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SURPRISE CHECKS TO STOP VIRUS SPREAD

VINOD NAIR

MUSCAT: With the number of COVID-19 cases increasing at an alarming rate over the past month, the government has warned of random inspections of workplaces in the coming days. The government is also considering raising fine for not wearing masks from the current RO 20 to a higher amount.

“Everyone should be worried when the number is 9,000 in one week. Preventive measures must be followed by all institutions. I call on all officials in all government units to alert everyone and to report those who do not comply with the measures. The Ministry of Health has formed health teams which will make surprise visits to offices and take immediate

action against those who fail to comply”, said Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Saeedi, Minister of Health, and member of the Supreme Committee.

The minister said the past six weeks, ending on July 2, the Sultanate's pandemic scenario witnessed annoying, deplorable and frightful changes.

The current situation is a far cry from our experience during the first months of the pandemic outbreak when we managed to limit the number of infections due to the cooperation of all and their adherence to precautionary measures set by the Supreme Committee, the minister added.

TURN TO P2



HIS MAJESTY SENDS CABLES OF GREETING TO LEADERS

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Jorge Carlos Fonseca of the Republic of Cabo Verde, on the occasion of his country's National Day. His Majesty expressed his sincere greetings and best wishes to the President and the friendly people of Cabo Verde.

His Majesty has also sent a cable of greetings to President Abdelmadjid Tebboune of Algeria, on the occasion of his country's Independence Day anniversary.

His Majesty has sent a cable of greetings to President Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela, on the occasion of his country's Independence Day anniversary.

His Majesty has also sent a cable of greetings to President Donald Trump of the United States of America, on the occasion of his country's Independence Day anniversary.

— ONA

US is one of Oman's largest trading partners

WASHINGTON: A recent report published by the US Congressional Research Service (CRS) said the United States is one of Oman's largest trading partners, describing the relations between the two countries as distinctive. In both 2018 and 2019,

the United States exported about \$2 billion in goods to Oman, and imported about \$1.1 billion from the Sultanate. The largest US export categories to Oman are automobiles, aircraft and related parts, drilling and other oilfield equipment and other machinery. Of the imports, the

largest product categories are fertilisers, industrial supplies and oil by-products such as plastics. The US-Oman Free Trade Agreement has led to increased partnerships between Omani and US companies in a broad range of industries, not limited to energy. — ONA

OMAN

SURPRISE CHECKS TO STOP VIRUS SPREAD

FROM PAGE 1

“There is one person who went to work and shook hands with all his colleagues, and then he testified that his wife was infected with COVID-19, what can we call this behaviour?” the minister said.

The Ministry of Manpower has warned of legal action if private sector companies and establishments try to hide any COVID-19 symptoms of their employees.

The ministry called upon the private sector to direct their employees to visit the nearest health institutions or testing centres if they have any COVID-19 symptoms. “Such cases should not be concealed in the larger public interest, to limit the spread of the virus”, it said.

In the event of any detection of the case, the employer should strictly adhere to domestic quarantine procedures for the worker, and the employer should not summon the worker to office during the period of the domestic quarantine.

27 FLIGHTS TO CARRY INDIANS HOME THIS MONTH

KABEER YOUSUF

MUSCAT: As many as 27 flights will take Indians home from the Sultanate of Oman as part of the 4th phase of repatriation, according to a statement issued by the Indian Embassy. Three flights will leave on Sunday to Thiruvananthapuram, Kozhikode and Kochi.

Four flights to Kannur, Trivandrum, Chennai and Kochi flew in the beginning of the month carrying nearly 1,000 passengers. Besides, over 15,000 people have reached home ever since the national repatriation drive began on May 9.

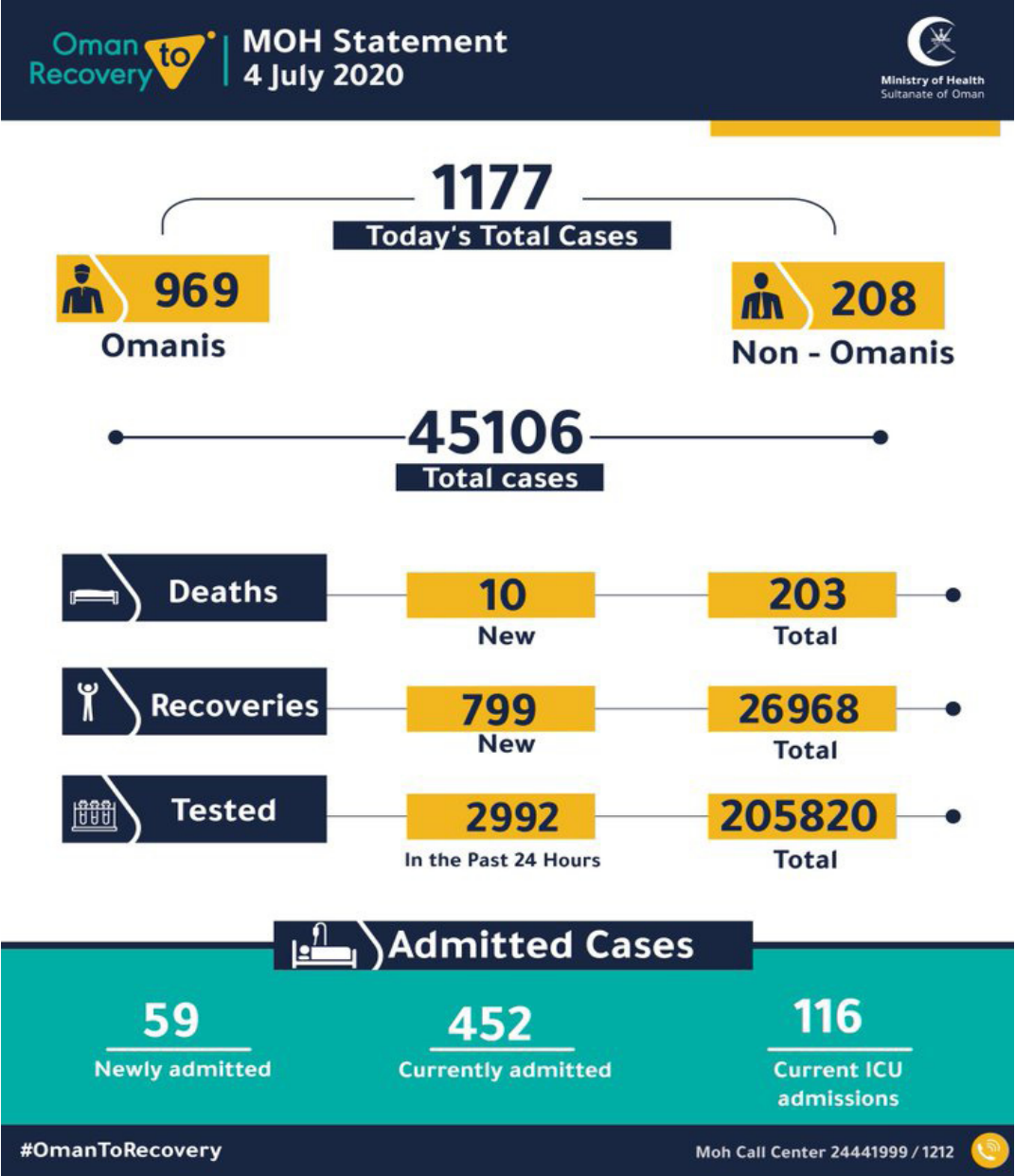
More than 90 flights have departed from Muscat and Salalah international airports to different Indian cities carrying 14,855 passengers. These included 42 flights under Vande Bharat Mission and 40 chartered services by NGOs and corporates in the Sultanate.

STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT: Ten people died of COVID-19 in the past 24 hours, taking the total death toll in Oman to 203 as 1,177 new cases were registered taking the total coronavirus cases in the country to 45,106.

New cases in the Wilayat of Muttrah hit an all-time low of 32 while the Wilayat of Seeb has the most number of COVID-19 patients in the Sultanate at 10,356, according to the data provided by the Ministry of Health on Saturday. A total of 5,744 patients recovered, while there are only 1,744 active cases in Muttrah.

Muscat reported 368 new cases, North Al Batinah 273, South Al Batinah 234, Al Dhakilyah 79, Al Wusta 4, South Al Sharqiyah 62, North Al Sharqiyah 39, Al Buraimi 18, Al



Dhahirah 45 and Dhofar 55.

Within Muscat, Bausher reported 50 new cases, Seeb 175, Al Amerat 66, Muttrah 32, Muscat 20 and Qurayat 25.

