

2,901 availed job security benefit

As many as 2,901 laid-off nationals have availed the Job Security System by the end of November (84 per cent males and 16 per cent females), according to data published by the Public Authority for Social Insurance (PASI). The Social Security System represents one of the objectives of Oman Vision 2040 and seeks to provide dignified livelihood for nationals who lose their jobs due to reasons beyond their control by bridging the transitional gap between their former job and the new employment. **DETAILS ON P2**



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P12

OCA CHAMPIONSHIP
FOURTH STAGE
TOMORROW



P15

EU MOVES TO REIN
IN US TECH GIANTS
WITH FINES



P20

TRIP OF LOYALTY
CONCLUDES
IN MUSCAT



OMAN

HM GREETINGS TO
BHUTAN, GHANA

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck of Bhutan, on his country's National Day. In his cable, His Majesty expressed his sincere greetings and best wishes to King Wangchuck and his country's friendly people. His Majesty also sent a cable of greetings to President Nana Akufo-Addo of Ghana, on the occasion of him being re-elected as a president of the Republic for a second presidential term. In his cable, His Majesty expressed his sincere greetings and best wishes of success to President Akufo-Addo in leading the friendly people of Ghana towards further progress and prosperity. — ONA

CAMEL RACES ENTER
UNESCO HERITAGE LIST

MUSCAT: Camel races in Oman have been included in the Unesco Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, the organisation announced on Wednesday. The Sultanate submitted its file jointly with the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The announcement was made during the 15th Session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, taking place online from December 14-19. The committee has decided to add camel races to its list after being viewed as a significant cultural heritage.

DETAILS ON P3



INSIDE



EX-MINISTERS SNUB JUDGE
AFTER BEING CHARGED

P6



BID TO MAKE 'ECOCIDE' A CRIME
PICKS UP MOMENTUM

P9

HM GETS MESSAGE FROM PALESTINE PRESIDENT



His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik received a written message from President Mahmoud Abbas of the State of Palestine. The message was delivered to His Highness Sayyid Asaad bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for International Relations and Cooperation Affairs and Personal Representative of His Majesty the Sultan, when he received at his office on Wednesday Major General Jibril Rajoub, Chairman of the Supreme Council for Youth and Sports in the State of Palestine.

DETAILS ON P3

AVIATION WINGS FOR RAFO PILOTS



HH Sayyid Shihab bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Defence Affairs, on Wednesday conferred aviation wings on a number of graduate pilots of the Royal Air Force of Oman (RAFO). The pilots had completed a comprehensive programme in different aviation fields. **DETAILS ON P2**

Relations at new heights,
says Indian minister

SAMUEL KUTTY
@samkuttyp

Bilateral relations between Oman and India have scaled to new heights, and there is potential for more partnerships in all the priority areas that are identified in Oman's Vision 2040.

"The historically close bilateral relations between our two countries have today expanded into a vibrant, multi-faceted strategic partnership, which is based on shared values and mutual trust," said V Muraleedharan, Minister of State for External Affairs of India, in an interview to the *Observer*, on Wednesday.

Both countries have identified several new areas of cooperation such as IT, space, mining, logistics, food security and tourism, where there are strong complementarities and huge potential to work together, the minister who is on two-day visit to the Sultanate, said.

The historically close bilateral relations between our two countries have today expanded into a vibrant, multi-faceted strategic partnership, which is based on shared values and mutual trust

V MURALEEDHARAN

While extending warm wishes and greetings to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on behalf of Indian leadership, the minister reiterated the Indian government's resolve to work together for further enhancing bilateral relations. **TURN TO P3**

Doha to host 2030 Asian Games, Riyadh in 2034

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DEC 16

The 2030 Asian Games will be staged in Qatar capital of Doha. Doha's bid beat Riyadh after receiving highest votes from the National Olympic Committees (NOC) of the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA).

The official deceleration of the Doha city as the hosts was part of the 39th General Assembly meeting of OCA on Wednesday at J W Marriot under the auspices of HH Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth, in presence of the

top dignitaries.

Riyadh will host the 2034 edition as Shaikh Ahmad Al Fahad al Sabah, President of the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA), affirmed that the both cities delivered excellent presentations and they will host the editions of 2030 and 2034 of Asian Games.

The voting procedure included online and manual as several remote attendees of NOCs voted through an online secured system while the NOC attendees in Muscat voted manually.

DETAILS ON P10

PATEK PHILIPPE
GENEVE
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YOU NEVER ACTUALLY OWN A PATEK PHILIPPE.
YOU MERELY LOOK AFTER IT FOR THE NEXT GENERATION.

ANNUAL CALENDAR CHRONOGRAPH REF. 5905R

Patek Philippe Boutique
at
القرم
Al-Qurum
MUSCAT - 22009991

WEATHER

MUSCAT: Max 24°C Min 15°C SALALAH: Max 27°C Min 20°C NIZWA: Max 26°C Min 12°C

PRAYER TIMINGS

SUNRISE: 06:42 FAJR: 05:22 DHUHR: 12:08 ASR: 15:08 MAGHRIB: 17:29 ISHA: 18:44

Deputy PM confers aviation wings on RAFO pilots



His Highness Sayyid Shihab bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Defence Affairs, conferred aviation wings on a number of graduate pilots of the Royal Air Force of Oman (RAFO) on Wednesday. The ceremony was attended by Air Vice Marshal Matar bin Ali al Obaidani, Commander of the Royal Air Force of Oman. The pilots had completed a comprehensive programme in different aviation fields. The passing out of this batch comes as part of training plans undertaken by the RAFO with a view to upgrading the standards of competence and preparedness of the air personnel. — ONA



CSR vital for achieving social aspirations

ZAINAB AL NASSRI
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The fourth edition of the Oman Forum for Partnership and Social Responsibility kicked off on Wednesday under the auspices of Laila bint Ahmed al Najjar, Minister of Social Development. The Forum, organised by *Al Roya* newspaper in a strategic partnership with the Ministry of Social Development, aimed at boosting corporate social responsibility (CSR) and enhancing its role in light of Oman's 2040 vision. In his address Hatim bin Hamad al Taie, General Supervisor of the Forum, said, "The future vision Oman 2040, that has been approved by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, is a dawn of a new era. Our country enters into an important stage. The motto here is 'national responsibility comes first' that has an ardent will, and high level of eagerness for everyone." Al Taie spoke about the involvement of key partners, including the private sector, in the country's sustainable development.

We urgently need to adopt an integrated national campaign to achieve our goals. The private sector's corporate social responsibility can work as a catalyst in achieving the development goals of the country

ALI AL LAWATI
Chairman
Al Habib and Partners

"Over the past five decades the private sector has been successful in taking forward the renewed renaissance and emerged as a reliable partner in the country's efforts to promote sustainable development," he said. Shaikh Rahid al Shamsi, Under-secretary of the MoSD, said the main and sub-committees of the Oman Vision 2040 were

formed nearly 8 years ago from now. It has a true vision of Oman's development for two decades. "The vision represents all sections of the Omani society. It is very close to the country's economic and social realities, and its objectives are guiding force behind the course of development," he continued. Ali Maleullah al Habib al Lawati, Chairman of the Board of Directors of Al Habib and Partners, gave the keynote speech. He stressed improving the effectiveness of private-sector programmes. "We urgently need to adopt an integrated national campaign to achieve our goals. The private sector's corporate social responsibility can work as a catalyst in achieving the development goals of the country," he said. He pointed out, "As a concept, the CSR has made great strides the country's modern renaissance. It has emerged as a specialised field for workers, researchers, developers, and those involved in the process. What has been achieved through CSR in the last fifty years is highly commendable."

Ministry of Education signs pact with PDO to develop website

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 16

The Ministry of Education signed an agreement with the Petroleum Development Oman LLC, through a virtual meeting held on Wednesday. The agreement is to develop a digital educational site on renewable energy. The PDO will develop, implement, and manage the site which will be directly connected to the official website of the Ministry, Educational Portal. Majid al Bahri, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Education for Administrative and Financial Affairs, signed the agreement with Abdul Amir al Ajmi, Executive Director of Foreign Affairs and Added Value of PDP.



The Under-Secretary said: "This agreement comes within the framework of the existing cooperation between the Ministry of Education and the PDO, and in line with Oman's Vision 2040, as well as the country's strategic orientation

aimed at increasing the contribution of the renewable energy sector in the Sultanate. "This site will provide interactive materials and lessons on various aspects of renewable energy and will create an enhanced and sustainable modern curriculum targeting school students at various levels and age groups. It will also be an enriching activity for the current science curricula, and a means of spreading the culture of renewable energy among young people, highlighting its fields. "We can only express our sincere thanks to PDO for its continuous and permanent cooperation with the Ministry of Education to develop the educational process in the Sultanate."

2,901 laid-off nationals get benefits

SHAMSA AL RIYAMIYAH
MUSCAT, DEC 16

As many as 2,901 laid-off nationals have availed of the Job Security System by the end of November (84 per cent males and 16 per cent females), according to data published by the Public Authority for Social Insurance (PASI). The Social Security System represents one of the objectives of Oman Vision 2040 and seeks to provide a dignified livelihood for nationals who lose their jobs due to reasons beyond their control by bridging the transitional gap between their former job and the new employment. The system provides a temporary benefit for them until they

land a new job that matches their skills and qualification. The data revealed that some 1,935 beneficiaries earned a monthly benefit below RO 300 while 812 beneficiaries earned a monthly benefit between RO 300 and RO 500. Another 113 beneficiaries received a monthly benefit between RO 500 and RO 700. Seventeen beneficiaries received between RO 700 and RO 900 and 15 beneficiaries received an amount ranging between RO 900 and RO 1,100 while 9 beneficiaries received a benefit between RO 1,100 and RO 1,800. Beneficiaries with less than five years of service in the private sector accounted for 45.8 per cent and those with services

years between 5 and 10 years made up 26 per cent. Those with 10 to 15 years of service made up 19.2 per cent while the rest of the beneficiaries (6 per cent) have between 15 to 20 years of service. Among those who benefited from the Job Security System, 28 per cent were in the age group 26-30 years, 22 per cent in the age group 31-34 years, 17.7 per cent in the age group 21-25 years, 17.3 per cent in the age group 36-40 years and 9.8 per cent in the age group 40-45 years. The committee entrusted with overseeing the implementation of the Job Security System earlier called on all nationals who were laid off due to reasons beyond their control, to apply for unemployment benefit.

■ ASSAD RECEIVES PALESTINIAN OFFICIAL



His Highness Sayyid Asaad bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for International Relations and Cooperation Affairs and Personal Representative of His Majesty the Sultan, with Major General Jibril Rajoub, Chairman of the Supreme Council for Youth and Sports in the State of Palestine. The meeting was attended by HH Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth, the Secretary General and the two advisers at Sayyid Asaad's Office, as well as Dr Tayseer Farhat, Palestinian Ambassador to the Sultanate. - ONA

■ FROM PAGE 1

India, Oman relations at new heights, says Indian minister



Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, with V Muraleedharan, India's Minister of State for External Affairs.



Dr Mahad bin Said Baowain, Minister of Labour, with V Muraleedharan, India's Minister of State for External Affairs.

He expressed India's willingness to be a strong partner in all the priority areas identified in Oman's Vision 2040 and its desire to become a knowledge economy.

"We can also support Oman's capacity building efforts through our ITEC programme. Omani companies can benefit from India's growth. We consider Oman to be an important partner in our campaign for a self-reliant India - Aatmanirbhar Bharat," he said.

According to him, the relationship between the two countries received added momentum following the visits of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in February 2018 and External Affairs Minister Dr S Jaishankar in December 2019.

With regard to his meeting with Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, he said it was very warm and productive.

"We reviewed our cooperation and agreed on the next steps to further enhance our relations. I have also had very constructive and positive meetings with

other ministers as well. In all my meetings, I have sensed a strong desire on both sides to be true partners and engage deeply. This is particularly important as we prepare to work together on new areas of cooperation in a post COVID-19 era," the minister said.

COOPERATION

As regards to the COVID-19 pandemic, the minister said that the effectiveness of the Omani response is reflected in high recovery rate and relatively low mortality rate. The pandemic has demonstrated the depth and resilience of India-Oman relationship.

While expressing the government of India's gratitude to the leadership in Oman for taking care of the Indian diaspora during the pandemic and extending excellent cooperation to the embassy, he said, "Both our countries cooperated in repatriation of respective citizens. India facilitated the return of many healthcare workers from India to Oman."

During the peak lockdown period, India remained a reliable supplier of essential commodities for Oman. India has shouldered its global responsibility of fighting the pandemic and emerged as a pharmacy of the world.

"We supplied essential medicines to more than 150 countries. We look forward to enhanced cooperation in healthcare and other priority areas in the post-COVID19 era," he said.

INDIAN COMMUNITY

The seminal role played by Indian community in Oman is acknowledged and appreciated by the government and people of Oman and has helped create a strong bond of friendship between both the countries.

"People-to-people ties provide the foundation for India-Oman strategic partnership. We deeply appreciate the support the government of Oman has provided to the Indian community during COVID-19," he said, adding that he would be interacting

with representatives of Indian community in Oman as well as members of the newly-established Oman-India Friendship Association.

Referring to his visit to the Sultanate, Muraleedharan said Oman is like a second home for many Indian nationals, full of warmth and friendship.

"While I have visited Oman earlier, I was very keen to visit this beautiful country again in my official capacity. Oman is the first country I am visiting since the outbreak of COVID-19. This reflects the importance India attaches to its strategic partnership with Oman," he said.

