets in the Gaza Strip. "During the strike, a military compound belonging to one of the special arrays of the Hamas was struck," the English-language statement added. — AFP

Hundreds of aftershocks jolt Philippine province

MANILA: Hundreds of aftershocks have jolted a central Philippine province following a powerful earthquake, the country's chief seismologist said on Wednesday, warning residents to stay away from damaged houses and buildings that could collapse.

One person died and 48 were injured in the magnitude-6.6 quake that struck on Tuesday, with the epicentre in Cataingan town in Masbate province, about 430 kilometres south of Manila.

Since then, the Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology (Phivolcs) has recorded more than 280 aftershocks, with the strongest measuring at magnitude 5.2 on Wednesday morning, said Renato Solidum, the agency's director. — dpa

Norway expels Russian diplomat

OSLO: Norway said on Wednesday it had expelled a Russian diplomat, just days after arresting a Norwegian man suspected of passing sensitive information to Moscow. The country's PST intelligence agency on Monday said the Norwegian man was "formally suspected of providing information to a foreign country," which it later confirmed was Russia.

"We have informed the Russian ambassador that an employee of the Russian embassy is undesirable as a diplomat and will be asked to leave Norway," said a foreign ministry spokeswoman, Siri Svendsen.

She said the person had engaged in acts "not compatible with his status as a diplomat."

The diplomat, who works in the embassy's trade section, has until the end of the week to leave the country. It was not immediately clear if the diplomat was the same person who was with the Norwegian arrested at an Oslo restaurant on Saturday. — AFP



President Alexander Lukashenko chairs a meeting with members of the Security Council in Minsk, on Tuesday. — Reuters

Belarusian leader orders police to quash protests, EU prepares sanctions

MINSK / BRUSSELS:

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko ordered his police on Wednesday to put down protests in the capital Minsk, signalling an escalation after a week and a half of mass demonstrations against his rule.

Lukashenko's order came as European Union leaders held an emergency summit over the political crisis in Belarus, long Russia's most loyal neighbour, which has heavily militarised borders with EU member states Poland and Lithuania.

EU leaders were expected to endorse sanctions on Belarusian officials they blame for election fraud following a disputed August 9 election that the opposition said it won.

"There should no longer be any disorder in Minsk of any kind," Lukashenko said in remarks reported by the official Belta news agency. "People are tired. People demand peace and

quiet."

Facing the biggest challenge of his 26-year rule, he ordered border controls to be tightened to prevent an influx of "fighters and arms". Workers at state media who quit in protest against government policies will not be rehired, he said.

Lukashenko, 65, also ordered intelligence agencies to continue searching for organisers of the street protests, Belta reported.

The EU leaders are treading a fine diplomatic line, trying to support democratic forces in Belarus without provoking Moscow's wrath.

"Violence has to stop and a peaceful and inclusive dialogue has to be launched. The leadership of #Belarus must reflect the will of the people," Charles Michel, the EU summit chairman, wrote in a tweet announcing the start of a video meeting.

— Reuters

Vaccine should be mandatory, says Australia PM as race heats up

SYDNEY: Australia's leader called on Wednesday for coronavirus immunisations to be mandatory, wading into ethical and safety debates raging around the world as the race to develop a vaccine gathers pace.

Almost 30 potential vaccines are currently being tested on humans across the globe in hope of ending a pandemic that has now killed more than 775,000 people and infected nearly 22 million, according to an AFP tally. Prime Minister Scott Morrison said he wants all 25 million Australians to get the jab after the country secured access to a vaccine currently under development by AstraZeneca and Oxford University.

"There are always exemptions for any vaccine on medical grounds, but that should be the only basis," he said.

Nations are scrambling to develop an immunisation or gain access to one of a handful of contenders in the final stages of clinical trials.

Upping the ante, Russia on August 11 said it had developed the world's first vaccine offering "sustainable immunity", and was in the final stage of human testing.

But the announcement was met with scepticism by the World Health Organization, which said it still needed a rigorous review, and scientists say it has been approved without large-scale trials.

Among the competitors, Brazilian health regulators on Tuesday gave the green light to the final stage of trials on a vaccine by Johnson & Johnson.

The US pharmaceutical firm will test its drug on 7,000 volunteers in



People walk in front of the Sydney Opera House as the state of New South Wales continues to report low numbers for new daily cases of COVID-19 in Sydney, on Wednesday. — Reuters

Brazil, authorities said, part of a group of up to 60,000 worldwide.

South Africa, meanwhile, will launch clinical trials of a US-developed vaccine with 2,900 volunteers this week, the second such study in the African country worst hit by the disease. However, the push for a vaccine has coincided with a rise in anti-vaccine sentiment that could hinder efforts to encourage widespread uptake.

'FASTEST WAY'

The global outbreak has seen a sharp rise in online misinformation, speculation and opposition — something experts have dubbed an "infodemic" — with debate raging

over whether vaccine rules impinge on personal freedoms.

The WHO has said the planet's highest-risk populations must all be inoculated simultaneously or else it will be impossible to rebuild the global economy.

It has appealed to countries to join its global shared vaccine programme rather than go it alone in developing a cure.

Director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said the most exposed 20 per cent of each country's population — including frontline health workers, adults over 65 and those with pre-existing conditions — would be vaccinated first in the WHO-led scheme.

"The fastest way to end this pandemic and to reopen economies is to start by protecting the highest risk populations everywhere, rather than the entire populations of just some countries," he said.

NEW SPIKES

His warning comes as the virus refuses to die across large parts of the globe, with South Korea and Lebanon the latest countries to witness new spikes. In Lebanon, authorities announced a new lockdown and overnight curfew to rein in a spike following a colossal chemical explosion on August 4 that has hampered virus prevention efforts.

— AFP

IN BRIEF

SUV-sized asteroid makes closest-ever flyby of Earth

WASHINGTON: An asteroid the size of a SUV has set a new record for coming closest to Earth without impacting the planet, passing 2,950 kilometres over the southern Indian Ocean on Sunday, US space agency Nasa reported.

"It's really cool to see a small asteroid come by this close, because we can see the Earth's gravity dramatically bend its trajectory," said Paul Chodas, director of the Center for Near-Earth Object Studies at Nasa's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Southern California.

"Our calculations show that this asteroid got turned by 45 degrees or so as it swung by our planet."

Asteroid 2020 QG has a diameter of 3 to 6 metres which makes it "very small by asteroid standards," according to Nasa. Space rocks of this size fly by the Earth several times per year, but only few of them can be detected due to their size and velocity.

The fact that 2020 QG appeared as a long streak on the camera image taken with a telescope at Caltech's Palomar Observatory in San Diego County was therefore considered "quite an accomplishment" by Chodas. — **dpa**

First major French city makes masks compulsory

TOULOUSE: Toulouse became the first French city on Wednesday to declare face masks compulsory outdoors, in a bid to halt the quickening spread of the coronavirus.

Toulouse is France's fourth-largest city and officials there fear that a mass movement of people as the summer break draws to a close will lead to a spike in infections.

Face masks are already compulsory on public transport in France and indoors in public places.

Additionally, many French towns and cities, including Paris and Toulouse, have used discretionary powers to make masks obligatory in certain areas — often busy streets, near tourist hotspots and at outdoor food markets.

Toulouse officials said masks would be compulsory outdoors across the city starting on Friday, from 7:00 am to 3:00 am the next day, for all people aged 12 and over, including those on bikes and kick-scooters. — **AFP**

Iran says COVID-19 killed 20,000 in six months

TEHRAN: Iran's novel coronavirus death toll has surpassed 20,000, the government said on Wednesday, six months after announcing the start of what quickly became the Middle East's deadliest outbreak.

The health ministry said COVID-19 claimed 153 more lives in the past 24 hours, bringing the country's overall toll to 20,125 dead.

Its spokeswoman, Sima Sadat Lari, told a televised news conference there had been another 2,444 cases of infection in the last 24 hours.

The Islamic republic has now reported 350,279 coronavirus infections since announcing its first cases — two deaths in the Shiite holy city of Qom — on February 19.

Lari described the situation as "concerning" in 26 of Iran's 31 provinces, among them Tehran. — **AFP**

Bombing in Kabul kills peace advocate

KABUL: A high-ranking Education Ministry employee known for his work as a peace activist and researcher was killed in a bomb blast in the Afghan capital on Wednesday.

Abdul Baqi Amin, director of the Scientific Council, was killed by an explosive device that was placed in his car, a ministry spokeswoman said, adding that the driver of the vehicle was wounded.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the attack.

Many Afghans expressed their sorrow on social media, saying Amin had been targeted because of his advocacy work. — **dpa**

Biden nominated to fight Trump and 'make a nation whole'

VETERAN: Biden termed 'a man of courage' who would sweep away the 'chaos' of four years

MILWAUKEE: US Democrats nominated Joe Biden as their 2020 presidential candidate on Tuesday, offering the Washington veteran as a "man of courage" who would sweep away the "chaos" of four years under Donald Trump.

Viewers tuning in to Day 2 of the four-day Democratic National Convention saw presenters affirm Biden's character and leadership while drawing a sharp contrast with the brash Republican scrambling to remain in the White House after November's election.

In an unprecedented and elaborate roll call vote that took place entirely online due to the coronavirus pandemic, all 50 states and seven territories announced their vote tallies that cemented Biden's role as the party flagbearer.

It was a diverse array of politicians, everyday Americans and even some of Biden's erstwhile rivals who helped nominated the 77-year-old Biden.

"Well thank you very, very much, from the bottom of my heart," a beaming Biden said in a live video link.

"It means the world to me and my family," he added, reminding viewers he will deliver a formal acceptance speech on Thursday at the conclusion of the four-day jamboree.

The nomination was a formality as he had already won the majority of the more than 3,900 delegates back in June.

The roll call came on Day 2 of the mostly virtual Democratic National Convention aimed at celebrating the party's candidate and welcoming independents and frustrated Republicans into their political movement to oust Trump from the White House.

The proceedings included a series of presentations by party leaders past and future who unleashed their own arguments against the White House incumbent and urged voters to rally around Biden.

The lineup featured 95-year-old

JOE BIDEN
Presidential nominee

Age: 77

A "fearless fighter for the little guy, and one of the country's finest public servants"
Biden in revealing his running mate

US 2020 election
Democratic ticket

- Born Nov 20, 1942 in Scranton, Pennsylvania
- At age 29, one of the youngest to be elected in Senate (1972)
- Former US vice president (2009-2017)
- Has sought the US presidency twice before, in 1988 and 2008
- Clinched Democratic nomination in June for the presidential race against Donald Trump
- Centrist. Touts his ability to work with Republicans
- Could become the oldest US president if elected

KAMALA HARRIS
Vice presidential nominee

Age: 55

"Joe Biden can unify the American people because he's spent his life fighting for us. And as president, he'll build an America that lives up to our ideals"
Harris's tweet

- Born Oct 20, 1964 in Oakland, California
- Daughter of Jamaican and Indian immigrants
- California's first black female attorney general (elected 2010)
- US senator for California (2016), first person of South Asian heritage and the 2nd black female senator in US history
- Democratic presidential campaign dogged by her failure to enact bold criminal justice reforms as attorney general. Dropped out of the race in Dec 2019
- Seen as more progressive than Biden, personifies diversity
- Could become America's first female and first black VP if elected

AFP Photos: Saul Loeb, Nicholas Kamm

president Jimmy Carter, who served one term from 1977, and 1990s commander-in-chief Bill Clinton, who warned that the Trump White House is swirling with chaos instead of the competence necessary to address the nation's crises.

"At a time like this, the Oval Office should be a command centre. Instead, it's a storm centre. There's only chaos," Clinton said.

