

HIS MAJESTY GREETES FRENCH PRESIDENT

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Emmanuel Macron of the French Republic, on his country's National Day. In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his sincere greetings along with his best wishes of good health and happiness to President Macron and the friendly people of France further progress and prosperity. — **ONA**



FAREWELL TO IRAQI AMBASSADOR

His Highness Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmood al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers, on Monday received Dr Ali Mehdi Jawad, Ambassador of the Republic of Iraq to the Sultanate, to bid him farewell at the end of his tour of duty in the country. HH Sayyid Fahd asked the ambassador to convey greetings of His Majesty the Sultan to the Iraqi leadership and His Majesty's best wishes to the brotherly people of Iraq. DETAILS ON P2

PHOTO BY **MOHAMED AL RASHDI**

Majlis panel discusses VAT draft law



MUSCAT: The Economic and Financial Committee of the Majlis Ash'shura on Monday completed its deliberations on Value Added Tax (VAT) Law draft forwarded to the Majlis by the government.

In this context, the committee hosted Saud bin Nasser al Shukaili, Deputy Chairman of the Tax Authority, and a number of specialists from the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, the tax authority and the Public Authority for Consumer Protection to listen to their views on the provisions of the draft law, and to enable them to present their comments and proposals.

The session was chaired by Sulayim bin Ali al Hakamani, Head of the Economic and Financial Committee.

The meeting discussed all aspects of the VAT draft law and its expected effects and impacts on commerce and industry sectors and the economy as a whole.

The committee will present its report for further review during the Majlis's regular sessions. — **ONA**

COVID-19 POSITIVE RATE STANDS AT 24%

A QUARTER MILLION TESTS DONE, CASES CLOSE TO 60,000

**ZAINAB
AL NASSRI**

MUSCAT: Since the reporting of the first COVID-19 case in the Sultanate on February 24, around 244,787 tests have been done so far. The Ministry of Health has intensified the tests at more than one centre, due to which more COVID-19 cases have surfaced.

Only on Monday, 6,173 tests have been done, resulting in 2,164 new cases, as the biggest daily number announced since the beginning of the outbreak of the

2,164
NEW CASES
ON MONDAY

Largest daily number since the beginning of the outbreak of the pandemic

pandemic. Among the new cases, 1,572 are Omanis and 592 are residents, taking the total number of positive cases in the Sultanate to 58,179.

The ministry also announced that two people died of COVID-19 in the past 24 hours, taking the total death toll in Oman to 259. Commenting on these high numbers, Dr Saif al Abri, Director-General of Diseases Surveillance and Control, mentioned "two-third of the cases in the past few weeks were Omanis. This is because of family gatherings and not complying with safety instructions. The curve is still going up and the virus is spreading fast."

TURN TO P2

Iraqi Ambassador thanks Sultanate

MUSCAT: His Highness Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmoud al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers, received Dr Ali Mehdi Jawad, Ambassador of the Republic of Iraq to the Sultanate on Monday, to bid him farewell at the end of his tour of duty in the country.

HH Sayyid Fahd asked the ambassador to convey greetings of His Majesty the Sultan to the Iraqi leadership and His Majesty's best

wishes to the brotherly people of Iraq.

HH Sayyid Fahd commended the growing relations between the two countries and the fruitful efforts exerted by the ambassador during his tour of duty, wishing him success in his future assignments.

On his turn, the Iraqi ambassador expressed his country's satisfaction with the bilateral cooperation that witnessed a tangible development. He affirmed

that the Iraqi leadership highly appreciates the Sultanate and its wise, balanced policy at the regional and international levels. He pointed out that his country looks forward to enhancing its relations with the Sultanate in various spheres.

The ambassador expressed his thanks to all officials in the Sultanate for the support extended to him during his tour of duty, which had enabled him to

carry out his assignments.

The conversation during the meeting dealt with the strong fraternal relations between the two countries and means of promoting aspects of cooperation between the two sides, besides reviewing the current situations at the regional and international arenas.

The meeting was attended by Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidi, Secretary-General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. — **ONA**



COVID-19 positive rate stands at 24%

FROM PAGE 1

About testing frequency, he said the positive rate normally soars at the beginning of the week because much of the coronavirus tests take place in private hospitals with the majority of them, if not all, halting testing on weekends. The ministry's analysis has shown that the number of positive cases usually rises on Mondays.

Speaking to Oman TV, Dr Al Abri mentioned, "As has been announced, 6,173 tests were carried out on Sunday including 2,192 tests carried out in the

private sector hospitals which were accumulated over the past three days. The nationwide positive rate now stands at 24 per cent and this rate is going up."

Dr Al Abri noted that many private establishments were now sending more workers to undergo testing. Public sector establishments are also sending more people for testing.

Activists on social media expressed concerns over the big jump in Omanis infected with COVID-19, which were small in the beginning. It is worrying.

MUSCAT FINANCE

Enabling Dreams

Job Opportunity

Head of Credit Administration

Muscat Finance is Omanis oldest finance company engaged in the activity of instalment financing and leasing of vehicles and other assets, debt factoring, working capital and receivable financing activities, since 1987. The Company's products and services consist of Auto finance both New and Used vehicles, Corporate Leasing, Debt Factoring and Working Capital Finance.

Responsibilities:

- Plans, directs and controls the activities of Credit Administration Department (CAD) to ensure effective coordination and optimum performance
- Initiates and suggests improvement in policies, procedures, guidelines and standards to ensure change / improvement in operations and current practice in CAD.
- Monitors internal controls to ensure their adequacy so that corrective action can be taken when necessary at the earliest possible time
- Exercises management and supervisory responsibilities over all personnel of CAD

Requirements:

- Bachelors of Commerce / Finance / Accounting
- Minimum 10-15 years' experiences in Financial Sector
- People management, Leadership, Operational knowledge
- Excellent communication and presentation skills

Interested Candidates please send your CV maximum by 25th July 2020, by mail (khoula@mfcoman.com)

MUSCAT FINANCE

Enabling Dreams

Job Opportunity

Head of Compliance (Omanis Only)

Muscat Finance is Omanis oldest finance company engaged in the activity of instalment financing and leasing of vehicles and other assets, debt factoring, working capital and receivable financing activities, since 1987. The Company's products and services consist of Auto finance both New and Used vehicles, Corporate Leasing, Debt Factoring and Working Capital Finance.

Responsibilities:

- Ensuring the company's compliance with the applicable laws, regulations and the internal regulation of the company.
- Promptly reporting on breaches and effectively follow-up on identified deficiencies.
- Monitoring compliance policies and procedures and ensuring proper functioning of the same. Also impart guidance to staff for implementation.
- Carry out reviews / compliance testing to ensure regular reporting to regulatory authorities.
- Advising on compliance policy, processes, rules and standards.
- Ability to handle tasks as a Board Secretary.

Requirements:

- 10-12 years of experience of which had 3-5 years' experience should be in compliance function
- Bachelors of Commerce / Finance / Accounting
- Excellent oral and written communication skills (English & Arabic)
- Should be abreast of all laws and regulations pertaining to public joint stock companies, particularly leasing companies.

Interested Candidates please send your CV maximum by 25th July 2020, by mail (khoula@mfcoman.com)

SURVEY TO SHARPEN
COVID-19 STRATEGY

Council panel
hosts SQU
officials

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH

MUSCAT: The National COVID-19 Survey will bring an understanding of the members of the population who could have been asymptomatic but gone unrecorded so far.

“Currently we only know about the cases with the symptoms now we will know the prevalence of the disease in each governorate and with the age group. This will give us an insight for the nest strategic planning – should we continue with the same efforts, the current restrictions or look for some other strategies. The airports are closed, the internal and external tourism have been affected, mosques and schools have been closed. The results of the survey will give us an indication on whether we should lift



The results of the survey will give us an indication on whether we should lift these restrictions.” said

**DR FATMA AL
YAQOUBI**

Dr Fatma al Yaqoubi, Head of TB and Acute

Respiratory Infection Section at the Department of Communicable Diseases at the Ministry of Health.

“It will gives us an idea of the community spread and have an estimation of the level of spread in different governorates as well as different age groups.”

The survey will have representation of demographics as children as young as five years old are participating.

“Children are included to give us a clear picture of the disease spread in the community as well as the age groups in wilayats of the governorates. The Ministry of Health representatives have been calling each participant to take verbal acceptance. It is up to the participant but I urge everyone to join the survey.”

STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT: The Education and Research Committee of the State Council headed by Mohammed bin Sulaiman al Toobi hosted several officials from the Deanship of Scientific Research at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) as part of its study on the role of private sector companies in scientific research. The delegation included Prof Dr Yahya bin Mansour al Wahaibi, Dean of Scientific Research; and Dr Fahd bin Mahmoud al Zadjali, Assistant Dean in Scientific Research.

The study aims to determine the reality of local, regional and global policies and legislations regulating the process of the private sector's contribution to scientific research and raising its efficiency, and identify its role in this regard, and suggest legislations and mechanisms that regulate the contribution of the private sector and international companies operating in the Sultanate in scientific research, in addition to proposing mechanisms to help settle technical expertise at all levels.

Fisheries Development Oman (“FDO”)

Job Opportunities
for Omani Nationals

Fisheries Development Oman (“FDO”) is a Joint-stock company and a subsidiary of Oman Investment Authority, a wholly government owned sovereign wealth fund, that specializes in investments in the Fisheries & aquaculture sector. The company is investing in Fisheries & fish farming projects that lead to the development of Fisheries & aquaculture sector in the sultanate, including shrimp farming, finfish, shellfish and seaweed ventures. The company is also investing in the establishment of support industries to the fish farming sector, including hatcheries and feed factories.

FDO is looking for Omani Talents to join its vibrant team in the below positions:

S.N	Position	Qty
1	Project Manager – Environmental Affairs	1
2	Environment Liaison Officer	1

For more details about the jobs, please visit FDO LinkedIn page.

Interested candidates should send their updated CV to career.fdo@fdo.om quoting the position name in the subject or apply directly through LinkedIn no later than 25 July 2020.