AIR BUBBLE

Regarding the steps being taken to help the Indians who are returning home, the minister said that the government of India attaches the highest priority to the welfare of its citizens abroad. The Vande Bharat Mission is the largest repatriation exercise ever undertaken by any country in the world. We

are grateful to the government of Oman for its support and cooperation in organising Vande Bharat flights from Oman.

"We now have an Air Bubble Agreement in place since October 1. The number of flights under this agreement are operated based on mutual agreement between the civil aviation authorities," he said.

The government is aware of the surge in demand as a result of the exit scheme announced by the Omani government.

"We had proposed to Omani side to increase the number of flights and I am happy to note that an agreement was reached to increase the number of weekly seats by 20 per cent. We remain open to further increases and civil aviation authorities of both countries are engaged in a discussion in this regard," he said.

While welcoming the steps by the Omani government in easing the visa rules for Indian nationals, the minister said, "This will certainly help attract more tourists from India to this beautiful

Air passengers touch 3.9 million till Sept

MUSCAT: The total number of passengers travelling through airports in the Sultanate (Muscat, Salalah, Suhar and Duqm) at the end of September 2020 reached 3.90 million passengers.

Meanwhile, the number of flights landing and departing from Muscat, Salalah and Suhar International Airports at the end of September 2020 reached 28,455 flights, according to the latest data released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

The total number of passengers at Muscat International Airport

fell by 70.9 per cent to 3.52 million passengers at the end of September 2020, over the same period of the previous year.

Meanwhile, the total number of flights at Muscat International Airport also fell by 66.6 per cent to 29,401 flights at the end of September 2020, from 88,119 flights for the same period of 2019.

The number of international flights at Muscat International Airport was 26,774 flights at the end of September 2020, falling 66.6 per cent over the same period of 2019.

— ONA



Camel racing intangible cultural heritage

MUSCAT: The UNESCO added camel racing in its list of intangible cultural heritage, following an application submitted by the Sultanate and the United Arab Emirates recently.

A decision to this effect was made by the Intergovernmental Committee for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage during its 15th meeting held via

videoconferencing.

The achievement comes in recognition of the leading role of the Sultanate in documenting elements of Omani culture and as a culmination of efforts undertaken by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth and the Omani National Committee for Education, Culture and Sciences.

Camel races have since

antiquity been a popular sport relished by millions around the world.

The sport has been the pride of Omani and other Arab people and it has been passed down, over centuries, from one generation to another.

The sport lovers compete to possess the best pedigrees of thoroughbred camels that secure top spots in camel races. — ONA

In brief

MUSCAT

116 NEW COVID-19 CASES, FIVE DEATHS

The Ministry of Health (MoH) reported 116 new cases of COVID-19 on Wednesday, bringing the total number of cases registered in the Sultanate to 126, 835. MoH reported five COVID-19 deaths, taking the total death toll to 1,480. The total recovery cases reached 118,736, which is 93.6 per cent of the total cases reported so far. Eleven people were hospitalised during the past 24 hours, taking the total number of inpatients in hospitals to 109, including 49 in Intensive Care Units (ICUs).

FIRE BROUGHT UNDER CONTROL

Firefighting teams managed to extinguish a fire that broke out at a house in Al Buraimi Governorate on Wednesday. The Public Authority of Civil Defence and Ambulance (PACDA) said: "The firefighting teams of the Civil Defence and Ambulance Department in Al Buraimi Governorate were able to extinguish a fire that broke out at an outdoor rest area in a house in the Wilayat of Al Buraimi without any injuries."

Meeting on job initiative held in Nizwa

AMAL AL RIYAMI
@amal92alriyami

Shaikh Hilal bin Said al Hajri, Governor of Al Dakhiliyah, met members of the administrative and advisory board of Gulf College recently at the governor's office in Nizwa.

The aim of the meeting is to introduce the Gulf College initiative to employ Omani youths looking for work, in an initiative named "My Omani Project".

The meeting was held in the presence of Dr Salim bin Abdullah al Wahaibi, Director-General of Labour in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate, Omar bin Mohammed bin Alawi, Director-General of Nizwa Industrial Area, and representatives of the industrial areas of Nizwa and Samayil.

At the beginning of the meeting, the governor welcomed the members of the Gulf College and thanked them for their keenness to implement the initiative and



make it known in the various governorates.

Dr Taqi bin Abdul Ridha Abdwani, Vice-President of the Board of Directors in the Gulf College, a member of Trustees and Supervisor Board, and the supervisor for the initiative, spoke about the initiative, shedding light on

the history of the Gulf College and its stages of development.

Dr Tari referred to the college's role in employing job-seekers through the "My Omani Project" initiative, which hoped to contribute in employing a large group of job-seekers in all governorates. He emphasised the

importance of the initiative and its target group, in addition to the stages through which the required service is provided.

Dr Haitham Atharibah, Rapporteur of the Advisory Board in the initiative, also participated in the conversation about the

required roles and the cooperation between the office of the governor and the participating parties to implement the initiative. They listened to the ideas, visions and recommendations that aim to achieve the general objectives of the initiative and bring them to reality.

University of Technology and Applied Sciences conducts virtual symposium

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 16

The University of Technology and Applied Sciences in Nizwa has organised a scientific symposium entitled "Higher Education and Industrial Institutions: Strengthening Links Towards Oman 2040." The symposium comes as a recognition of the integral role of higher education in promoting

sustainable economic and social development towards the Oman Vision 2040 — a role that has been recently amplified in response to the ever-changing dynamic needs of the labour market. The symposium brought together scholarly contributions from many researchers and academics from various universities and institutions in the Sultanate.

In the opening speech, Dr

Salim al Shaikh, Assistant Dean for the Academic Affairs and Scientific Research, stated that one of the most prominent indicators of Oman Vision 2040 is to increase the Omani workforce in the private sector to 40 per cent. This percentage cannot be easily reached unless the gap between the higher education and labour market is bridged.

Dr Faisal al Balushi, the head of the Office of Science, Knowledge

and Technology Transfer at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, delivered the keynote speech of the symposium which stressed the need for higher education institutions to adapt to the changes in the labour market and cope with the demands with the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

The virtual symposium spanned two days and featured 28 research papers.



All-new Nissan X-Terra 2021 launched in Oman

MUSCAT— Nissan Oman, from the house of Suhail Bahwan Automobiles (SBA), unveiled the all-new Nissan X-Terra 2021, further solidifying the brand's presence in Oman. The launch of the all-new Nissan X-Terra represents a new addition to the line-up in the country, bolstering the brand's extensive SUV portfolio, while also addressing customer demands in the rapidly growing D-SUV segment.

The tough yet sophisticated Nissan X-Terra represents 70 years of SUV expertise. It promises to be an ideal partner for customers seeking a reliable partner for both everyday commuting and exciting outdoor adventures.

Powered by a 2.5-litre four-cylinder gasoline engine, paired with a seven-speed automatic transmission, the all-new Nissan X-Terra delivers a robust four-wheel-drive experience with features including four-wheel lock, brake limited slip differential and electronic locking rear differential. It has 2.5 litre DOHC 14, VTC (INT/EXH) engine, 165 HP @ 6000 RPM and a torque of 241NM @ 4000 RPM. With generous spaciousness, luxurious interiors and a ground clearance of 243mm — the X-Terra looks right at home next to its bigger sibling, the Patrol.

A senior official of Nissan Oman, from the house of Suhail Bahwan Automobiles (SBA) said, "We are delighted to launch the all-new X-Terra which demonstrates how sophistication and ruggedness can co-exist. We are proud to offer a product that extends customers best-in-class riding comfort while also creating a relaxed and quiet setting for togetherness. We believe it will redefine what an SUV in this segment can do, and we are delighted to expand the realm of possibilities for our customers. Bold design, spacious interior and advanced technologies make the all-new SUV ready to go anywhere, beyond boundaries."

Underlining this bold new design, breakthrough engineering and a suite of advanced Nissan Intelligent Mobility technologies, the all-new X-Terra offers impressive strength, driving capabilities and adventure-ready confidence for drivers to go 'beyond boundaries' and explore new places.

Available on the vehicle's Platinum grade are Lane Departure Warning, Blind Spot Warning, Intelligent Forward Collision Warning, Rear Cross Traffic Alert, Intelligent Driver Alertness and Intelligent Emergency Braking.

Developed in line with Nissan's 'unbreakable' frame vehicle design philosophy, the all-new X-Terra offers the right combination of solidity with sleek and modern execution. The front resembles the iconic Nissan Patrol with the powerful new V-motion grille, whose thick frame contrasts with the refined horizontal chrome bars within.

The overall image is rugged and imposing, with added expressions of sophistication and technology. The C-shaped LED signature headlamps, similar to those on the Patrol, have evolved and have been interpreted in a new way on the all-new X-Terra to convey a high-tech impression.

Inside, the instrument panel has a full-width horizontal design,



with its movement stretching from door to door to emphasize the spaciousness of the cabin. The shapes are bold and strong, yet finished in comfortable soft-touch materials. The 9-inch intuitive touch-screen display screen dominates the centre, adding enhanced sophistication.

The all-new X-Terra delivers best-in-class ride comfort thanks to Zero Gravity seats in the front and second row. Meanwhile, significant noise reduction efforts around the engine compartment and the use of acoustic glass on both the windshield and side windows help create a relaxed and quiet cabin setting for all occupants.

The all-new Nissan X-Terra will be available in seven exterior colors, including bright brown and burgundy. The upscale exterior is matched with premium black and light grey interior colours that add to the richness of the vehicle.

Awards for Nissan

In 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019, Nissan was conferred with 'Oman's Most Trusted Brand' award across categories including SUV, crossover, 4WD and mid-size Nissan, considered a premium and trusted name in the market, was the only brand to have won the recognition for four times in a row in the automobile category.

SBA commitment

SBA is largely committed to supporting Nissan's growth in the

Sultanate through major emphasis on customer satisfaction and by providing world-class after-sales services in Oman. With a national network of 12 showrooms, 17 service centres and 24 spare parts outlets, SBA has further built upon its legacy of excellent customer service and providing value for money to each of its customers.

Like Nissan Oman on Facebook

Customers can also get unlimited access to Nissan's prestigious vehicle line up at the comfort of their homes or offices on Nissan Oman's Facebook page - <http://www.facebook.com/Sbanissanoman>.

Nissan Oman on Instagram

Instagram users can follow Nissan Oman at <https://www.instagram.com/sbanissanoman/>

After sales service

Every customer purchasing a Nissan vehicle can be assured of Nissan's top class after sales service, which guarantees the advantage of factory-trained experts.

Nissan's impressive vehicle line-up

Nissan has built up its reputation through innovative technology, and a broad product line-up.

For test drive options call Nissan Toll free 80050011. For more details on Nissan vehicles visit their new website: www.nissanoman.com