"Just one thing never changes — his determination to deny responsibility and shift the blame," Clinton said. "The buck never stops there."

LOYAL SUPPORTER

The night's emotional underpinning was delivered by Jill Biden, who closed out the night with a compelling profile of the man she married in 1977.

The educator from Pennsylvania delivered a personal, high-stakes prime-time testimonial describing how the personal tragedy of the death of Biden's first wife and daughter in a 1972 car crash has shaped him.

"How do you make a broken family whole?" she said. "The same way you make a nation whole. With love and

Viewers tuning in to Day 2 of the four-day Democratic National Convention saw presenters affirm Biden's character and leadership

understanding — and with small acts of compassion. With bravery. With unwavering faith."

Americans, she said, were "coming together" despite Trump divisiveness.

"We have shown that the heart of this nation still beats with kindness and courage," she added. "That's the soul of America Joe Biden is fighting for now."

The president faced a barrage of criticism on opening night too, notably from former first lady Michelle Obama who said Trump lacks the character

and skills for the job.

"I thought it was a very divisive speech, extremely divisive," Trump told reporters at the White House.

In her pre-taped remarks to the convention, Obama urged Americans to rally behind Biden, her husband's former vice president, in the November 3 presidential election.

"Donald Trump is the wrong president for our country," Barack Obama's wife said in unprecedented criticism of a sitting US president by a former first lady.

Later on Tuesday on a visit to battleground state Arizona, Trump knocked Obama for delivering taped remarks.

"Thursday night I'm doing it live," Trump said, referring to his speech next week when he formally accepts his party's nomination at the online Republican convention.

Trump said he has chosen the White House South Lawn as the location — a controversial decision given that presidents are required to separate their campaigning from taxpayer-funded governing. — **Reuters**

Floods in Delhi inundate roads as South Asia monsoon death toll rises to nearly 1,300



Children play in a waterlogged street following monsoon rainfalls in Gurgaon on the outskirts of New Delhi on Wednesday. — **AFP**

NEW DELHI: Heavy monsoon rains lashed New Delhi on Wednesday, inundating roads and piling on misery for commuters in the chaotic Indian capital, as the death toll from the annual deluge across South Asia rose to nearly 1,300.

The monsoon is vital to the densely populated region, revitalising land and waterways amid scorching summers. But it also causes widespread death and destruction.

In New Delhi, commuters battled through knee-deep waters and cars and buses were submerged as torrential rains added to traffic woes in the city of 20 million.

At a museum in Jaipur in the mostly desert state of Rajasthan, staff said how they were forced to smash open a glass display case containing a 2,300 year-old Egyptian mummy in order to save it from rainwater flooding the ground floor.

"The workers broke the glass of the box and took the mummy out" last Friday after water levels started rising, Albert Hall Museum's superintendent Rakesh Cholak said.

"The case of the coffin got a little wet but we've put it out to dry too."

The torrid conditions in recent days also hit India's northern and eastern states.

Across India, 847 people have died this season, the home ministry said.

In the southwestern state of Kerala,

the death toll from a single landslide rose to 61 on Wednesday, with nine people still missing, an official said.

In India's poorest state Bihar, eight million people have been hit by the floods, with thousands of displaced people sleeping on embankments and

highways amid a shortage of relief camps.

SLEEPING ON ROADS

This year's rains have also come in the wake of the economic devastation wrought by the coronavirus pandemic, with the loss of crops across flood-

affected areas a further blow to farmers and rural communities.

In Bangladesh, 226 people have died so far with 40 per cent of the country underwater after torrential rain caused rivers to burst their banks and inundate villages.

Yemen aid programmes hit by lack of funds: UN

SANAA: The United Nations said on Wednesday it has been forced to close or severely cut back half of its major programmes in Yemen to tackle the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

"We have a moral obligation to warn the world that millions of Yemenis will suffer and could die because we don't have the funding we need to keep going," said the UN humanitarian coordinator for Yemen, Lisa Grande.

Grande said UN programmes in Yemen had had a "real impact", preventing large-scale famine, rolling back the worst cholera epidemic in modern history and providing help to millions of displaced people, and she appealed to donors to provide the funds to keep them going.

Five years of war between Ansar Allah fighters and a Saudi-led coalition which intervened to shore up the beleaguered government have left nearly 80 per cent of Yemenis — more than 24 million people — dependent on some form of humanitarian aid.

A Yemen aid conference held in Riyadh on June 2 saw donors pledge only \$1.35 billion of the \$2.41 billion needed to cover essential humanitarian activities until the end of the year, leaving a gap of more than \$1 billion.

Saudi Arabia emerged as the biggest donor, pledging an aid package worth \$500 million.

The UN said the impact of underfunding had been dramatic, against what it has termed the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

In April, food rations for more than eight million people in northern Yemen were halved and humanitarian agencies were forced to stop reproductive health services in 140 facilities.

Health services were cut or reduced in a further 275 specialised centres for treating people with cholera and other infectious diseases. — **AFP**

"In terms of duration it was the second-worst floods in the country's history," said Arifuzzaman Bhuyan, the head of Bangladesh's Flood Forecasting and Warning Centre.

More than six million people have had their homes damaged by the floods, and tens of thousands of villagers remain in shelters, an official from Bangladesh's disaster management ministry said.

Others are sleeping in shanties built on roads on higher ground, unable to return home to their submerged homes. In flood-hit Rupangar village outside the capital Dhaka, Shahanara Begum said she has been living on the road with her family for more than a month.

"It seems like bad luck doesn't leave us. Wherever we go, floodwater follows us," the 50-year-old said on Wednesday.

"It is very insecure to live on the road but we don't have a choice... most of our food stocks and clothes are already ruined," added 70-year-old Maya Saha.

In Nepal, 218 people have died and 69 are missing from landslides and floods since mid-June when the monsoon began.

In the latest incident early on Wednesday, six bodies were recovered and 11 people were missing after a flood swept away a remote settlement in a western district, an official said. — **AFP**

EU and Britain resume talks, deal still weeks away at the earliest

BRUSSELS: Negotiators for the European Union and Britain began a seventh round of talks on Wednesday to reach a post-Brexit deal on all aspects of future relations, from trade to security, though diplomats said a deal was still weeks away at the earliest.

British chief negotiator David Frost and his EU counterpart, Michel Barnier, dined together on Tuesday ahead of the talks, which have snagged on the issues of fishing rights in British waters and ensuring state aid preserves fair competition.

“The state aid part of the level playing field and fisheries remain the main hurdles. If this moves, everything else will fall into place,” said an EU diplomat.

“This round should not bring major breakthroughs: eyes are on the last one in September.”

Britons voted in a referendum four years ago to leave the EU and, after tortuous divorce talks, Britain formally left the 27-nation bloc on January 31. The UK is now in a transition period to the end of

this year, but a deal on its future relationship with the EU will need to be wrapped up by October to ensure it is ratified by that deadline.

If they fail to strike a deal, trade between the two will be on World Trade Organization terms, which would include tariffs and quotas and be more burdensome for businesses.

Barnier said last month the “level playing field” was the biggest remaining hurdle, but also listed energy and transport cooperation, as well as rules on marking the origin of products.

Eurasia Group analyst Mujtaba Rahman said an eventual trade-off on state aid and fishing rights was “possible and remains likely, but will take time”.

Rahman said a messy “no deal” with the prospect of delays at the border and food shortages would be a major risk for British Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s troubled government, and so pressure on him to agree a last-minute compromise would grow.

— Reuters



People holding a Union Jack themed umbrella take a stroll in the rain at Westminster Bridge near the London Eye in London, on Wednesday. — Reuters

Britain to bring in mass testing to curb spread of COVID-19

LONDON: Britain plans to bring in regular, population-wide testing for COVID-19 so it can suppress the spread of the virus and ease restrictions that have crippled its economy without triggering a second wave in one of the worst-hit countries in the world.

Health Secretary Matt Hancock said the government was trialling a range of new, faster tests that can give instant results and hoped to roll them out towards the end of the year.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s government has been criticised by political opponents and health experts for being too slow to go into lockdown and in rolling out testing to know how far the virus had spread.

Britain now has the highest death toll in Europe, at more than 50,000, and the deepest economic contraction of any major advanced economy.

“The mass testing, population testing, where we make it the norm that people get tested regularly,

allowing us therefore to allow some of the freedoms back, is a huge project in government right now,” Hancock told BBC Radio.

He said the country’s research laboratories at Porton Down were trialling new saliva tests that do not need to go to a laboratory, so they can deliver faster results.

“There are new technologies coming on track which we are buying and testing now,” he said. “We’ll ramp it up certainly over the remainder of this year.”

RUNNING OUT OF TIME

Widespread testing is seen as one way to reopen the economy, which suffered a record 20 per cent contraction in the second quarter and is expected to see unemployment soar when the government ends its huge job subsidy programme in October. “Hard times are here,” finance minister Rishi Sunak said last week.

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has promised mass testing there after its first local

* UK aims for general population testing by year-end

* Heathrow ready to test arrivals to shorten quarantines

that’s why it’s very urgent,” Blair said.

Some other countries are utilising a higher proportion of overall testing capacity. Germany’s testing lab association said on Tuesday the country had been using about 750,000 of a weekly capacity of a million tests.

London’s Heathrow Airport said on Wednesday that a testing area was ready to open should Britain approve a rule change and allow two tests, one on arrival and one some days later, to cut the quarantine time for travellers from the current two weeks.

Cases in Britain have started to rise again, with more than 1,000 positive results on eight of the last 10 days.

The government said on Wednesday it would expand a testing study being run by the Office for National Statistics from 28,000 people now to 150,000 by October and ultimately to 400,000 to help establish a better national picture of the pandemic and spot local outbreaks. — Reuters

THAI STUDENTS STAGE RALLY



Student protesters use their mobile phones as flashlights during an anti-government rally at King Mongkut’s Institute of Technology in Bangkok on Wednesday. A Thai court issued arrest warrants on August 19 for six pro-democracy activists involved in recent rallies that heard calls for an overhaul of the government. — AFP

S Korea warns of virus spread after church outbreaks

SEOUL: South Korea reported on Wednesday its highest daily rise in novel coronavirus cases since early March as outbreaks from churches around the capital spread, prompting a warning of a nationwide wave of infections. The 297 new infections mark the sixth straight day of triple-digit increases in a country that has managed to blunt several previous outbreaks.

The national tally rose to 16,058 infections with 306 deaths, according to data from the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC).

Nearly 90 per cent of the new cases appeared in the capital, Seoul, and surrounding areas, raising concern of the rapid spread of the virus in a metropolitan area of more than 25 million people.

“We’re in a desperately dangerous crisis where infections are spreading in the Seoul metropolitan area and threatening to lead to a massive nationwide transmission,” Vice Health Minister Kim Gang-lip told a briefing.

“The government cannot contain the current spread only with tracing

The 297 new infections mark the sixth straight day of triple-digit increases in a country that has managed to blunt several previous outbreaks

and isolation ... please stay home unless you must go out.”

At least 140 of the new infections are linked to the Sarang Jeil Church, taking the number of cases from it to nearly 600.

Authorities are trying to trace another 600 members of the church’s congregation who should be in isolation and would like to test all of its 4,000 members, Kim said.

More than 8,500 police have been mobilised to track down church members, he said.

Authorities have said some members of the church, which is run

by a radical conservative preacher, are reluctant to come forward and get tested, or to self-isolate.

Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun said the government would take legal action against the church for any attempt to disrupt tracing and testing efforts by failing to provide accurate membership lists.

At least three other smaller clusters have been linked to churches in Seoul and one to a church in the city of Yongin. Dozens of cases were linked to a coffee outlet in the city of Paju. Nightclubs, karaoke bars, buffets and cyber cafes have been ordered to close in Seoul and surrounding regions.