P.S: Shortlisted candidates only meeting the required level of experience and set criteria will be contacted.

LinkedIn Page: Type Fisheries Development Oman S.A.O.C (FDO) in the search bar.

1.53 million vehicles registered

MUSCAT: The total number of vehicles registered at the end of May 2020 reached 1.53 million, according to a recent update from the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

White was the most preferred in the Sultanate with as many as 660,244 vehicles. Silver was the second choice, with 196,258 vehicles. Gray is the third most prominent colour, with about 116,130 vehicles.

— ONA

OMAN CONVENTION
& EXHIBITION CENTRE
مركز عُمان للمؤتمرات والمعارض

Investment Opportunity

(Designing & implementation of advertising Spaces) at Oman Convention &Exhibition Centre.

The Oman Convention & Exhibition Centre (OCEC) requests proposals from qualified agencies to identify advertising spaces in and around the Centre and propose SMART Solutions (digital & non -digital) for the identified spaces.

OCEC is soliciting proposals for these services in accordance with the terms, conditions, and instructions set forth in this brief. There is no expressed or implied obligation for the OCEC to reimburse responding agencies for any expenses incurred in preparing proposals.

To participate in the following tender:

Tender Details:

Tender No.	Tender Name	Last date to collect Tender Document	Last date for clarifications	Last date for proposal submission	Tender fees
OCEC/01/2020	Investment Opportunity (Designing & implementation of advertising Spaces)	20th July 2020 At : 15:00	23rd July 2020 At :15:00	27th July 2020 At : 15:00 Send to the email shown below	Free

To obtain tender documents ,Please contact the purchasing department at:

Purchasing Department (PO box 1659, PC 130)
Phone: 24 233 930,
Email: aalbalushi@ocec.om

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

Equip learners with 4IR skills

MUSCAT: The Education Council has endorsed the document “Oman National Framework for Future Skills”, which comes in response to the rapid changes currently taking place in the world and are directly reflected in the educational process.

With the emergence of the global technological and information revolution, and the outcomes of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and its related technologies, it has become necessary for those in charge of education to further concentrate on improving the learners' skills to enable them to adapt to the changing world, and continue to learn for life in order to be able to compete on both local and global levels.

The document comes in implementation of the recommendations made at the symposium “education and development trends, existing and future employment opportunities in the labour market”, held by the Education Council in May 2017. The recommendation reads: Preparing a document that includes the 21st century skills and competencies and the results of the fourth industrial revolution and general skills necessary for the labour market, to be integrated in the education-



al programmes of schools and higher education institutions.

Accordingly, the Education Council assigned a work team headed by officials at the Ministry of Education and the private sector to develop the document previously prepared by the ministry, and include the skills required for the fourth industrial revolution, and the general skills needed for the changing labour market in a manner that integrate the skills required in various types, stages and levels of education.

The Oman National

Framework for Future Skills is a document that seeks to achieve several goals, the most important of which are: providing a unified vision for educators and education stockholders in the Sultanate to enable them to integrate future skills in the educational system, finding a common understanding about future skills among the various educational authorities which enables them to work in harmony, developing the educational system in the Sultanate to keep pace with the requirements of sustainable development,

upgrading educational and learning practices in line with international standards, and ensuring that learners are provided with the skills necessary to keep pace with the rapid international development.

It is worth noting that the Oman National Framework for Future Skills document is in line with the Human and Society pillar of the Oman Vision 2040 which targets to establish a highly competitive educational system that keeps pace with the sustainable development and the future skills requirements. — **ONA**



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RO 50,000 UPGRADE FOR 6 PARKS IN SUHAR



STAFF REPORTER

SUHAR: OQ, Suhar Municipality and Jusoor Foundation signed a Memorandum of Cooperation (MoC) to upgrade six public parks in Suhar on Sunday.

The RO 50,000 project is funded by OQ, as part of its social investment projects, which will be implemented through Jusoor Foundation, the non-profit Social Responsibility arm of Sohar Aluminium, Vale and OQ.

The project includes the funding and installation of playground equipment for a number of parks in Suhar including the Silver Jubilee Park, Hambar Park, Al Hadhira Park, Sawaihra Park, Al Owainat Park and Al Mynyal Park, in cooperation and coordination with Suhar

Municipality. The signing ceremony was held in the Office of the Wali of Suhar, Shaikh Ali bin Ahmed bin Mashari al Shamsi, Acting Governor of North Al Batinah, Chairman of the Board of Directors of Jusoor. The event was attended by Salim bin Hamad al Kindi, Director-General of Suhar Municipality, and Dr Hilal bin Abdullah al Hinai, Adviser to the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Refineries and Petrochemicals at OQ and representatives of the local community at Jusoor Foundation.

Dr Al Hinai said, “The public parks project in the Wilayat of Suhar reflects the cooperation between OQ and Jusoor Foundation in implementing development and service projects that serve a large segment of both citizens and residents. Provision of the recre-

ational games in the parks will have a positive impact on the visitors, especially children, and it will hopefully encourage domestic tourism coming from the different wilayats of North Al Batinah Governorate.”

Khalifa bin Darwish al Shibli, Acting Director of the Afforestation and Gardens Department at Suhar Municipality, said, “We thank Jusoor Foundation and the supporting companies (OQ, Sohar Aluminium and Vale) for their continuous support in community service. The social responsibility commitment adopted by these companies not only covered many aspects of service and development in North Al Batinah Governorate, but also exceeded the governorate’s boundaries to reach other governorates.”

Illegal to raise charity funds

STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Social Development (MoSD) said on Monday that it is illegal to raise charity funds from the public without approval. MoSD stated that it draws the attention of all citizens and residents to the need to adhere to the reg-

ulations in place for collecting money from the public, especially through social media or events. It also urged people not to collect donations from the public by any means without obtaining a licence to do so from the ministry. MoSD said it is prohibited to defame families and individuals by posting video

clips of their living conditions to collect money, knowing that such matters are legally criminal. It called on citizens and residents not to respond to calls to collect money for any purpose before making sure that the entity or person has a licence to do so from the Ministry of Social Development.



The Council of Administrative Affairs for the Judiciary

TENDER ANNOUNCEMENT

The Administrative Affairs Council of the Judiciary announces its desire to submit the following tenders:-

Tender No.	Tender Title	Tender Document Sales End Date	Bid Submission Closing	Vendor Grade	Tender Document Fee
10/2020	EMS Project CAAJ	26/07/2020	20/08 /2020	Excellent & First	RO 25/-
11/2020	AL-Amerat Primary Court RFP	26/07/2020	16/09 /2020	Excellent & First	RO 25/-

Where you can buy the tender documents electronically via the link below website:
<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>

Bidders should submit their offers electronically via the aforementioned site and attach to each bid an electronic copy of the provisional insurance in the form of a bank guarantee or a certified check from one of the banks operating in the country at a rate of (1%) of the bid value and is valid for a period of (90) days from the date of submission. The offers are meant in the name of the Chairman of the Internal Committee for Tenders in the Council of Administrative Affairs for the Judiciary. And based on the Tender Board Circular No. (07/2020), we confirm that the necessity of uploading the soft copy of the bid bond when submitting the tender in a support system while preserving the original bid bond without the need to hand it over to the board until the council is asked to hand over the original one.

1. For inquiries and clarifications on the tender:
Submit inquiries related to the project electronically through the website of the electronic tender system (<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>).

2. For inquiries and clarifications on the electronic bidding system:
Submit inquiries regarding technical support for the electronic bidding system via e-mail and the phone number shown below:
Phone: +968 24166670
Email: etenderhd@ita.gov.om



Taghleef Industries SAOC

P.O. Box 38, PC 327, Sohar Industrial Estate, Sultanate of Oman. Tel: 26751823/24, Fax: 26751822

Invitation and Agenda of the Extraordinary General Meeting and the Annual Ordinary General Meeting of Taghleef Industries SAOC

27 July 2020

The Board of Directors of the Company is pleased to invite the shareholders to the Extraordinary General Meeting and the Annual Ordinary General Meeting to be held at **11:30 am on Monday, 27th July 2020** via the electronic platform for general meetings which may be accessed through Muscat Clearing and Depository's website (www.mcd.gov.om). In the event that the quorum to convene the Extraordinary General Meeting and/or Annual Ordinary General Meeting is not complete, the second general meeting will be convened at **11:30 am on Monday, 2nd August 2020** to discuss and consider the following agenda:

First Meeting: Extraordinary General Meeting

- To consider and approve the amendments to the Articles of Association of the Company to be in line with Commercial Companies Law promulgated by Royal Decree No. 18/2019.

Second Meeting: Annual Ordinary General Meeting

- To consider and approve the Board of Directors' report on the activities of the Company and its financial status for the financial year ended on 31 December 2019.
- To consider and approve the Board of Directors' report on the organization and management of the Company for the financial year ended on 31 December 2019.
- To consider and approve Auditor's Report on the financial statements of the Company for the year ended on 31 December 2019.
- To notify the general assembly of the cash dividends distributed to the shareholders on 20th April 2020 of an amount equal to RO 1.250 per share from the retained earnings.
- To approve the related party transactions entered into by the Company during the financial year ended on 31 December 2019.
- To consider and approve the related party transactions which will be entered into by the Company during the financial year ending on 31 December 2020.
- To elect three members of the Board of Directors of the Company (comprising of shareholders or non-shareholders).

Anyone who wishes to nominate himself for the membership of the Board of Directors of the Company must complete the form prepared for this purpose and submit it to the Company at least five (5) days prior to the date of the general meeting on or before Wednesday, 22nd July 2020. Candidates must consider fulfilling the requirements prescribed for membership of the Company's Board of Directors. If the candidate is a shareholder, it is required in accordance with the Articles of Association of the Company to be an owner of 25,000 shares as of the date of the General Meeting.

- To appoint auditors of the Company for the financial year ending on 31 December 2020 and determine their fees.