Of the total 28,846 infected cases, 18,589 cases have recovered. There are only 10,125 active coronavirus cases in Muscat Governorate.

RAFO carries out medical evacuation

KHASAB: The Royal Air Force of Oman (RAFO) carried out medical evacuation of a citizen suffering from health problems. The patient was transported from the Wilayat of Khasab in Musandam Governorate to Al Musannah Air Base and then he was taken by an ambulance to the Royal Hospital in Muscat to receive medical attention.

The operation is part of the humanitarian services provided to citizens and expats by the Sultan's Armed Forces and the other departments of the Ministry of Defence alongside other state departments.



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Plan for field hospital in Muscat

SAMUEL KUTTY

MUSCAT: Plans are afoot to set up a field hospital in the Muscat Governorate as part of the measures to treat persons infected with coronavirus.

This was revealed by Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Saeedi, Minister of Health, member of the Supreme Committee tasked with tackling developments resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

“A plan is under way to set up a field hospital in Muscat Governorate for non-critical cases, with a capacity ranging between 250 and 300 beds”, he told a media briefing.

While revealing that the intensive care units in different government hospitals are experiencing immense pressure, Al Saeedi said that plans are ahead to increase their capacity.

He pointed out that there is great indifference and that gatherings were detected in family homes. Some people were found playing football on the



beach. Others converged in masses at shopping outlets. The minister explained that lockdown procedures depend on epidemiological data, noting that this pandemic impaired health establishments, compromising their ability to cope with other diseases and treatments. Dr Ali al Muqbali, Director of

Disease Surveillance and Control Department in the Governorate of North Al Batinah, said that gatherings are the biggest culprit of the recent spate in cases of infection in North Al Batinah Governorate. He cited examples of wedding parties which, he said, put hospitals on the verge.

OCCI COMMITTED TO ALLEVIATING COVID-19 IMPACT

KABEER YOUSUF

MUSCAT: The Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) has said it is committed to alleviating the impact of coronavirus pandemic on

the small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and start-ups in the country.

Speaking to the Observer, Redha bin Juma al Saleh, Member of the OCCI Board, said that the interest-free loans stipulated by the Supreme Committee are great relief to these sectors.

“The plan of an emergency loan without

interest to help the groups of entrepreneurs who are most affected due to the pandemic is a great relief to the sector,” he said. “We are committed to supporting the various entrepreneurs and business entities in the country by offering the packages that offer respite to the businesses operating in the country.”

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FOLLOW GUIDELINES OR FACE ACTION

RESPONSIBILITY TO FIGHT CORONAVIRUS SHOULD BE ‘COLLECTIVE’: MINISTER

SAMUEL KUTTY

MUSCAT: The evasive approach of the civil society in adhering to the laws as part of containing the spread of the coronavirus in the Sultanate has come under fire from the Supreme Committee.

With a further spike looming on the horizon, the authorities have sounded tough saying, “follow the guidelines of face action”.

While expressing his ire at the present scenario, Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Saeedi, Minister of Health, said, “It is really sad that our experience suffered a radical setback over the past six months as a result of the nonchalance of some people.”

Dr Al Saeedi, who is a member of the Supreme Committee tackling the COVID-19 situation, made the statement during the 12th press conference held at the weekend.

“We must always be disciplined to ensure that we remain safe. For this, we must wear mask, must not go out if not necessary, and practise our social distancing,” the minister urged.

The Minister of Health underscored that responsibility should be “collective between the government as institutions and as individuals”.

The minister recalled the decision of the Minister of Manpower on escalating penalties on private sector establishments that do not abide by the precautions.

WE MUST ALWAYS BE DISCIPLINED TO ENSURE THAT WE REMAIN SAFE. FOR THIS, WE MUST WEAR MASK, MUST NOT GO OUT IF NOT NECESSARY, AND PRACTISE OUR SOCIAL DISTANCING

DR AHMED BIN MOHAMMED AL SAEEDI
MINISTER OF HEALTH



“Penalties deterred many, but we are still studying ways of accentuating and escalating them against offenders and non-abiding individuals,” said Dr Ahmed.

He added, “It is high time we acted firmly with offenders. Their names should be announced.”

The minister said that deliberate offense causing the infection is considered an equivalent of murder. “In order to sense the risk, we should all feel as potential carriers of the virus,” said the minister.

While explaining, he said, “The cur-

rent situation is a far cry from our experience during the first months of the pandemic outbreak when we all managed to limit the number of infection cases due to the cooperation of all people and their adherence to precautionary measures set by the Supreme Committee,” the minister explained.

He pointed out that failure to stick to health guidelines can cause the transfer of the infection to people having chronic diseases or elderly people, causing severe suffering or even death in some cases.

GDP FALLS 3.9 PER CENT IN FIRST QUARTER

MUSCAT: The Sultanate's gross domestic product (GDP) at current market prices fell by 3.9 per cent to reach RO 6.75 billion at the end of March 2020, according to the provisional data released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

There was a rise in oil activities by 0.7 per cent at the end of March 2020, registering RO 2.42 billion compared to RO 2.41 billion at the end of March 2020. The share of crude oil from

among oil activities was RO 2.07 billion, which is an increase of 2.6 per cent at the end of March 2020, when it was RO 2.01 billion.

Natural gas dropped by 9.1 per cent, reaching RO 356.7 million compared to RO 392.5 million. Total non-oil activities declined by 6.2 per cent to RO 4.63 billion. Services activities were at the forefront of non-oil activities, which was at RO 3.33 billion, down by 5.2 per cent over RO 3.51 billion.

Hotels and restaurants, transport, storage and

communications and financial brokerage activities fell by 14.7 per cent, 5.7 per cent and 4.8 per cent. Wholesale and retail trade, as well as public administration and defence activities also decreased by 10.5 per cent and 4.2 per cent, respectively.

Industrial activities dropped by 11.5 per cent to RO 1.10 billion at the end of the first quarter of 2020. The manufacturing sector fell by 12.1 per cent and mining and quarrying by

37.9 per cent.

Basic chemical industry activities declined by 7.8 per cent, electricity and water supply by 2.8 per cent. Other manufacturing industries fell by 12.1 per cent, and construction activities fell by 10.3 per cent.

Agriculture and fisheries sectors and real estate showed an increase of 10.3 per cent and 2.1 per cent to reach RO 195.4 million and RO 321.8 million, respectively, by end of March 2020. — **ONA**

OMAN ENDORSES MULTILATERALISM

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH

MUSCAT: Oman recently stressed on the welfare of the youth and their education that saw disruption due to COVID-19.

The digital divide was in focus at the Global Declaration on the Digital Response to COVID-19 co-sponsored by Estonia and Singapore last week.

‘The aim of this Ministerial Conference was to provide an opportunity to discuss how countries can emerge stronger and better equipped from the COVID-19 crisis by using innovative and flexible digital solutions and working together as a global family. Countries can share the lessons learned from our response to this unprecedented crisis, and highlight their outlook for our future, particularly as we face challenges to multilateralism and in view of the 75th anniversary of the United Nations,’ said the organisers.

During the video



conference, Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidi, Secretary-General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stated that the issues raised by this video conference are of great importance. “Whatever is our current difficulties, we are totally supportive of its objectives as well as of the declaration that comes out of it.

“First we endorse the priority of supporting and sustaining multilateralism at every opportunity. We view the proliferation of unilateralism as unhelpful for peace and stability.



We endorse the principle that no one should be left behind. We recognise that inequality is a fundamental challenge that needs to be addressed again in the interest of peace and stability.

Only through multilateralism and technologies and best practices can it be most effectively shared around the world. It is the foundation stone for fruitful international cooperation,” said Sayyid Badr.

“We endorse the principle that no one should be left behind. We recognise that inequality is a fundamental challenge that needs to be addressed again in the interest of peace and stability.”

He also addressed the

concern for the young people, “In the Sultanate of Oman, Omanis are doing the best in this regard. For instance, we have the Technology Investment Fund to support Youth initiatives and Start-Ups which we hope will generate more digital solutions for our community in many fields from healthcare to education.”

But the fact remains that right now in Oman as is the case in many countries around the world schoolchildren and college students have had their education drastically interrupted.

Ministers from more than 60 countries participated in the virtual conference.

According to the organisers, the digital transformation of societies, which has sped up as a result of the current COVID-19 crisis, could bring about a global breakthrough. The understanding is that digital transformation should be addressed in a holistic manner, encompassing all aspects of society.

Online Honey Market extended till July 12

KABEER YOUSUF

MUSCAT: The 14th edition of the Omani Honey Market organised by the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries has been extended till July 12, according to the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries.