In-person church services, have also been banned while indoor and outdoor gatherings have been restricted to no more than 50 and 100 people, respectively. Authorities said if the number of infections rises or continues at the current rate of spread, they will likely impose the highest level of social distancing rules, under which schools are closed, businesses advised to work from home and gatherings limited to 10 people. — Reuters



A woman wearing a protective mask walks at Myeongdong shopping district, as social distancing measures were introduced to avoid the spread of COVID-19, in Seoul on Wednesday. — Reuters

Growth of e-commerce opens up new opportunities

T

here is a formidable growth in the e-commerce sector in Oman, same as anywhere in the world. It has expanded its ambit as it can be done from the comfort of the home or online from anywhere in the country. This has opened up lot of opportunities to the people of our country for extra or basic income. It has given them employment opportunities. Therefore, it appears to be the most appropriate time for the Authority of Small and Medium Enterprises to take the initiative and launch electronic platforms for entrepreneurship, such as open electronic market which has all product and service providers of all types in it, and where orders for goods and services and its prices are regulated by a government organisation which enjoys the confidence of the people.

There is a dire need that work starts on such ideas where a larger segment of our society is involved directly or indirectly.

There is no doubt that e-commerce has become a reality which must be regulated in a way that can add value to the market. It should have all full time and part-time providers of services and products at all levels under a reliable authority. This will also result in satisfaction of those who want goods and services and log into it for purchases. Customers or consumers of these goods and services can face problems in dealing with such platforms if they lack any regulation or supervision.

The Authority is the entity which we think as most appropriate to start providing electronic space for entrepreneurs, job-seekers and skilled

people. This space can be in the form of a locally-built popular platform which also has a global reach. If this type of commercial method is regulated properly, it can grow and prosper in a better way.

There is a dire need of a local platform of global reach where all goods and services are made available under different categories, and where all those who want to serve can register themselves with their names and categories to reach the customers. This will create confidence in such trade as it will have certain guarantees required by the consumers. It is the responsibility of the Authority to launch such a platform as part of its work. This can provide lot of jobs to a large segment of the youth in the country.

This platform once launched will

help in the promotion of national products at international level. This aspect of trade must be given more strength. More demand of individuals and societies can be made through this platform. Even this will provide wide options for citizens who want to support Omani youth as part of their responsibility and support national initiatives of the country and entrepreneurs.

The Authority can provide every an entrepreneur or owner of a business or electronic service a "code" through which he or she can introduce himself or herself and their services or goods to the customers. Those who will have this code will be considered as approved by the Authority and are trustworthy. This can be done by this Authority. When we talk about this it does not mean that there are no more

organisations which can do this job of strengthening a national e-commerce platforms directly or indirectly. Of course, there are many organisations which can work in this area. They can also support entrepreneurship in a big way and open more horizons for the youth of our country.

We hope to hear some good news about national e-commerce project. If it starts working in this area, it would be a major contribution to the idea of a much required local e-commerce platform of global reach. It can organise some random efforts which are already being made in this direction and remove the hurdles in winning the confidence of the providers of goods and services as well as that of consumers. Confidence and trust are the corner stone of e-commerce.



ALI AL MATANI

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Joe Biden and his wife celebrate after he was formally nominated as 2020 Democratic presidential candidate in convention roll call in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. – Reuters

Widespread fears grow about unfair election

JAMES OLIPHANT

W

ith less than 80 days to go before the US presidential election, it looks like Joe Biden's race to lose.

Yet, as Democrats nationwide gather online this week to nominate him as their party's choice to challenge President Donald Trump on November 3, many fear Biden may just do that - for factors almost entirely out of his control.

The former vice-president and his allies have every reason to feel bullish. Polls show Biden has built an expansive lead in nearly every battleground state that Trump won narrowly in 2016, as the Republican's approval numbers tumble amid the coronavirus pandemic. For the first time in a decade, retaking the Senate - and full control of Congress - is within sight.

Yet, interviews with more than a dozen Democratic officials, activists and voters reveal deep anxieties that Trump will make voting as difficult as possible during the pandemic, and should he lose the vote, he won't accept its outcome.

Biden himself has called it his biggest fear. Former president Barack Obama sounded the alarm last Friday, saying on Twitter the Trump administration is "more concerned with suppressing the vote than suppressing a virus." And eight of 10 Democrats are concerned about voter suppression, according to a Reuters/Ipsos poll in late July.

Trump has railed against voting by mail for months, proclaiming without evidence that it will lead to fraud, and last Thursday all but acknowledged he was blocking Democratic demands for

additional funding for the post office because of his opposition to mail-in voting.

"We can't predict what's going to happen other than the closer we get to the election, the more desperate Trump and his campaign will become," said Rodell Mollineau, an adviser to Unite the Country, a political action committee that backs Biden.

Tim Murtaugh, a spokesman for the Trump campaign, said the president wants a "free and fair" election, adding that it is Democrats who are inviting "chaos and the very real possibility of fraud" by trying to expand voting by mail.

Democrats and voting rights groups say mail-in voting can help protect voters from the coronavirus, and that a failure to guarantee that option during the pandemic will disenfranchise millions of Americans, especially the poor and African-Americans who tend to vote Democratic.

Some say Biden's commanding edge in the polls only makes them more nervous. They worry that increasing cases of COVID-19 could keep voters away from polling places, particularly if Biden is perceived as coasting to an easy win.

"If Biden is up by 10 points, how likely are you to risk your life to pull that lever," Stefan Smith, who was a top digital strategist for Pete Buttigieg's presidential campaign, said.

At about this time in 2016, then Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton had around a five-point lead in various polls and still lost the

election three months later, partly due to the first decline in African-American turnout in 20 years.

Michigan Democrat Patty Leitzel, who lives in politically divided Macomb County, said she is still traumatized by the win Trump squeaked out in her state four years ago and worries he could do so again - as do the voters she talks to on a regular basis.

Leitzel, who was county chairman for the Clinton campaign, has been phone-banking and organising virtual house parties on Biden's behalf. "If I had Biden's ear, I would tell him this: Don't follow the polls," she said.

Like most Democrats, Leitzel's biggest concern is voter suppression. But she said she also would like to see Biden make a greater effort to get his message out so that the election hinges less on Trump's performance in office.

Democrats fret that the race has become overly focused on Trump's handling of the pandemic. That has so far worked in Biden's favour, but has also left him vulnerable to a sudden shift in the country's fortunes, such as the economy improving greatly in the run-up to the election or a coronavirus vaccine becoming available, they say.

"These changes could narrow the race," said Geoffrey Skelley, an elections analyst for FiveThirtyEight, a website that analyses polling data. "Because the president generally polls better in the states that are most likely to decide the election than he does nationally, he doesn't necessarily have to recover that much to improve his chances of winning in the Electoral College." — Reuters

Riding out of the storm...

A

s the coronavirus inflicted changes continue, we spend time on the sofa, watching videos, or playing video games. There is a catch here - someone is making money out of our boredom.

Earning money out of a crisis is a sign of entrepreneurship, and the epidemic has created challenges in positive ways to several types of industries with entertainment topping the list. Games, toys, personalised T-shirts, masks, dolls, and stuffed toys in the form of the virus are some examples. It is all about cash flow.

Collectible figures on coronavirus themes are also available these days. I asked a few parents whether they have bought coronavirus shaped toys for their children. Some gave me a flat no, others did not reply; a few, who answered, did not have an emotional sense attached to the disease - they bought toys related to the virus.

Across the globe, the representation of the virus is as entertainment, education and information tools. Card games in honour to medical professionals, food workers, small delivery vans, little people figures such as He-Man as a grocery delivery worker, and Barbie as a scientist are a hit in the toy industry. Crossword puzzle and games in which gamers simulate the outbreak of plague are popular. However, a visit to toy shops in several local malls resulted in being met with the 'Uhh' apathy expression.

Communicating with children using games and puppets can be engaging and enjoyable,



SONIA AMBROSIO

soniambrosio@gmail.com

particularly in a health crisis. The initiative goes back at least some 18 years with manufacturers producing microbes to help children understand the importance of washing their hands.

In most representations of the virus, the shape is a spherical particle with spikes, resembling an alien invader. In the depictions of the virus, designers, illustrators, and communicators make highly creative and evocative decisions. Interestingly, major historical events influence language and communication. In the case of COVID-19, it has also influenced new emojis and the way people use them in social media to express feelings towards the disease and pandemic, besides a sense of solidarity, compassion, or fun.

Presenting health information with illustrations, images or shapes is easier to understand. It also encourages the dissemination of content. Health and science products with a forward vision can create fresh positive situations to spread knowledge and to inspire children and adults to learn about science.

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LeBron James #23 of the Los Angeles Lakers drives the ball against Gary Trent Jr #2 of the Portland Trail Blazers during the second quarter in game one of the first round of the 2020 NBA Playoffs at AdventHealth Arena.– USA TODAY Sports

Lakers, Bucks stumble out of gate in NBA playoff openers

LOS ANGELES: A pair of eighth-seeded teams delivered stunning upsets in their playoff openers on Tuesday as the Portland Trail Blazers and Orlando Magic surprised the top-seeded Los Angeles Lakers and Milwaukee Bucks.

Damian Lillard scored 34 points as the Trail Blazers toppled the West's number one seeded Lakers 100-93 and Nikola Vucevic tallied 35 points as the Magic defeated the East's top seeded Bucks 122-110 at Walt Disney World Resort in Florida.

"Every time we have played since we have been here, it is like a playoff game," said Lillard. "So that prepared us for a game like this."

The last time both NBA top seeds lost their playoff openers was 2003 when the San Antonio Spurs and Detroit Pistons stumbled out of the gate.

Game two is Thursday in Orlando, Florida

Lillard drained several long three-pointers including one from 36 feet with just over three minutes left to break a 89-89 tie. Three-pointers are something he has been working on in practice.

"In the summer when I step away, I try to find ways I can improve my game," Lillard said.

"Playing further out was major part what I wanted to add to my game. It is starting to show. I am just reaping the benefits of the work I put in."

CJ McCollum had 21 points and Bosnian Jusuf Nurkic scored 16 points and 15 rebounds for the

Blazers, who made 13 of 34 three-pointers. Carmelo Anthony added 11 points and 10 rebounds.

NEW JAMES MARK - Anthony Davis finished with 28 points and 11 boards, while LeBron James had 23 points, 17 rebounds and 16 assists for the Lakers, who struggled from beyond the arc making just five of 32 attempts. Kyle Kuzma chipped in 14 points.

James is the first player in history to record a 20 point, 15 rebound and 15 assist triple double in the postseason.

"We had a lot of wide open looks. The first playoff game so there were a lot of jitters. We have to calm down, take our time. The shots will be there all series," said Lakers Kuzma.

Gary Trent nailed a clutch three-pointer with 75 seconds left in the fourth to give the Blazers a 98-93 lead. Nurkic then sealed the win with a late dunk.

The Magic got off to a quick start to seize a double-digit lead then blunted a second-half rally by the Bucks, who boast the league's top player Giannis Antetokounmpo.

"We focus on ourselves"

Orlando came into the series as big underdogs against the NBA's best all-around team.

"We don't care what other people have to say," Vucevic said. "We focus on ourselves and we came out and played a great game on both ends of the floor."