Pursuant to the Articles of Association of the Company and the Rules for Convening General Meetings of Closed Joint Stock Companies issued by the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, we would like to bring your attention to the following:

- Only juristic persons shall have the right to appoint a proxy to attend the Extraordinary General Meeting and Annual Ordinary General Meeting and vote on their behalf via electronic means, provided that this natural person has an investor number in the Muscat Clearing and Depository Company.
- Voting on any of the items on the agenda shall commence no more than three days before the date of the general meeting and until the voting process ends on the day of the meeting. If a shareholder's balance is increased or decreased, the voting process will be cancelled, and the shareholder must cast his vote again on the day of the general meeting.

To prevent delay in starting the meeting, shareholders are requested to attend the meeting at least half an hour before the scheduled meeting time.

For any clarification regarding the matters mentioned in the above agenda, please contact Mr. Khalid Kharousi / Mr. Zacharias Chacko on 26650229 / 26650268.

Chairman

OMAN

KNOWLEDGE OMAN
HOSTS WEBINARS ON
LIFE POST COVID-19

STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT: Knowledge Oman has launched a series of webinars aimed at enriching society with knowledge, enhancing skills and raising awareness on different aspects of personal and professional life. Amidst the current global crises, the award winning platform has innovatively taken their initiatives online in their commitment towards sharing knowledge for the benefit of society with virtual webinars which will address “Life Post COVID-19”, among other topics that contribute to the development of the society.

The platform will engage professionals, academics, leaders and experts from various industries to share knowledge online and guide society on the road to recovery. Topics such as wellbeing, the impact of technology, the shift towards online or blended learning and entrepreneurial challenges will be discussed. The public can gain access to the webinars at the touch of their fingers through any mobile device.

Israa al Ajmi, Head of KO Seminars, is optimistic about the long term value that these webinars will add to society. “As we gradually begin to come out of lockdown, there is anxiety about what normal life will be like and how to live post COVID-19. Knowledge Oman will share valuable insights and suggestions to alleviate these fears and guide



society out of this period with life-long skills provided by experts from different fields. This will enable all participants to be a part of Oman’s vision of the way to recovery and moving forward.” The webinar series is in support of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik’s Oman’s Vision 2040 on building knowledge and upskilling the nation.

The webinars will be broadcasted bi-weekly on Sunday evenings from 07:30-08:30pm. The public can register via the website: www.knowledgeoman.com/register

Call to ensure
safety of
public water
dispensers

SAMUEL KUTTY

MUSCAT: Water dispensers installed at public places and residential neighbourhoods should be properly maintained and kept clean.

To ensure safety and compliance with the standards and specifications, the Muscat Electricity Distribution Company (MEDC) is launching a campaign to check water coolers installed in the Muscat Governorate.

“In order to avoid accidents like electric shocks from the water dispensers at public places and their compliance with the standards specified by the Authority for Electricity Regulation, checks will be conducted on these appliances”, the MEDC said in a statement.

On regular intervals the company issues warnings and appeals to all those involved to do necessary maintenance and check their electrical connections.

According to MEDC, safety measures to be followed include that the refrigerators or coolers are installed by a licensed electrician, electrical materials used are of high quality and there are regular maintenance and inspection of the appliances.

Use slaughterhouses for Eid sacrifices

KABEER YOUSUF

MUSCAT: Citizens and residents in the country have been urged to use the government-approved slaughterhouses for Eid sacrifices. They have been asked to adhere to the rules and regulations that govern the slaughtering of animals to maintain public health in the country.

Speaking to the

Observer, a senior official at the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs (MERA) said, “In the current scenario, slaughtering in public places is not at all advisable. Slaughtering needs to be done at the slaughterhouses approved by Muscat Municipality. Sacrifice in the open is also against the efforts to combat the community spread of COVID-19,” he said.

There are two major slaughterhouses in Mawaleh and Al Amerat. They are equipped to cater to the needs of people in the area.

Earlier, the Ministry of Regional Municipalities and Water Resources (MRMWR) and Muscat Municipality too had urged all to ensure the norms of public health during Eid.

“Besides, the MRMWR will constantly monitor

the livestock and meat delivery sites to keep track of the performance of the companies which are operating these slaughterhouses. It is important to maintain public health,” an official of the ministry said.

Additionally, the ministry will also monitor the food establishments to ensure that the consumers get foodstuff healthily and properly.



An employee takes the temperature of a customer at the entrance of a super market in China Town in London. — Reuters

Global coronavirus cases rise above 13 million

WASHINGTON: Coronavirus infections rose above 13 million across the world on Monday, according to a Reuters tally, climbing by one million in just five days in a pandemic that has killed more than half a million people.

The Reuters global tally, which is based on government reports, shows the disease is accelerating the fastest in Latin America. The Americas account for more than half the world's infections and half the deaths.

Parts of the world, especially the United States with more than 3.3 million confirmed cases, are seeing huge increases in a first wave of COVID-19 infections while others "flatten the curve" and ease lockdowns.

Other places, such as the Australian city of Melbourne and Leicester in England, are implementing a second round of shutdowns. Hong Kong, albeit with a low 1,522 cases, is to tighten social distancing measures again amid growing worries about a third wave.

THE US STATE OF FLORIDA REPORTED A RECORD INCREASE OF MORE THAN 15,000 NEW CASES IN 24 HOURS ON SUNDAY, MORE THAN SOUTH KOREA'S TOTAL SINCE THE DISEASE WAS FIRST IDENTIFIED AT THE END OF LAST YEAR

The United States reported a daily global record of 69,070 new infections on July 10. In Brazil, 1.86 million people have tested positive, including President Jair Bolsonaro, and more than 72,000 people have died.

The US state of Florida reported a record increase of more than 15,000 new cases in 24 hours on Sunday, more than South Korea's total since the disease was first identified at the end of last year.

Coronavirus infections were rising in about 40 US states, according to a Reuters analysis of cases for the past two weeks compared with the prior two weeks.

Yet US President Donald Trump and White House officials have repeatedly said the disease is under control and that schools must reopen in the autumn.

"The president and his administration are messing with the health of our children," House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said on CNN's "State of the Union" programme.

— Reuters

IN BRIEF

Third Iranian lawmaker dies from COVID-19

TEHRAN: Another lawmaker has died in Iran due to an infection with the coronavirus, the news agency ISNA reported on Monday. Issa Jafari is the third member of the Iranian parliament to die of the coronavirus since the beginning of the pandemic in late February. The 59-year-old's death was confirmed on Monday, according to ISNA. Members of the Iranian parliament have been criticised for not keeping the appropriate social distance during sessions. Parliamentary Speaker Ali Larijani tested positive in April but has since recovered. Since the easing of restrictions mid-May, safety rules have increasingly been ignored, leading to a dramatic rise in infection numbers.

Pfizer, BioNTech's vaccine candidates get FDA's 'fast track' status

WASHINGTON: Pfizer Inc and partner BioNTech SE said on Monday two of their experimental coronavirus vaccines received 'fast track' designation from the US health agency, speeding up the regulatory review process. The companies are in a global race with Moderna Inc, AstraZeneca Plc and others to develop a vaccine for COVID-19, the respiratory illness caused by the new coronavirus, which has claimed over 568,500 lives globally, according to a Reuters tally. There are no approved vaccines for COVID-19, and the United States and other countries have poured billions into their development as they seek to secure a safe and effective vaccine.

German study shows low infection rate in schools

BERLIN: Very few of 2,000 school children and teachers tested in the German state of Saxony showed antibodies to COVID-19, a study found on Monday, suggesting schools may not play as big a role in spreading the virus as some had feared. Germany began reopening schools in May, though debate continues as to the role children may play in spreading the virus to vulnerable adults at home as well as to older teachers and school staff. The study by the University Hospital in Dresden analysed blood samples from almost 1,500 children aged between 14 and 18 and 500 teachers from 13 schools in Dresden and the districts of Bautzen and Goerlitz in May and June.

— Agencies

WORLD

Populist president wins re-election in Poland



Polish President Andrzej Duda won 51 per cent of the vote. — AFP

WARSAW: Polish President Andrzej Duda has squeezed past his europhile rival to win re-election, official results showed on Monday, but the narrow victory puts the populist right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) party government on the backfoot.

A close ally of US President Donald Trump, Duda has vowed to tighten already highly restrictive laws against abortion.

The incumbent won a new five-year term with 51 per cent in Sunday's vote against 49 per cent for Warsaw's liberal mayor Rafal Trzaskowski, who had promised to mend ties with the European Union.

Experts said the result means the governing party, which has been criticised at home and abroad for controversial reforms of the judiciary seen as eroding democratic freedoms, will face a more confident opposition.

"Despite Trzaskowski's defeat, his strong performance looks like a new beginning, a new dynamic for the opposition," Andrzej Rychard, a political scientist at Warsaw University, told local media. "We're on the cusp of some very significant changes on the Polish political scene," he said, adding that "Trzaskowski appears poised to lead the opposition".

The government faces the immediate challenge of dealing with the fallout of the coronavirus pandemic, which is pushing Poland into a recession — the country's first since the fall of communism three decades ago.

Duda has promised to defend highly popular social welfare payments introduced by the PiS government.

"Poland is split down the middle," said Witold Orlowski, a professor at Warsaw University of Technology Business School, predicting "a very difficult period" ahead. "On the one hand, even this slim victory is a PiS success and will allow it to continue to govern, at least technically.

"On the other hand the social and economic situation will deteriorate and a large part of the electorate will blame the PiS," Orlowski said.

On the foreign policy front, experts said Duda's close ties with Trump could also spell trouble ahead if the US president fails to win re-election in November.

Duda's support was particularly strong in rural areas and small towns and in the east of the country, while Trzaskowski has performed well in larger cities and western regions on the border with Germany. — AFP

40 hurt in car bombing in northern Afghan city

KABUL: At least 40 people were wounded when a car bomb exploded in the northern Afghan city of Aybak, officials said on Monday. There are fears that people have been killed, said deputy provincial governor Sefatullah Samangani and local councillor Raz Mohammad. After the car bombing, there was an exchange of gunfire between assailants and security forces stationed in the area, the officials said. The exact target of the bombing was not clear, but the vehicle exploded near the intelligence agency's department for the province of Samangan, and the city centre, according to the officials. No group has claimed responsibility for the incident.