Cinépolis
Cinemas plans to
reopen venues

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 16

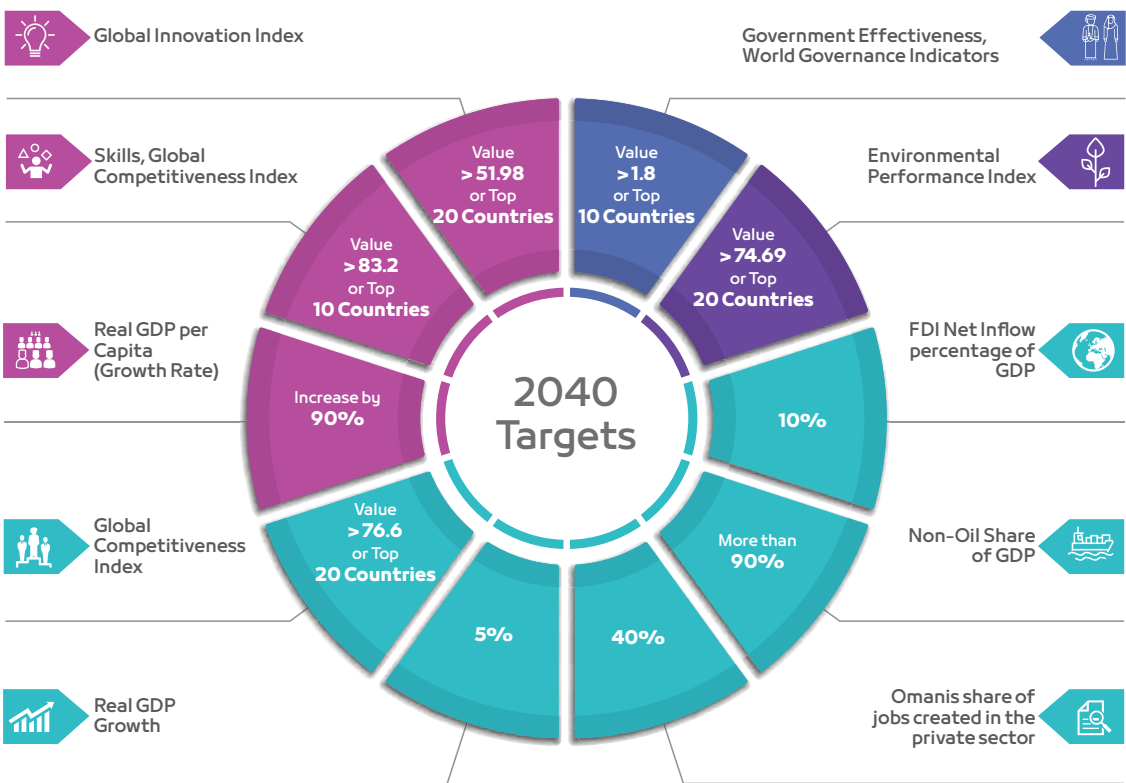
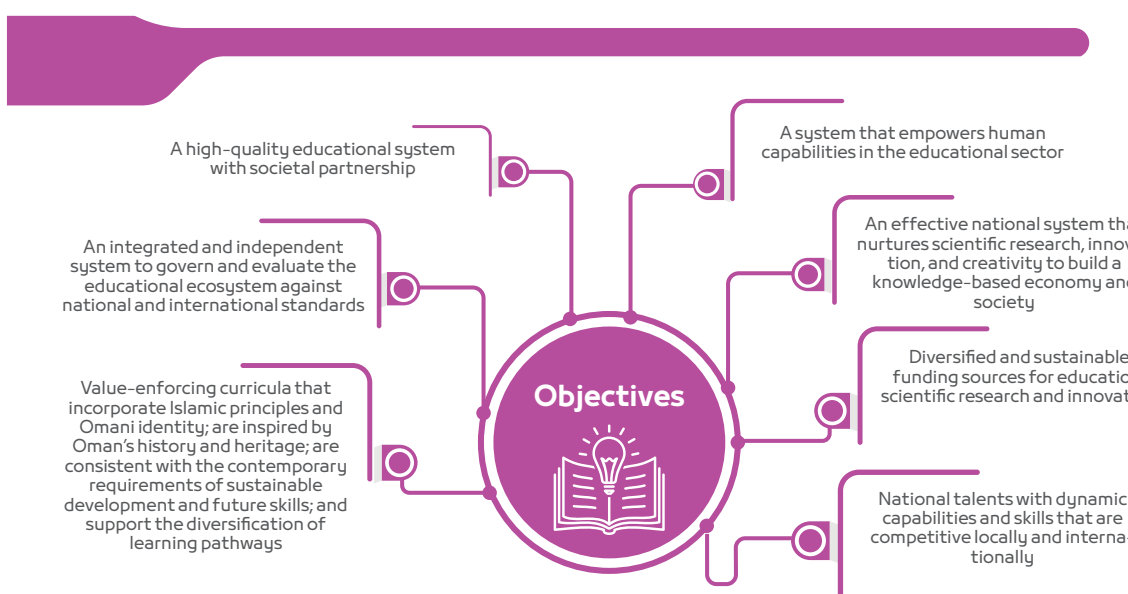
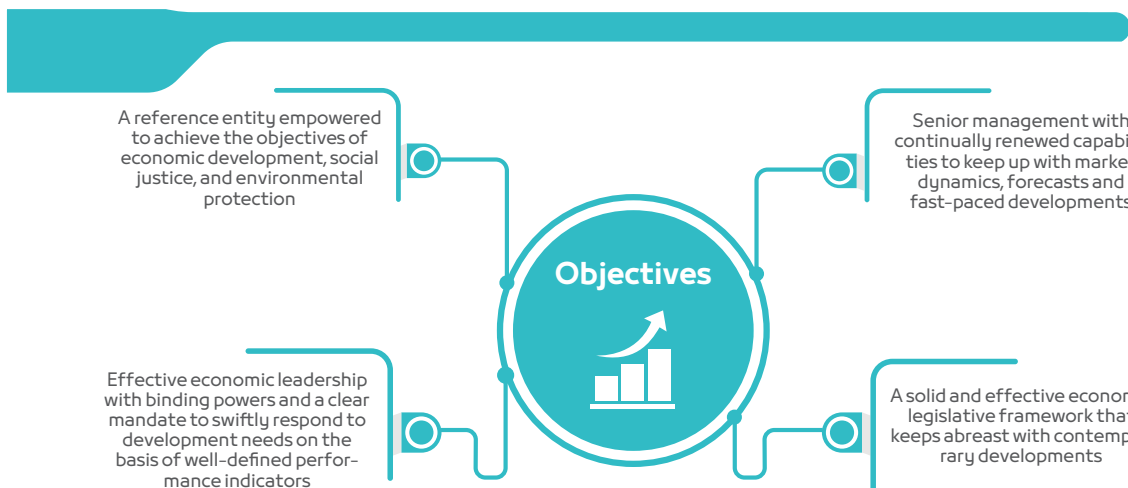
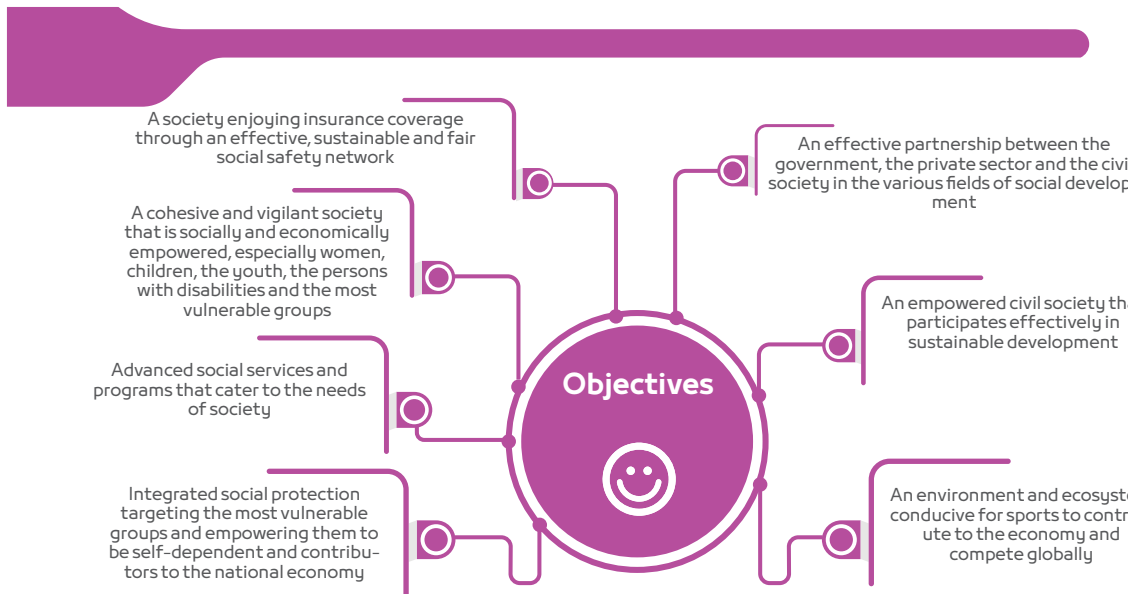
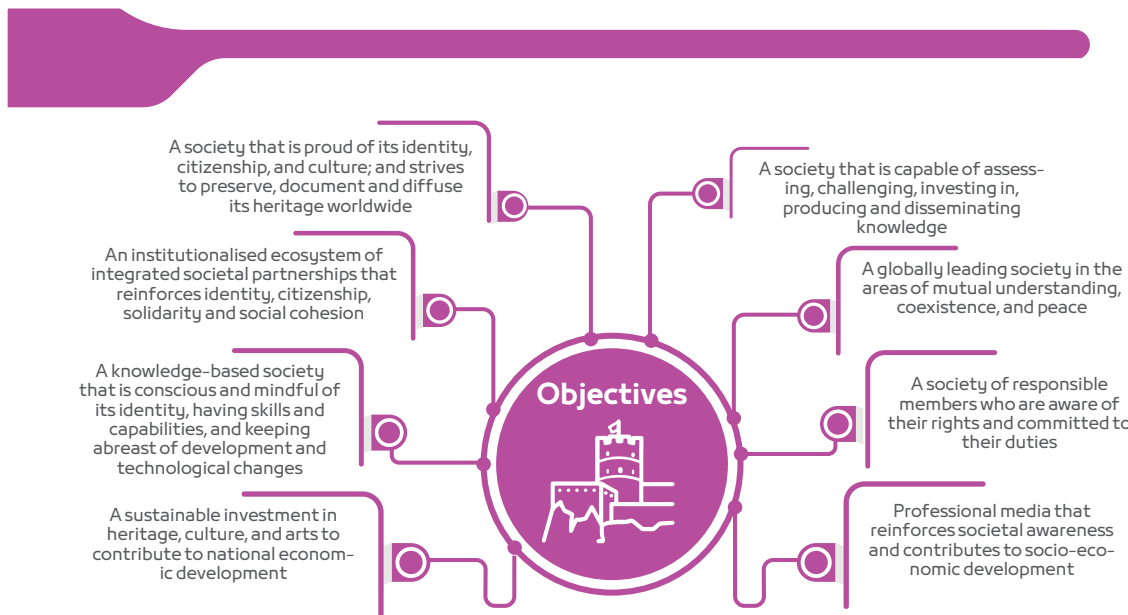
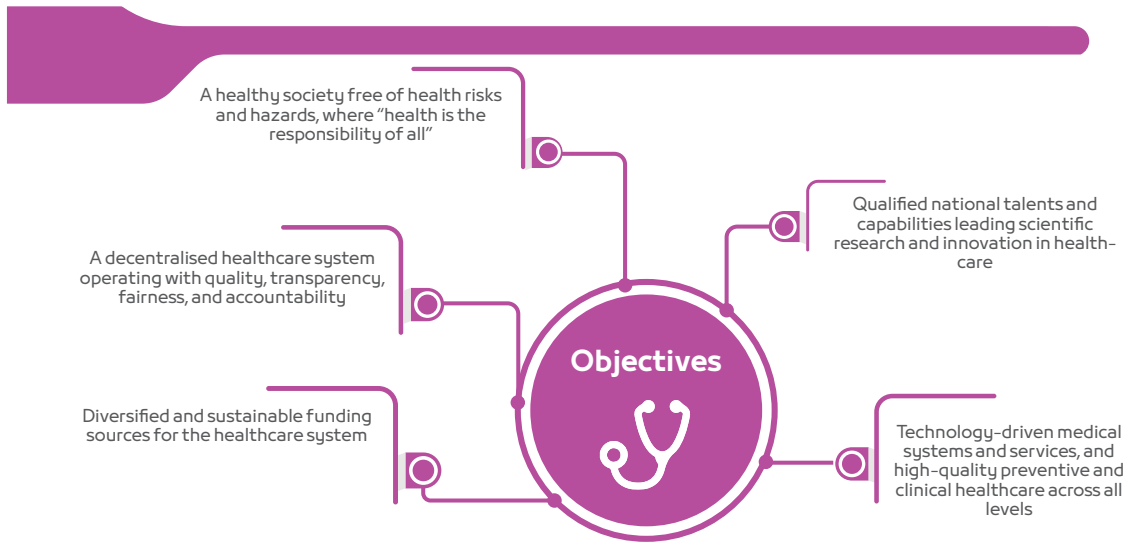
Cinépolis Cinemas has announced the imminent reopening of its venues across the Sultanate welcoming residents and visitors back to the immersive, high-tech experiences they have known and missed.

The much-awaited reopening will include the international movie exhibitor's multiplexes at Oman Avenues Mall in Muscat, Oasis Mall in Suhar, and Oasis Mall in Salalah, all of which will receive moviegoers five days a week, between Wednesday and Sunday, with showtimes set to start between 3 pm to 11 pm featuring the latest blockbusters and family favourites.

"Cinépolis Cinemas will make sure guests are pleasantly reminded of the appeal of cinema through a variety of viewing experiences featuring state-of-the-art audiovisual technologies. At Muscat's Oman Avenues Mall, the global brand has announced reopening its 4D E-motion, Junior and Macro XE experiences to the public, with the Luxury screen scheduled for opening at a later date, to be duly announced. In Suhar and Salalah, Cinépolis will welcome moviegoers at the family-friendly Junior experience, as well as the larger-than-life Macro experience and the state-of-the-art Premium auditoriums with Recliner seating categories," a Cinépolis press release said.

Cinépolis Cinemas has additionally announced discounts and F&B offers across all its Oman venues, where moviegoers can refine their experiences with expertly prepared and seasoned snacks, such as popcorn, nachos and hot dogs.

Vision 2040 to improve Oman's global standings



VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

The priorities of Oman Vision 2040 will be to join the group of the world's developed countries (in top 20 from top 40 in Vision 2030) by seeking to foster economic competitiveness and social well-being, stimulate growth and build confidence in all economic, social and developmental relations nationwide.

The focus will be to improve Oman's global standings in key socio-economic indicators such as Global Innovation Index, Real GDP per Capita (Growth Rate), Global Competitiveness Index, Real GDP Growth, Environmental Performance Index, FDI Net Inflow percentage of GDP, Non-Oil Share of GDP and Omanis share of jobs created in the private sector.

Vision 2040 has outlined the strategic directions, goals and key policies to translate ambitions into action plans underpinned by clear milestones and timelines and progressing against a set of local and international indicators to measure and evaluate the performance in a transparent manner.

EDUCATION

The vision seeks to develop the different levels of the educational system and improving educational outcomes have become necessary to build Omanis' confidence in their identity and commitment to their social values. This is attainable through increasing the quality of basic and higher education and developing scientific and

educational curricula so that graduates are acquainted with competitive quality cations and employability skills to enter the local and international labour market.

HEALTHCARE

An inclusive and equitable healthcare system should cover all of Oman governorates, with the participation of government, the private sector and civil society. This coverage should include more medical specialties and specialised medical institutes and universities to develop a medical staff of various specialisations. The desired healthcare system should follow international best practices in accreditation, be it in medical services, healthcare centres, medical laboratories, or medical personnel.

SOCIAL JUSTICE

Social justice will be a prerequisite for cohesive, strong and peaceful societies. It is achieved by providing sustainable quality social well-being services, such as healthcare and education, and providing social safety nets to ensure viable livelihood means for the present and future generations.