Vucevic, of Montenegro, also



Orlando Magic forward James Ennis III (11), center Nikola Vucevic (9), and guard Terrence Ross (right) celebrate their win over the Milwaukee Bucks during the second half of Game 1 of the NBA basketball first-round playoff series at The Field House. The Orlando Magic won 122-110. – USA TODAY Sports



LeBron James #23 of the Los Angeles Lakers and Anthony Davis #3 of the Los Angeles Lakers react after a shot during the third quarter against the Portland Trail Blazers in game one of the first round of the 2020 NBA Playoffs at AdventHealth Arena. – USA TODAY Sports



Orlando Magic guard Evan Fournier (10) shoots a three point basket in front of Milwaukee Bucks guard George Hill (3) during the second half of Game 1 of the NBA basketball first-round playoff series at The Field House. – USA TODAY Sports

had 14 rebounds and four assists. Terrence Ross finished with 18 points and six rebounds, while DJ Augustin added 11 points and 11 assists for Orlando, who shot 49 percent from the field and made 16 baskets from beyond the arc.

"You have to really be ready for what they do," Vucevic said.

"We have to make sure we know their stuff and we are prepared for everything. Tonight, we definitely were on top of that. We did a good job executing the game plan." Reigning league MVP Antetokounmpo finished with 31 points, 17 rebounds and seven assists.

Milwaukee closed the gap to 62-52 at the half, then began the third quarter on a 16-7 run to cut

Orlando's advantage to one.

The Bucks got within six points, 99-93, on a Brook Lopez basket with 8:13 to play, but Orlando answered with Ross' driving dunk and Augustin's three-pointer to push its advantage back to double digits.

Orlando's Evan Fournier was held scoreless until hitting three clutch three-pointers late in the fourth quarter to help clinch the victory.

In another playoff encounter, James Harden scored 37 points to lift the Houston Rockets to a 123-108 win over the Oklahoma City Thunder. Despite not having Russell Westbrook for the fifth time in six games, the Rockets offence was sizzling, combining for 76 points in the second and third quarters. — AFP

KOEMAN 'WILL BE BARCELONA COACH' NEXT SEASON, SAYS CLUB'S PRESIDENT

Former Netherlands coach
Ronald Koeman, who will take
over as the new Barcelona
manager. — Reuters



BARCELONA: Barcelona president Josep Bartomeu all but confirmed Ronald Koeman as the club's new coach on Tuesday night in an interview with its in-house television channel.

"If there are no twists Koeman will be Barcelona coach for next season," said Bartomeu.

"We have gone for him because of his experience and his style of football."

Koeman, who is the current Netherlands coach, played for Barcelona six years between 1989 and 1995.

Bartomeu added that the incoming Dutch coach wanted Lionel Messi as the "cornerstone" of his new project.

But when asked who else would definitely be part of the club's future he hinted that Luis Suarez, Gerard Pique, Sergio Busquets and Jordi Alba were all being invited to leave.

"Messi is untouchable but there are other players who we will also not sell," he said before naming Frenkie de Jong, Clement Lenglet, Nelson Semedo, Antoine Griezmann and Ousmane Dembele, and leaving out the likes of Pique and Suarez.

Bartomeu referenced Barcelona's crippling wage bill and they need to reduce it drastically.

"I don't want to talk badly about anyone but we have to start sending some of them off with full honours," he added.

"There are certain players who know they are not going to continue. Give them free transfers? All the options are open."

Earlier, Barcelona said it parted ways with technical secretary Eric Abidal as the fall-out from last week's 8-2 Champions League thrashing by Bayern Munich continued.

"We thank Eric Abidal for the professionalism, commitment, dedication and positivity that he has always shown towards the Barca family," a statement said.

Abidal is the second high profile figure to lose his job after Barcelona's humiliation by Bayern in the Champions League quarterfinals last Friday.

Abidal had been in the job for two years but fell out with Messi last year when the Argentinian star complained comments from Abidal suggested Barcelona players had got coach Ernesto Valverde the sack.

Meanwhile, goalkeeper Marc-Andre ter Stegen came through a knee operation on Tuesday and will be out for 10 weeks the club said.

The Germany international keeper who has tendon problems in his right knee had been "operated on successfully" by club doctor Ramon Cugat and would be "out for approximately two-and-a-half months," according to Barcelona.

The 28-year-old ter Stegen will miss the start of the new season in Spain currently planned for September 12. — AFP

Bayern Munich's amazing power, thanks to professor Broich



Holger Broich

And as they head into the semifinal against Olympique Lyon later on Wednesday, praise has rained down on the 45-year-old Broich and his team.

"Big praise for Holger Broich and the entire coaching staff for how they planned it all during the break with the cyber training," defender Jerome Boateng said.

"I believe it was the key that we started as soon as it was possible. Holger Broich built it up superbly. We are in very good physical shape. That is important, especially in the Champions League with its tournament format, that you can raise your level towards the end when the opponent starts to tire."

Bayern ran almost 10 kilometres more than the Barcelona players and the game turned into a complete rout when they scored three goals in the last eight minutes.

"We just marched on, our pressing was brutal," midfielder Leon Goretzka said.



Bayern Munich's
Thomas Mueller
during training.
— Reuters



Said Flick: "You develop if you go to the limit every day." Flick and Broich reacted immediately when all play was suspended in mid-March. The players had bikes delivered to their homes as Flick and Broich conducted the now famous cyber training sessions via video from the club headquarters.

The same happened last month in the build-up to the Champions League, and forward Thomas Mueller readily admitted that the players on some occasions "would have liked to have launched our dear professor into outer space."

The remark was nothing short of absolute praise, just in Mueller's unique way.

After all, Bayern have won all 13 games since the restart in mid-May with a goal difference of 45-12.

Broich recently told the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* paper that some of the methods used during the break would have a future, in football and life in general.

"We have gotten to know a few things during the

corona pandemic that will stay: video conferences, online education, home office, and our cyber training is part of it as well," Broich said.

Munich now plan to set up a special studio at their training centre, which could also be used in a regular off-season to allow players to stay a little longer at their holiday locations while at the same time training via video link with Munich.

In Lisbon, Bayern can also count on the likes of Niklas Suele, Corentin Tolisso and Philippe Coutinho (scorer of the last two goals against his parent club Barca), who are all fit again from injuries now that it matters.

Chairman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge is not the least surprised about the team's extraordinary fitness because his office overlooks the training ground.

"I can see how intense and concentrated they work," Rummenigge said. — dpa



LISBON: Bayern Munich impressed with the way they played in the 8-2 quarterfinal demolition of Barcelona, and their relentless attack until the final whistle drew comparisons with a steam roller.

"Brutal" was a word frequently used by the players, and coach Hansi Flick praised his men for "keeping the intensity even when you are leading high. That is our mentality, that's what we stand for."

For a team to play with such force takes some extraordinary fitness, and that's where professor doctor Holger Broich comes into play.

Officially named "Chief scientific officer and head of fitness," it is thanks to Broich that Bayern's players have stayed fit during the two-month suspension of play owing to the coronavirus, and then also during another five-week break between the end of the domestic season and the resumption of the Champions League.

sport

NEYMAR, ATTACKING STARS POWER PSG INTO

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE FINAL

LISBON: An inspired Neymar helped Paris Saint-Germain reach the Champions League final on Tuesday, but the fact that the Brazilian was not their best player against RB Leipzig says everything about the frightening strength of Thomas Tuchel's team and shows why they can be confident of lifting the trophy for the first time.

Neymar has become a different player in his third year in the French capital. His first two seasons at PSG following his 222 million-euro (\$264m) transfer from Barcelona were blighted by injuries and constant speculation about a move back to the Camp Nou.

When it became clear last summer that a return to Catalonia would not happen, he knuckled down and decided finally to make a proper go of it in Paris. This is the end result.

After scoring in both legs against Borussia Dortmund in the last 16, just before the coronavirus brought football to a halt, he was outstanding in the 2-1 quarter-final win over Atalanta last week in Lisbon and even better in the 3-0 demolition of Leipzig.

Neymar hit the post twice in the first half, including from an audacious free-kick wide out on the right as everyone waited for a cross.

The 28-year-old won the free-kick which led to Marquinhos's opener, and it was his flick which set up Angel Di Maria for the second goal, ensuring it was game over by half-time, before Juan Bernat sealed the win.

The only thing missing was a goal of his own.

"What can I say to Neymar to help him score a goal when I scored maybe two in my career," joked Tuchel.

"He scores in training, but he is

playing exceptionally well, he is so, so strong. He has a winning mentality, a hunger to win and to show he is capable of being the best player in the world.

"If he scores in the final then I'll be happy."

Neymar later posted a picture on Instagram of himself lying on the ground in agony, a reminder of his bad luck with injuries in his first two seasons after arriving in Paris for that world record fee in 2017, which has clearly made him even more determined to succeed now.

"Today I am in one piece, with no injuries, able to help my teammates in the best possible way," he wrote.

Di Maria right at home

There will be no Ballon d'Or this year, with organisers *France Football* cancelling the award because of the coronavirus pandemic.

But Neymar will still have a strong claim to be the best player on the planet if he can lead PSG past either Bayern Munich or Lyon in Sunday's final.

"I am sure that if we win the Champions League he will be in a position to win these trophies," said teammate Kylian Mbappe. "He is destined to do so."

Yet while Neymar and Mbappe, the two superstars and the two most expensive players of all time, dominate the headlines, there were standout performances all through PSG's team on Tuesday. In particular, Di Maria.

The Argentine was once the major superstar at PSG before being eclipsed by his attacking colleagues.

Against Leipzig, on his return from suspension, it was he who set up two goals either side of scoring himself.

— AFP



business

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OIL PRICE

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Brent Crude \$45.24

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OQ TO FUND SOCIAL INVESTMENT PROJECTS IN MUSANDAM P14

JAPAN'S EXPORTS DROP AS DEMAND COLLAPSES P15

WHY US STOCK MARKET JUST HIT A NEW HIGH P16

Oman secures global markets for its urea output

AS PART OF THIS PACT, AN INITIAL SHIPMENT OF 49,500 METRIC TONNES OF GRANULAR UREA WAS LOADED ON BOARD A BULK CARRIER AT OMIFCO’S QALHAT JETTY EARLIER THIS MONTH, WITH THE VESSEL CURRENTLY EN ROUTE TO BRAZIL — REPRESENTING A PROMISING NEW MARKET FOR OMANI UREA.

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, AUG 19

Swiss-based international agri-business trader Ameropa has announced that it has struck a deal with OQ Trading Limited (OQT), the trading arm of OQ – the Sultanate’s global integrated energy company – to lift a sizable proportion of the urea output of the Oman-India Fertiliser Company’s (OMIFCO) fertiliser project at Sur.

Basel-headquartered Ameropa, which specialises in the marketing of fertilisers and grains around the world, said it has entered into a three-year offtake agreement covering part of the granular urea output of the OMIFCO plant.

As part of this pact, an initial shipment of 49,500 metric tonnes of granular urea was loaded on board a bulk carrier at OMIFCO’s Qalhat jetty earlier this month, with the vessel currently en route to Brazil — representing a promising new market for Omani urea.

“This ground-breaking deal with OQT, which is being supported by OMIFCO (Oman India Fertiliser Company SAOC), further solidifies our role as the leading urea trading company in the world and helps us gain additional market share in strategic regions,” said Ameropa in a statement.

A joint Omani-Indian venture,



OMIFCO was launched in 2005 at Sur Industrial City with a capacity to produce 1.65 metric tonnes/year of urea and 350,000 tonnes/year of ammonia. Wholly Omani government-owned OQ has a 50 per cent stake in the project. Indian

A joint Omani-Indian venture, OMIFCO was launched in 2005 at Sur Industrial City with a capacity to produce 1.65 metric tonnes per year of urea and 350,000 tonnes per year of ammonia.

state-owned cooperatives Indian fertiliser cooperatives Krishak Bharati Cooperative (25 per cent) and Indian Farmers Fertilisers Cooperative (25 per cent) are also shareholders in the project. When it commenced operations on July

15, 2005, it heralded an era of petrochemicals production in the Sultanate.