Zindzi Mandela, daughter of Nelson Mandela, has died

JOHANNESBURG: Zindzi Mandela, daughter of former South African president and liberation hero Nelson Mandela, has died, the spokesman of the ruling African National Congress (ANC) said on Monday. Zindzi Mandela, whose mother was anti-apartheid activist Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, rose to international prominence when she read out Nelson Mandela's rejection of then-president P W Botha's offer for freedom in 1985. State broadcaster SABC said the 59-year-old, who was serving as South Africa's ambassador to Denmark, died in a hospital in Johannesburg. It did not say why she had died. "This is untimely. She still had a role to play in the transformation of our own society and a bigger role to play even in the African National Congress," said ANC spokesman Pule Mabe.

Actress Kelly Preston dies of breast cancer at 57

LONDON: American actress Kelly Preston who has appeared in films including "Jerry Maguire" and "Twins", has died aged 57 after battling breast cancer for nearly two years, her husband, John Travolta, announced in an Instagram post late on Sunday. "It is with a very heavy heart that I inform you that my beautiful wife Kelly has lost her two-year battle with breast cancer," the 66-year-old "Grease" actor said in his post. "Kelly's love and life will always be remembered. I will be taking some time to be there for my children who have lost their mother, so forgive me in advance if you don't hear from us for a while", Travolta wrote. Born Kelly Kamalelehua Smith in Honolulu on October 13, 1962, she changed her name to Kelly Preston before securing her first film role in the 1985 romcom "Mischiefs", then appeared in another teen comedy, "Secret Admirer". — Agencies

ANALYSIS



Amid the pandemic, parents are becoming more hands on. — Reuters

Many US teachers at greater risk of serious illness

MURI ASSUNCAO

About one in four teachers in the US are at greater risk of becoming seriously ill if they get infected with the new coronavirus, according to a report released by the Kaiser Family Foundation. The foundation, a nonpartisan organisation that focuses on national health care issues, looked at a series of factors identified by the Centers of Disease Control which could indicate that a person could be “more likely than others to become severely ill,” when they are exposed to the virus. They include several underlying health conditions — such as diabetes, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, heart disease, moderate or severe asthma, having a body mass index of greater than 40, or having a compromised immune system due to, for example, treatment

for cancer — as well as being age 65 and older. The analysis found that about 1.47 million teachers and instructors in the country — nearly 24 per cent of the entire workforce — have a condition that will put them at higher risk of serious illness from coronavirus. According to the CDC, that means that “they may require hospitalisation, intensive care, or a ventilator to help them breathe, or they may even die.” The report comes as educators around the nation contemplate on the best solutions to regain some type of normalcy in the classroom, as many areas of the country experience record-breaking COVID-19 surges. Last Friday, United Teachers Los Angeles pushed back against pressure from the White House to reopen schools. They called on the Los Angeles Unified School District to “keep school campuses closed when the semester begins on August 18” and demanded full-time remote learning. — dpa

Our post-COVID society...



AHMED AL HARTHY

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As the world continues to grapple with the on-going spread of COVID-19, there is an incessant drive by many thinkers and decision-makers on how to survive, adapt and thrive. For almost four months, the focus and priority was on protecting the masses; ensuring that all are safe and well. Very little was attempted to live and cope with the virus as our new reality. It is difficult to imagine, in hindsight, that we would be living in lockdown for as long as we have, with a virus so dangerous that it would end up consuming the lives of over half a million people world-wide. As we passed the midway point of 2020, it has become imperative to reopen markets, schools and offices. We must begin reviving the economy and maintaining people’s mental health and overall happiness. However, it will prove challenging to imagine a world after COVID-19. Big questions will arise on the social, political and philosophical planes. Will people find a way back to socialising normally? Will handshakes become a greeting of the past? Are we going to transform the ways in which we work into more digitally accommodative channels? It is interesting to observe how our society will evolve. I would go as far as to claim that this pandemic will radically reshape society into new ways of conducting themselves. It’s impact would be as far-reaching as the impact of the two World Wars, and the 9/11 attacks. Peoples of the world will realise that the trivial activities that we partake in on a daily basis can no longer be taken for granted. Our constant freedom and independence may prove impossible to guarantee. There may be a lot of good that may emerge from the ashes. The natural environment would have had a chance to rehabilitate itself. The impact of which may make more realise how much damage the human race inflicts on wildlife and on the flora and fauna of our planet. Additionally, we may see a dramatic to shift to work evermore smartly; workplaces will not have the previous hesitancy to adopt new technologies that make their workers more efficient and optimise their operational overheads. To end on a positive note, this global crisis has helped many to rediscover what truly matters in life: health, family and stability. We must not revert to our old ways once this crisis ends, but should seek to take all the lessons learnt and practice them consistently. That should be our new norm.

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Tax measures offer respite to Omani firms hit by pandemic

CONRAD PRABHU

MUSCAT: Relief measures unveiled recently by Oman's Tax Authority offer a measure of welcome respite to businesses hit hard by the pandemic, as well as the accompanying economic downturn.

They are the latest in a series of gestures announced by the Supreme Committee designed to offer much-needed succour to private sector firms, as well as various sections of the general population, weighed down by the punishing effects of the ongoing pandemic.

"The measures (...) come as a welcome move by the Tax Authority to provide relief to taxpayers who have not already filed their returns, and who are adversely impacted by the current COVID-19 pandemic," said KPMG, professional services provider, in an advisory to clients.

As a result of the measures, Omani businesses have until September 30, 2020 to file their tax returns, both provisional and final, along with their annual audited accounts for the year ended December 31, 2019, without incurring any of the penalties prescribed under the Income Tax Law for non-compliance.

Also waived until September 30, 2020 is the application of additional taxes (amounting to one per cent per month) that defaulters are liable to cough up for non-payment of income tax due for the year ended December 31, 2019.

In a further sop to taxpayers, the Tax Authority has also suspended the addi-

WELCOME SUCCOUR:

Waivers on payment deadlines, fines and penalties for non-compliance bring relief to businesses impacted by COVID-19 and economic downturn.



tional taxes (applied at the rate of one per cent per month) applicable to the period from January 1, 2020 to September 20, 2020 due to non-payment of income

tax due for the years ended prior to December 31, 2019.

In effect, the measures imply that the due date for filing tax returns for the year ended December 31,

2019, has been extended to September 30, 2020, says KPMG.

According to Deloitte, the measures allow for pending tax payments to be paid in instalments.

Further, the measures "potentially waive any additional taxes imposed on installment payments, subject to the Oman Tax Authority's approval, based on the condition/cases presented by the taxpayer".

"Taxpayers can submit a request to postpone the payment of disputed tax at the objection stage until it is decided. Taxpayers can request for an extension of deadline in submitting the required documents and clarifications during the assessment and objection stage," Deloitte noted in an explainer to its clients.

Omantel's network upgrades help meet increased demands during pandemic

Significant increase in service demand met through exceptional network performance, upgrades and innovative solutions

Muscat, JULY 12, 2020 - Omantel, the leading provider of integrated telecommunications services in the Sultanate, has remained a partner in Oman's nationwide initiatives being implemented in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Not only has Oman's telecommunications giant been at the centre of awareness drives taken in the direction of public safety and health by joining hand with relevant authorities, it has upscaled its services to meet accelerated service demands.

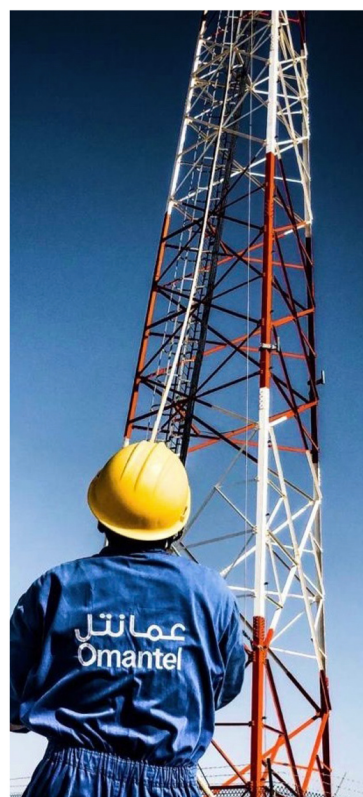
The demand for various telecom services has seen an exponential increase since the pandemic as individuals and enterprises - government and private - switched to a more flexible yet productive way of functioning. Remote working facilities needed added network upgrades and Omantel rose to the occasion like a true digital partner.

In response to these shifts in demand, Omantel has proactively upgraded its networks, increased the capacities of its Internet facilities, and employed modern digital technologies to provide the best services to customers. These measures by Omantel have resulted in a remarkable

increase in the use of its various telecom services and in turn, empowered its customers, from government agencies and major companies, to adapt to the requirements of the new situation of work from home. This has complemented the overall global public health motto: Stay Home, Stay Safe.

Omantel's response in dealing with challenges resulting from precautionary measures included expansion of fixed-line and mobile networks (3G, 4G and 5G) by increasing the capacity of existing sites, adding new sites and increasing Internet capacities. During the period from last February until date, Omantel added 77 new 5G sites, upgraded 42 sites from 3G to 4G in addition to adding 26 new sites to its 3G and 4G networks. Omantel also increased the capacity of 23 4G sites in various governorates of the Sultanate.

Commenting on this achievement, Eng. Said bin Abdullah Al Ajmi, Vice President of Operations Unit at Omantel said, "Providing telecom services that live up to the aspirations of our various customers is a priority for us at Omantel. COVID-19 was a



real test for the quality and reliability of our network in addition to its ability in meeting the exponential increase in traffic resulting from individuals

spending more time at home and the increased requirements from several companies and institutions that had to provide their services remotely. We worked diligently to come up with innovative and safe solutions that meet the needs of the different customers."

He further asserted, "Telecom networks are designed to deal with an additional number over their average capacity. We use different technologies in our networks such as 5G, 4G, 3G for mobile networks in addition to the fibre optic network and the legacy fixed networks. All these major technologies have proven their reliability over the past years. During COVID-19, we are proud of their exceptional performance that successfully met the increased and sophisticated requirements of our customers, enabling individuals to work from home and corporates to ensure business continuity and serve their customers virtually."