The week- long festival opened by Ahmed bin Nasser al Bakri, Under-Secretary at the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries last Sunday has been showcasing a diverse collection of honey and honey products online attracting beekeepers

as well as customers from the region and beyond.

“We have also launched a catalog of products available and purchase methods to support participants and make it easy for customers to scroll through the products,” said Dr Yousuf al Raisi, Assistant Director-General for Agriculture and Livestock Marketing and Investment at the MoAF.

The online expo titled ‘Shahd’ offers over 5.5 tonnes of honey from products, a collection of 36 beekeepers from various governorates of the Sultanate.



SULTANATE ATTENDS ARAB MINISTERS' MEET



MUSCAT: Shaikh Saad bin Mohammed al Saadi, Minister of Sports Affairs, Deputy Chairman of the Executive Office of the Council of Arab Ministers of Youth and Sports, took part in the 65th session of the executive office held via video conferencing. The session, chaired by Ashraf Sobhy, Egyptian Minister of Youth and Sports, discussed the recommendations of the 40th session of the Board of Directors of the Arab Fund for Youth and Sports Activities, and the report of the Technical Secretariat of the Council of Arab Ministers of Youth and Sports. — **ONA**

COCONUT FARMING PROSPERS IN DHOFAR



SALALAH: The Governorate of Dhofar is rich in many tropical fruit crops, such as the coconut palm, which is largely grown in the coastal areas of the governorate, thanks to appropriate climate conditions. Some people call the coconut palm ‘the Tree of Life’ due to its multiple economic, nutritional, healing and cosmetic benefits. It is considered as one of the main sources of vegetable oils. It is used in extracting oil and butter, and making various types of sweets and cosmetics. Owing to its economic importance, the government institutions in the governorate are making efforts to promote coconut farm-

IN VIEW OF THE ECONOMIC IMPORTANCE OF THE COCONUT TREE, GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS IN DHOFAR PROMOTE ITS FARMING BY INCREASING THE CULTIVATED AREA, PRODUCING HIGH QUALITY SEEDLINGS AND BY CONTROLLING PESTS

ing by increasing the cultivated area or multiplying their numbers and producing improved high quality seedlings for planting, in addition to controlling the agricultural pests. The Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries

continues to implement the project for distributing 50,000 seedlings over a period of five years. The project started in October 2017. The ministry has distributed more than 12,522 coconut palm seedlings to farmers, citizens and government institutions. The project continues until it reaches the targeted number. Dhofar Municipality is keen on growing many coconut trees in a number of locations in Salalah and some coastal wilayats. The municipality has planted 3,109 saplings, from 2018 to the middle of 2020, along the main roads and public places in Salalah. The municipality over-

sees a coconut farm, which has about 5,200 trees. The total number of coconut trees in the municipality stands at 11,740 in various public places of the governorate. Dr Ahmed bin Bakhait al Shanfari, Director of the Department of Agricultural and Animal Research in the Governorate of Dhofar, said in a statement to Oman News Agency, “The Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries made great efforts to develop and maintain this crop.” He pointed out that the ministry is working to produce and distribute seedlings of various varieties of coconuts at its fruit nursery in the Agricultural Research Station. — **ONA**

Restaurants, salons reopen in England



A woman gets her hair coloured at Blow by Suave as it reopens in Chester, UK, on Saturday. — Reuters

LONDON: People could have a meal in a restaurant or get a hair-cut for the first time in over three months on Saturday as England took its biggest steps yet towards resumption of normal life.

They could also get a drink in a pub, as they were allowed to start serving from 6 am, sparking worries of over-indulgence on what the media dubbed a “Super Saturday” of coronavirus restrictions being eased. Some hairdressers were reported to have opened at the stroke of midnight.

The Holland Tringham pub in south London, part of the JD Wetherspoon chain, opened at 8 am and was about three quarters full by 11.20 am.

Julie Scott, a 43-year-old teacher, was there with her family for drinks and food.

“I think it’s just where everyone gets to socialise and catch up with people that they haven’t seen... it’s nice to just get together,” she said.

Others complained that the lockdown, which began in late March and has been gradually eased in recent weeks, had lasted too long.

“It’s about time they opened them up,” said pensioner Ron Lock.

Police chiefs are worried the reopening of pubs could fuel drunken

and irresponsible behaviour, while hospitals have been warned to prepare for a New Year’s Eve-style weekend.

“There’s an element of decompression going on, particularly with younger people who’ve had some very responsible parents keeping them in over recent weeks,” Marc Jones, Police and Crime Commissioner for Lincolnshire, told BBC radio.

Britain has been the European country worst hit by the coronavirus, with more than 300,000 infections and an official death toll of 44,131. Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s government has faced criticism from the opposition over its handling of the pandemic — including locking down later than some other parts of Europe.

In another relaxation of lockdown rules two households can now meet indoors as long as social distancing is maintained, and overnight stays are allowed.

The rule changes apply only to England as the devolved nations in the United Kingdom — Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland — have been setting their own timetables for easing lockdown restrictions.

— Reuters

14 feared dead as heavy rain lashes Japan

TOKYO: Fourteen people were feared dead at a nursing home in western Japan on Saturday as record rainfall triggered massive floods and landslides, forcing authorities to issue evacuation advisories for more than 200,000 residents.

The victims were found “in cardio-respiratory arrest” at the facility for elderly people that was flooded after a nearby river broke its banks, governor Ikuo Kabashima from the western region of Kumamoto told reporters.

Authorities in Japan often use that term before a doctor officially certifies death.

“The Self-Defence Forces have launched rescue operations,” Kabashima said, adding that three others at the home were suffering from hypothermia.

Some 60 to 70 people were in the home as water rushed into the second floor on Saturday morning, public broadcaster NHK said.

Local officials separately said another person was also found in cardio-respiratory arrest in landslides in Kumamoto. They had previously said two were feared dead.

Elsewhere in Kumamoto, one person was seriously injured and nine others were missing while about 100 people were stranded as roads were cut off by floods and landslides, NHK reported.

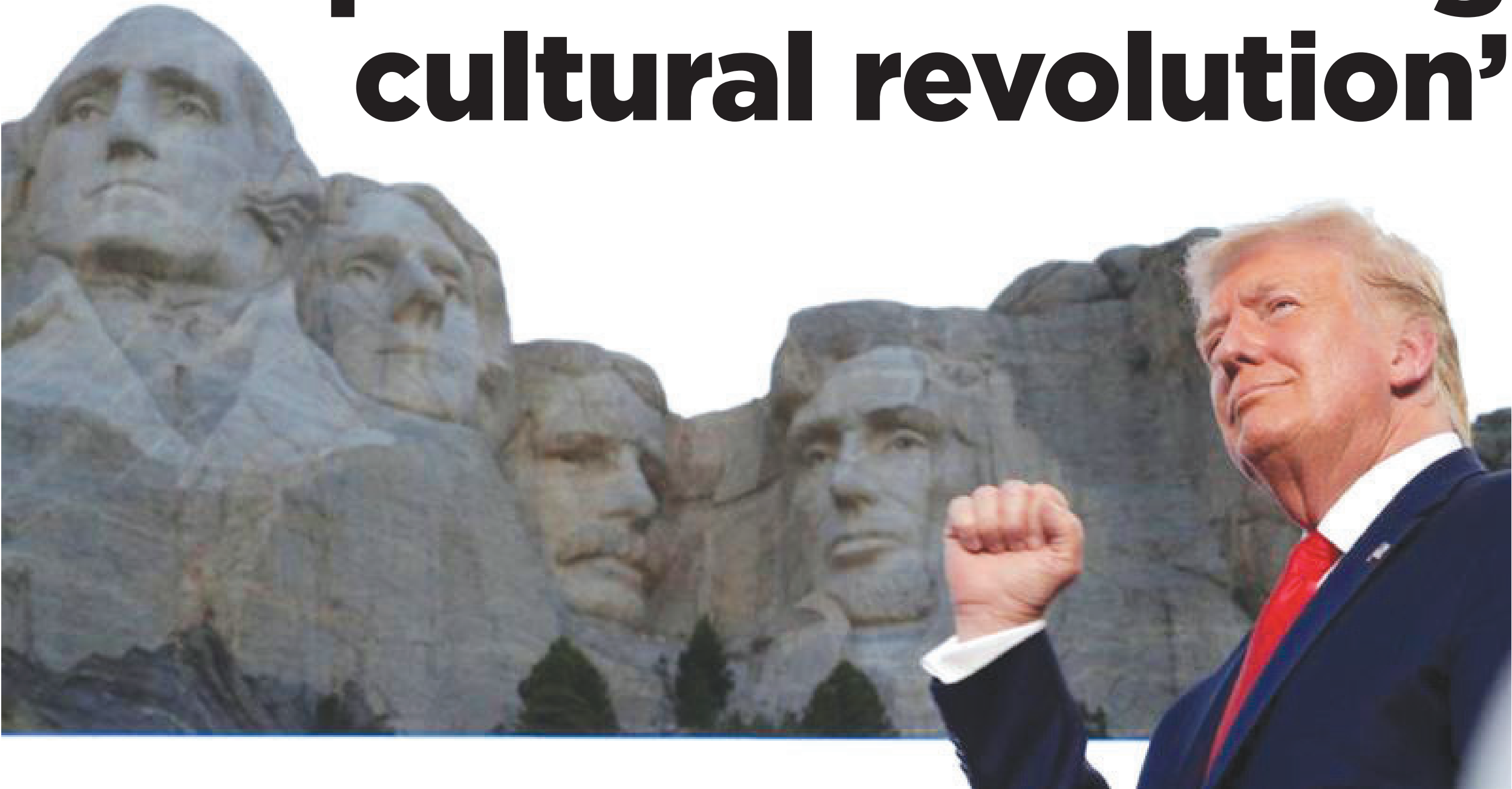
The nation’s weather agency downgraded rain warnings by one notch from the highest emergency level in Kumamoto and nearby Kagoshima, but Prime Minister Shinzo Abe urged local people to be “on maximum alert”. — AFP