STABLE LEADERSHIP

As stable economic leadership and management are key to align the fiscal, monetary, trade, investment, industrial and labour market policies, the national priorities shall constitute a framework for this leadership, building on the Sultanate's comparative advantages, and its aspiration to build a competitive knowledge-based economy and

keep abreast of economic and technical developments.

Diversification

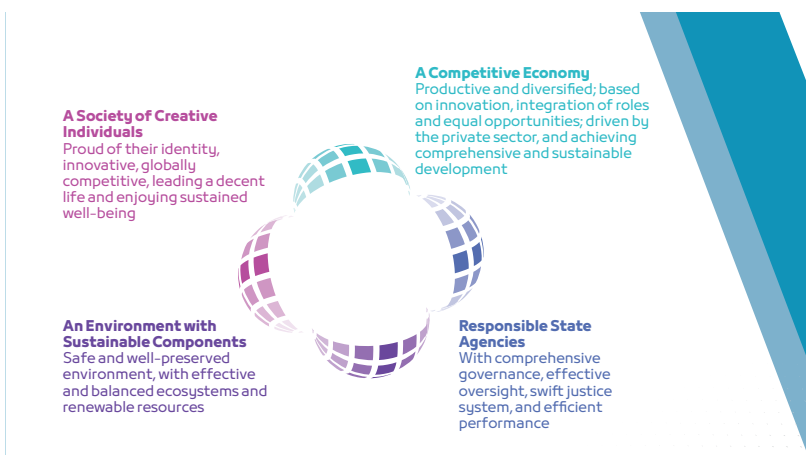
The Omani economy is heading towards a robust base of economic diversification with a focus on technology, knowledge and innovation.

"It also aims at reinforcing upstream and downstream integration among economic sectors to expand the production and export base, diversify trading partners, deepen investment in high value-added sectors, and enhance the contribution of non-oil sectors to the GDP"

TECHNOLOGY

A future Omani economy that embraces technology, knowledge and innovation will allow for the production of competitive products and services with higher knowledge and technology components. Consequently, this will contribute to developing the economy and enhancing its competitiveness in most sectors and activities such as tourism, education and manufacturing, including oil and gas-based industries.

Achieving a balanced development requires a labour market with a highly efficient legislative system that ensures effectiveness, integrates national capabilities coming from the educational system into the domestic labour market, attracts both technical and skilled labour from abroad and develops specific methods to improve the administrative and organisational framework to manage the labour market, the report said.





Notice

This is to inform all concerned that **Mr. Jai Kumar Samtani** holder of Indian Passport No. K4632290 Resident Card No. 66838764 will be no longer working with **Al Bashouq Trading** from 1.01.2021. Therefore, all the concerned are requested to stop dealing with the above named in favor of the company. If anyone is dealing with him it is at their own risk and the company will not take any responsibility hereafter. If anybody has any claim, he/she should report to the company within the next **10 working days**.

AL BASHOUQ TRADING

Two ex-ministers snub judge after being charged over Beirut blast

BEIRUT: Two former Lebanese ministers charged with negligence over a huge explosion at Beirut port in August that killed 200 people snubbed a judge on Wednesday by not turning up for questioning. Judge Fadi Sawan charged three former ministers and the caretaker prime minister last week, sparking fierce debate about whether he had the authority to charge the politicians in a nation still seeking answers about the devastating blast.

The explosion, one of the biggest non-nuclear blasts in history, added further strains to a country struggling with its worst crisis since the 1975-1990 civil war. Some leading parties rebuked the judge for his action, including Hezbollah and the group led by former prime minister Saad al Hariri.

Ali Hassan Khalil, a former finance minister, and Ghazi Zeaiter, a former public works minister, who were both charged, said they had not been officially informed of Wednesday's session, which protocol demanded. Both are lawmakers from Amal, the party led by powerful long-time Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, who is allied to Hezbollah.

State news agency NNA reported that Sawan set a new date of January 4 for the politicians to be questioned after their no-show on Wednesday. It said he heard testimony from a former top army officer, who was acting as a witness. Hassan Diab, the caretaker prime minister whose cabinet resigned after the explosion, declined to be questioned on Monday.



A member of Civil Defence walks on rubble near the damaged grain silo at the site of blast at Beirut's port area. — Reuters file photo



Ghazi Zeaiter

* Judge charges three ex-ministers and caretaker premier

* Some political parties rebuke judge over charges

* Legal experts, others say judge acted courageously

* Lebanese lose hope politicians will be held to account



Ali Hassan Khalil

An official source said the judge set a new appointment for Friday but had yet to receive a response. Diab says his conscience is clear

over the matter. Families of blast victims are increasingly frustrated that details have not emerged from an investigation since the

August 4 explosion caused by a huge stockpile of ammonium nitrate, which was stored in unsafe conditions.

The blast injured thousands of people and devastated several districts in the centre of the Lebanese capital. Many Lebanese say they have given up hope of finding out the truth about the explosion in a country where a political elite have held power for decades amid corruption and mismanagement, while few in authority have ever been held to account.

Politicians say Sawan has been selective and overstepped his powers, while the head of the Beirut Bar Association and others say the judge has shown courage.

— Reuters

Iran nuclear deal parties try to defuse tensions

VIENNA: The remaining parties to the faltering 2015 Iran nuclear accord met on Wednesday after Tehran announced plans for a new breach of the deal, and as uncertainty reigns ahead of US President-elect Joe Biden's January inauguration.

The meeting of the so-called "joint commission" included China, France, Russia, Iran, Germany and Britain and was chaired by senior EU foreign affairs official Helga Schmid.

The meeting, which lasted around two hours, was held virtually because of the coronavirus pandemic.

The 2015 deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), has unravelled steadily since US President Donald Trump withdrew from it in 2018 and went on to impose crippling economic sanctions on Iran.

Tehran has retaliated by progressively abandoning limits on its nuclear activity laid down in the deal, most recently planning to install advanced centrifuges at Iran's

main nuclear enrichment plant in Natanz.

Last week France, Germany and Britain — collectively known as the "E3" — condemned the plan as "deeply worrying".

Meanwhile, the assassination last month of prominent Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh has heightened tensions in the region, with Iran blaming the killing on Israel.

In the wake of Fakhrizadeh's death, Iranian MPs passed a bill calling for further expansion to Iran's nuclear programme and an end to inspections of nuclear facilities by the UN watchdog International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

The Iranian foreign ministry said it did not agree with the bill and President Hassan Rouhani has suggested he will not sign it into law.

Rouhani has defied criticism from Iran's ultra-conservatives to state his determination to seize the "opportunity" presented by the change of US president in January. — AFP

Khamenei reappears in public, hits out at US

DUBAI: Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on Wednesday used his first public appearance in weeks to suggest the United States would remain hostile towards the Islamic Republic even after President-elect Joe Biden takes office.

Speaking at his first public function since rumours surfaced in early December that his health was deteriorating, Khamenei said Washington could not be trusted, a remark indicating a wary attitude towards President Donald Trump's successor. In a meeting with organisers of events to mark the first anniversary of the killing of military commander Qassem Soleimani in a US attack in Iraq, Khamenei said American antagonism would not disappear with the end of the Trump administration.

"My firm recommendation is not to trust the enemy," Khamenei said in remarks carried by state TV. "The hostility (against Iran) is not just from Trump's America, which supposedly some could say would end when he leaves, as (President Barack) Obama's America also did bad things to ...the Iranian nation." Biden was



Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei gestures during a meeting with organisers of events to mark the first anniversary of the killing of top commander Qassem Soleimani, in Tehran, on Wednesday. — Reuters

Obama's vice-president. Earlier, President Hassan Rouhani said he was happy Trump was leaving office, calling him "the most lawless US president" and a "murderer" for hampering Iran's access to COVID-19 vaccines.

"We are not overjoyed about Mr Biden's arrival, but we are happy about Trump leaving... that such a terrorist and murderer, who does not even have mercy for coronavirus vaccines, will be gone," Rouhani said in a televised speech to the cabinet. — Reuters

Erdogan calls US sanctions 'attack on sovereignty'

ANKARA: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Wednesday called US sanctions against Ankara over its purchase of a Russian missile defence system an "open attack" on the Nato member state's sovereignty.

The United States made good on months of threats to punish Turkey for buying the S-400 system under a 2017 law known as CAATSA, which aims to limit Russia's military influence and punish it for its behaviour abroad.

Erdogan noted that sanctions had never before been used against a fellow member of Nato.

"Sanctions are imposed on our country, a Nato member. What kind of an alliance is this?" Erdogan asked during a televised



President Tayyip Erdogan attends a ceremony via video link in Ankara on Wednesday. — Reuters

speech in Ankara.

"This decision is an open attack on our sovereignty," he added.

Washington had already punished Ankara in July by barring it from developing parts

for and acquiring America's next-generation F-35 fighter jets.

This week's punitive measures included a ban on all US export licences and loan credits for Turkey's military procurement agency.

Its president Ismail Demir and three other executives were also barred from travel or holding assets in the US.

The State Department said the sanctions "are not intended to undermine the military capabilities or combat readiness of Turkey... but rather to impose costs on Russia in response to its wide range of malign activities".

But in his first public comments about the sanctions, Erdogan called them unjust. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

RIYADH

Saudi Arabia receives first shipment of vaccines

Saudi Arabia has received the first shipment of a COVID-19 vaccine, Minister of Health Tawfiq Rabiah said on Wednesday. Last week, the kingdom approved the use of the vaccine developed by US pharmaceutical giant Pfizer and German partner BioNTech for use in the Gulf country.

"I am happy to inform everyone, citizens and residents, of the arrival of the first shipment of the vaccine this morning," Al Rabiah said, adding that the ministry will start vaccinations within days.



The country became the first in the Gulf region to obtain the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine.

On Tuesday, Saudi Arabia opened the door to registration to be vaccinated via a mobile application developed by the ministry. — dpa

CAIRO

Sudan hails US move to clear WB arrears

Sudan's finance ministry said on Wednesday that it welcomed the US Treasury's move to clear \$1 billion in Sudanese arrears to the World Bank after its removal from Washington's list of terrorism sponsors.

The move allows Sudan to access \$1.5 billion annually in funds from the International Development Association (IDA), which is an arm of the World Bank. Sudan's presence on the list had cut it off from much-needed financial assistance and



foreign investment in the midst of an economic crisis. Acting finance minister Heba Ahmed (pictured) said on Monday that the US Export-Import Bank would also provide guarantees to American investors from the private sector that could initially total \$1 billion, after Washington removed Sudan from its list of state sponsors of terrorism.

GAZA

Record virus infections in Gaza Strip

The number of new coronavirus infections has reached another high in the Gaza Strip, with 935 new cases recorded in the last 24 hours, the Hamas-controlled Health Ministry said on Wednesday.

According to the Health Ministry, about 45 per cent of 2,088 tests conducted resulted positive. The previous record had been at 922 cases at the end of November.

The number of fatalities related to the coronavirus also



reached a new high with 10 deaths recorded in the last 24 hours, the ministry said, for a total of 220 fatalities. The number of infections has recently spiked in Gaza, where 2 million people live in cramped conditions with poor infrastructure. — dpa

In brief

■ SEOUL



SOUTH KOREA REPORTS RECORD COVID-19 CASES

South Korea reported a record daily rise in novel coronavirus cases on Wednesday and the prime minister issued an urgent call for more hospital beds to cope with the country's worst outbreak since the start of the pandemic. Hospitals were at breaking point with only three critical care beds available in greater Seoul.

"The top priority is securing more hospital beds," Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun told a government meeting, according to a transcript. "Full administrative power should be mobilised so that no patient would wait for more than a day before being assigned to her bed." — Reuters

■ BEIJING



CHINESE SPACECRAFT EXPECTED TO RETURN TODAY

China's Chang'e 5 space capsule, carrying samples of moon rock, is readying a landing early on Thursday in the country's northern steppe. If the landing is successful, it will be the first time since 1976 that lunar samples will have been brought to Earth. It is the final leg of a 23-day mission that included the spacecraft's moon landing, collection of soil and rock samples, ascension and docking with a moon orbiter, and, finally, a four-day trip back to Earth.

A re-entry capsule carrying about 2 kilograms of lunar material is expected to land in the county of Siziwang in China's Inner Mongolia region. — dpa

■ JAKARTA



MILITANT LINKED TO BALI BLASTS BROUGHT FOR QUESTIONING

Indonesian authorities on Wednesday transferred 23 militants to the capital Jakarta for questioning, including one of the suspected bomb makers behind the 2002 attacks on the resort island of Bali. Zulkarnaen, thought to be one of the seniormost members of Al Qaeda-linked militant group Jemaah Islamiah, was arrested on Sumatra island last week along with 22 others in a series of raids.

After the charter plane had landed at Jakarta airport, Zulkarnaen, who was wearing an orange shirt with a sarong, was escorted by anti-terrorism cops from the plane. — Reuters

Taliban team visits Islamabad on peace bid

VISIT TAKES PLACE DURING A BREAK IN PEACE TALKS • 13 AFGHAN POLICEMEN DIE IN ATTACKS

ISLAMABAD/PESHAWAR/KABUL: A Taliban delegation was to arrive in Pakistan's capital on Wednesday for a three-day visit, according to official statements, as both sides in the Afghan peace process continue consultations during a break in negotiations. The Taliban delegation, led by the militant group's top political leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, is set to meet Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan and the foreign minister during the visit, according to a Pakistan foreign office statement.

Two Taliban political sources in Doha told Reuters they would also hold a meeting in Pakistan among their leadership. The Taliban last visited Islamabad in August, just before the peace talks with the Afghan government began in Doha as the United States pushed for a political settlement while it

withdraws troops from the war-torn country.