Under a long-term offtake pact signed with the Indian government, urea output from the plant — averaging around 2 million metric tonnes annually — had been shipped to Indian markets from the outset of operations 15 years ago.

But, according to recent media reports, that agreement effectively came to an end last month, on the 15th anniversary of OMIFCO’s inauguration — prompting the company and its trading arm — OQ Trading Limited — to explore alternative markets for the plant’s urea production. The ammonia output, however, is sold internationally via an offtake arrangement with another trader.

Also on the occasion of the 15th anniversary, OMIFCO and its shareholders announced the launch of its ‘OQ’ brand of Omani bagged urea for the local, regional and internationally markets. The high-quality product, marketing in 50 kilogramme bags, promises to provide new impetus to Oman’s efforts to boost agricultural production as part of a national strategy to strengthen food security and reduce the country’s long-standing dependence on imports for its food requirements.

Opec+ meets to review compliance with oil cuts

LONDON: Opec oil producers and allies such as Russia, a grouping dubbed Opec+, meets on Wednesday to review compliance with oil cuts meant to support oil prices amid the coronavirus pandemic.



Opec+ is unlikely to change its output policy, which currently calls for reducing output by 7.7 million barrels per day (bpd) versus a record high 9.7 million bpd up until this month, Opec+ sources said.

“The meeting will be mostly a focus on conformity and compensation,” said an Opec source, rather than any major tweaks to the Opec+ supply cut deal.

Other sources said the virtual meeting, scheduled to start at 1400 GMT, would look in particular at compliance by countries such as Iraq, Nigeria and Kazakhstan. They have made a smaller share of their reduction than members such as Saudi Arabia.

Another Opec source was upbeat, saying the producers could deal with challenges like rising US or Libyan production. “Everything will go well within Opec+ because everyone needs stability and visibility in the market,” the source said.

Overall compliance reached 95 per cent to 97 per cent in July, according to Opec+ sources.

That is high by Opec standards. In July, Saudi Arabia was pumping below its target and Iraq and Nigeria, while lagging the Gulf Opec members on compliance, were pumping less than in previous months, according to a survey and other assessments. — Reuters

193K phishing attacks reported in Q2

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, AUG 19

Computer and net users in the Sultanate were the target of an estimated 193K phishing attacks during the second quarter of this year – part of over 2.5 million attacks reported across the Gulf and Middle East region during the quarter, according to global cybersecurity company Kaspersky.

According to cybersecurity experts, attackers have been exploiting widespread concerns over the COVID-19 pandemic to prey upon unsuspecting users, while others have added new tactics to their methodologies ranging from HR dismissal e-mails to attacks disguised as delivery notifications. Using these tactics, they mounted as many as 2,578,501 phishing attacks across Egypt, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman, said Kaspersky in its latest spam and phishing report.

“Phishing is one of the oldest and most flexible types of social engineering attacks. They are used in many ways, and for different purposes, to lure unwary users to the site and trick them into entering personal information. The latter often includes financial credentials such as bank account passwords or payment card details, or login details for social media accounts. In the wrong hands, this opens doors to various malicious operations, such as money being stolen or corporate networks being compromised. This makes phishing a popular initial infection method,” said



Phishing is one of the oldest and most flexible types of social engineering attacks. They are used in many ways, and for different purposes, to lure unwary users to the site and trick them into entering personal information.

Kaspersky in a statement.

Saudi Arabia with 973,061 phishing attacks was the biggest target in Q2 2020, followed by UAE (617,347), Egypt (492,532), Oman (193,379), Qatar (128,356), Kuwait (106,245) and Bahrain (67,581).

Phishing is a strong attack method because it is done at such a large scale. By

sending massive waves of e-mails under the name of legitimate institutions or promoting fake pages, malicious users increase their chances of success in their hunt for innocent people’s credentials. The first six months of 2020, however, have shown a new aspect to this well-known form of attack.

In Q2 2020, phishers increasingly

performed targeted attacks, with most of their focus on small companies. To attract attention, fraudsters forged e-mails and websites from organisations whose products or services could be purchased by potential victims. In the process of making these fake assets, fraudsters often did not even try to make the site appear authentic.

Such targeted phishing attacks can have serious consequences. Once a fraudster has gained access to an employee’s mailbox, they can use it to carry out further attacks on the company the employee works for, the rest of its staff, or even its contractors.

TURN TO PAGE 14



OQ to fund social investment projects in Musandam

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, AUG 19

OQ, Oman’s global integrated energy company, has signed a Memorandum of Cooperation (MoC) with the Office of the Minister of State and Governor of Musandam to finance a number of social investment projects in the Governorate of Musandam.

The MoC was signed by Sayyid Ibrahim bin Said al Busaidy, Minister of State and Governor of Musandam, and Musab al Mahrouqi, Group CEO of OQ.

In coordination with the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, the agreement covers the execution of various projects which includes setting up a visitor centre at the archaeological site in the Wilayat of Daba, one of the most important archaeological sites in Oman, to preserve more than 2,111 artefacts discovered at the site.

On this occasion, Sayyid Ibrahim Said Al Busaidy, Minister of State and Governor of Musandam, said: “We are pleased with this continuous cooperation. The memorandum will enhance the protection and promotion of archaeological sites and museums in cooperation with the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism. It will also help visitors understand



Since inception, OQ has been playing a significant role in supporting education, innovation, culture and heritage projects, economic welfare, health and environment, along with initiatives that aim to promote sustainable projects through its corporate social responsibility programmes

the value of such historical treasures that are spread across the country. I would like to thank OQ for this strategic partnership initiative.”
“Signing such agreements fall under

OQ’s social responsibility programme which is based on executing projects that fulfil the conditions of sustainability, and benefits to the community at large”, said OQ Group CEO Musab al

Mahrouqi. “This partnership reflects the extent of OQ’s active contributions to various aspects of community services, and its commitment to community development across Oman.”

Since inception, OQ has been playing a significant role in supporting education, innovation, culture and heritage projects, economic welfare, health and environment, along with initiatives that aim to promote sustainable projects through its corporate social responsibility programmes.

BUSINESS ALERT

#It_is_Your_Turn to Win with BankDhofar’s Savings Account Scheme 2020

MUSCAT: Reiterating its keenness to spread the culture of saving among the community, BankDhofar continues to reward customers through Savings Account Scheme 2020 Draws. The Bank recently conducted guaranteed monthly — branch wise- prizes draw, minor prizes draw, youth prizes draw, and Al Riadah Priority Banking prizes.



Congratulating the winners, Dr Tariq Taha (pictured), Chief Retail Banking Officer at BankDhofar, said: “We are glad with the success of the BankDhofar Savings Account Scheme 2020. The scheme which provides chances to win for all family members has encouraged customers to save more. More winning chances are awaiting lucky winners in the coming draws of the scheme which continues to the end of the year. Therefore, I would like to encourage our customers to continue saving.”

With a total of nearly RO 2 million, the scheme is valid till December 2020. As per the prize draw scheme, BankDhofar customers who save a minimum of 100 RO in their accounts are eligible to enter the draws and get the chance to win in the guaranteed branch wise draws including: the monthly prize draws for all customers worth RO 1,000 (each/ branch wise), and the monthly minor prize draws worth RO 250 each/ branch wise. In addition to that, this year’s Savings Account Scheme includes Monthly prize draws worth RO 5,000 for 2 winners each, and Youth Prizes worth RO 1,000 for 2 winners each. BankDhofar will continue celebrating occasions with customers through rewarding them for saving. The Bank will conduct Omani Women’s Day prize draw, where 5 lucky winners will take home RO 1,000 each, and National Day prize draw where 5 customers will get the chance to win RO 10,000 each. As for Al Riadah customers, one customer will win in the monthly draw a prize worth RO 25,000, and grand prize draw worth RO 250,000 for 2 winners each.

Oman Arab Bank launches new credit card for frontline workers

Showcasing its appreciation for frontline health care workers combatting the effects of the Coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), Oman Arab Bank has announced the launch of an exclusive credit card with 0 per cent interest and annual fees dedicated to those heroes of Oman.



Highlighting the importance of the launch of the credit card, Rashad al Shaikh (pictured), Acting Head of Retail Banking Division at Oman Arab Bank, said, “The Coronavirus has had its toll on a majority of the population in the Sultanate. However, to mitigate its impact, there are several frontline health care workers that are performing their duties with dedication, saving lives and ensure everyone’s health and well-being. This new credit card is a unique offering, created specifically for them and providing incredible benefits.”

All government staff in hospitals and health care centres can avail this offer, which includes 0 per cent interest, no annual fees, double activation rewards as well as exclusive insurance rates. In addition, Omani health care workers will not need to transfer their salary to the bank, a 1-month salary limit will be applied to the credit card.

Gold dips below \$2,000 as dollar slide briefly halts

WASHINGTON: Gold fell below \$2,000 an ounce on Wednesday after rising sharply in the previous session as the dollar steadied, while investors awaited minutes from the US Federal Reserve’s last policy meeting.

Spot gold was down 0.4 per cent at \$1,993.68 per ounce by 0253 GMT, after hitting a one-week high of \$2,014.97 on Tuesday. US gold futures fell 0.5 per cent to \$2,002.50.

“Gold is down as the US dollar strengthened slightly this morning. In the short term, a rebound in the USD might inhibit the rally in gold,” said DailyFx strategist Margaret Yang.

“Gold has registered a 3 per cent gain over the past two days, rendering the metal prices vulnerable to profit-taking activities.”

The dollar index steadied after hitting a more than two-year low in the last session. A stronger greenback makes gold expensive for holders of other currencies.

The dollar, also considered a safe-haven, has lost its appeal recently after the US central bank rolled out a wave of fiscal measures and cut interest rates to near zero to mitigate economic damage



A man sorts gold bars in the Austrian Gold and Silver Separating Plant ‘Oegussa’ in Vienna, Austria. — Reuters

caused by the coronavirus outbreak.

“Given the ferocity of the US dollar sell-off, gold should find plenty of eager buyers on any dips to \$1,990 during the session,” said Jeffrey Halley, a senior market analyst at OANDA.

Markets are looking to the release of the Fed minutes at 1800 GMT.

“Although the Fed is not expected to indicate any new monetary stimulus initiatives in the minutes, investors would be paying attention to any change to Fed’s approach to inflation that could be negative for the dollar,” Phillip Futures analysts said in a note. — Reuters

193K phishing attacks reported in Q2

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The news agenda, following the COVID-19 outbreak, has already influenced the “excuses” fraudsters use when asking for personal information. This included disguising their communications with unsuspecting users as:

- **Delivery services:** At the peak of the pandemic, organisations responsible for delivering letters and parcels were in a hurry to notify recipients of possible delays. These are the types of emails that fraudsters began to fake, with victims asked to open an attachment to find out the address of a warehouse where they could pick up a shipment that did not reach its destination.

- **Postal services:** Another relatively original move used by fraudsters was a message containing a small image of a postal receipt. The scammers expected that the intrigued recipient would accept the attachment (which, although it contained ‘JPG’ in the name, was an executable archive) as the full version and decide to open it. The Noon spyware was found in mailings

such as these examined by Kaspersky researchers.

- **Financial services:** Bank phishing attacks in the second quarter were often carried out using emails offering various benefits and bonuses to customers of credit institutions due to the pandemic. Emails received by users contained a file with instructions or links to get more details. As a result, depending on the scheme, fraudsters could gain access to users’ computers, personal data, or authentication data for various services.

- **HR services:** The weakening of the economy during the pandemic in a number of countries caused a wave of unemployment, and fraudsters did not miss this opportunity to strike. Experts encountered various mailings that announced, for example, some amendments to the medical leave procedure, or surprised the recipient with the news about their dismissal. In some attachments, there was a Trojan-Downloader.MSOffice.SLoad.gen file. This Trojan is most often used for downloading and installing encryptors.