An aerial view shows flooded Kuma River caused by heavy rain at a residential area in Hitoyoshi, Kumamoto prefecture, southern Japan, on Saturday. — Reuters

WORLD

Trump attacks ‘left-wing cultural revolution’



President Donald Trump attends US Independence Day Mount Rushmore fireworks celebrations in Keystone, South Dakota, on Friday. — Reuters

MOUNT RUSHMORE NATIONAL MEMORIAL: President Donald Trump on Friday accused “angry mobs” of trying to erase history with efforts to remove or rethink monuments to US historical figures and used a speech at Mount Rushmore to paint himself as a bulwark against left-wing extremism.

On a day when seven US states posted a record number of new COVID-19 cases, the pandemic moved further into Trump’s inner circle. Kimberly Guilfoyle, a senior campaign official and the girlfriend of Donald Trump Jr, tested positive in South Dakota before the event, according to Sergio Gor, a

Trump campaign official. Trump Jr tested negative, Gor said.

The pre-July 4 holiday event drew 7,500 people, packed into an outdoor amphitheater. Many did not wear masks, defying the advice of health officials who have urged Americans to avoid large gatherings to slow the spread of COVID-19.

Trump has not worn a mask in public and made only limited reference to the pandemic in his remarks.

Speaking underneath the famed landmark depicting four US presidents, Trump warned that the demonstrations over racial inequality threatened

the foundations of the US political system.

“Make no mistake, this left wing cultural revolution is designed to overthrow the American revolution,” Trump said. “Our children are taught in school to hate their own country.”

In the nationwide unrest following the death of George Floyd, a black man who died in police custody in Minneapolis, protesters in several cities have vandalised the statues of leaders, including Confederate generals who led a rebellion against the US government during the 1861-65 US civil war.

— Reuters

Iran imposes new curbs as toll rises

TEHRAN: Iranians who do not wear masks will be denied state services and workplaces that fail to comply with health protocols will be shut for a week, President Hassan Rouhani said on Saturday as he launched new measures to try to curb the coronavirus.

Iran has been battling the spread of the coronavirus, with the total number of cases hitting 237,878 on Saturday and a further 148 deaths bringing the country’s toll to 11,408, Health Ministry spokeswoman Sima Sadat Lari said on state television.

Wearing masks becomes mandatory from Sunday in covered public places, Rouhani said. — AFP

G4 swine flu virus not new: China

SHANGHAI/BEIJING: China’s Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs said on Saturday that the so-called “G4” strain of swine flu virus is not new and does not infect or sicken humans and animals easily, rebuffing a study published earlier this week.

That study, by a team of Chinese scientists and published by the US journal Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS), warned that a new swine flu virus, named G4, has become more infectious to humans and could become a potential “pandemic virus”.

— Reuters

India’s virus cases hit record high

MUMBAI: India recorded its highest single-day spike of coronavirus cases on Saturday, with over 22,000 new cases and 442 deaths, as infections rose in the western and southern parts of the country amid heavy monsoon rains. The western state of Maharashtra, home to the densely packed financial capital Mumbai, has the country’s highest total, recording 6,364 fresh cases of the virus on Saturday and 198 deaths from COVID-19, the disease caused by the virus. Meanwhile, at least 32 people were killed by lightning across Bihar and Uttar Pradesh during monsoon storms, officials and news reports said on Saturday. — Reuters/dpa



Macron tightens grip ahead of 2022 challenge

MARIËTTE LE ROUX

By replacing his popular prime minister with a little-known bureaucrat, French President Emmanuel Macron has signalled that he intends to tighten the reins on government ahead of a bid for reelection in 2022, analysts say.

Macron anointed Jean Castex to take over from Edouard Philippe, whose popularity rose as the public face of France's coronavirus response even as the president lost support and his party suffered a humiliating rout in local government elections.

"And the new prime minister is.... #EmmanuelMacron," analyst Jean Garrigues of the University of Orleans tweeted after the surprise appointment of Castex on Friday.

The move, he said, was Macron's way "to reclaim the dominant spot in the executive couple" after long butting heads on policy with Philippe.

Contrary to expectations that Macron would choose from the left of the political spectrum to

appease widespread concern over his social agenda, the president looked to the right.

The new premier, like his predecessor, comes from the rightwing Republicans party of former Nicolas Sarkozy, who Castex had served as deputy chief of staff.

But, importantly, he is "a complete unknown quantity politically," according Mujtaba Rahman, managing director for Europe of the Eurasia Group political risk consultancy.

"President Emmanuel Macron has decided, in effect, to be his own prime minister for the last two years of his mandate," Rahman said.

Castex "will be the manager and de-facto chief of staff while Macron takes direct control of government in a lightning attempt to create a new record which he can present to the electorate in 2022."

The mayor of a tiny commune in southern France, Castex's most prominent job has been to oversee the easing of France's coronavirus lockdown.

— AFP

Thinking out loud...



RAY PETERSEN

r.j.petersen52@gmail

We are all scared... we are all frustrated... we do not understand what is going on... and 'things' don't appear to be getting any easier, or any better.

COVID-19 is a global pandemic from which no country has escaped thus far, and too many people have paid the ultimate price for an event which will be writ large in history, probably not as a natural event, but one built upon the foolishness of those seeking to manipulate nature in the cause of regional or global domination. Honestly, it is like something from the pages of a 'James Bond' thriller gone awry, where the evil genius was not stopped in time. Now 8 billion of us are scared witless!

But what is scarier is that there are murmurings not only in social media, of other viruses mutating from the original COVID-19. Frustratingly too, are the observations that the pandemic is "no problem. More people died on the road, drowned in the sea, died of lung cancer in the same period last year than this has killed so far," thus demonstrating why we are still in the grip of this thing. That is the scariest!

Across America, and much of Europe, 'Black Lives Matter' dominates, and not because most people think otherwise, but because as always, the response has been disproportionate and inappropriate to the offence. I certainly do not support the actions of the police, but we have an evolved society, laws, and process, and we just cannot use and/or ignore those as it suits us. Without the violence, looting and disruptions a way would have been found. I understand the frustration... but!

The problem is that the societies now suffering under the pressure of BLM have already earned the distrust of generations in the way they allowed wealthy, self-entitled, immoral financiers to escape from the moral and ethical excesses of the 2008 finance and stock market crash. Millions saw the very people they trusted with their life savings, mortgages, hopes and dreams, take them, spend them, pocket them, and just walk away. Now we are seeing airlines and big businesses, that have one bad year in fifty, throw their hands in the air and say, "we are broke," and make hundreds of thousands jobless. What are they doing with the squillions they have earned in other years? No wonder we are frustrated!

The escalation of BLM into a knee-jerk reaction against all police, and all government, has its beginnings in 2008, and its powder-keg moment deep in the restrictions and control elements of the pandemic.

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PACT SIGNED FOR \$350M TECH CITY IN SALALAH FREE ZONE

BUSINESS REPORTER

MUSCAT: Salalah Free Zone has signed an agreement with an investor in the United Arab Emirates for the establishment of a Technology City with an investment of around \$350 million.