After reaching an agreement on procedural ground rules this month, negotiators representing the government and the Taliban are taking a break until January 5 when they will continue to work on an agenda.

Diplomatic sources said that both sides will continue to consult with their leaderships and other key players over the break. They added that the next stage will be very challenging as violence rises around the nation and the Afghan government calls for a ceasefire to be top of the agenda, while the Taliban says it should be discussed later.

ATTACK KILLS 13 COPS

At least 13 Afghan policemen were killed when Taliban militants attacked two checkpoints



An Afghan security officer stands guard at the site of a bomb blast in Kabul on Tuesday. - Reuters

overnight in the north of the country, officials told AFP on Wednesday. The militants stormed and briefly held the checkpoints on the outskirts of Pule Khumri, capital of northern Baghlan province, officials said.

The dead, and five wounded, had been taken to the provincial

hospital, said Ainuddin Sayad, the director of the facility.

Provincial police spokesman Ahmad Jawed Basharat confirmed the attack. The Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack, the latest in a wave of violence to rock the country in recent weeks.

In a separate incident on

Wednesday, five security personnel and 17 Taliban militants were killed when government forces countered an offensive in southern Uruzgan province, another official said.

DEPORTATION FLIGHTS

Several European countries have resumed deportation flights to Afghanistan that were suspended in the past couple of months due to the coronavirus pandemic, Afghan officials said on Wednesday. Germany, Austria, Sweden, Bulgaria, and Hungary have already taken steps to deport failed Afghan asylum seekers.

A group of 11 rejected asylum seekers arrived in Kabul early on Wednesday after being deported from Austria and Bulgaria, an official from the Afghan Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation told dpa. — Agencies



Women, including widows and relatives of farmers who were believed to have killed themselves over debt, at Tikri border near Delhi, on Wednesday. - Reuters

Indian farm widows join protests against agriculture reforms

NEW DELHI: Hundreds of Indian women, including many widows of farmers who were believed to have killed themselves over debt, joined a protest on Wednesday against government reforms that farmers say threaten their livelihoods.

Farmers have been protesting for nearly a month over the reforms, enacted in September, to deregulate the agriculture sector, allowing farmers to sell to buyers beyond government-regulated wholesale markets. Small farmers

fear the changes will mean the end of guaranteed minimum prices for their crops and leave them at the mercy of big retailers.

"If these black laws come, more farmers will go deeper into debt," said 40-year-old Harshdeep Kaur, a widow from Punjab state, at one protest site on the outskirts of the capital, New Delhi.

"More mothers and sisters will become widows like me." Suicide by struggling farmers has been a problem in India for years. Nearly

10,350 farmers and agricultural labourers committed suicide in 2018 - making up almost 8 per cent of all suicides in India, according to the National Crime Records Bureau. Kaur said her husband committed suicide three years ago after running up debts of 500,000 rupees (nearly \$7,000).

As she spoke, she held a passport-sized photo of him. The reforms, contained in three laws, loosen rules around the sale, pricing and storage of farm produce. — Reuters

Indonesia pledges free COVID-19 vaccines, with president first in line

JAKARTA: Indonesia will provide free coronavirus vaccines to its citizens when the world's fourth most populous nation starts its inoculation programme, President Joko Widodo said on Wednesday, adding he would get the first shot to reassure people on safety.

The sprawling, developing country received its first shipment of vaccines, 1.2 million doses from China's Sinovac Biotech in early December, but is awaiting emergency use authorisation from its food and drug agency. Another 1.8 million doses are due in January with authorities saying that healthcare workers in Java and Bali, and people aged between 18 and 56 deemed most at risk given their high mobility, would be prioritised.

"After receiving many people's suggestions and after recalculating state financial calculations, I can say that COVID-19 vaccines for citizens will be free," the president said in a video statement from Jakarta's state



President Joko Widodo reacts as he wears a protective mask during an interview at the Presidential Palace in Jakarta. — Reuters

palace.

The decision comes as the country of 270 million faces an escalating coronavirus outbreak and also after social media campaigns urging authorities to provide vaccines free of charge.

The president, widely known as Jokowi, said he had instructed the finance minister to reallocate spending for the programme. Amid concerns over vaccine safety and whether shots would be halal, an issue for many in the world's largest Muslim-majority nation, the president said he would be the first recipient. — Reuters

Lab-grown meat to make debut at Singapore eatery

SINGAPORE: Lab-grown chicken meat will make its debut at a Singapore restaurant in a culinary first this weekend after the company behind the product announced its inaugural sale on Wednesday.

US start-up Eat Just said earlier this month that its product had been approved for sale in the city-state as an ingredient in chicken nuggets after Singapore became the first country to allow meat created without slaughtering any animals to be sold.

Consumption of animals is an environmental threat as cattle produce potent greenhouse gas methane, while logging to create



The restaurant will start serving the lab-grown chicken meat from Saturday.

pastures destroys natural barriers against climate change. On Wednesday, the company said it had made its first commercial sale of the product to 1880, a restaurant in Robertson Quay, a posh riverside entertainment centre.

Eat Just chief executive Josh Tetrick said the news "moves us closer to a world where the majority of the meat we eat will not require tearing down a single forest, displacing a single animal's habitat or using a single drop of antibiotics".

The restaurant will start serving it from Saturday, the company said.

Three cultured chicken dishes will be served, "each bite influenced by a top chicken-producing country in the world: China, Brazil and the United States", the statement added.

"This is a very exciting collaboration for me," said Colin Buchan, the restaurant's executive chef who used to cook for footballer David Beckham. "I think people are going to love it."

Demand for sustainable meat alternatives is rising due to growing pressure from consumers about the environment and animal welfare, but other products in the market are plant-based. — AFP



A man whose son is among those who were kidnapped by gunmen sit under a tree at the Government Science Secondary school in Kankara, northwestern Katsina State, on Wednesday. – AFP

Families of kidnapped Nigerian boys fear time running out

KANKARA: Families of more than 300 kidnapped Nigerian schoolboys worried they may be brainwashed or held for years as security forces continued the hunt on Wednesday for armed captors possibly from the militant Boko Haram movement.

According to an unverified audio clip, the group — whose name means “Western education is forbidden” — was responsible for last week’s raid on the all-boys school in Kankara town in northwestern Katsina state. Parents fear time may be running out.

“They will radicalise our children if the government does not act fast to help us rescue them,” trader Shuaibu Kankara recounted from his home, stopping to cry. His 13-year-old son Annas was among those abducted from the Government Science school on Friday night. Two other sons managed to escape, he added, when gunmen

on motorbikes stormed the school and marched the boys into a forest.

Nnamdi Obasi, senior adviser with security think tank International Crisis Group, said the boys may have been taken over the porous border with Niger, about an hour’s drive north, as has happened with past kidnappings in the area “That would make the task of rescuing the boys a lot more complicated,” he said. If Boko Haram carried out the kidnapping, that would mark an expansion beyond its northeastern base, security experts say. But it may have purchased the boys from criminal gangs in the northwest with whom it has been building ties.

Numerous Nigerian soldiers and intelligence officers were combing the Rugu forest on Friday in search of the missing schoolboys, Abdu Labaran, an aide to Katsina’s state governor, said. — **Reuters**

US Congress ‘closing in’ on \$900bn COVID-19 aid bill

WASHINGTON: US congressional negotiators on Wednesday were “closing in on” a \$900-billion COVID-19 aid bill that will include a new round of stimulus talks and extended unemployment benefits, a person familiar with the talks said.

The source said the deal also focused on providing aid to state and local governments. But it was not clear what form such aid would take, since Republicans have resisted another round of direct payments to those entities. “Other avenues” were being discussed to deliver such aid, the source said, without providing details. The aid bill is not expected to include new protections for companies and universities from lawsuits related to the pandemic, the source said. Congressional leaders made substantial progress toward finalising a new coronavirus aid plan during talks that stretched into the night on Tuesday.

Facing a deadline to avert a government shutdown on Friday night, lawmakers also want to come up with some way to address the pandemic’s heavy human and economic toll. Republican Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said he felt optimistic. “We made major headway toward hammering out a targeted pandemic relief package,” McConnell said as he opened the Senate.

“We need vaccine distribution money, we need to re-up the Paycheck Protection Program to save jobs, we need to continue to provide for laid-off Americans.” PPP is the federal loan and grant aid to small businesses suffering from the pandemic. “It’s not a done deal yet, but we are very close,” Senate Demo-



A bee hovers above flowers in front of the US Capitol as House Speaker Nancy Pelosi was scheduled to continue talks with Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin on a deal for COVID-19 relief legislation in Washington. – **Reuters file photo**

cratic leader Chuck Schumer said.

With pressure building to deliver more help — and a US death toll that has passed 304,000 — McConnell and House of Representatives Republican Leader Kevin McCarthy met twice on Tuesday with Democratic counterparts House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer. The size of the direct payments for individual Americans was not immediately clear.

WEAKENING ECONOMY
The apparent breakthrough comes at a key moment for a US economy that is clearly weakening after an initial rebound from a historic recession triggered by the coronavirus pandemic earlier this year. Consumer spending, buoyed through

“
We need vaccine distribution money, we need to re-up the Paycheck Protection Program to save jobs, we need to continue to provide for laid-off Americans

CHUCK SCHUMER
Senate Democratic leader

the summer and early fall by the first rounds of federal assistance totalling more than \$3 trillion, has hit a wall in the fourth quarter as new restrictions to thwart COVID-19

limit business activity and households begin to hunker down.

Commerce Department data on Wednesday showed retail sales fell unexpectedly sharply in November, with consumer outlays on goods and services showing softness across the board. As lawmakers worked on the deal, officials at the US Federal Reserve were also meeting to debate whether additional stimulus from the central bank was also warranted.

The Fed has already cut interest rates to near zero and is buying \$120 billion of bonds a month to ensure borrowing costs for consumers and businesses remain cheap and help encourage spending. Fed policymakers will unveil their decision on Wednesday afternoon. — **Reuters**

British govt reluctant to cancel Christmas

LONDON: The British government resisted pressure to impose even tighter restrictions on Christmas family get-togethers on Wednesday as pubs and restaurants in London and elsewhere shut their doors amid worsening coronavirus figures.

One cabinet minister suggested it was up to people to make up their own minds about what precautions to take, and said some may want to wait for Easter to gather with their family given the risk to the elderly and the vulnerable. But with eating and drink-

ing establishments told to close in a bid to prevent the coronavirus spreading further, young revellers packed nightlife areas of the capital on Tuesday night to party up to the deadline.

After imposing the most onerous restrictions in peacetime history, Boris Johnson is keen to avoid becoming the prime minister who cancelled Christmas, even though the United Kingdom has the sixth worst official COVID-19 death toll in the world. It plans to relax restrictions for five days around Christmas, but

two influential medical journals and a number of health experts have appealed for the policy to be scrapped.

Housing Secretary Robert Jenrick said on Wednesday it was for people to make up their own minds. “It’s not for government to tell people exactly how to handle this situation,” he told the BBC.

Speaking separately to Sky, he said: “How much do they want to bring members of their broader family together at Christmas or whether they think on this occasion let’s just keep it small and we

can meet up in the Spring - Easter can be the new Christmas for some people.”

The rollout of COVID-19 vaccine developed by Pfizer and BioNTech has raised hopes that some semblance of normal life could return in 2021, though some families have said they will meet up for Christmas no matter what the government decrees. A total of 137,897 people have been vaccinated in the past week, Nadhim Zahawi, the minister in charge of vaccine deployment, said on Wednesday. — **Reuters**



People walk on Regent Street as the spread of COVID-19 continues, in London. — **Reuters**

SHORT TAKES

WASHINGTON

State Dept says Pompeo to quarantine

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has come into contact with someone who tested positive for the coronavirus and will be quarantining although he has tested negative, the US State Department said on Wednesday. “Secretary Pompeo has been identified as having come into contact with someone who tested positive for COVID. For reasons of privacy we can’t identify that individual,” a spokesperson for the State Department said.

“The secretary has been tested



and is negative. In accordance with CDC guidelines, he will be in quarantine. He is being closely monitored by the department’s medical team.” — **Reuters**

LONDON

Top court nod for Heathrow expansion

Britain’s top court gave the go-ahead to the expansion of Heathrow Airport on Wednesday, allowing the £14 billion (\$19 billion) plan to proceed after decades of legal battles and political wrangling. The Supreme Court ruling overturned a previous court decision that had blocked the plan on environmental grounds. Heathrow, Britain’s biggest airport, is keen to proceed despite the plunge in air traffic during the COVID-19 pandemic



that has seen it lose its crown as the busiest hub in Europe.

In February, a court had declared the expansion unlawful, ruling in favour of climate change campaigners. — **Reuters**

ISLAMABAD

Pakistan approves chemical castration

Pakistan has approved the chemical castration of rapists as part of sweeping new legislation sparked by outcry over the gang rape of a mother on a motorway. New laws approved by President Arif Alvi on Tuesday will see rape cases expedited through the courts and create the country’s first national sex offenders register.

“The provision of the chemical castration of repeat as well as first-time sex offenders... was added in the Anti-Rape



Ordinance 2020”, the president’s office confirmed on Wednesday. In September, protests erupted after a mother was raped on the side of the road in front of her children when her car broke down near Lahore. — **AFP**

COVID-19 vaccines raise hope but the ‘last mile’ challenge looms

THIN LEI WIN AND
NAIMUL KARIM

The start of mass vaccinations has raised hopes that COVID-19 can be beaten, but ending the pandemic hinges on tackling a plethora of “last mile” challenges - from a lack of fridges to vaccine hesitancy and fraud, according to specialists.