Thailand plans more stimulus for economy in deep slump

BANGKOK: Thailand will introduce more stimulus measures to boost tourism, jobs and consumption hit hard by the coronavirus pandemic, a deputy prime minister said on Wednesday, including generous subsidies to encourage more hiring and domestic travel.

Southeast Asia’s second-largest economy suffered its biggest contraction since the 1998 Asian financial crisis in the second quarter as the pandemic put the brakes on vital tourism and domestic activity.

With borders closed to foreign visitors since April, the government plans more incentives to spur local tourism and add more jobs, while other measures will be decided later, Supattanapong Punmeechaow told a briefing.

The tourism and employment perks are expected to be put to



A man walks at an empty terminal at Bangkok’s central business district. — Reuters

Southeast Asia’s second-largest economy suffered its biggest contraction since the 1998 Asian financial crisis in the second quarter as the pandemic put the brakes on vital tourism and domestic activity

cabinet for approval next week, he said after a meeting of a special task force tasked with reviving the economy.

“The job measures should create more than a million jobs, including 400,000 for new graduates,” he said.

The government plans to “co-pay” for new employment with the private sector, Supattanapong said, without elaborating.

On tourism, it plans to increase benefits included in an earlier package to spur domestic travel, to recoup some losses from the absence

of foreign tourists, who numbered a record 39.8 million last year, with spending accounting for 11.4 per cent of GDP.

The government hopes to increase its subsidies for hotels, flights and bus tickets, said Danucha Pichayanon, a spokesman for the task force.

The tourism-reliant country is expecting full-year visitor numbers to be less than a fifth of last year’s total. It has shelved its “travel bubble” proposal due to new outbreaks around Asia. — Reuters

Japan's exports drop as demand collapses

FRANKFURT: Japan's exports extended their double-digit slump into a fifth month in July as the coronavirus pandemic took a heavy toll on auto shipments to the United States, dashing hopes for a trade-led recovery from the deep recession.

Meanwhile, core machinery orders, a leading indicator of business spending, unexpectedly fell to a seven-year low in June, dashing hopes domestic demand would make up for some of the slack from sluggish global growth.

The grim data suggests the depressed conditions seen in the world's third-largest economy in the second quarter showed no signs of rapid improvement in the current quarter, compounding challenges for policymakers as they look to prop up activity. Total exports fell 19.2 per cent in July from a year earlier, roughly in line with market expectations for a 21.0 per cent decrease, government data showed.

It was, however, smaller than a 26.2 per cent drop in June, which some analysts saw as a sign external demand may have bottomed out.

"Today's trade data confirmed that external demand hit bottom and is heading toward gradual recovery," said Masaki Kuwahara, senior economist at Nomura Securities. "But the pace of recovery remains slow. Given the risk of a second wave of infections, it will take a couple of years before exports and GDP return to pre-pandemic levels," he said.

Shipments to the United States plunged 19.5 per cent in the year to July as demand for engines and automobile remained weak, a sign Japan was feeling the pinch from the slow US recovery from the pandemic's pain.

Globally, automakers are taking a heavy hit from the coronavirus,



Birds fly in front of Mt Fuji and a crane at a port in Tokyo, Japan.

— Reuters

which has shuttered vehicle factories and kept customers out of car dealerships.

Suzuki Motor Corp said this month its operating profit nearly wiped out during the June quarter because of plunging car sales in India, its biggest market.

In a glimmer of hope, exports

SHIPMENTS TO THE UNITED STATES PLUNGED 19.5 PER CENT IN THE YEAR TO JULY AS DEMAND FOR ENGINES AND AUTOMOBILE REMAINED WEAK, A SIGN JAPAN WAS FEELING THE PINCH FROM THE SLOW US RECOVERY FROM THE PANDEMIC'S PAIN.

to China — Japan's largest trading partner — rose 8.2 per cent to mark the first increase in seven months on brisk demand for chip-manufacturing equipment and cars.

But those to the rest of Asia were down 8.2 per cent, the data showed, reinforcing expectations that a full-fledged recovery in regional trade

was still some time off.

Core machinery orders, a highly volatile data series regarded as an indicator of capital spending in the coming six to nine months, fell 7.6 per cent in June, confounding market estimates of a 2.0 per cent gain.

Foreign orders dropped 3.9 per cent in June from the previous month, extending declines to a fourth straight month, but slowing from double digit falls seen in April and May.

Total core orders slumped to 706.6 billion yen (\$6.72 billion), the lowest since February 2013, forcing the government to downgrade its assessment to say machinery orders were "declining."

Manufacturers surveyed by the government expect core orders to fall 1.9 per cent in the current quarter after dropping 12.9 per cent in April-June, the data showed.

A decline in July-September would mark the fifth straight quarter of falls, the longest streak of decrease since orders slid for six straight quarters during the 2008 global financial crisis.

Adding to the gloom, a survey from Tokyo Shoko Research on Tuesday showed 8.5 per cent of small firms, or more than 300,000 companies, could go out of business if the pandemic is prolonged. Such firms employ 7 out of 10 workers in Japan.

Japan's economy suffered a record annualised contraction in April-June as the pandemic crushed demand for cars and other exports and kept consumers confined at home. Analysts expect any rebound in the current quarter to be modest as a resurgence of infections will likely put a lid on demand both at home and abroad. — Reuters

UK inflation jumps on virus fallout, rebounding oil

LONDON: Inflation in Britain rose to its highest level in four months in July, fuelled by rebounding oil prices and businesses passing on the costs of the coronavirus pandemic, data showed on Wednesday.

The annual inflation rate, as measured by the UK's Consumer Prices index, rose to 1.0 per cent in July from 0.6 per cent in June, the Office for National Statistics said.

It is the highest level since March and comes after inflation slowed to a four-year low of 0.5 per cent in May when Britain was in coronavirus lockdown.

Volatility is expected to continue with analysts predicting a large slowdown in inflation in August after the government recently cut tax for the hospitality and tourism sectors.

The pick-up in the inflation rate in July was "due to the largest monthly (petrol) pump price increase in nearly a decade, as international oil prices rose from their lows earlier this year," said Jonathan Athow, deputy national statistician for economic statistics at the ONS.

"In addition, prices for private dental treatment, physiotherapy and haircuts have increased with the need for personal protective equipment contributing to costs for these businesses," he said. Clothing prices were also a factor, as they declined by less than a year earlier, the ONS said. — AFP

FORMAL AGREEMENT

Goldman, Malaysia sign off on \$3.9 bn 1MDB settlement

KUALA LUMPUR: Goldman Sachs and Malaysia have signed an agreement finalising the US bank's \$3.9 billion settlement over the 1MDB scandal, allowing for its implementation.

Both parties announced the settlement last month, but the formal signing of the agreement — disclosed by Goldman in a regulatory filing in New York on Tuesday — completes the process.

Billions of dollars were looted from sovereign wealth fund 1Malaysia Development Berhad in a fraud that involved former prime minister Najib Razak (pictured) and his cronies.

The cash plundered from state coffers

bankrolled a global spending spree, and was spent on everything from artwork, to real estate and a superyacht.

Goldman's role came under scrutiny over bond issues totalling \$6.5 billion it helped arrange for the investment vehicle, with Malaysia claiming large amounts were misappropriated during the process.

In its New York filing, the Wall Street titan said the signing of the settlement pact "implements the prior agreement in principle" announced on July 24.



The settlement comprises a cash payment of \$2.5 billion to Malaysia and a guarantee that at least \$1.4 billion in assets acquired with misappropriated funds would be recovered.

Bloomberg News reported that Goldman must make the cash payment to Malaysia within 10 days, citing sources.

Najib was voted out of office in 2018 as he succumbed to public anger over the scandal, and the government that took over charged Goldman and a string of former and current employees over the fraud, as well as demanding hefty compensation.

Under the agreement, Malaysia will end all criminal proceedings against the bank.

Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin said last month that, combined with 1MDB-linked funds already returned to Malaysia by the United States, the country will receive a total of \$4.5 billion.

Najib was last month jailed for 12 years after being convicted on all seven charges in the first of several trials related to 1MDB.

The scandal's alleged mastermind, jet-setting Malaysian financier Low Taek Jho, also known as Jho Low, has also been charged in Malaysia and the US. Low denies any wrongdoing, and his current whereabouts are unknown. — AFP

Taiwan aims to become Asian financial hub



Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen smiles during an interview with media at the Presidential Office in Taipei, in this file photo. — Reuters

TAIPEI: Taiwan will further liberalise its economy and offer more financing products, aiming to become an Asian financial and asset management hub, President Tsai

Ing-wen said on Wednesday.

Export-dependent Taiwan, which already has a very open economy, is trying to diversify away from its traditional reliance on



The government will continue to adopt even more open measures, open up diverse financial products, expand the scope of our wealth management business, and let Taiwan become an Asian corporate financing centre and high-level asset management centre.

trade with China, its largest trading partner.

Instability in Hong Kong, has called into question how long the city can remain Asia's dominant financial centre.

While Taiwan is unlikely to supplant Hong Kong immediately, the government does hope to seize the opportunity to attract professionals and capital from the city.

Speaking to the Third Wednesday Club, a business group made up of 78 of Taiwan's most important companies including Foxconn, the world's largest contract electronics manufacturer, Tsai made no direct mention of Hong Kong.

However, she noted the growing interest in Taiwan from foreign companies.

"More and more internationally renowned companies, and even more international-level capital, talent and technology, are bullish

about Taiwan, are coming to Taiwan and increasing their investment in Taiwan," she said.

"The government will continue to adopt even more open measures, open up diverse financial products, expand the scope of our wealth management business, and let Taiwan become an Asian corporate financing centre and high-level asset management centre." She gave no details.

Tsai also said the government would strive to sign more bilateral trade deals, including a long-mooted one with the United States, and reiterated her desire for Taiwan to join the 11-member Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, or CPTPP.

Taiwan has only a limited number of international trade deals, with countries wary of signing such agreements lest they anger the world's second-largest economy China. — Reuters



SPENDING POWER

COVID-19: What will happen to the middle-class?

As the economic numbers impacted by COVID-19 began emerging in the global media, we were able to draw some conclusions and predictions based on GDP and unemployment data.

It is clear that the SME globally has been hit the most, but an assessment on how severe the damage has been, might be more accurate if we wear the spectacles of the day to day life.

News from China is showing how the economy has already started picking up, with a forecasted GDP growth of 1.2 per cent in 2020. This number shows again the economic might of China.

Despite the crisis and the lockdown, the economy has already restarted galloping. It is estimated that over the next 5 years, China

IT IS CLEAR THAT THE SME GLOBALLY HAS BEEN HIT THE MOST, BUT AN ASSESSMENT ON HOW SEVERE THE DAMAGE HAS BEEN, MIGHT BE MORE ACCURATE IF WE WEAR THE SPECTACLES OF THE DAY TO DAY LIFE.

will grow steadily at least 5 per cent annually. The internal demand is the drive for such growth, as nearly 60 per cent of the economy is pulled by the 1.5 billion population.

However, for the Chinese economy to pick up again, a price had to be paid. It is known that many SMEs have cut salaries in order to remain profitable, therefore less spending power in the hands of the middle class employed in SMEs.

How this will reflect in the number to come is still unknown,

but we can imagine a slower retail consumption as well as a higher trade and industrial output.

In the US, unemployment numbers are encouraging. After a 15 per cent peek in April this year, July has shown a 4.8 per cent improvement in jobs data. According to the latest figures released, the employment rate is presently at 10.2 per cent.