A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed to this effect envisages a Technology City for innovation and fourth-generation (4G) technologies, said Ali bin Mohammed Tabouk, CEO of Salalah Free Zone. The City will feature a Data Park, technology academy and support facilities covering an area of 500,000 square metres.

It is the latest in a string of recent investments that have underscored the free zone's robust investment appeal. "We signed so far seven investment agreements during the first half of this year, taking the total number of projects signed to date in Salalah Free Zone (SFZ) to 88, representing around RO 3.3 billion (\$8.7 billion) in total investments, with the potential to create more than 8,000 direct jobs," said Tabouk.

Among the recent signings is a contract for the construction of the second phase of Al Mazaya Logistics Station, which offers 134,000 sq metres of storage area and land for the development of facilities and amenities for tenants in the free zone, he said.

Welcoming Salalah Free Zone's role in driving the economic diversification



“

We signed so far seven investment agreements during the first half of this year, taking the total number of projects signed to date in Salalah Free Zone to 88, representing around RO 3.3 billion (\$8.7 billion) in total investments, with the potential to create more than 8,000 direct jobs.



ALI BIN MOHAMMED TABOUK,
Chief Executive Officer,
Salalah Free Zone

of Dhofar Governorate, Sayyid Mohammed bin Sultan al Busaidi, Minister of State and Governor of Dhofar, said, "The Free Zone in Salalah is considered one of the most important fruits of the blessed Renaissance, which aims to support development efforts in Dhofar and contribute to the diversity of sources of income and the growth of

the national economy. We commend the successes achieved in Salalah Free Zone and its aspirations to become a global and regional centre for attracting investments."

Ahmed bin Nasser al Mahrizi, Minister of Tourism and Chairman of Salalah Free Zone, said: "The SFZ's success in attracting RO 3.3 billion in investments will translate

into developmental benefits for the national economy while also spawning business opportunities for national companies and SMEs.

These investments will also support job creation for citizens and drive technology inflows. Within this framework we continue to organise promotional campaigns in target markets such as India, Turkey, Iran, South Africa and other markets with a focus on attracting quality investments in logistics, manufacturing, and innovation-based technology.

Dr Abdullah bin Ali al Omari, First Deputy Chairman of Majlis A'Shura, said: "SFZ has achieved an Omanisation rate of about 89 per cent at the management level and 36 per cent generally, which is higher than the percentage specified in the Royal Decree 62/2006 for establishment of the free zone."

TURN TO PAGE 12



PROPOSED MINERAL RAILWAY PROJECT IN OMAN SHOWS PROMISE

CONRAD PRABHU

MUSCAT: An ambitious plan by Oman's authorities to harness the prolific mineral potential of central and southern parts of the Sultanate via the development of a Mineral Railway line holds significant promise, according to a key report published here recently.

According to the Implementation Support & Follow-up Unit (ISFU) of the Diwan of Royal Court, the project – which has been several years in planning – has the potential to catalyse economic growth in areas targeted for mineral development.

“Oman's ‘Mineral Railway’ project continued to show its potential as a key source of national economic development,” said ISFU, a high-powered task force mandated to fast-track approvals for projects and initiatives designed to accelerate Oman's economic diversification.

“The social-economic study for the railway showed impressive results after being carried out in April 2019 by Oman Rail, as it identified that the project has a very favourable Benefit Cost Ratio and will have a positive and sustainable contribution to the GDP of Oman,” the Unit stated in its 2019 Annual Report.

MULTIPLIER EFFECTS:

The social-economic study for the railway showed impressive results after being carried out by Oman Rail, as it identified that the project has a very favourable Benefit Cost Ratio and will have a positive and sustainable contribution to the GDP of Oman, says report.

ISFU is currently working with a number of government and public sector stakeholders to ensure that the requisite permits and approvals are speedily considered and processed.

Given the location of the mineral sites in Al Wusta and Dhofar Governorates, and the proposed alignment of the Mineral Line, the stakeholder agencies include a wide array of government ministries, as well as Minerals Development Oman (MDO), Public Authority for Mining (PAM), Special Economic Zone Authority at Duqm (SEZAD), and Oman Global Logistics Group (Asyad).

The Mineral Railway is proposed to support the annual transportation of over 30 million tonnes of mineral commodities from sites in Al Wusta and Dhofar Governorates to processing plants and export-channels in Duqm and neighbouring GCC countries. It will also enable the transportation of a projected 1 million tonnes of oilfield equipment from

Duqm port to oil and gas fields located in the surrounding area.

Furthermore, by transporting around 3 million tonnes of industrial goods and 15 million tonnes of general products, including foodstuff and agricultural products to destinations in Al Wusta and Dhofar Governorates, it will also act as an alternative to road-based transportation.

Wholly government-owned Mineral Development Oman (MDO) has been tasked with formulating a strategy for harnessing the industrial mineral resources located in the Al Shuwaymiyah – Manji mineral zone of Dhofar Governorate. The mineral zone – encompassing an area of over 3,000 sq kilometres – is said to host prodigious reserves of high-quality limestone and gypsum.

According to the latest ISFU report, significant headway has been made in progressing the project. “In 2019, ISFU has continued its efforts to assist

Minerals Development Oman (MDO) to begin the development and exploration programme for the project, as well as to appoint a partner to conduct the detailed exploration study,” it said.

“Furthermore, Oman Rail (a wholly-owned subsidiary of Asyad Group) developed Expressions of Interest documents to facilitate the floating of the project once it is approved. One of the challenges the initiative faced was selecting the appropriate mode of transport that would maximise economic benefits, while still remaining competitive in the mining market,” the Unit noted.

Significantly, the Public Authority for Privatisation and Partnership (PAPP) recently revealed that it is studying the potential for a privately-funded mineral port at Manji in Dhofar Governorate. The initiative – one of 49 projects planned for procurement by the Authority via the Public-Private-Partnership (PPP) model – is being explored in close collaboration with the Supreme Council for Planning, Ministry of Finance, Asyad Group, the Investment Centre at the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, and Public Authority for Mining, among other stakeholder agencies.

BUSINESS

OMAN’S RESTRUCTURED WATER SECTOR TO BE UNVEILED THIS YEAR

CONRAD PRABHU

MUSCAT: An ongoing restructuring of the Sultanate’s water and wastewater sectors is due to be wrapped up before the end of this year — a landmark exercise that will pave the way for the Authority for Electricity Regulation (AER) to assume responsibility for the water sector as well. According to the Public Authority for Water (Diam), considerable progress has been made in the unbundling and reorganisation of the constituent entities that make up the water and wastewater sectors in the Sultanate.

“During (2019), the Council of Ministers approved further steps in the project of restructuring the water and wastewater sectors, and it is hoped to complete the implementation of the restructuring project during the year 2020. The project will define the public policy for the water and wastewater sector, regulatory authority and operational structure,” said Dr Abdul Malik bin Abdullah al Hinai, Chairman of the Board of Directors, stated in foreword published in the 2019 Annual Report of Diam.

“Diam has continued to play an active role in the industry restructuring project with considerable



GOOD HEADWAY:

A draft sector law has been developed and consultation with the Ministry of Legal Affairs has commenced, says Diam.

progress being delivered throughout the year. The draft sector law has been developed and consultation with the Ministry of Legal Affairs has commenced. It is expected that the project will be implemented during 2020,” added Mohammed bin Abdullah al Mahrouqi, Chairman – Diam.

Nama Holding Company — part of state-owned Nama Group — is spearheading the execution of

the 20-months Detailed Design and Implementation phase, which was initiated in April 2018. The process broadly mirrors the unbundling and restructuring of the electricity sector that was undertaken around 2004.

It is understood that the restructuring exercise will dispense with the multiplicity of entities currently providing water and wastewater services in

the Sultanate. In their place will be three companies each of which will provide potable water and wastewater services within a specific geographical area.

This integrated business model will apply to all three companies in their respective jurisdictions. Sitting on top of this model is a regulator and policy maker for the combined sector.

Besides enhancing administrative and operational efficiencies within the new corporatised companies, restructuring will also contribute to increased competition and delivery of sustainable services. The overarching objective is to support water security.

PACT SIGNED FOR \$350M TECH CITY IN SALALAH FREE ZONE

FROM PAGE 10

SFZ has announced a Knowledge Academy project with an investment of \$20 million to support skills development.”

Eng Ali bin Salem Omar Fadel, Vice-President of Dhofar Municipality, member of the Municipal Council in Dhofar Governorate, commented: “SFZ is now the headquarters for dozens of international companies that take advantage of Salalah’s strategic

location to maintain global transport lines, which provides easy access to a large number of global and regional markets.