In order to tame a disease that has killed more than 1.6 million people and battered the global economy, billions of vaccine doses must be shipped to people in every corner of the world, including war zones and remote, poverty-stricken areas.

Accessing such regions and finding suitable cold storage for vaccines during the journey and on arrival will be a huge task. “No one’s ever done this before. It’s not about trying to vaccinate all the children, all the pregnant women. It’s about saying we’ve got to vaccinate everybody,” said Toby Peters, professor of Cold Economy at the University of Birmingham.

“And until we do it, the economy will

ENDING THE
PANDEMIC
HINGES ON
TACKLING A
PLETHORA OF
‘LAST MILE’
CHALLENGES

not restart,” said Peters, a global expert on cold chains - storage and transport facilities that maintain the safety and quality of perishable goods like food and medicine.

Among the three vaccines for which efficacy results have been announced, those from Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna need to be kept at temperatures far below normal fridges, which would complicate their distribution in poor nations. The sheer scale of the inoculation campaign will also magnify the “last mile” challenges, experts said, noting even smaller immunisation programmes struggled to meet their goals.

Since 2000, the GAVI vaccine alliance has vaccinated more than 760 million children, but achieving COVID-19 herd immunity would mean vaccinating up to 5.5 billion people, Ben Hartley, from the UN-backed initiative Sustainable Energy for All, told a recent webinar.

As of last year, 85 countries had failed to reach a 90 per cent target rate for diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis

vaccinations, Hartley said, adding that a global COVID-19 campaign would need “concerted efforts” from all stakeholders.

Shahrzad Yavari, who works for a technology non-profit that produces a wireless solution to monitor temperatures in vaccine fridges in rural clinics, said the “last mile” would not only be an issue in areas that lie far from urban centres. “It’s the under-reached and under-served communities that could very well be in urban settings, or in countries in conflict,” said Yavari, Director at Nexleaf Analytics.

“It’s actually a large percentage of the population worldwide,” Yavari said. At least 60 million people live in areas controlled by armed groups, adding extra obstacles, said Esperanza Martinez, global head of health for the International Committee of the Red Cross. The need for travel permits and frequent power cuts or a lack of electricity can make access to vaccines in conflict zones especially tricky, she said. — **Thomson Reuters Foundation**

DEAL OR NO DEAL

Meat supply lines will choke on red tape

JONATHAN SAUL

Shipments of meat, such as lamb, bacon and sausages, between Britain and the European Union will be disrupted next year even with a Brexit trade deal, as a shortage of veterinarians and a mountain of paperwork disrupt supply lines.

Under the temporary transition period in force since Britain’s departure from the EU at the end of January, meat imports and exports flow freely between the major trading partners. But from January 1, 2021, vets will be required to conduct detailed examinations and issue documents certifying that British exports of animal products meet the health requirements of the European Union.

British sausages, burgers and other “meat preparations” will also be banned from the EU unless frozen. New rules will also apply to EU exports coming into Britain. Britain’s food, feed and drink exports to EU totalled 14.2 billion pounds in 2019, while imports were worth 33.7 billion, British government data show.

Lamb is among the most important of Britain’s meat exports with around one-third of production traded abroad, mostly to the EU.

British government estimates point to a “five-fold increase” in the number of certificates required for the smooth export of British meat and livestock. Shipping and trade sources say Britain

is not prepared and disruptions are also expected in European hubs such as Antwerp, Rotterdam and Calais.

“The longer the delays, the more risk there is to the fresh food that farmers on both sides produce,” said Mark Bridgeman, president of the Country Land and Business Association,

which represents 30,000 landowners, farmers and rural businesses in England and Wales.

“Member states such as France may check every shipment of animal products, to comply with phytosanitary measures. Even if they decide not to, there is still going to be significant room for delay.”

Britain’s farming and environment ministry said in a statement that the country has prepared for the expected surge in paperwork by providing funds for more vets to become Official Veterinarians (OVs), the qualification required to make the checks, and 1,300 have this status, up from 600 previously.

For many, however, this work will add to an already heavy load. Britain faces its worst winter for bird flu for several years, as well as bovine tuberculosis, and the country is alert to the potential threat of African Swine Fever.

James Russell, president of the British Veterinary Association (BVA), said it was not yet clear which diseases exports needed to be shown to be free from, with details expected to be announced this week.

There is also pressure on the supply of vets in Britain as many are EU nationals from countries such as Spain. “There are less new people coming in as well as some going home,” the BVA’s Russell said, noting the meat sector was particularly dominated by EU nationals as British graduates generally found clinical work more attractive.

In some cases, relationships between vets and exporters have yet to be developed.

“A section of the industry has been sitting tight and not really making plans anticipating there would be a deal, meaning they would not need to engage in this process,” he said.

— **Reuters**

LIKE GENOCIDE

Bid to make ‘ecocide’ a crime picks up

AMÉLIE BOTTOLIER-DEPOIS

Climate change, oil spills, deforestation. The injuries caused to the natural world by states and companies threaten whole ecosystems and imperil the environment that sustains life itself. But are these crimes?

Many think that they are and the idea of criminalising “ecocide” is beginning to gain ground.

“People are starting to realise that if we don’t get serious about climate change and the threats to biodiversity, then we’ll have nothing for ourselves, nothing for our children and grandchildren,” said Rob White, professor of criminology at the Australian University of Tasmania.

Deliberate environmental destruction in war has a long history and it was a conflict — the United States intervention in Vietnam — that shaped the concept of ecocide.

During its operations in the country in the 1960s and 70s, the American army dropped tens of millions of litres of toxic herbicides, including Agent Orange, on to Vietnamese forests and crops.

The health and environmental impacts continue to this day — and so do campaigns to recognise environmental destruction as a specific atrocity.

Under its description of war crimes the Rome statute — which formed the basis of the 2002 International Criminal Court — describes “widespread, long-term and severe damage to the natural environment which would be clearly excessive” in relation to military goals. But activists want ecocide to be a crime in peacetime as well.

In the last year, their campaign has gathered new momentum, with the support of Swedish activist Greta Thunberg, French President Emmanuel Macron and Pope Francis.

At the end of 2019, Francis said “an



US President-elect Joe Biden at his transition headquarters in Wilmington, Delaware. – **Reuters file photo**

MANY THINK
THAT THE IDEA OF
CRIMINALISING
‘ECOCIDE’ IS
BEGINNING TO GAIN
GROUND

elementary sense of justice” demands that conduct, often by corporations, does not go unpunished.

He highlighted actions “that can be considered as ‘ecocide’: the massive contamination of air, land and water resources, the large-scale destruction of flora and fauna, and any action capable of producing an ecological disaster or destroying an ecosystem”.

One stumbling block is that there is currently no internationally agreed characterisation of ecocide.

“We use a kind of working definition of mass damage and destruction to

an ecosystem, serious harm to nature which is widespread or severe or systematic, and which is committed with the knowledge of the risks,” said Jojo Mehta, president of the Stop Ecocide Foundation.

The group has recently set up a panel of lawyers and international judges to draft a definition and hopes that ecocide will be added to the crimes prosecuted by the ICC, alongside genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes. The issue was raised by the Maldives and Vanuatu at the ICC general assembly in December 2019. — **AFP**



Doha to host 2030 Asian Games

Riyadh handed hosting rights for 2034 edition

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DEC 16

After an impressive edition in 2006, the 2030 Asian Games will be staged in Qatar capital of Doha. Doha's bid beat Riyadh after receiving highest number of votes from the National Olympic Committees (NOC) of the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA).

The official deceleration of the Doha city was part of the 39th General Assembly meeting of OCA on Wednesday at JW Marriot under auspices of HH Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth, in presence of the top dignitaries.

Riyadh will host the 2034 edition as Shaikh Ahmad al Fahad al Sabah, President of the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA), affirmed that both cities delivered excellent presentations and they will host the editions of 2030 and 2034 of Asian Games.

Qatar's delegations celebrated after the announcement and Shaikh Joaan bin Hamad al Thani, President of Qatar Olympic Committee, signed the agreement contract and Prince Abdulaziz bin Turki al Faisal, President of Saudi Arabian Olympic Committee, signed the contract of 2034 Asian Games.

The voting procedure included



OCA President Shaikh Ahmad al Fahad al Sabah with Qatar and Saudi officials in Muscat. – Mohammed Mahjoub

online and manual as several remote attendees of NOCs voted through the online secured system while the NOC attendees in Muscat voted manually. Twenty-seven votes went to Doha, 10 to Riyadh and eight were abstentions, according to an official count.

A series of rehearsal was done on familiarising the methodology of the e-voting procedure prior to the official voting but later on, the OCA president decided to proceed with the manual voting for Muscat attendees and online for the attendees who were not present at

the meeting physically.

Speaking after being awarded the bid, Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC) Secretary-General Jassim bin Rashid al Buenain and CEO of 2030 Doha bid, said: "We are very proud with this historic moment. We would like to dedicate hosting of this top Asian event to His Highness Shaikh Tamim bin Hamad al Thani, Emir of the State of Qatar, and Shaikh Joaan bin Hamad al Thani, President of Qatar Olympic Committee, and to all the Qatar's society. All the organising committee members

of 2030 Doha bid were confident to host this world-class event," he said.

"This is a huge development for sports in Qatar and an outcome of 16 years of hard work. We had earlier successfully hosted this top Asian event. Qatar has top quality infrastructure besides the world-class complexes. It is not only the availability of good infrastructure but also the capability and ability of human resources and their experience to manage any top sporting events. Qatar is well known for hosting sports events

and is leading by example," he added. The Secretary-General of QOC thanked OCA for the fine organisation of the OCA Congress. "A special thanks to all the NOCs for their trust to position Doha to host the Asian Games. A dedicated thanks to the Sultanate of Oman for their top efforts to host the General Assembly of OCA during this tough time of pandemic and thanks to all the delegations and the attendees," he said.

Qatar Swimming Association (QSA) President Khalil al Jaber and member of organising team at

2030 Doha pointed out that Qatar have a clear strategy depending on well-mapped plans and activities to improve further in hosting the sports events.

"Qatar has 70 top events to host every year. The readiness of infrastructure and well-structured transport system are supporting tools to better facilitate all the athletes and delegations. Future of sporting events is inline to Qatar's vision 2030. Asian Games will require top-class complexes and we are ready to host all the 54 competitions that will be held in all the complexes," he added.

Asma al Thani, Director of Marketing & Communications of Qatar Olympic Committee, opined that hosting the Asian Games means a lot for women. "The top sporting events impact and influence positively in the society. Many youths will get inspired by the star athletes as they attend the competitions. It will instil a dream in them to achieve medals in top sporting championships and tournaments," she said.

Olympic champion Moataz Issa Barsham promised his best to get a medal in the 2030 Doha Asian Games if he is still doing his top performance. "I am fully ready barring no injuries. If I could not make it to the Games due to any reasons, then a 'small Barsham' will take my position," he stated.



India keep faith with Shaw for Adelaide

India have kept faith with young opening batsman Prithvi Shaw for the opening day-night Test against Australia in Adelaide, which starts on Thursday, the country's cricket board said.



Iniesta out for four months after operation

Andres Iniesta faces four months out of action after undergoing an operation to treat a ruptured hamstring, the Vissel Kobe midfielder's representatives said in a statement on Wednesday.

Khawar wins Player of Year prize

SHAHZAD RAZA
MUSCAT, DEC 16

Star Oman all-rounder Khawar Ali walked away with the Player of the Year Award as Oman Cricket (OC) honoured the toppers of 2019-2020 season badly marred by the Covid-19 pandemic at its Annual Awards Night at Oman Cricket Academy ground on Tuesday.

Khawar scored close to 500 runs and picked up 15 wickets across 50-over and T20 formats during the shortened season.

Chief guest Sayyid Qais bin Khalid al Said, Vice-Chairman of Oman Cricket, gave away prizes to the toppers of Premier Division, A Division, B Division league and knockout tournaments in the presence of senior OC officials.

Premier Division League champions Assarain received the winner's trophy while Passage to India (PTI) were presented the runner-up prize. Akshay Patel

of Al Turki NMC was adjudged the best batsman while Waseem Akhtar of IT Works won the best bowler award.

A Division toppers Arm Alpha and AER were presented the winners and runners-up trophies. Danish Mohammed of AER received the best batsman award while the best bowler prize went to Chetan Mallya of Arm Alpha.

Special awards were presented to Omani players as well, Waleed Rahim al Balushi receiving the best batsman prize in a category where an Omani cricketer represented more than one team. Best bowler award went to Shareef al Balushi while Rafeeq al Balushi received the best all-rounder prize.

The category where an Omani cricketer played for only one team saw Salim al Balushi of OCT Mabella winning the best batsman award while Mohammed Aslam al Balushi claimed the best bowler prize.