The Vice President, Operations added that there has been a noticeable increase in the demand for Omantel services through channels such as the Call Centre and Omantel App. "For

instance, more than 5,000 customers have opted for the Plug & Play 5G home broadband from February 2020 until date," he added.

Since the spread of the pandemic, traffic over Omantel's fixed network witnessed a significant 35% increase by the end of May. Special offers launched by Omantel giving unlimited local calls to 'Baqati' and 'Hayyak' subscribers for 30 days also increased the voice traffic on the mobile network by 14% by the end of May. Data usage in the mobile network too, witnessed a 36% increase between February and the end of May 2020. Omantel's infrastructure has been able to accommodate this increase without causing any bottlenecks in the core network.

Omantel is the Sultanate's first and leading integrated telecommunications services provider, enabling the digital society to flourish, allowing new ways of doing business and delivering a world of information, news and entertainment. Today, Omantel is working to achieve the highest level of customers' satisfaction as the most reliable and wide network.

Oman’s be’ah proposes biodiesel fuel from waste cooking oil



New Ramada Encore Hotel Opens in Muscat



Muscat, Oman, 13th July 2020 – Al Khaleel Group, a leading trading and contracting company in Oman, today announced the opening of *Ramada Encore by Wyndham Muscat*. Strategically located on Sultan Qaboos Street, this new hotel redefines the concept of midscale business and leisure travel, offering a comfortable and consistent environment with state-of-the-art facilities.

Located 15 minutes away from Muscat International Airport and the city’s major landmarks such as Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque, Qurum Beach, the Royal Opera House, the hotel attracts visitors from across the globe. The 163-room hotel is aesthetically designed for the guests to enjoy their stay with prime comfort. Well equipped with reliable services and amenities, Ramada Encore by Wyndham Muscat will offer an unparalleled experience for business and leisure visitors. The hotel also provides distinctive benefits making travel successful and offers guests single, double and suite accommodations.

Property highlights include a rooftop pool with sundeck, a fully-equipped fitness center with professional equipment, an Italian cuisine all-day dining, a coffee shop, a multipurpose meeting room, and a lobby lounge. Rooms feature amenities such as complimentary Wi-Fi, flat-screen television, safe deposit box, rollaway beds, and a high-tech touch panel to control the lighting and temperature of the room. Guests also have access to an exhaustive choice of local and international channels for entertainment.

“It gives us great pleasure to be able to bring quality and affordable lodging to the Muscat community and we look forward to welcoming travelers to the area’s newest hotel,” said Sheikh Mohammed Hilal Ali Al Khalili, the hotel’s owner.

Ramada Encore by Wyndham Muscat is set to open on Saturday 1st August 2020 and is expected to add more than 120 jobs to the Muscat community, giving the opportunity to locals to experience and work amongst the leading hotel chains across the globe.

CONRAD PRABHU

MUSCAT: Oman Environmental Services Holding Company SAOC (be’ah), the Sultanate’s solid waste management flagship, has embarked on a plan to harness the potentially prodigious quantities of used cooking oil (UCO) generated daily across the country for use as feedstock in the production of commercially valuable and eco-friendly biodiesel.

On Monday, the state-run utility invited interest investors to prequalify for a competitive tender leading to the award of a contract for the management and recycling of UCO in the Sultanate. The initiative is expected to lead to the production and sale of biodiesel in Oman, said be’ah.

“The purpose of this pre-qualification document is to assess international and local interest from developers with relevant experience to manage the collection and/or the treatment of generated (used cooking oil) from local generators to be utilised as feedstock into biodiesel production, on a

design, build, own and operate (DBOO) basis,” it stated. The utility is allocating a 25,000 sq metre plot of land within the Barka landfill for the establishment of the

driven, says be’ah. The initiative aims to (i) eliminate illegal dumping of used cooking oil down the drain, which leads to blockages that cost the government of Oman

CIRCULAR ECONOMY:
25,000 SQ METRE SITE EARMARKED AT BARKA
LANDFALL FOR ESTABLISHMENT OF BIODIESEL
PRODUCTION FACILITY

biodiesel facility. According to experts, sizable quantities of cooking oil are generated everyday by hotels, restaurants, fast food outlets, school cafeterias, catering companies, camps and even residential homes. While a portion of this waste is collected by firms for onward export to overseas-based recyclers, the remainder is understood to be disposed of in drains and landfills. Additionally, there are concerns that waste cooking oil is being resold to the detrimental of public health. Indeed, consumer and environmental health are underlying objectives behind this biodiesel project is environment-

major expenses to resolve these blockages; and (ii) eradicate environmental and health concerns resulting from the reselling or reusing of UCO in refrying causing severe health impacts. A key goal is to harness the commercial potential behind the recycling of waste cooking oil, be’ah has stressed. By promoting recycling and conversion into biodiesel, the project will help reinforce a recently introduced ban on exports of recyclable waste and thereby encourage the commercialisation of recycling opportunities in-country. Equally, it will promote the “replacement of petro-

leum diesel consumption by integrating appropriate biodiesel blends that minimise the negative effects on standard diesel engines and NOx emissions”, be’ah further added. Interested investors have been invited to submit an outline of their proposal for the “design, build, procurement, construction, insurance, financing, testing, commissioning, operating and maintaining a biodiesel production facility” using used cooking oil as feedstock. Also solicited by be’ah are details about the choice of advanced and efficient technologies that are proposed by the investor to minimise energy and chemical losses, while producing biodiesel at “international quality standards”. Be’ah says it is collaborating with Royal Oman Police Customs to restrict any exports of used cooking oil with the goal of promoting its recycling in-house. Collectors duly approved by be’ah and the Ministry of Environment and Climate Affairs (MECA) will also be integrated into the collection scheme, it stated.

BUSINESS

Oman launches major project to strengthen digital economy

MUSCAT: The Omani government has selected Oracle's Dedicated Region Cloud@Customer solution to support its national initiative to accelerate digital transformation across more than 120 government and semi-government entities with an integrated Government Cloud (G - Cloud) platform.

The initiative is led by the Oman Information and Communications Technology Group (OICTG), a new entity established by the Oman Investment Authority (OIA), owned by the government. The Oracle solution provides the government with a fully-managed cloud region that brings all of Oracle's second-generation cloud services, including Autonomous Database, to the government's datacentres.

"At OICTG, our aim is to design digital initiatives to strengthen the country's digital economy in line with Oman's Vision 2040 framework," said His Highness Sayyid Kamil bin Fahad al Said, Chairman, OICTG. "We are working toward creating an integrated cloud-ready modern IT infrastructure that provides seamless scalability, agility,

Initiative to accelerate digital transformation across more than 120 government and semi-government entities with an integrated Government Cloud platform.



and security with a compelling cost of ownership."

"Cooperation with Oracle demonstrates OICTG's focus on innovation and 4IR trends: migrating on-premises Oracle ERP and CRM applications to a cloud environment, developing customised cloud native applications, and exploring the implementation of emerging technologies like Artificial Intelligence, Blockchain, Big Data and high-performance computing (HPC), while following Oman's data sovereignty regulations," stated Said al Mandhari, Chief Executive

Officer, OICTG. "Oracle Dedication Region Cloud@Customer in Oman will help us explore several dynamic use cases for Omani Government entities."

Oracle Dedicated Region Cloud@Customer enables customers, like the government of Oman, to run an entire IT portfolio on a cloud infrastructure with physical control of infrastructure and data, to help meet the most demanding data sovereignty requirements. The fully managed cloud region provides strong isolation of customer data, including all API

operations, which remain local to the government's datacentres and provide the highest levels of security. Oracle Dedicated Region Cloud@Customer provides significant cost benefits to more than 120 Omani government entities under the Oman G - Cloud initiative. Omani government entities will be able to drive agility by quickly bringing new applications and services online in efficient and cost-effective manner compared to an on-premises platform.

"Making cloud innovation more accessible to governments and enterprises with superior security, infrastructure, performance, reliability, and data management is a key priority for Oracle," said Abdul Rahman al Thehaiban, Senior Vice President, Technology, MEA & CEE, Oracle. "The Sultanate of Oman's 'Cloud First' national strategy to drive socio economic success for the country is inspiring. Government entities in Oman will now be able to quickly respond to changing economic conditions by rapidly scaling and introducing secure innovative services."

Global equity markets likely to remain volatile

MUSCAT: Global equity markets were marginally positive during the week, supported by economic surprises. However, investors appeared to be concerned about the resurgence in new COVID-19 cases and roll back in reopening measures, which are likely to have an impact on the pace of recovery observed during the past one month. Oil prices closed higher by 1.03 per cent after an upward revision in its 2020 demand forecast by the International Energy

Agency (IEA); however, gains were capped by the rising concern of resurgence in new cases, Allied Investment Partners said in its weekly market report.

For the MENA region, equity markets performed positively during the week, adding to the gains recorded in the previous week. For the week, 5 out of the 7 indexes closed in green, while Oman and Abu Dhabi closed in red with losses of 0.51 per cent and 0.38 per cent, respectively. Egypt was the best performing index in the region with

gains of 1.79 per cent, followed by 1.43 per cent in Saudi Arabia, 1.00 per cent in Dubai, 0.94 per cent in Bahrain, and 0.33 per cent in Kuwait.

Going forward, global equity markets are likely to remain volatile amid concerns of resurgence in new cases and the subsequent restrictions on business activity to curb the new cases. Investors will also closely monitor the upcoming second-quarter earnings, which should help in reassessing economic recovery during the quar-

ter.

"In the MENA region, investors will continue to remain cautiously optimistic about the upward revision in oil demand for 2020 as the rapidly evolving COVID-19 situation could potentially depress any upside in oil prices going forward. Moreover, the upcoming earnings season will also be an important indicator for the equity markets as it will help in gauging the recovery in economic activity post the reopening of regional economies," the report added.