These companies export their products abroad and bring foreign currencies to the Sultanate and contribute to tax revenues, support the introduction of new technology and technical skills, and so on.”

Shaikh Jassim bin Abdullah al Misnad, Chairman of Philex

Pharmaceuticals Industries at SFZ, stated: “Our pharmaceutical project, which is currently under development in the free zone with an investment of \$365 million, will create more than 300 job opportunities. The complex aims to produce more than 100 compound pharmaceutical types for export to the Middle East and North Africa, and we expect the plant’s construction to finish in the third quarter of 2020.”

Canadian firm to supply SATCOM network for Oman

MUSCAT: SpaceBridge Inc, a privately held Canadian corporation and manufacturer of High Throughput Satellite (HTS)/VHTS Broadband VSAT Satellite Network Platforms, Terminals and network solutions, has announced that it has been selected by Space Communication Technologies (SCT) of the Sultanate to supply an HTS Multiple Spot Beam Broadband VSAT Network. The network to be supplied incorporates SpaceBridge's unique ASAT system including its turnkey WaveSwitch, Point-to-MultiPoint Satellite Broadband Platform technology.

Space Communication Technologies LLC was established by the Government of Oman with a mission of spearheading the National Satellite Programme initiative by building national satellite communications infrastructure and developing required capabilities to serve public and private sectors, coping with their immediate long-term telecommunication needs.

"SpaceBridge was selected following careful evaluation of a public tender and showed a high level of performance with the ability to provide its state-of-the-art solution that addresses perfectly SCT's challenges using advanced MSB platform to serve various types of customers", said Salim al Alawi — SCT Executive Director and CEO.

The SpaceBridge ASAT Platform, sized to support SCT growth to thousands of Remote Terminals, will deliver services enabling enterprises, mobile network operators and homeland security entities to transmit real time applications data under the Arabsat



Satellite communications: Sultanate's leading operator, SCT, selects SpaceBridge Inc to supply Multiple Spot Beams HTS, Multi Service Broadband satellite network

Satellite coverage in the Sultanate of Oman and its Exclusive Economic Zone. Operating multiple high throughput DVB-S2X beams in the forward channel, coupled with SpaceBridge's advanced QoS and Performance Enhancement Proxy (PEP), SCT will provide high speed and spectrally efficient bandwidth to their customers.

On the returns, SCT benefits from dynamic MF-TDMA return channels delivering industry leading reaction time and bandwidth delivery based on customer demands. Additionally, WaveSwitch enables SCT to dynamically switch customers with higher bandwidth demands from MF-TDMA dynamic SCPC, providing SCT with benefits from high performance, improved spectral efficiency on the returns and increasing the overall satellite data throughput.

"We are very pleased to have been chosen by SCT for this vital network. SpaceBridge's technology offers unique and innovative advanced performance in the market by implementing the latest industry standards allowing our customers to provide a quality telecommunication solutions in a cost-effective manner," said David Gelerman — President & CEO of SpaceBridge Inc.

"The SpaceBridge's system is fundamentally designed to be scalable and efficient for SCT as a long-standing and important partner to our business and we are happy to deploy the most effective HTS satellite network solution available in the marketplace to meet SCT current needs, we are confident in our ability to support SCT as the network grows in capacity and reach," added Jamil Joseph, VP Sales — EMEA.

Majan College supports professional development of Omani lecturers

MUSCAT: Majan University College (MUC) has worked closely in partnership with HEA, the UK Higher Education Academy (part of Advance HE) since September 2017. Under the partnership agreement, MUC enters groups of its staff as applicants for the various categories of Fellowship offered by HEA.

So far, fifteen lecturers have been successful, with twelve more results expected in September. The 2020-2021 group of applicants includes five Omani staff, bringing the total of Omanis who have entered to twelve. Application is supported by webinars led by HEA staff and offers an opportunity for applicants to reflect on



their professional practices and submit an account of them that is considered by UK-based assessors. HEA Fellowships act as a badge of professional excellence that is keenly sought after in the UK, Australia and the wider world.

"We see our partnership with HEA as an important part of our strategy to develop our academic staff and promote teaching excellence", says Majan's Dean, Dr Maha Kobeil. "We particularly see it as a way to build up a group of Omani academics in the College who are reflective practitioners and have a deep understanding of teaching, learning and assessment issues in higher education."

BUSINESS

AIR FRANCE AND SISTER AIRLINE TO CUT 7,580 JOBS



An employee works on an Airbus A380 plane inside the Air France KLM maintenance hangar at the Charles de Gaulle International Airport in Roissy, near Paris. — Reuters

PARIS: Air France confirmed plans to cut some 7,500 jobs including 1,000 at sister airline HOP! on Friday, as staff protested over its response to the collapse in travel due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The French flag carrier, part of Franco-Dutch group Air France-KLM, said it had lost 15 million euros a day during the worst part of the crisis, which also saw its revenues plunge by 95 per cent. It did not see traffic returning to 2019 levels before 2024.

As a result, it plans to cut 6,560 or 16 per cent of jobs at the main airline by the end of 2022, more than 3,500 of which will come through natural departures, it said after union talks.

Another 1,020 jobs will go over the next three years at "HOP!", representing 42 per cent of staff at the regional carrier based in the coastal city of Nantes, which has also been hit by job cuts at planemaker Airbus.

The French government — which granted Air France 7 billion euros in aid, including state-backed loans, to help it to survive — has urged the airline to avoid compulsory layoffs, though it has conceded Air France is

"on the edge".

"A successful labour reorganisation is one where there are no forced departures", Junior Economy Minister Agnes Pannier-Runacher told Sud Radio on Friday.

In its statement, Air France said it would give priority to voluntary departures, early retirement and staff mobility.

It did not rule out compulsory redundancies, however.

The reconstruction plan will be presented at the end of July, together with a plan for the wider Air France-KLM

Group.

Some 100 union members and employees, from cleaning staff to check-in assistants, demonstrated earlier outside the airline's base at Charles de Gaulle airport against plans to cut staff after receiving state aid to absorb the pandemic fallout.

"It's scandalous. The government is putting in 7 billion euros and the company is destroying jobs," said 62-year-old Annick Blanchemin, who works as ground staff for the airline. "They'll push me to retire but I won't get my maximum pension this way. And this is not how I wanted to leave." — Reuters

THE FRENCH FLAG CARRIER SAID IT HAD LOST 15 MILLION EUROS A DAY DURING THE WORST PART OF THE CRISIS, WHICH ALSO SAW ITS REVENUES PLUNGE BY 95 PER CENT

Canada's biggest banks join boycott of Facebook platforms

TORONTO: Canada's biggest lenders confirmed on Friday they had joined a widespread boycott of Facebook Inc begun by US civil rights groups seeking to pressure the world's largest social media platform to take concrete steps to block hate speech.

More than 400 brands have pulled advertising on Facebook in response to the "Stop Hate for Profit" campaign, begun after the death of George Floyd, a Black man who died in police custody in Minneapolis on May 25.

Canadian lenders Royal Bank of Canada, Toronto-Dominion Bank, Bank of Nova Scotia, Bank of Montreal, National Bank of Canada and Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce all said they will pause advertising on Facebook platforms in July.

Desjardins Group, Canada's largest federation of credit unions, also said on its website on Thursday it will pause advertising on Facebook and Instagram for the month "barring any exceptional situations where we need to communicate with our members or clients".

Most cited their commitments to inclusion and diversity.

Facebook has opened itself up to a civil rights audit and has banned 250 white supremacist organisations from Facebook and Instagram, a spokesman said by email. Its investments in artificial intelligence mean it finds nearly 90 per cent of hate speech it takes action on before users report it, he added.

— Reuters



A Royal Bank of Canada (RBC) logo is seen on Bay Street in the heart of the financial district in Toronto. — Reuters



NEW YORK: Seven-time Cup Series champion Jimmie Johnson has become the first NASCAR driver to test positive for COVID-19 and will miss this weekend's Brickyard 400 at Indianapolis Motor Speedway, Hendrick Motorsports said on Friday.

Johnson, who will not return to competition until being cleared by a physician, has not experienced COVID-19 symptoms and was tested upon learning earlier on Friday that his wife had tested positive after having allergy-like symptoms.

"My first priority is the health and safety of my loved ones and my team-mates," Johnson said in a news release issued by Hendrick Motorsports.

"I've never missed a race in my Cup career, but I know it's going to be very hard to watch from the sidelines when I'm supposed to be out there competing.