Khawar Ali receiving his award from Sayyid Qais bin Khalid al Said



Waleed Rahim al Balushi receiving Best Omani Batsman Award

LIST OF TOP TEAMS AND INDIVIDUAL PRIZE WINNERS

SENIOR TEAM TOPPERS
Premier Division 50 overs
Champions: Assarain
Runners-up: PTI Al Sawadi
A Division
Champions: Arm Alpha
Runners-up: AER

Knockout Senior
Joint champions: Zubair CT and LC Tech
Knockout Junior
Joint champions: Design Group and Gitacs
B Division
Champions: ACT
Runners-up: Basta
C Division
Champions: Bank Muscat
Runners-up: Zubair
D Division
Champions: Unique Elegant
Runners-up: Khalsa United
E Division
Champions: Design Group
Runners-up: Global Phone Tech
F Division
Champions: Spanio & VDD
Runners-up: TR Engineering
G Division
Champions: Gitacs
Runners-up: Vanderlande
H Division
Champions: Desert CT
Runners-up: Rimal & Rock
SENIOR LEAGUE SEASON 2019-20
Individual toppers
Omani nationals (playing for one team)
Best batsman: Salim al Balushi (OCT Mabella)
Best bowler: Mohammed Aslam al Balushi (OCT Muscat)
Consolation bowling: Mohammed Siddiq (OCT Al Hail A)
Omani nationals (playing for more than one team)
Best batsman: Waleed

Rahim al Balushi (OCT Al Hail A/Douglas OHI)
Best bowler: Shareef al Balushi (OCT Al Mabella/TR Engg)
Best all-rounder: Rafeeq al Balushi (OCT Al Nahda/Gitacs)

PREMIER DIVISION
Best batsman: Akshay Patel (Al Turki NMC)
Consolation batting: Sanuth Ismail Ebrahim (Assarain)
Best bowler: Waseem Akhtar (IT Works)
Consolation bowling: Samay Shrivastava (Muscat CT)
A Division
Best batsman: Danish Mohammad (AER)
Best bowler: Chethan Mallya (ARM Alpha)
B Division
Best batsman: Hafiz Irfan (ACT)
Best bowler: Zubair Akbar al Balushi (OCT Ruwi)
Best all-rounder: Abdul Naveed Abdul Majeed (PDO RC)

Women Senior
Champions: Indian Social Club
Runners-up: Women's Cricket Sohar
Junior U-19
Champions: Indian School Muscat
Runners-up: Indian School Wadi Kabir
Junior U-16
Champions: Indian School Muscat
Runners-up: Indian School Wadi Kabir
Junior U-13
Champions: Indian School Muscat 'A'
Runners-up: Indian School Seeb



Vinu Mathew and Gustav Burger of Assarain receiving Premier Division Winner's Trophy





OCA Championship fourth stage tomorrow

Overall leader Willcox faces firm challenge from Mohammed al Wahaibi and Mundher al Hasani

ANUROOP ATHIPARAMBATH
MUSCAT, DEC 16

The Oman Cycling Association (OCA) will organise the fourth stage of OCA Championship 2020-21, a 98-km individual road race with 10 laps, on Friday.

The fourth of the total eight stages will start from the Civil Aviation Club building near the Muscat International Airport to The Wave.

As many as 145 cyclists from 14 clubs affiliated to the OCA along with 20 individual cyclists, junior and women riders will take part in the stage.

North Road Oman team rider Paul Willcox from United Kingdom is leading the race for Omantel jersey in the open category with 220 points after the third round. Willcox also leads the 40 plus category for the Sohar International Jersey with 140 points.

Willcox had won the first stage with his team and claimed top spot in the second stage. The UK cyclist continued his impressive form with a third-place finish in the third stage.

Mundher al Hasani of Ahli Sidab A is leading the under-23 section for Bank Nizwa jersey with 120 points.

In the third round, Omani cyclist Mohammed al Wahaibi of Ahli Sidab A stormed to the top position in the open category with a timing of 2 hours 29 minutes and 37.87 seconds at Halban.

Mohammed al Wahaibi said he is training hard to keep up the good work.

"I will work hard in the remaining stages to achieve podium positions. The competition is really challenging and getting stronger," he said.

Mundher al Hasani missed the first spot by a whisker as the Omani finished with a timing of 2:29:37.89 in the 90-km road race with 15 laps.



"Undoubtedly, the competition in this championship is strong from the first stage to the third stage, and thank God, I was able to perform well during the past stages and was able to lead the general ranking in the U-23 category. I thank the OCA for organising such tournaments that contribute to the development of the players of the national teams and also contribute to create a spirit of competition among the cyclists," Mundher said.

After third round, Ahli Sidab A (Mohammed al Wahaibi,

Mundher al Hasani and Saud al Mandhari) are leading with 285 points. Royal Army consisting of Said al Rahbi, Mashari al Khalili and Hatim al Booshri are second with 240 points and North Road Oman (Paul Willcox, Szczepan Pietruska and Yuri Lipkov) are third with 197 points.

Ishaq al Balushi, OCA General Secretary, said: "We have witnessed a high level of performance in the last stages. National cyclists have made significant improvement in the second and third stages."

"The OCA has the best referees and technicians who are able to manage races and any championships of any size, and we also have the best national referees at the Gulf and Arab levels, as well as they are referees approved by the world cycling body, UCI."

Sultan al Rawahi, Saud al Rawahi and Arafat al Hinai are the technical umpires for the championship.

Sultan al Rawahi, said: "There is no doubt that the technical level has increased significantly

over the past years, especially with the increase in the number of participating teams to 14 teams. It is also noticeable that there is a significant development in the level of Omani competitors, especially among the youth."

"Abdullah al Ghailani had won the second place in the open section and first in the under-23 category during the stage two. Mohammed al Wahaibi and Mundher al Hasani had won first and second places in the third stage as well," the OCA board member added.



Ishaq al Balushi



Saud al Rawahi



Sultan al Rawahi

business

MUSCAT
STOCK
MARKET

3,601.27

CRUDE
OIL PRICE

Oman Crude	\$50.96
Brent Crude	\$50.47
Light Crude	\$47.19

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Bounced cheques rise in Oman

CONRAD PRABHU
@conradprabhu

Of an estimated 4.71 million cheques processed through the Payments and Settlements System of the Sultanate in 2019, about 10.7 per cent – equating to around 504K cheques – went unpaid, according to the Central Bank of Oman (CBO).

The figure represents a 7.64 per cent uptick in so-called dud cheques over the corresponding number for 2018, the banking and financial sector regulator noted in its Financial Stability 2020 Report issued on Tuesday.

Significantly, a significant 76.14 per cent of the dud cheques were rejected because of the “inability of the drawer to maintain sufficient balance” slightly down from 78.2 per cent in 2018, the apex bank said.

Closed or ‘legally locked’ accounts were also a leading factor and accounted for 15.39 per cent of cheques being rejected, up from 12.6 per cent in 2018.

Other reasons cited for the bouncing of cheques included:

MICR coding errors, drawer signature issues, account closed / frozen / transferred, and insufficient funds.

The number of bounced cheques has been on the rise in trend with a strong uptick in the number of cheques entering the Payments and Settlements System operated by the CBO.

Although the number of cheques grew 0.4 per cent in 2019, aggregate transaction values processed through the system witnessed a dramatic 17 per cent increase to reach RO 236.5 billion up from RO 202.9 billion in 2018, the Central Bank said.

Commenting on the threats posed by dud cheques to the financial system, the regulator noted: “While the impediment to pay the beneficiary of the cheques caused by technical reasons may be decreased with advancement of technology and stronger operating environment, it is the lapse by the drawer of the cheque that is more serious as it may decrease the confidence of recipients regarding the sanctity of the cheques and hence needs attention.”

Healthy foreign exchange reserves support stability of fixed peg: CBO

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 16

Despite a plethora of fiscal challenges unleashed by the economic downturn and the effects of the coronavirus pandemic, the foreign exchange reserves of the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) have remained adequate while also helping support the stability of the Omani currency’s fixed peg to the US dollar, the Central Bank said in a report.

Based on standard metrics, the CBO’s reserves remained adequate in 2019 and the first half of 2020, the apex bank said.

“They provide sufficient external buffers for the fixed exchange rate regime and provide suitable coverage of imports,” it stated in the newly released 2020 Financial Stability Report.

It further noted: “Price stability continued to be one of the strengths of the Omani economy, as the stable peg to the USD continued to serve as a credible nominal anchor that supports price stability and minimises the risk of inflationary pressures.”

“The Central Bank’s foreign exchange reserves together with the foreign liquid assets held by the Oman Investment Authority (OIA) constitute crucial external buffers for the Sultanate against external shocks.

As an oil exporting economy with a pegged exchange rate regime, it is critical for Oman to hold adequate FX reserves to safeguard the stability of the peg, without imposing capital controls, and maintain its ability to purchase necessary imports if regular FX inflows are interrupted,” it said.



PRICE STABILITY: The Central Bank’s foreign exchange reserves together with the foreign liquid assets held by the Oman Investment Authority (OIA) constitute crucial external buffers for the Sultanate against external shocks

The Central Bank’s gross FX reserves decreased 4.2 per cent during 2019 to RO 6.41 billion (versus RO 6.69 billion in 2018). Excluding foreign liabilities to non-residents, net FX reserves amounted to RO 5.72 billion in December 2019, 4.7 per cent less than its 2018 value (RO 6.0 billion).

During the first half of 2020,

gross FX reserves rebounded to RO 6.63 billion, but net FX reserves slid to RO 5.65 billion.

“Despite fluctuating oil revenues and persistent current account deficits, CBO’s FX reserves maintained relative stability over the past few years,” the report stated.

Monetary conditions, the report said, remained supportive for growth without imposing inflationary pressures and were generally in line with monetary conditions in the USA thanks to the pegged exchange rate regime.

“The trends of monetary aggregates in Oman do not seem to be a source of macroeconomic vulnerabilities,” it stated.

However, the Financial Stability Report noted that the solid demand for Omani Sovereign International Debt Issues in 2019 temporarily weakened in 2020 because of the pandemic.

“Notwithstanding the vulnerabilities highlighted earlier, market participants continued to show

considerable confidence in the Omani economy and strong demand for Omani issues of sovereign debt,” said the Central Bank.

In fact, the July 2019 Eurobond issues were oversubscribed and Oman raised \$3 billion in total at attractive rates. Orders totalled nearly \$14 billion.

Coupon rates were 4.875 per cent for 5.5 year maturity and 6 per cent for 10-year maturity, according to the CBO report.

The yield and sovereign spread data for Oman’s sovereign Eurobonds and international sukuk displayed a muted reaction to the negative rating actions of 2019, the report said.

In 2020, however, the dual shock caused by the pandemic, and the subsequent multiple unfavourable rating actions, adversely reflected on the demand for Oman’s Eurobonds and international sukuk in March and April, with quick recovery observed during May and June 2020, it noted.

Pact renewed for operation of Al Amerat landfill in Muscat

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 16

Oman Environmental Services Holding Company (be’ah) has renewed its contract with French multinational corporation SUEZ to operate and maintain the Al Amerat engineered sanitary landfill near Muscat.

This five-year contract, worth €1.4 million a year, will start in the beginning of 2021, the Middle East office said in a press statement. It follows a contract signed in 2005 for the construction of the landfill’s extension with the creation of a second cell and five years’ Operation & Maintenance of the entire landfill.

Within this contract, SUEZ oversees the reception and land-filling of 1,320 tonnes of municipal solid waste daily.

The facility includes a biogas extraction system and a Membrane bioreactor (MBR) plant for treating leachates, allowing the



country to curb greenhouse gas emissions and improve its environmental performance.

“We are honoured of this renewed trust which is the result of a successful a 10-year partnership and collaboration with be’ah targeting a common goal: preserving Oman beautiful environmental capital. We are proud to support the Sultanate in leading the change of the waste management sector by implementing high level international practices and sustainable waste management solutions,” commented Cyril Courjaret, CEO, SUEZ Middle East & Central Asia.

Since 2010, SUEZ has been supporting the Sultanate with the construction, operation and management of several municipal and industrial waste landfills across the country, including Barka Municipal Solid Waste Landfill, Sohar Industrial waste treatment facility (Phase 1) and Duqm Integrated Waste Management Facility.

Tourism sector gearing up for post-pandemic recovery

IT is not surprising that Oman's tourism sector losses since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic have amounted to a half billion Omani riyals (\$1.3 billion) or perhaps more, not counting the disruption and other impacts caused to small enterprises associated with this sector.

The latter provide services in the form of hospitality, transportation, food, souvenirs, and so on.

The impacts to the tourism sector were outlined the Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism at the last press conference of the Supreme Committee overseeing Oman's response to the coronavirus pandemic.

This comes on top of a dramatic decline in international oil prices since the start of the year and earlier, the closure of airports, travel, tourism and hospitality services, and so on.

Some preventive measures were necessary to be taken to prevent the rapid spread of the virus.

Now, the authorities concerned are making efforts to effectively restart the tourism and other sectors by relaxing visa guidelines for citizens of 103 countries worldwide.

Notwithstanding the positive results of these decisions, beneficiaries will be mainly major institutions that own large and upscale hotels and come equipped with their own



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SUCCESSFUL TOURISM INITIATIVES REQUIRE EFFECTIVE MARKETING TO HELP STIMULATE TOURISM SECTOR AHEAD OF THE LAUNCH OF THE NEXT FIVE-YEAR PLAN

airport reception facilities and services, car and bus rental transportation, lounges, resorts and restaurants.

The owners of small enterprises, on the contrary, are unlikely to reap the rewards flowing from these decisions. It is high time that major institutions collaborate with the Omani owners of small enterprises to benefit jointly from the recovery expected in the tourism sector.

The pandemic has hit both big and small businesses. The number of hotel guests almost halved by the end of the third quarter of this year.

For its part, the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism is working to support Omani businesses by

rolling out a recovery plan for the sector covering not only opportunities for small players, but also ensuring their safety amid the pandemic.

It is also working on the sustainability of the human resources in this sector, notably by providing training support and developing their qualifications.

At the same time, successful tourism initiatives require effective marketing to help stimulate this sector ahead of the launch of the next five-year plan aimed at diversifying sources of national income.

Tourism plays a big role in the global economy and was therefore included in the 'Tanfeedh' programme among

five sectors with the potential to fuel Oman's economic diversification.