How to launch an e-commerce marketplace in Oman

This column is divided into two parts and explains in great details what are the steps needed in order to get started with an online marketplace in Oman and Middle East more broadly. Marketplaces have been popularised by Amazon and eBay in the late 90s and at the beginning of the 2000s. More recently, platforms like Alibaba have brought this concept to a global magnitude.

A dear Omani friend — let us call him Ibrahim in this column — has asked me to advise on an online marketplace project. He trusted my expertise in the fields and so he shared with me the principle of his new venture. After consulting him, he made some changes to the business model, so I thought of sharing the thinking process that I put in advising him, and hopefully it will be



STEFANO VIRGILLI

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of use for any other young Omani entrepreneurs who want to launch a new project during or after COVID-19.

Ibrahim told me that together with his cousin he wanted to launch a marketplace platform through which other entrepreneurs from Oman could have sold their products. Unfortunately it is easier said than done.

Having worked on similar projects before, I immediately pointed out the challenges in structuring such enterprise in such a way that business can be profitable and sustainable in the long run. In a nutshell, if you were to take away only one idea from this column I

would stretch that any marketplace takes more planning to get started than just setting up a website.

AVAILABILITY: First of all I have asked Ibrahim who was allowed to open a virtual shop in his marketplace. He answered that anyone could have opened a shop, but by doing so there is a main challenge in exercising quality control. It is very important to verify the origin of the goods. For example some stores might sell items that are illegal. In that case my friend Ibrahim could be legally in trouble, even if the products were not sold by him, but through his marketplace. Secondly, some virtual shops might

not be registered through the chamber of commerce and industry, posing another problem of legality, as the merchant could be infringing the rules and regulations to attain and maintain a commercial license.

ACCOUNTABILITY: Then I asked Ibrahim who was going to deliver the goods. He said that he did not think about it yet. I see logistics as the single most important node to solve when launching any e-commerce project. Making a website is the easiest part of the project. Making sure that the clients receive the products that they purchased in a short period of time, is the element that defines the success of the venture.

This is the end of the first part of this column. In the second part we will analyse more about Accountability, Responsibility and having All Parties Involved.

BankDhofar launches e-payment solution

MUSCAT: BankDhofar joined hands with Oman Air to launch an E-commerce Payment Gateway platform. The initiative will enable Oman Air customers to process their air tickets booking online, using their debit cards and receive instant responses of the payment transactions.

Ahmed bin Said al Ibrahim (pictured), Chief Operating Officer said: "BankDhofar is committed to providing quality products and services that fit in seamlessly to customer's needs and adapt to the increasingly changing technological trends. With this solution offered to Oman Air, BankDhofar aims to reaffirm its position as a leading bank in the Sultanate



in providing secured payment solutions."

This service is in line with BankDhofar's digital transformation roadmap to offer service excellence to its customers and contribute to the digital economy by improving the electronic payment ecosystem. BankDhofar's

E-commerce Payment Gateway platform offers a highly secure, safe & intelligent E-commerce transaction environment to its E-commerce customers. As phase one, the platform enables Oman Air customers to process their air tickets booking with their debit card, through booking websites or apps and receive instant responses of the payment transactions.

Al Ahlia Insurance names new Chairman

MUSCAT: Al Ahlia, one of Oman's leading insurers, has elected Shaikh Khalid bin Abdullah al Khalili (pictured)

as its new Chairman during the recently held board meeting. In the recent AGM, shareholders reelected six Directors Shaikh Khalid al Khalili, Jonathan Cope, Shahid Rasool, Yousuf al Balushi, Christopher Dooley and Patrick O Flynn and elected three new Directors Martin Rueegg, Paul Holmes and Ali Taqi Ibrahim al Lawati.

Shaikh Khalid al Khalili said, "Over the last three decades, Al Ahlia Insurance Co has come a long way in its journey of excellence to gain respect and reputation as a progressive, customer-centric insurer that contributes to growth of the industry as well as the economy. The strong brand



values, robust business process, international experience and local expertise have ensured that Al Ahlia is always evolving and keeping customers One Step Ahead".

Welcoming the newly elected Chairman and the new board members, Praveen Kumar, CEO – Al Ahlia Insurance Co. said, "It is a privilege for us to have Shaikh Khalid al Khalili continue on our board in his new role as Chairman and to have the new members. As a public listed company, Al Ahlia is proudly serving the community and the nation during these unprecedented times. I am confident that the Board of Directors will lead the team driving the company positively into the future to achieve new milestones."

BUSINESS



A security guard walks in front of an image of the Federal Reserve logo in Washington.

— Reuters

Federal Reserve's \$3 trillion virus rescue inflates market bubbles

WASHINGTON: The Federal Reserve's \$3 trillion bid to stave off an economic crisis in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak is fuelling excesses across US capital markets.

The US central bank has pledged unlimited financial asset purchases to sustain market liquidity, increasing its balance sheet from \$4.2 trillion in February to \$7 trillion today.

While the vast majority of these purchases have been limited to US Treasuries and mortgage-backed securities, the Fed's pledge to bolster the corporate bond market has been enough to spur a frenzy among investors for bonds and stocks.

"COVID-19 is now inversely related to the markets. The worse that COVID-19 gets, the better the markets do because the Fed will bring in stimulus. That is what has been driving markets," said Andrew Brenner, head of international fixed income at NatAlliance. Here are some of the market bubbles that investors are attributing to the Fed's intervention.

STOCK MARKET BONANZA

The Federal Reserve has not bought stocks as part of its financial stimulus programmes. But its near-zero interest rates and credit support for large swathes of Corporate America have driven yield-hungry investors back to the equity market.

THE US CENTRAL BANK HAS PLEDGED UNLIMITED FINANCIAL ASSET PURCHASES TO SUSTAIN MARKET LIQUIDITY, INCREASING ITS BALANCE SHEET FROM \$4.2 TRILLION IN FEBRUARY TO \$7 TRILLION.

Since their bottom on March 23, the S&P 500 and the Dow Jones Industrial Average have both risen more than 40 per cent and the Nasdaq composite has gained nearly 60 per cent. The S&P 500's forward price-to-earnings ratio is currently 21.5, a level last seen during the dot-com boom 20 years ago.

IPO FRENZY

The stock market euphoria has spilled over into initial public offerings (IPOs) and other stock sales to investors.

A record \$184 billion was raised in US equity capital markets in the second quarter, according to Refinitiv IFR data. Over \$8.9 billion worth of IPOs in the second quarter priced above the target range, the highest amount since the third quarter of 2014, according to Dealogic.

"Why anyone would buy Nissans at Bentley prices is beyond me, but that's what happens generally with any sexy IPO. Sure the Nissan has 4 wheels and it's fine transportation, but is it worth a Bentley valuation?" said Richard Bernstein, chief investment officer at Richard Bernstein Advisors.

DEBT BINGE

The Fed's bond-buying programs encouraged companies to tap credit markets and made the second quarter the busiest ever for debt issuance.

Some \$1.2 trillion of investment-grade paper was sold in the first half of the year, the highest issuance volume recorded by the Securities Industry and Financial Markets Association. Even though the Fed refrained from buying most junk-rated bonds, issuance was at \$200 billion through June, more than double last year's rate.

"Investment grade and high yield bonds had an incredible quarter in terms of issuance and performance. We just continue to see more and more money flow into those markets," said Ted Swimmer, head of capital markets at Citizen's Commercial Banking. "But there's been so much new issuance in the second quarter, you get concerned you're not going to see a ton of new issuance in the third quarter." — Reuters



AL MASHAYKHI RARING FOR MORE TRIUMPHS

ADIL AL BALUSHI

MUSCAT: Oman Paralympic star Mohammed al Mashaykhi has made his impressive mark in Arab, regional and international championships. The 29-year-old has won several medals for the Sultanate in the last few years.

Al Mashaykhi told Oman Daily Observer that his medal at the World Para Athletics Championship in London in 2017 will remain as his top accomplishment. “I am proud of my triumphs and I am looking forward to new achievements in the forthcoming events. London victory had encouraged me a lot to compete for the top positions and to claim the podiums in all my participation”, he said.

In February this year and prior to novel coronavirus spreading in the Sultanate, Al Mashaykhi, had claimed a gold medal in style in the fifth edition of the International Paralympic Athletics in Morocco. He had stolen the limelight from his opponents with top performance at the competitions. He registered a new personal record as he cleared a distance of 31.93 metres.

The Jaalan Bani Bu Ali resident is looking for new challenges and



accomplishments when things become normal after the COVID-19 outbreak. “It is correct that all athletes are affected by the stopping of the sporting activities during the pandemic as many of the events and championships are cancelled or postponed.

However, I took this opportunity to increase my daily home training sessions. I would like to thank Oman Paralympics Committee (OPC) as they provided some equipment for me to train at home”, he said.

Explaining how he overcame his injury period last year, the youngster said: “It was a difficult era in my sporting career as an athlete. However, I fully focused on my rehabilitation programme and thanks to all those who stood with me during the tough time”.

Coached by experienced Tunisian coach Sonia Mustafa, Mohammed aims to give better performance in the forthcoming participation. “I hope this outbreak will get over very soon and all the athletes will be back to their training and championships. I advise all my colleagues and team-mates to improve their physical fitness prior to the resumption of sporting activities”, he concluded.

Manchester City’s Europe ban overturned

MANCHESTER, England: Manchester City’s two-year suspension from European football was overturned by the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) on Monday, allowing the club to compete in next season’s elite Champions League competition.

CAS ruled that City did not breach Financial Fair Play (FFP) rules by disguising equity funding as sponsorship. Sport’s highest court also reduced a fine for failing to cooperate with Uefa to 10 million euros (\$11.30 million) from 30 million euros.

“Most of the alleged breaches reported by the (Uefa) Adjudicatory Chamber of the CFCB (Club Financial Control Body) were either not established or time-barred,” CAS said. European soccer’s governing body Uefa ruled in February that City had committed serious FFP breaches and failed to cooperate with its investigation.