"Although this situation is extremely disappointing, I'm going to come back ready to win races and put ourselves in play-off contention."

In order to return to racing, NASCAR said Johnson must be symptom free and have two negative COVID-19 test results, at least 24 hours apart, and also be cleared by his physician.

The 44-year-old Johnson, a four-times winner of the Brickyard 400, was due to start the race in the second row in fourth position. Hendrick Motorsports said Justin Allgaier will drive the No 48 Chevrolet on Sunday as Johnson's replacement. — Reuters

JIMMIE JOHNSON BECOMES FIRST NASCAR DRIVER TO CONTRACT COVID



MY FIRST PRIORITY IS THE HEALTH AND SAFETY OF MY LOVED ONES AND MY TEAM-MATES. I'VE NEVER MISSED A RACE IN MY CUP CAREER, BUT I KNOW IT'S GOING TO BE VERY HARD TO WATCH FROM THE SIDELINES WHEN I'M SUPPOSED TO BE OUT THERE COMPETING

JIMMIE JOHNSON, NASCAR DRIVER

SPORTS



SIMPSON
IN SHARE
OF LEAD AT
HALFWAY POINT
IN DETROIT

DETROIT: Webb Simpson, who skipped last week’s tournament after his daughter tested positive for COVID-19, made a late birdie to earn a two-way share of the lead after the second round at Detroit Golf Club on Friday.

World number six Simpson, the top-ranked player in this week’s field, shot a bogey-free, eight-under-par 64 for a 12-under halfway total of 132 at the Rocket Mortgage Classic where he shared a one-shot lead with fellow American Chris Kirk (65).

Simpson, seeking wins

MOST GUYS I FEEL LIKE PLAY WELL OUT HERE WHEN THEY’RE NOT REALLY THINKING A WHOLE LOT, THEIR MIND IS CALM AND THEY FEEL IN CONTROL AND THEY FEEL CONFIDENT. THAT’S KIND OF WHERE I AM RIGHT NOW

WEBB SIMPSON,
FORMER US OPEN
CHAMPION

in consecutive starts after a triumph in South Carolina 12 days ago, birdied seven of his first 13 holes and moved into a share of the lead when he holed out from a greenside bunker at the par-four 16th.

“I came in confident, I came in feeling good about my game,” former US Open champion Simpson said.

“Most guys I feel like play well out here when they’re not really thinking a whole lot, their mind is calm and they feel in control and they feel confident.

That’s kind of where I

am right now.”

World number 10 Bryson DeChambeau (67) was among a group of six golfers sitting one shot off the lead in Detroit, where the field lacked the same star power seen at the PGA Tour’s previous three events since returning from a three-month COVID-19 hiatus.

DeChambeau, who started on the back nine, came agonizingly close to capping his bogey-free round with an ace at the par-three ninth where his tee shot settled two-feet from the cup.

— Reuters



‘Developing skating sports and grooming top national teams a priority’

ADIL AL BALUSHI

MUSCAT: Oman Skating Sports Committee (OSSC) moved into different stages of development as a committee in 2014. It was responsible for ice hockey sports previously and after reforms in 2018 the committee's role expanded more in all the skating sports. Said bin Ali al Zaabi, the chairman of the OSSC, affirmed to *Oman Daily Observer* that the committee after reformation in 2018 succeeded to establish the national team in Roll Ball and Roller Skating as well as more than 180 local players registered and joined in eleven domestic teams. “One of the significant achievements of the OSSC at the national teams level is that we have a women's national ice hockey team which was set up in the previous year. The committee board is working hard to add new sports linked to the skateboard including the

freestyle skating sports at the ice zones. The junior category programmes will continue after resuming the sporting activities as we invest a lot in this category which is the future of the sports,” Al Zaabi added. OSSC is an umbrella of all the sports related to skating including ice hockey, free-style skating which comprises roller skating and other related sports. The OSSC aims to boost skating sports in the Sultanate among the youth and encourage all to know more about types of skating sports and to take part in different tournaments and raise the Sultanate flag. The chief of OSSC said that many of the committee's activities and events were cancelled as the other sporting events

due to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. “Oman national ice hockey team took part at the Asian championship in Malaysia earlier this year. Despite the tough competitions among the top Asian teams, the national team had impressed and registered top results in their debut event. Also, the national ice hockey team had participated at the professional clubs ice hockey tournament in Kuwait. Oman team comprised all the local players and the team had good exposure from this event. In 2018, OSSC had organised Oman International Ice Hockey tournament which featured participation of many international teams from UAE and Qatar. Oman Rocks team had clinched the title after

edging Dubai Camels team 6-4 in the final match. Oman Roll Skating team, which was recently formed, managed to position in the fifth place at the Asian Championship in India in last March. It was the first abroad event for the team and they had tough competitions among the top Asian teams. The team was very close to advance to the semifinal but they suffered a loss against the Bangladesh team,” he pointed out. Commenting on the future plan of the committee, Al Zaabi said the committee is working based on the available current financial fund from the Ministry of Sports Affairs. “Definitely, if we would like to be among the top Asian professional teams, we need to have a qualified coach for all the teams. However, the committee is utilising the existing resources from the domestic veteran players who are acting as head coach for the national team.”



SPORTS



CHINA'S LIN DAN HANGS UP HIS RACQUET

SHANGHAI: China's two-time Olympic badminton champion Lin Dan, one of the sport's greatest singles players, announced his retirement on Saturday.

Fondly called 'Super Dan' by badminton fans across the world, Lin became the first shuttler to retain the Olympic title when he won in the 2012 London Games after his triumph in the home event in Beijing in 2008.

"I've dedicated everything to the sport I love. My family, coaches, team-mates and fans have accompanied me through many happy times and difficult moments," Chinese media quoted Lin as saying in the retirement announcement.

"Now I'm 37 years old, and my physical fitness and pain no longer allow me to fight side by side with my team-mates," Lin added.

Lin also won all the sport's major titles, including five gold medals at the world championships between 2006 and 2013 and six All England crowns.

The left-handed shuttler also

“

I've dedicated everything to the sport I love. My family, coaches, team-mates and fans have accompanied me through many happy times and difficult moments

**LIN DAN,
TWO-TIME
OLYMPIC
CHAMPION**

helped China to six gold medals in the Thomas Cup men's team event and five titles in the mixed Sudirman Cup.

He also helped the national

side to three gold medals in team events and two individual singles titles at the Asian Games.

"From 2000 to 2020, after 20 years, I have to say goodbye to the national team. It is very difficult to speak it out," said Lin.

Malaysia's Lee Chong Wei, who lost to Lin in both the Olympic finals in Beijing and London, hung up his racquet last year due to prolonged health issues.

The rivalry between Chong Wei and Lin was considered legendary and the Malaysian paid rich tribute to his on-court nemesis through a poem on social media, accompanied by pictures of them together as children and adults.

"We knew this day would arrive, Heavy moment of our lives; You pulled down the curtain gracefully, You were king where we fought so proudly; Your final wave all four disappear, Within the hush of silent tear," Chong Wei wrote on Twitter with the hashtag #lindan. — **Reuters**

FEATURES

DATES: THEY ARE ALL AROUND US, BUT WHERE HAVE THEY COME FROM?

It is believed that the date palm has been around for millions of years, though archeological evidence has only emerged from some 9000 years ago in the Indus Valley Neolithic settlement of Mehrgahr... **page 20**

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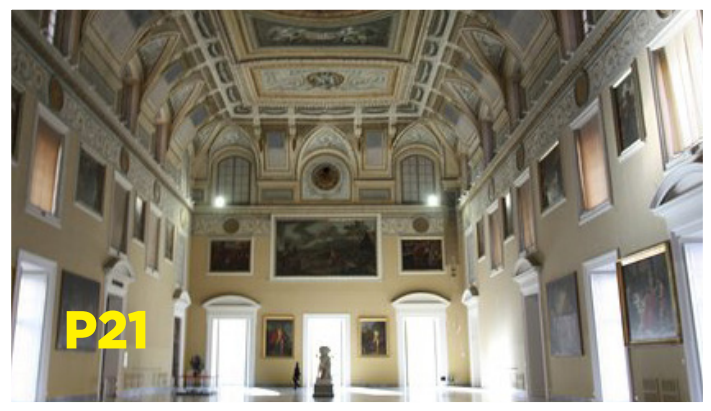
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WHAT'S INSIDE

Paris show relives
Pompeii's final
horrifying hours



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Young Italians pick
cows over clubbing
in Italy



P22



Dates: They are all around us, but where have they come from?