This could have a positive impact in the retail sector, as more middle class individuals and families will

regain spending power. However, it is not possible to make a clear projection, as unemployment data is quantitative only on the number of people employed, not on their salary.

If these individuals went back to work with a much lower salary, then the retail potential would be impacted significantly.

Talking about Nigeria, the 7th largest country in the world, the combined data unemployment and underemployment (when the employment does not provide enough income to rise above the poverty line) hit a record high 55.7 per cent last month. Unemployment is at 27.1 per cent with close to 22 million jobless Nigerians.

It is alarming that unemployment

is rapidly increasing among the youth. In the past this would have caused unemployed individuals to venture overseas in search of jobs, but due to the COVID-19 travel restrictions, this option has become impossible.

Looking close to home, in the Middle East and more specifically in Oman, unemployment has been on a positive decline over the past few years.

In the Sultanate we moved from 3.27 per cent unemployment in 2015 to 2.67 per cent in 2019. Oman is working hard to keep improving in times of economic distress.

Some of the measures aimed to help Omani people to get more jobs have been rolled out earlier this year and begun yielding results.



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DETACHED REALITY



The 'Fearless Girl' statue facing the New York Stock Exchange is pictured near Wall St in New York City.

— AFP

Why US stock market just hit a new high

The US economy remains battered by the coronavirus outbreak and Congress is deadlocked on another stimulus bill — yet the US stock market just hit a new record intraday high.

While it may seem like investors have failed to factor in any of the bad news weighing on most US households, there are several key reasons why the stock market has recovered and could continue to rally higher.

“Main Street lives for today, whereas Wall Street focuses on tomorrow,” said Sam Stovall, chief investment strategist at CFRA. “There’s been a massive amount of monetary and fiscal stimulus ... and there’s a rising confidence that pharmaceutical firms are getting closer to a vaccine.”

A finish for the S&P 500 above 3,386.15 — its record closing high from February 19 — would confirm the end of the shortest bear market in history.

The Federal Reserve kick-started the rebound into risk assets by pledging \$3 trillion in unprecedented monetary support, going so far as to buy corporate bonds. That led to many investors repeating the mantra: “Don’t fight the Fed,” as they swooped in to follow the central bank’s lead.

Fiscal aid from US lawmakers helped the Fed’s recovery efforts and further encouraged investors, as has the ability of many companies to beat expectations with their second-quarter earnings.

At the same time, bets that the Fed will keep rates at rock-bottom levels and stimulus flowing for the foreseeable future have pushed yields on some government bonds to record lows, driving money into equities.

“There’s a lot of money sloshing around in the system and a lot of it is finding a home in stocks,” said Jeff

Buchbinder, equity strategist for LPL Financial.

While US growth took its worst hit since the Great Depression in the second quarter from coronavirus-fueled lockdowns, some market participants have been factoring in a comparatively speedy recovery, as seen in a jump in Citigroup’s Economic Surprise Index.

After the sharp rally, investors are considering looming risks such as the upcoming US presidential election, with some concerned that a contested result will create volatility across markets.

FISCAL AID FROM US LAWMAKERS HELPED THE FED’S RECOVERY EFFORTS AND FURTHER ENCOURAGED INVESTORS, AS HAS THE ABILITY OF MANY COMPANIES TO BEAT EXPECTATIONS WITH THEIR SECOND-QUARTER EARNINGS.

Valuations remain a concern. The S&P 500 trades at 24.5 times forward earnings, a level last seen during the dot-com bubble two decades ago. Some worry there is still too much uncertainty over the trajectory of the pandemic and its impact on growth to justify those valuations.

“Much of the possible good news is already priced in to markets, and valuations are starting to look stretched,” wrote Bob Doll, senior portfolio manager at Nuveen.

Meanwhile, investors crowding in a cluster of technology and internet stocks

that have come to dominate the S&P 500 have heightened concerns that the index may be vulnerable to sharp reversals if holders decide to sell all at once.

Just five stocks — Microsoft Corp, Apple Inc, Amazon.com Inc, Google parent Alphabet Inc and Facebook Inc — account for more than 22 per cent of the market cap of the entire S&P 500 index. Last month, 74 per cent of fund managers in a BofA Global Research survey said holding tech stocks is the market’s “most crowded trade.”

The outsized rally has helped turn some previously bearish fund managers more bullish, with fund managers such as Guggenheim’s Scott Miner now predicting that stocks will continue to rise after the November 3 presidential election, regardless of the winner.

DoubleLine’s Jeffrey Gundlach is among the few well-known managers who have remained bearish, telling Reuters in late July that the equity rally led by a handful of large tech firms is “classic bear market rally activity.”

More optimistic investors argue that tech-related stocks pull their share of the index’s weight. While technology and communications stocks make up about 40 per cent of the S&P 500’s market capitalization, they also account for a similar share of its earnings.

Tech stocks look increasingly attractive given historically low yields in the bond market that limit possible future returns, said LPL Financial’s Buchbinder. While the scorching rally in tech sector stocks seen in the second quarter has eased somewhat this quarter, the tech sector continues to outperform the broad market.

“The gap between the winners and losers is widening and the strong are getting stronger,” he said. — Reuters

ROUGHER RIDE

India’s auto royalties deserve scrutiny

Automakers are set for a rougher ride in India. Officials are pushing carmakers like the \$28 billion Maruti Suzuki to reduce fees paid to foreign partners. Tightening up rules on such payments could help. But India’s drive for more domestic research and development will be a slow one.

Royalties are common when multinationals form local partnerships and permit them to use brands and technology developed overseas. In India, these fees generate more attention because a host of foreign companies from Monsanto to Nestle have locally-listed joint ventures.

In the auto sector, Maruti is an obvious target with over half of the market for local passenger vehicles. Institutional Investor Advisory Services (IIAS) notes that the carmaker, majority-owned by Japan’s Suzuki Motor, is one of five companies that made up over three-quarters of the \$1.1 billion in royalties paid by 31 large Indian multinationals last year.

Some shareholder friendly tweaks might help officials get what they want. Maruti paid out 4.6 per cent of its consolidated revenue in royalties in the year to March 2019 — below the 5 per cent threshold required for shareholder approval. But because cash outflows from companies often take multiple forms, such as “technology license fees”, IIAS recommends a more encompassing definition of payments to parent companies. It also argues for calculating payments based on profitability.

Companies were already trying to make changes. Maruti decided in 2018 to make payments in rupees, rather than in yen, shifting the currency risk onto its foreign parent. And last year, Nestle India gave up on an effort to win approval in perpetuity from shareholders to pay out royalties.

Indian officials have long wanted more investment in local research and development that can create higher value jobs. Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s call for the country to be “atma-nirbhar”, or self-reliant, piles on fresh pressure. Yet all of India’s top carmakers from Tata Motors to Mahindra & Mahindra have foreign partners of sorts. Indian carmakers may struggle to remain competitive if restrictions on legitimate payments become too tight. — Reuters

ROYALTIES ARE COMMON WHEN MULTINATIONALS FORM LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS AND PERMIT THEM TO USE BRANDS AND TECHNOLOGY DEVELOPED OVERSEAS. IN INDIA, THESE FEES GENERATE MORE ATTENTION BECAUSE A HOST OF FOREIGN COMPANIES FROM MONSANTO TO NESTLE HAVE LOCALLY-LISTED JOINT VENTURES.



Kenichi Ayukawa, Chief Executive Officer of Maruti Suzuki India Ltd., poses with concept Futuro-e car after it was unveiled at the India Auto Expo 2020 in Greater Noida, India. — Reuters



High-tech farmers sow seeds of revolution in Dubai desert

An ultra-modern vertical farm in the middle of the desert stands as a testament to Dubai's determination to spark a "green revolution" to overcome its dependence on food imports.

Al-Badia market garden farm produces an array of vegetable crops in multi-storey format, carefully controlling light and irrigation as well as recycling 90 per cent of the water it uses.

"It's a green revolution in the middle of the desert," the farm's director Basel Jammal said.

"Each plant is given the amount of light, humidity, heat and water it needs. It's as if it were a guest in a five-star hotel," he says.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted global supply chains, has refocused attention on food security in the United Arab Emirates.

The UAE is rich in oil and ingenuity, but has little arable land and endures dry, baking summers.

That was not an issue decades ago when the area was sparsely inhabited by Bedouins. But the wealth generated by oil discoveries since the 1970s sent expatriates flocking to the UAE.

Dubai now has more than 3.3 million inhabitants of 200 nationalities, relies largely on expensive desalinated water, and its food needs have grown and diversified.



'CHOICES FOR THE FUTURE'

Dubai, like the other six emirates that make up the UAE, is heavily dependent on imports, which make up 90 per cent of its food needs according to official statistics.

Produce arrives from all over the world by air and at Dubai's state-of-the-art port, stocking supermarkets with a range that compares favourably to those of any Western capital.

But in a region where geopolitical tensions with nearby Iran frequently threaten to boil over, long-term food security and self-sufficiency are key goals.

More than a decade ago, the UAE began buying or leasing agricultural land abroad, mainly in east Africa, to lock in supply even in times of crisis.

Problems on the ground including political instability led it to look towards Australia and Eastern Europe.

But the need to address its over-reliance on imports has inspired other strategies including stockpiling and high-tech agriculture.

Jammal says his model farm where everything is controlled by computers, is a "choice for the future".

"We no longer want to depend on imports. We want to produce locally, all year round, without worrying about climate change, rainfall or drought," he says.

Like Al-Badia, a number of farms are springing up in Dubai and less-developed areas like Al-Ain and the mountainous emirate of Ras al-Khaimah.

Abdellatif al-Banna is another independent farmer joining the innovation drive, growing pineapples in greenhouses using hydroponics — without soil — and selling his production via an Internet platform.

At his farm in Al-Awir, Banna also experiments with growing fruits, vegetables and even wheat in the cooler months — producing enough grain for his family in what he hopes is a prototype.

Elsewhere, not far from Dubai's coastline and glitzy skyscrapers, several farms raise cows in air-conditioned sheds that help provide the local market with dairy products.

And in vast tanks overseen by a control room that duplicates Norway's sunrises and

sunsets, salmon are being farmed in tanks, despite searing heat outside.

FREE OF SHORTAGES

Such farms are often private ventures but are actively encouraged by Emirati authorities, said Omar Bouchehab, who chairs Dubai's Food Security Committee.

Authorities have launched a plan to raise domestic agricultural production by 15 per cent by 2021 and boost the use of agricultural technologies, he said.

At the beginning of the coronavirus crisis, while many developed cities saw shelves stripped of pasta, tinned goods and toilet rolls, Dubai did not experience any shortages in fresh produce or staples.

Thanks to airborne cargo services via giant carrier Emirates, which repurposed passenger seats to boost capacity, Dubai was even able to ensure the re-export of various food products to its neighbours.

At the Fresh Market, a large wholesale enterprise, workers busily transported and stored tonnes of imported fresh food. Executive director Redha al-Mansouri was upbeat about the emirate's food security.

"Dubai has an adequate infrastructure and a stock capable of meeting the needs of the United Arab Emirates, and even the needs of neighbouring countries," he said. — **AFP**

INSTAGRAM TOP PICKS

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Oman

bosnian_barbiee • Follow
Tiwi- White Beach Oman

allan.j.fernandes • Follow
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ART



Princess Diana musical to debut on Netflix before hitting Broadway

LOS ANGELES: A new musical about Britain's Princess Diana will be filmed without an audience and air on Netflix Inc in early 2021 before it debuts on Broadway, producers announced on Wednesday. The unusual arrangement for "Diana" was made as Broadway remains closed due to the coronavirus pandemic. "We couldn't be more excited to finally be able to share our show with theatre lovers everywhere," the producers said in a statement. "Though there is no substitute for the live theatre, we are honoured to be a part of the quality entertainment that Netflix provides its subscribers worldwide." "Diana" had been set to open on March 31, 2020, but the debut was delayed as

"Diana" had been set to open on March 31, 2020, but the debut was delayed as Broadway closed its theatres to help prevent the novel coronavirus from spreading. The show had started previews in early March.