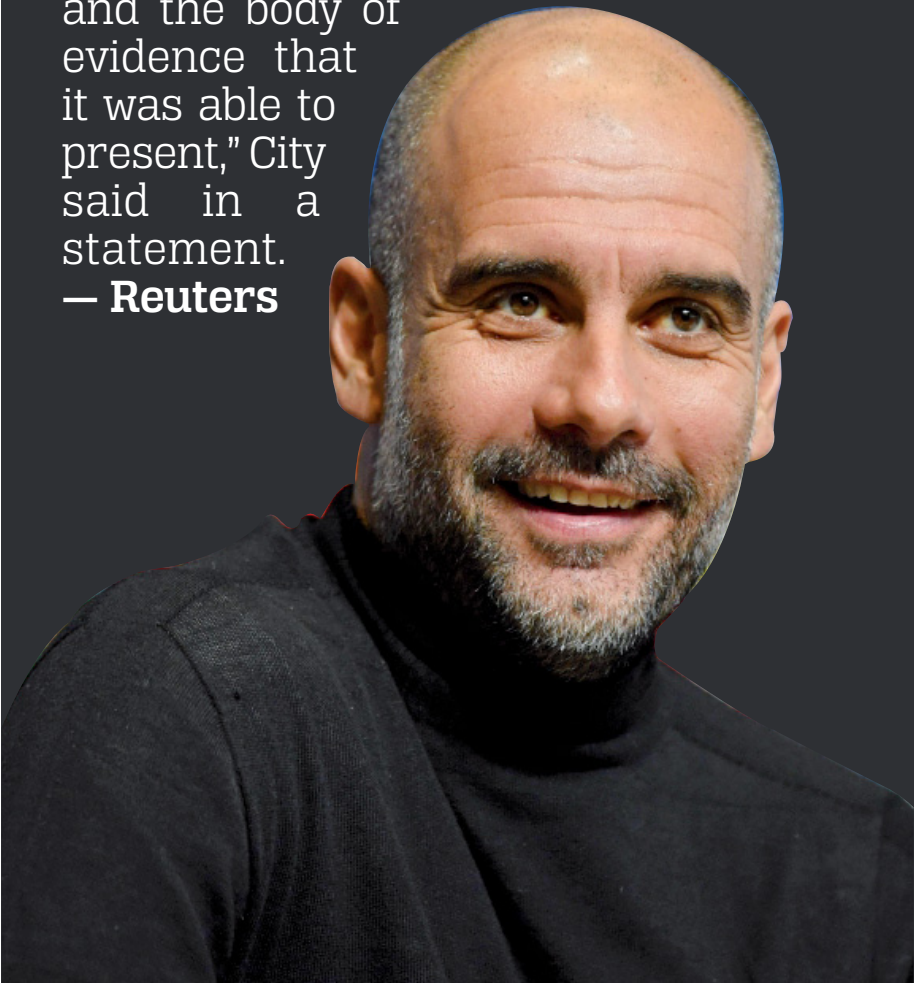
Missing out on the Champions League would have cost City, who have denied any wrongdoing, as much as 100 million pounds (\$126.02 million) in prize money and broadcast revenue, as well as matchday and other revenues.

The FFP regulations are designed to stop clubs running up big losses through spending on players. They also ensure sponsorship deals are based on their real market value and are genuine commercial agreements — and not ways for owners to pump cash into a club to get around the rules.

CAS said its full legal ruling, with details of the case and the decision, would be published in the coming days.

“Whilst Manchester City and its legal advisors are yet to review the full ruling by the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS), the Club welcomes the implications of today’s ruling as a validation of the Club’s position and the body of evidence that it was able to present,” City said in a statement.

— Reuters



SPORTS

SPURS CASH IN ON GUNNERS' ERRORS

ANDY JALIL

LONDON: A late winning goal by Toby Alderweireld secured a 2-1 victory for Tottenham Hotspur, taking them closer to their aim for Europa League next season. Arsenal, also fighting for a place in Europe, will need to tighten their defence which let them down, opening the way for Spurs in both their goals.

Spurs coach, Jose Mourinho, delighted with victory over their bitter rivals, said: "Big credit to the players because they were really fantastic. What I asked from them tactically they gave me, what I asked from them emotional point of view, they gave me even more.

"I could look at it from a selfish point of view and say since I arrived, if the championship started in that moment, even with all the problems we had, we would now be fourth or fifth in the table. I don't want to be selfish. I don't want to look at it just as a fan that is happy to finish above Arsenal."

He added: "I would love to play Europa League. It is not a competition I am in love with, but when you



Tottenham Hotspur's Toby Alderweireld celebrates scoring their second goal with Harry Winks. — Reuters

EPL RESULTS

On Sunday

Aston Villa 2 (Trezeguet 45+4, 59) Crystal Palace 0
Bournemouth 4 (Stanislas 66-pen, Solanke 67, 87, Evans 83-og) Leicester 1 (Vardy 23)
Tottenham 2 (Son 19, Alderweireld 81)
Arsenal 1 (Lacazette 16)
Wolves 3 (Jimenez 45+2-pen, Dendoncker 46, Jota 74) Everton 0

cannot play Champions League you play Europa. In my career I only played Europa League twice and I won it twice."

Gunners would be kicking themselves because they squandered a position of superiority. Alexandre Lacazette's 17th minute thunderbolt

from 25 yards gave them the lead after Granit Xhaka won possession from Serge Aurier.

But the lead was short lived as within a couple of minutes came the equaliser. Sead Kolasinac's pass back to David Luiz fell short and Heung-Min Son pounced on it, beating Luiz

who failed to catch up as Son advanced towards the goal and lifted the ball sublimely over Emiliano Martinez.

Arsenal missed two fine chances to score in the second half, Nicolas Pepe burst through with a powerful run only to put his shot just wide and Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang hit the bar after 59 minutes soon after another shot from him had been turned wide of the post.

Arsenal looked increasingly vulnerable and the decisive goal was scored after 81 minutes. Shkodran Mustafi failed to reach the in-coming corner kick and Kieran Tierney was out-matched as Alderweireld rose for his glancing header.

A disappointed Arsenal coach, Mikel Arteta said: "We have to learn, in every game something happens. A little margin here, a little margin there. But I'm sure we'll get there. I'm proud because I've never seen them play like they did today. I am sorry for the fans because I know how much it means to them." He added: "If we minimise the mistakes we make and play like that we will win many, many games."





West Indies’ Shannon Gabriel in action. – Reuters

SOUTHAMPTON: West Indies captain Jason Holder praised the “massive, massive heart” of Shannon Gabriel following the tourists’ four-wicket win in the first Test against England at Southampton on Sunday.

Fast bowler Gabriel was named man-of-the-match after taking combined figures of nine wickets for 137 runs as international cricket returned from lockdown.

The 32-year-old Trinidad quick was originally only named as a travelling reserve as he recovered from ankle surgery.

But he proved his fitness in two intra-squad warm-up matches and then showed his class as West Indies went 1-0 up in this three-match series.

Gabriel now boasts a fine career record of 142 wickets in 46 Tests at an average of under 30, with Holder telling reporters after stumps: “What Shannon has done in this game is nothing surprising.

“Shannon is just one of those guys who keep doing it. He has a massive, massive heart and he’s been through a lot.



West Indies’ Jermaine Blackwood plays a shot. – Reuters

“He wants success so badly. His body hasn’t held up the way he would like but to see him back out there fit and well and bowling fast for the West Indies is always a pleasing sight.

“He deserves every bit of success he’s had in this game. I’m really, really happy for Shannon, I know what he’s been through.

“We kept in contact while he was doing rehab. At some stages he was very frustrated by how things were going but he stuck it through,” added all-rounder Holder, who himself took a Test-best 6-42 in England’s lowly first

innings 204.

“We all know when Shannon is fit and healthy, he is a handful and he proved it in this game.”

For all Gabriel’s heroics, the West Indies still needed to bat well after being set a target of 200 to win on Sunday’s final day.

They got there largely thanks to Jermaine Blackwood’s 95.

Blackwood might not have played had fellow batsmen Darren Bravo and Shimron Hetmyer decided to tour rather than opting out of a campaign taking place against the backdrop of the coronavirus pandemic.

— AFP

ENGLAND 1ST INNINGS 204 (J HOLDER 6-42, S GABRIEL 4-62)	
WEST INDIES 1ST INNINGS 318 (K BRATHWAITE 65, S GABRIEL 61; B STOKES 4-49, J ANDERSON 3-62)	
ENGLAND 2ND INNINGS	
R Burns c Campbell b Chase	42
D Sibley c Dowrich b Gabriel	50
J Denly c Holder b Chase	29
Z Crawley c and b Joseph	76
B Stokes c Hope b Holder	46
O Pope b Gabriel	12
J Buttler b Joseph	9
D Bess b Gabriel	3
J Archer c Dowrich b Gabriel	23
M Wood c Dowrich b Gabriel	2
J Anderson not out	4
Extras (b4, lb10, nb3)	17
Total (all out, 111.2 overs, 502 mins) 313	
Fall of wickets: 1-72, 2-113, 3-151, 4-249, 5-253, 6-265, 7-278, 8-279, 9-303	
Bowling: Roach 22-8-50-0, Gabriel 21.2-4-75-5, Holder 22-8-49-1, Chase 25-6-71-2, Joseph 18-2-45-2, Brathwaite 3-0-9-0	
WEST INDIES 2ND INNINGS (TARGET: 200)	
K Brathwaite b Archer	4
J Campbell not out	8
S Hope b Wood	9
S Brooks lbw Archer	0
R. Chase c Buttler b Archer	37
J Blackwood c Anderson b Stokes ..	95
S Dowrich c Buttler b Stokes	20
J Holder not out	14
Extras (lb7, nb1, w5)	13
Total (6 wkts, 64.2 overs, 367 mins) 200	
Fall of wickets: 1-7, 2-7, 3-27, 4-100, 5-168, 6-189	
Bowling: Anderson 15-3-42-0, Archer 17-3-45-3, Wood 12-0-36-1, Bess 10-2-31-0, Stokes 10-2-1-39-2	
REMAINING FIXTURES	
Jul 16-20: 2nd Test, Emirates Old Trafford, Manchester	
Jul 24-28: 3rd Test, Emirates Old Trafford, Manchester	

SPORTS



■ MERCEDES
TAKE ONE-TWO

■ BOTTAS SECOND
WITH 6-POINT LEAD OVERALL

■ VERSTAPPEN THIRD AT RED BULL RING

HAMILTON SIZZLES AT STYRIAN GP

STYRIA, Austria: Six-time world champion Lewis Hamilton dominated the Styrian Grand Prix in a Mercedes one-two on Sunday to celebrate his 85th Formula One win and move a step closer to Michael Schumacher's record of 91 victories.