TEXT BY RAY PETERSEN
PHOTO BY LENA PETERSEN

The date is the sweet fruit of the Phoenix Dactylifera, or Date Palm, which is believed to have its origins in the ancient Indus Valley through China, India, and Pakistan.

However, its pre-eminence, in terms of its diversity, cultural and societal value, was first recognized in the ancient Middle Eastern regions of the Nile river from Nubia, up through the Theban capital of Luxor, staying with the Nile through the famed Valley of the Kings, and onwards through the pyramids that stretch from through Giza, Memphis and Kutu to the Nile Delta and the Mediterranean coast. Then East to the Levant region, so called as, "The place where the Sun rises," and incorporates the similarly fertile areas of the Euphrates River through Mesopotamia, where such historically important cities as Babylon, Ur, Sidon, Damascus, and Jerusalem have been recognized as the 'cradle of civilization.'

It is believed that the date palm has been around for millions of years, though archeological evidence has only emerged from some 9000 years ago in the Indus Valley Neolithic settlement of Mehrgahr. The date fruit itself is readily identified a the 'finger' because of its shape, and the date palm owes its name to the translation of the Latin dactyl lifera as, 'the bearer of the finger fruit.' It has also proven tough and resilient as seeds of the Judean

Date Palm variety, recovered from the Masada archeological dig, have been successfully cultivated after 2000 years.

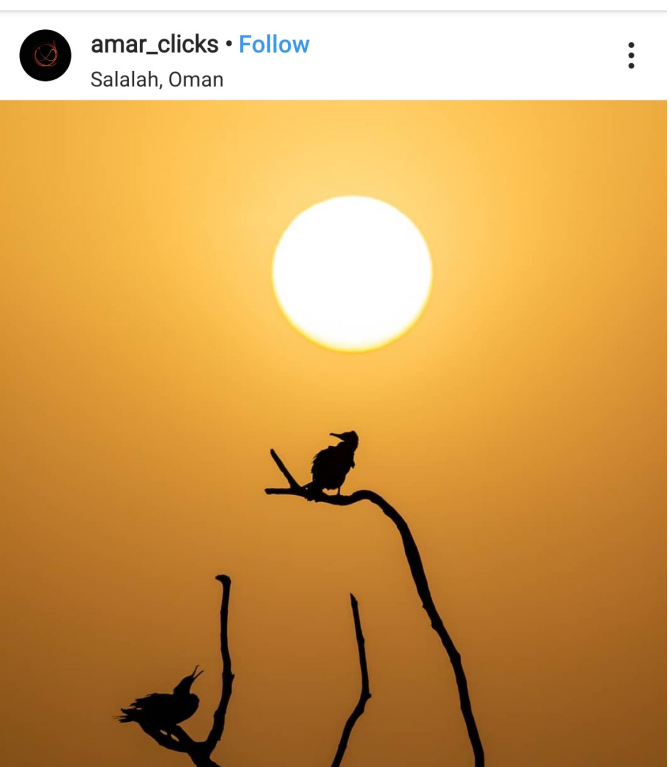
The date palm's reproductive morphology is doeicious, which means there are both male and female plants, only the females provide fruit, and female and male palms, from seeds, will be approximately half male, half female, however most dates today are horticulturally managed and grown from cuttings for commercial date farming, thus a predominance of female palms produce greater crops. Also, while pollination was originally 'windblown,' most pollination today is manual, and achieved by brushing the male petals across the stigma of the female plant.

In the Sultanate, the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries wealth is responsible for the strategic enhancement of this valuable national resource through its Nakheel Oman Development Company through the 'One Million Date Palm Trees Project,' and the establishment of a Nizwa based manufacturing complex in 2018. Other, private entities also contribute significantly to scientific, innovation, diversification, and marketing of the date fruit to maximize its potential for multi-million dollar returns, each year.

Still though, the story of the date, and the date palm comes back to the tree, the fruit, and the people who grow and harvest them, often as they have done through time... as we found at Lizagh, where this Wakeel, or falaj keeper, Rashid Said al Nidabi produces bumper harvests each year.

FEATURES

INSTAGRAM TOP PICKS



Paris show relives Pompeii’s final horrifying hours

IT IS THE most explosive Paris exhibition of the summer — Mount Vesuvius erupting several times a day in a new immersive 3D show which opens Wednesday in the Grand Palais.

“Pompeii” recreates daily life in 79 AD (CE) in the hours before the volcano poured death and destruction down on the city and its 40,000 inhabitants.

A street and some of the sumptuous villas and temples of what was one of the richest cities in the Roman empire have been brought back to life by the exhibition, which the organisers describe as a “time machine”.

Among the 3D recreations of Roman mansions such as the House of Leda with their startling mosaics and frescos, are some of the “extraor-

dinary finds” recently unearthed by archaeologists from the remains of the city near modern Naples.

And every 15 minutes, the mountain overlooking the city begins to growl, before eventually erupting with a mushroom atomic cloud of volcanic dust, rocks and lava.

WITCH’S CHEST
Archaeologists used drones

to film the site as well as laser cartography, infrared cameras and photogrammetry, which allows accurate measurements to be taken from photographs, to bring the scene to life.

The show — which runs until September 27 — was delayed by the coronavirus lockdown, meaning the treasures, rarely seen outside Italy, had to be locked away for safekeeping by French authorities.

Among them are a statue of the Livia, the wife of the first Roman emperor, Augustus, which still has traces of her blonde hair and her purplish red dress and a fresco of Venus, the goddess of love, on a ship’s bow drawn by four elephants.

Massimo Osanna, director of the Pompeii Archaeological Park, said one of the most unusual exhibits is a chest of 100 tiny amulets in glass, ivory and amethyst used by a “witch to protect her clients from the evil eye”.

“We wanted to chose iconic and representative objects” to illustrate the richness of life in the city, he said, which was frozen in time by the speed of the eruption and its pyroclastic storm of lava and ash.

Bodies were buried where they fell, engulfed by the searing hot clouds of ash.

The virtual reconstruction of the city “is not at all a Disneyland version,” Osanna told AFP.

“What we have shown in 3D corresponds exactly with our scientific research,” he said.

The show also includes some of the plaster casts made of people and animals caught in their death agony.

As digging continues, nearly a third of the ancient city has yet to be uncovered by archaeologists. — AFP

FEATURES

YOUNG ITALIANS PICK ANIMALS OVER CLUBBING IN ITALY

WHILE HER FRIENDS sleep off hangovers, 23-year-old Vanessa Peduzzi is doing a dawn check on her livestock, one of a growing number of Italian youths ditching the fast lane for a farmer's life.

"It's a tiring, demanding job, but I like it," she said as she walked through the wood-lined pastures high above Lake Como in northern Italy to show off the building she is slowly restoring and transforming into a farmhouse.

"I chose this life. This is where I want to be, surrounded by nature and animals," she said.

Peduzzi is a trained chef, but has downed her ladles to become a donkey and cow breeder instead in Alpe Bedolo, some 813 metres (2,600 feet) above sea level, near the border with Switzerland.

"I started last year with two little donkeys. I didn't have any land or a stable, so I had a friend lend me a meadow," she said.

"The situation has got a bit out of hand," she laughed. She now owns some 20 donkeys — 15 of which are pregnant — as well as about 10 cows, five calves and five heifers.

'NOT AN EASY CHOICE'

Jacopo Fontaneto, of Italy's main agricultural



union Coldiretti, said after years of mountain life being out of favour among Italians, "we have seen a good return of young people in the last 10 to 20 years".

There has been a 12 per cent rise in the number of

people under 35 at the helm of agricultural businesses in the past five years, Coldiretti said in a study of data from last year.

It said women make up almost a third of the total of new entries to farming.

The sector was seen as "ripe for innovation" and working the land "is no longer considered the last resort of the uneducated" but something parents would be proud of.

Nonetheless, Fontaneto admits: "It's not an easy choice."

Instead of computer screens or checkout tills, those on remote pastures stare at "the most beautiful countryside you can dream of", but it is also "a life of sacrifice", with little opportunity for wild nights on the town, he said.

Youngsters can also help modernise the profession by bringing in new technologies or investing in online sales.

Though it can be a lonely existence, Peduzzi has made friends on the job: all of her donkeys and cows have names, she said fondly, as she introduced Beatrice, Silvana, Giulia, Tom and Jerry.

"I've had this passion since I was a little girl," she said, stroking a black cow with dramatic white-ringed eyes.

"My grandparents, who had an inn, had dairy cows. They made butter, cheese. And as a child I used to accompany my father when he took his cows to the mountain pastures," she remembered.—AFP