Broadway closed its theatres to help prevent the novel coronavirus from spreading. The show had started previews in early March. The production, which chronicles Diana's courtship and marriage to Prince Charles and eventual divorce, now is scheduled to open on May 25, 2021. The Actors' Equity

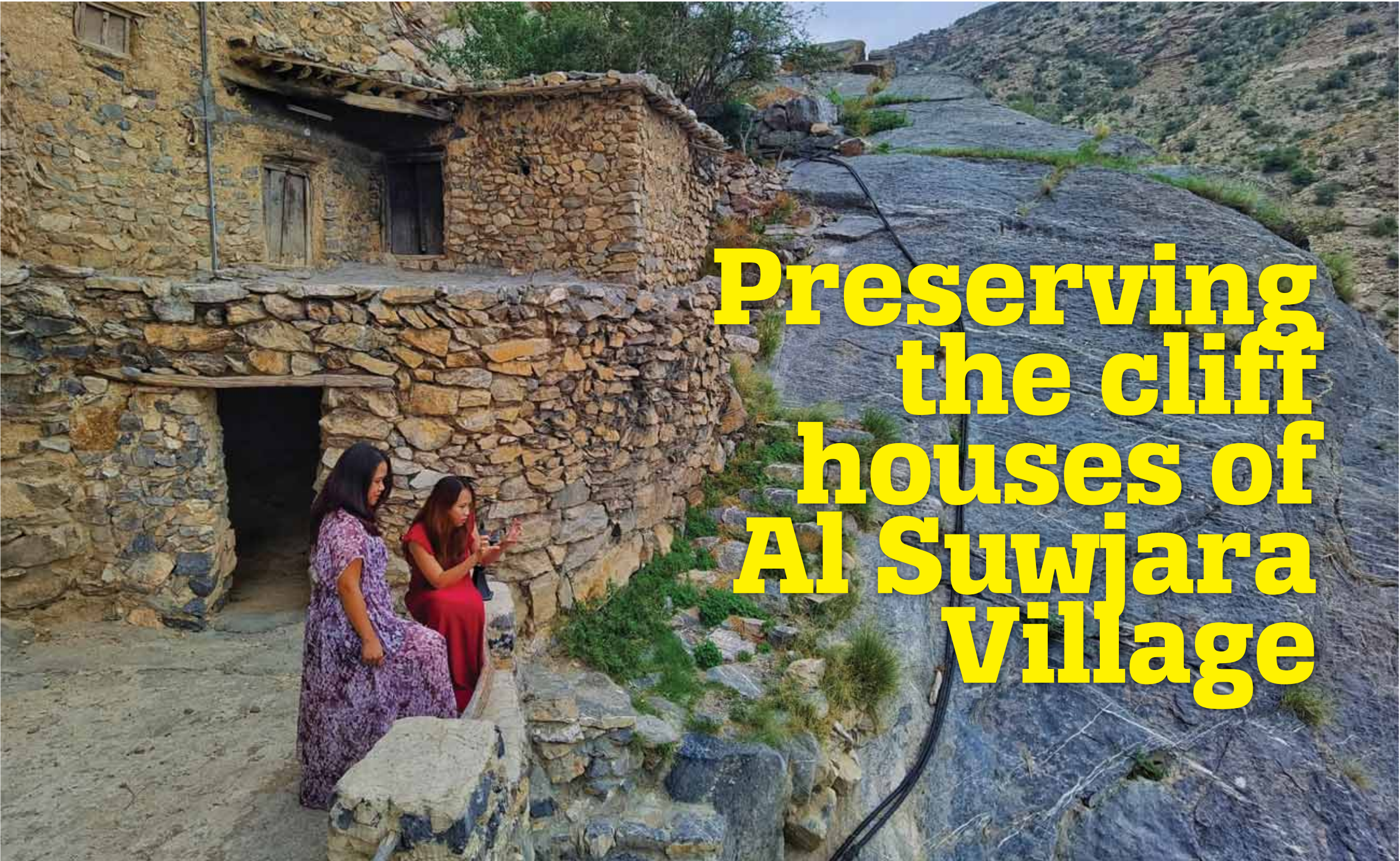
Association, a labour union representing stage actors, said it had approved a safety plan for rehearsals and recording of the musical. The plan includes regular coronavirus testing, isolating actors and stage managers and changes to ventilation in backstage areas, the group said in a statement. — **Reuters**

Raphael did a nose-job in self-portrait, face reconstruction suggests



THAT IS THE conclusion of Rome University scientists who produced a 3D computer reconstruction of the Renaissance master's face from a plaster cast of his presumed skull made in 1833. In that year, the remains believed to be those of the man hailed by his contemporaries as "the divine one" because he sought perfection through his work were last exhumed. "He certainly made his nose look more refined," said Professor Mattia Falconi, a molecular biologist at the university's Tor Vergata campus. "His nose was, let's say, slightly more prominent." Raphael died in Rome in 1520 aged 37, probably from pneumonia, and was buried in Rome's Pantheon. The self-portrait, which normally hangs in Florence's Uffizi gallery but is currently in Rome for an exhibition marking the 500th anniversary of his death, was done about 15 years earlier, when he was clean-shaven. It features the more aquiline nose that Raphael also included in other works in which he painted himself. The reconstruction is of the way he may have looked closer to his death, when he wore a beard. Falconi, along with forensic anthropologists and other experts, reconstructed the face with tissue layering tech-

niques used by crime investigators. The result was a face similar to that of the master on an engraving by Marcantonio Raimondi, one of his students. "When we finished, I said to myself 'I've seen that face before,'" Falconi, 57, said in a telephone interview. Another similarity is with the subject of "Portrait of a Man," painted between 1512 and 1515 by Sebastiano del Piombo, a Raphael contemporary and rival. For centuries there has been speculation that the bones exhumed in 1833 and reburied in a re-styled crypt may not have been Raphael's because some of his students were later buried near him. But Falconi believes the research points to an around 85 per cent chance that the skull is Raphael's because of similarities with most of the artist's face as depicted by him and his contemporaries. Not everyone was pleased with Falconi's research. An art critic for the Rome newspaper *La Repubblica* said it had produced a cheap "videogame version" of Raphael. Falconi said he hoped the tomb can be opened again someday for direct tests on the skull. This could resolve several mysteries, including confirming what caused his death. — **Reuters**



Preserving the cliff houses of Al Suwjara Village

YERU EBUEEN

Jabal Al Akhdhar is home to 60 different villages with several of them can only be accessed by taking ancient paths and walking for two hours or more. The village of Al Suwjara, located about 30 minutes away from the famed Alila Jabal Akhdar Hotel used to be one of these remote villages but the government efforts made in the last few years to modernise some of the roads including providing remote villages with access to water and electricity has transformed the village into a modern one and now boast its own concrete mosque as well as well-irrigated gardens. Al Suwjara village started with one family. The ancestors of the Al Shraiqi family carved out homes from the side of the mountains and they made terraces from the lands to create gardens filled with different crops and fruit trees. These gardens are still utilised even to this day. Today, the village is now divided into the old and the new. The new village is nearly 20 minutes hike away from the old one. Four-wheel cars can drive all the way to the new village but to access the old village, one has to climb down one side of the mountain, cross a wooden bridge, and climb another to reach the old houses. "Our families lived here for generations. My grandfather is the patriarch and when his children and grandchildren married, the village also grew. Living on the original location of the village was challenging so they have to move. For years, the original houses were abandoned," shared Mohammed al Shraiqi, a young Omani now working in the hospitality sector. Learning a few things from his job, he talked to his family. Rather than see an ancient settlement get destroyed, he initiated the renovation of the houses transforming the then crumbling houses into an inn. "We started with one room. Make changes to it. We fitted it with working bathrooms and installed lightings. In the last two to three years, old homes have become attractive for many of the travellers coming to Al Jabal Al Akhdhar. We continued doing renovations giving birth to The Cliff Guest House," he said. "Today, we have seven rooms with a few others still ongoing renovations. We have different suites. We have double, we have twins, we have special and normal rooms. Several of the rooms have a sweeping view of the new village and the

garden," he said. Despite the renovations made, the guest house maintains almost all of the elements of a traditional Omani home. "We have to modernise the beds and the bathrooms because we are also thinking of the comfort of our guests but other than that, the structures — from the doors to the windows, they are typical Omani homes. They allow our guests an opportunity to experience how Omanis live in this part of Al Jabal Al Akhdhar," Mohammed said. "The food served to guests are being cooked by my family. These are traditional Omani food including shuwa in some days. We also offer fruits produced from the garden and if when they are in season. The food has to be transported via the zipline from the new village to the old houses giving the whole experience a very rustic feel," he said. On a recent trip made to the village, expat adventurer Rose Ebuén said that she finds the village very peaceful and the whole experience memorable. "The Cliff allows you to enjoy nature at its most pristine. I like the fact that you get to see the farmers interact with their livestock. If you're thinking of a meaningful off-the-beaten-path experience, this is the perfect place to be lost in," she said. Mohammed said that they also organise guided tours not only of the old village but also of the nearby caves. "There are two cave systems near to Al Suwjara. One of them used to be the home of another family. This is a great experience for those wanting to know more about the country," Mohammed said. For inquiries, Mohammed can be contacted through his Instagram account [@5_hawk](#) or the village's account [@alsuwjara_village](#).



The ancestors of the Al Shraiqi family carved out homes from the side of the mountains and they made terraces from the lands to create gardens filled with different crops and fruit trees

features

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Preserving the cliff houses of Al Suwjara Village

The challenging landscape has forced the Al Shureiki family of Al Suwjara Village in Al Jabal Al Akhdhar to moved to the opposite side of the mountain accessible by car. But rather than let the old houses perched on the side of the cliff crumble, Mohammed al Shrāiqi convinced his family to renovate them to allow visitors to experience a traditional Omani mountain home... **P19**

DAILY PICKS

TRAVEL



CLIFF JUMPING IN WADI MIBAM

"One of the hardest things I've done is jump from a cliff in Wadi Mibam. In real life, the height looks higher than the photo. With the encouragement of my friends, I actually jumped and it felt like a great achievement," shared Aws al sewaidi with regard to his recent visit to Wadi Mibam.

EAT



ARAP SHAKSHOOKA

Simply described, Shakshooka is a dish of poached eggs slowly cooked over a sauce of tomatoes, chilli peppers and garlic. Easy to make and flexible when it comes to additives and ingredients, it's healthy and comforting food to have at any time of the day. Try this recipe by visiting <https://bit.ly/3gc4EGr>.

SUPPORT



HOW YOU CAN HELP THE ENVIRONMENT

Environment Society of Oman has dedicated itself in safeguarding the environment of Oman and to preserve nature and wildlife for the future generations. Visit www.eso.org.om and check how you can help.

FASHION



WHAT SORCERY IS THIS?

How we wish these come in adult sizes. Preppy trends get a magical twist with limited edition prints inspired by Harry Potter. It's time for some spellbinding fashion! Get these for your kids at H&M – the ultimate uniform for Harry Potter fans.

CELEBRATE



INTERNATIONAL DAY OF MEDICAL TRANSPORTERS

The COVID-19 pandemic has magnified the importance of medical frontliners. August 20 is celebrated as the International Day of Medical Transporters. These are the people who know how crucial time is and that is why they rush people to the hospital to help save them. Thank a medical transporter today.