Finnish team-mate Valtteri Bottas, winner of last weekend's season-opener that was also held without spectators at Austria's Red Bull Ring, finished 13.719 seconds behind with his championship lead cut to six points.

Red Bull's Max

Verstappen completed the podium, more than half a minute behind Hamilton, on a sunny afternoon at his team's home track.

Hamilton's victory, something of a cruise past the empty grandstands, was his first since Abu Dhabi in November and extended his record run of successive points finishes to 35 races.

"What a weird year it is, but it's great to be back up here, to be driving with this kind of performance," said Hamilton, who started from his 89th pole position after a

Styria		Spielberg	July 12		
1	L. Hamilton (GBR)	1h22:50.683	25	Driver rankings	
		Mercedes		Valtteri Bottas (FIN)	43
2	V. Bottas (FIN)	at 13.719 secs	18	Lewis Hamilton (GBR)	37
		Mercedes		Lando Norris (GBR)	26
3	M. Verstappen (NED)	at 33.698	16	Charles Leclerc (MON)	18
		Red Bull		Sergio Perez (MEX)	16
4	A. Albon (THA)	at 44.400	12	Teams	
		Red Bull		Mercedes	80
5	L. Norris (GBR)	at 1:01.470	10	McLaren	39
		McLaren		Red Bull	27
				Racing Point - Mercedes	22

sensational lap in a rain-drenched qualifying and remained in complete control.

"I'm so grateful to be back in first place. It feels like a long time coming since the last race last year, and to come back in after a difficult weekend last week is a great, great step forward."

Sunday's race was the first time a circuit has hosted two back-to-back

rounds in the same championship year, with the original calendar ripped up and rewritten due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ferrari, far from Schumacher's glory years at the turn of the century, provided one of the major talking points with Charles Leclerc and Sebastian Vettel colliding on the opening lap and retiring from the race.

It was the second time in four races that the pair had clashed.

"I have done a very bad job today, I let the team down. I can only be sorry even though I know it's not enough," said Leclerc of his rash move on the inside of Vettel.

"I put all the efforts of the team in the bin."

— Reuters

FEATURES

THE AWAITED AL TABSEEL SEASON OF OMANI FARMERS

Photo by Hani al Sulaimani

It's a traditional practice celebrated by many farmers across different wilayats for generations. Although its popularity has waned in recent times, majority of date farm owners still look forward to late June and early days of July for the al tabseel season, the dates harvest and processing season, and in some farms, families still do it together just like in the olden days ... **page 20**



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Virus won't stop Eiffel
Tower high life, says top
French chef



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The awaited Al Tabseel season of Omani farmers

TEXT BY RUQAYA AL KINDI
PHOTOS BY HANI AL SULAIMANI

In the olden times, the beginning of June until the early days of July was celebrated by many of Oman’s farmers. Across the different wilayats all over the country, this period is a busy time when families would gather in their farms for the yearly Al Tabseel season – the annual harvest and processing of the much-awaited ripened dates. The practice has been passed from one generation to the next and while many of the traditional practices in the past has waned, there are still wilayats that honour this tradition and carried on an important social and economic practice. “The period between late June and

early July are specifically referred to as “Al Qiyd” or the period of harvesting the “Al Mabsali” palm tree,” shared Yaqdan al Masroori, an Omani who manages his own dates factory located in the Wilayat of Manah for four years now. Farmers can tell the start of al Tabseel period through the signs appearing in the palm trees. The most important of these signs, as al-Masroori shared, is the change of colour of the Al Basr (fresh dates). The fruits change from light yellow to dark yellow. “Farmers collect their harvest (Al Mabsily dates) and put them in huge pots called ‘Marajel’. These fresh dates are boiled in these pots for about half an hour. Then the boiled dates are taken to an open space called Al Mestah. Farmers dry these dates under the sun for four days,” Al Masroori said. “Fagurs, the dates after cooking, are left in Al-Mestah for 7 days until they

dry completely and then they are transferred to the place of storage for several months. Then, it is sold in the markets or exported abroad,” al Masroori added. Usually cooking is done by the most experienced and skilled men. In the past, during the season, men, women, and children from families or even neighbours gather to help and each has a specific duty to accomplish. This ritual is accompanied by traditional songs to entertain them and encourage them to exert more efforts. But nowadays, these rituals began to disappear. For commercially processed dates, Al Masroori said that the “The sales and marketing outlets were limited to the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, as it is the one that buys the product from the citizens, and it imposes prices according to the quality levels. The prices often range from 400 Bz to 600 Bz per kilo.” Al Masroori said that low price is one of the factors why many people have stopped processing and selling their dates. “For us, we managed to survive in this field because we do the marketing ourselves and we also included the product with other industries to increase its economic return. We convert the dates into powder and use it as “dates sugar”. Perhaps in the coming years, it will be used in other things,” he said. In the future, “I plan to use this product in the manufacturing industries instead of exporting it as raw material. For example, we can use the dates sugar to substitute for white sugar and to include it into the bread and biscuit industry,” he shared.



FEATURES

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Dhalqut, Zūfār, Oman





New York’s Met Opera to host virtual concert series

SEVERAL OF OPERA'S biggest stars beamed in from around the world on Saturday to announce the Metropolitan Opera's latest virtual initiative amid the coronavirus outbreak.

The New York opera house, which suspended live performances in March, plans a dozen pay-per-view concerts through mid-December featuring leading singers from around the world. Tickets will

cost \$20.

The series kicks off on July 18 with German tenor Jonas Kaufmann at the Polling Abbey outside Munich performing some of opera's greatest hits including "Nessun dorma" from Puccini's "Turandot" and popular arias from "Tosca" and "Carmen."

Others performances include American soprano Renee Fleming at the

Dumbarton Oaks Museum in Washington in August and Russian soprano Anna Netrebko from the Liechtenstein Palace in Vienna.

Details about later performances are still being worked out. None of the shows will have a live audience, a Met spokeswoman said.

Welsh bass-baritone Bryn Terfel plans a holiday concert from a to-be-determined church in Wales in December.

"Hopefully by then there will be a semblance of an orchestra," Terfel said on the Zoom press conference.

American soprano Angel Blue will also perform in December at a New York venue yet to be named. Blue said she hopes to include some patriotic numbers that could bring people together in the wake of mass protests for racial justice.

"We are a melting pot," said Blue, who is African American. music has the capacity to help people "come together for the good of the commu-

nity," she added.

The series is the opera's latest effort to stay on the public radar and garner some revenue at a time when live performances remain suspended.

The Met last month canceled its fall 2020 season. The current plan is to launch the season on December 31, but that also depends on public health conditions.

Like their audiences, singers said they have been grappling with how daily life has been upended by COVID-19.

Instead of jetting around the world to perform, singers have been home-schooling kids, baking bread and making home repairs.

Joyce DiDonato, an American mezzo soprano, said she went back and forth between relief at having "time to breathe" and grief at the loss of her old life.

She expects her September recital in Spain to reflect this tension, but hasn't completely figured it out yet, calling the program "work in progress." —AFP

FEATURES

Virus won't stop Eiffel Tower high life, says top French chef

THE EBULLIENT FRENCH chef Frederic Anton is having none of the talk that the world will not be the same again after the coronavirus.

From the kitchen of his Jules Verne restaurant perched high on the Eiffel Tower 125 metres (410 feet) above Paris, the combative cook is determined that it will make not one iota of difference to the glories of French gastronomy.

"Nothing is going to change," he declared, certainly not on the plate.

"The whole world loves to eat. The first day after the lockdown in Paris, restaurant terraces everywhere were full of people eating out.

"No one thought twice about it," Anton told AFP. "France is the land of food after all."

The three-star Michelin chef took over the Eiffel Tower space last year after locking horns with its previous tenant, Alain Ducasse.

The superchef — who holds more Michelin stars than any other living chef — did not take well to Anton swiping the lease for the dining room, with its panoramic views, from under his nose.

Especially as it was there that Ducasse cooked for Donald and Melania Trump and the French first couple after the US president's 2017 trip to Paris, where he was guest of honour at the Bastille Day celebration.

While many top chefs worried about whether their restaurants would ever open again because of the virus, Anton said that for him the lockdown was a "holiday".

TAKEAWAYS? NEVER

As well as dreaming up a summer menu — courgette and almond tarts, artichoke poivrade, crab with cavier and

langoustine ravioli with smoked cream — he caught up on the whole eight seasons of "Game of Thrones".

Not for him the soul-searching or the need to reinvent haute cuisine for the post-virus world.

"I am not going to question how a gastronomic restaurant works," said Anton.

Unlike some top Paris eateries, he never seriously considered the possibility of doing takeaway meals.

"We thought about it for two minutes — it's not necessary," said Anton, whose other Paris restaurant, the three-star Le Pre Catelan, will not reopen until September.

Nor is he following the lead of other chefs and toying with simpler and cheaper menus.

The very best ingredients do not come cheap, Anton argued.

"We are never going to debate about whether to buy the best langoustines or lamb from the Pyrenees, we will buy them. And if it takes a lot of people to transform them, we will do it," he insisted.

The Jules Verne's multi-course tasting menus is just as sophisticated and as expensive as it ever was — between 190 and 230 euros (\$260), without wine.

'LOCKDOWN DID ME GOOD'

Seasonality is the great buzz word of the moment but Anton plays it down. "We have done that since the dawn of time," declared the chef.

That said, all is not quite as it was before the virus.

Diners arriving in the private lift are separated from other clients by Plexiglass panels, though they can let their mask slip as soon as they are ushered to their table by the maitre d' who, like the waiters, will be wearing a natty black mask. — **AFP**