Also, it represents an important resource and a vital factor in employing Omani manpower in the various projects that are being developed within this sector.

It is expected that the tourism industry will witness a return to good growth in the post-pandemic era.

The introduction and roll-out of vaccines bode well for the sector's recovery. Efforts are also underway to reassure foreign visitors that the Sultanate continues to be a safe and tranquil destination with all precautions being taken to ensure their well-being.

Essentials of VAT compliance in Oman



WITH a VAT implementation date of April 2021, businesses have a limited time to get ready for VAT. Based on our experience across the region, we have set out below essentials of VAT readiness which every business seeking to be compliant with the VAT law should ensure can be fulfilled at the VAT go-live date.

VAT registration

Businesses in Oman will be required to self-assess their VAT registration obligation in Oman. It is anticipated that the Tax Authority will announce VAT registration thresholds that, if breached, a business should be required to submit a VAT registration application. Generally, and for the purposes of VAT registration, businesses are required to calculate their 12-month historic or expected taxable turnover. Whilst the thresholds are yet to be announced, it is expected that the Tax Authority will introduce two thresholds whereby if you breach one you are mandated to register, whereas if you breach the other you have the option to register for VAT.

VAT invoices

VAT is known to be a document driven tax, and tax invoices are amongst the key documents driving VAT compliance. All taxable businesses will be required to issue valid tax in-



Alkesh Joshi,
Partner, Oman
Tax Leader and
MENA Energy
Tax Leader, EY



Mazoon al Jabri,
Senior
Consultant,
Indirect Tax, EY

voices for all taxable supplies made by them, and similarly receive valid tax invoices for all purchases. It is anticipated that the VAT implementing Regulations will outline 9-13 requirements that must appear on an invoice for it to be considered a valid tax invoice. Non-VAT compliant invoices can be rejected by customers and may subject the business to penalties to be applied by the Tax Authority in accordance with the provisions of the VAT Law.

VAT returns

A key aspect of VAT compliance is submitting a periodic VAT return after each tax period. Tax periods are generally not less than one month and can be calendar quarters. It is expected that in Oman, VAT returns will be due at the end of the month following the end of the tax period. In the VAT return businesses are expected to submit values of their

turnover, categorised into the different VAT treatments, in addition to the total output and input VAT amounts and the net VAT amount payable or refundable.

Record keeping

As outlined in the VAT law, businesses will be required to maintain documents relating to VAT for a period of ten (10) years from the end of the year in which the tax return is filed. These documents include tax invoices, accounting records and books, customs documents relating to the importation and exportation of goods and any other document relating to the provisions of the Oman VAT law. This period is extended to fifteen (15) years for transactions relating to real estate.

VAT transition

Businesses in the KSA, the UAE and Bahrain faced many challenges with supplies which spanned across the VAT implementation date. The Oman VAT Law has introduced certain transitional provisions which govern such supplies. As such, businesses should carefully assess the application of the transitional provisions to their long-term contracts and take appropriate steps to address those matters.

(Alkesh may be contacted at: Alkesh.Joshi@om.ey.com for any VAT related clarifications)

Broad money supply climbs 11 per cent

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 16

The effective exchange rate index of Omani Rial fell by 2 per cent to 104 points as of the end of September 2020 compared to 106.1 points in the same period of 2019.

The Sultanate registered an increase in narrow money supply (M1) by 13.4 per cent to reach RO 5.71 billion as of end September 2020. Meanwhile, Broad Money Supply (M2) rose 11 per cent to reach RO 19.30 billion during the period as against RO 17.39 billion the previous year,

according to data released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

Total foreign assets of the Central Bank of Oman fell 1.4 per cent, reaching RO 6.53 billion compared to the same period of 2019, when it stood at RO 6.63 billion.

PRESS RELEASES

HYUNDAI CELEBRATES SPIRIT OF 50 WITH JUST RO 50 EMI

The ongoing promotion by OTE- Hyundai, is offering just RO 50 EMI on Grand i10 and popular 1.6L models such as Accent, Elantra, Creta and Tucson, for the first year, apart from exceptional prices on the entire model line-up of Hyundai models along with an attractive cash-as-gift ranging from RO 1,712 to RO 5,606 and a manufacturer warranty of up to 5 years / 100,000 KMs - one of the best in the industry.

The promotion will be valid only for a limited period and



the elements may vary for different models; exact details can be checked out at any of the Hyundai showrooms closer to you.

With such attractive EMIs and attractive prices on the Hyundai line-up, this is indeed the best time to buy your favourite Hyundai!

Hyundai's model line-up features a bold design and each loaded with a wide range of cutting-edge safety technologies, host of advanced driver assistance systems and convenience features, have been continuously winning renowned awards across the globe for design, performance, safety, delivering great customer value.

HSBC VOTED BEST CASH MANAGEMENT BANK IN OMAN, ME

HSBC Bank Oman SAOG has been voted the number 1 cash management bank in the Sultanate by corporates for the ninth consecutive year in the annual Euromoney Cash Management Survey. HSBC Bank Oman was also voted the number 1 bank for cash management service in the Sultanate by corporates for the second year.

"This accolade demonstrates our customers' confidence in our cash and liquidity management services as well as our broader role as their banking partner, which is particularly important during these difficult times. It also demonstrates the value of our investment in digital,



which has ensured our cash management platform is market leading at a local, regional and global level," said Melika Betley (pictured), CEO of HSBC Bank Oman.

The local recognition was complemented by other HSBC successes, with the bank once again voted the #1 bank for

cash management by corporates across the entire Middle East region.

Noor Adhami, HSBC's Head of Global Liquidity and Cash Management in the Middle East, North Africa and Turkey, said: "This year's achievement is particularly special because not only has HSBC been voted by the market as the leading bank for cash management in the Middle East but we have also come top in each of the five service categories — personnel, service, tech provisions, financial facilities and business functions — and have been awarded the overall best service award for the region."

JAPANESE EMBASSY DONATES BOOKS TO TECH UNIVERSITY



MUSCAT: Toshinori Kobayashi, Ambassador of Japan to the Sultanate, met with Dr Said al Rubaie, Vice Chancellor of the University of Technology and Applied Sciences in Muscat, and handed over a collection of books related to Japanese literature, culture and language among others. These books were donated by the Japan Foundation.



In brief

■ WASHINGTON



IMF CHIEF SAYS 62 PC OF COVID-19 LENDING WENT TO LATAM

Sixty-two per cent of the International Monetary Fund's lending in response to the coronavirus pandemic has gone to 21 countries in hard-hit Latin America, IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva said. Georgieva told a panel hosted by the Americas Society/Council of the Americas, the fund had plenty of lending firepower left, and would focus on helping countries in the region take the "turn towards a greener and digital and fairer economy."

Latin America had 8 per cent of the world's population, but about 20 per cent of the COVID-19 infections and 30 per cent of the deaths, and the end of the pandemic was not yet in sight, Georgieva said.

■ WASHINGTON



US, SINGAPORE INK TRADE MEMORANDUM

The United States announced it had signed a memorandum of understanding to improve trade relations with Singapore, as both countries eye economic recoveries following the COVID-19 pandemic.

The United States is already the largest foreign investor in Singapore, which is in turn the fourth-largest Asian investor in the American economy.

In a statement, the US Commerce Department said the renewable, two-year memorandum would also "enhance the availability of and access to trade financing options for US and Singapore companies." — AFP

■ SAN DIEGO



ELI LILLY TO BUY PREVAIL IN ABOUT \$1 BILLION DEAL

Drugmaker Eli Lilly and Co said it would spend about \$1 billion to buy Prevail Therapeutics Inc to strengthen its presence in the lucrative field of gene therapy that is used to develop treatments for neurodegenerative diseases such as Parkinson's.

Lilly also forecast 2021 revenue above analysts' average estimates, helped by about \$1 billion to \$2 billion in sales of its COVID-19 treatments.

Gene therapy has emerged as one of the hottest areas of drug research, with several large drugmakers drawn into the field as such treatments are usually expensive.

EU moves to rein in US tech giants with threat of fines, break-up

BRUSSELS: The European Union on Tuesday unveiled tough draft rules targeting tech giants like Google, Amazon and Facebook, whose power Brussels sees as a threat to competition and even democracy.

The landmark proposals — which come as Silicon Valley faces increasing global scrutiny — could shake up the way Big Tech does business by menacing some of the world's biggest firms with mammoth fines or bans from the European market.

EU competition chief Margrethe Vestager said the bloc's draft laws to regulate the Internet aimed to bring "order to chaos" and rein in the online "gatekeepers" that dominate the market.

"The Digital Service Act and Digital Markets Act will create safe and trustworthy services while protecting freedom of expression," she told a press conference.

The EU says the long-trailed legislation would see Internet behemoths face fines of up to 10 per cent of their turnover for breaking



Executive Vice President of the European Commission for A Europe Fit for the Digital Age Margrethe Vestager (L) and European Commissioner for Internal Market Thierry Breton at a press conference on Digital Services Act and the Digital Markets Act at the European Commission headquarters in Brussels. — AFP

some of the most serious competition rules or even risk being broken up.

It also proposes fining them six per cent of revenues or tem-

porarily banning them from the EU market "in the event of serious and repeated breaches of law which endanger the security of European citizens."

The Digital Services Act and its accompanying Digital Markets Act will lay out strict conditions for doing business in the EU's 27 member countries as authorities

aim to curb the spread of disinformation and hate speech online, as well as Big Tech's business dominance.

A source close to the EU commission said ten firms faced being designated as "gatekeepers" under the competition legislation and subjected to specific regulations to limit their power to dominate markets.

The firms that would be subject to stricter regulation are US titans Facebook, Google, Amazon, Apple, Microsoft and SnapChat, China's Alibaba and Bytedance, South Korea's Samsung and the Netherlands' Booking.com.

Search engine Google said it would carefully study the proposals but complained that they "seem to specifically target a handful of companies".

The draft laws will go through a long and complex ratification process, with the EU's 27 states, the European Parliament, and a lobbying frenzy of companies and trade associations influencing the final law. — AFP

Watchdog sues Facebook over 'misleading' VPN app

SYDNEY: Australia's consumer watchdog launched legal action against Facebook on Wednesday, alleging the social media giant "misled" thousands of Australians by collecting user data from a free VPN service advertised as private.

The platform could face a fine if found guilty of deceiving users, as Australia takes an increasingly assertive stance towards powerful US tech titans.

The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) has accused Facebook and two of its subsidiaries — Facebook Israel and Onavo Inc — of misleading people who downloaded its virtual private network (VPN) app Onavo Protect, by collecting and using their "very detailed and valuable personal activity data".

Records of which apps they accessed and the amount of time they spent using them were among the data allegedly used to support Facebook's market



research.

The ACCC alleges Facebook and its two partners falsely represented the now-defunct VPN service as keeping user data "private, protected and secret" between February 2016 and October 2017.

"Consumers often use VPN services because they care about their online privacy, and that is what this Facebook product claimed to offer. In fact, Onavo Protect channelled significant volumes of their personal activity data straight back to Facebook," ACCC Chair Rod Sims said.

"We believe that the conduct deprived Australian

consumers of the opportunity to make an informed choice about the collection and use of their personal activity data by Facebook and Onavo."

Facebook did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The ACCC has previously helped draft a law that threatens Facebook and Google with millions of dollars in fines unless they agree to pay media outlets when their platforms host news content.

In March, the Office of the Australian Information Commissioner also began legal action against Facebook for allegedly exposing more than 300,000 Australians to a data breach by political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica.

Facebook has already paid penalties in the United States and Britain over the massive 2018 data hijacking scandal involving the now-defunct British company.

— AFP

Continental aims to triple profitability under new CEO

FRANKFURT: German auto supplier and tire maker Continental aims to triple profitability under restructuring plans led by its new chief executive, sending its shares 4 per cent higher.

The firm said on Wednesday it was seeking to drive up adjusted earnings before interest and taxes (EBIT) margin to 8 per cent to 11 per cent in the medium term.

In November, it said 2020 adjusted EBIT margin was expected to be about 3 per cent. The Hanover-based company said it would increase its focus on vehicle networking and autonomous driving, while seeking to increase automation and digitalise production.

"While hardware is still important, software will increasingly make the difference in the future," Nicolai Setzer, who took

over as chief executive on December 1, said during the firm's Capital Markets Day.

The company, which said it was aiming for organic annual growth in the medium term of about 5 per cent to 8 per cent, said it would press on with restructuring and cleaning up its balance sheet. It also said it would consider possible sales and acquisitions, as well as partnerships.

Setzer said the planned spin-off of powertrain business Vitesco Technologies would go ahead as scheduled next year.

The company said in September that 30,000 employees would be affected by the restructuring but that did not mean all of them would be laid off.

Setzer said some of those people affected would be reassigned rather than made redundant. — Reuters

Virus response helps Vietnam's economy weather pandemic

HANOI: A strong response to the coronavirus pandemic, surging exports and healthy public spending have helped Vietnam buck a global recession in 2020 and fast-track its recovery, with analysts predicting it will likely enjoy one of the highest growth rates in the world.

But the pain is not over for some sectors with containment measures and border disruptions hammering the country's tourism industry, and leaving the once-booming aviation sector limping.

While many countries have suffered from high infection and mortality rates, Vietnam has recorded fewer than 1,500 corona-



A propaganda poster on preventing the spread of the COVID-19 is seen on a wall as a woman walks by along a street in Hanoi. — AFP

virus cases and 35 deaths thanks to mass quarantines, expansive contact-tracing and strict controls on movement, allowing factories to largely stay open and people to swiftly get back to work.

"The serious lockdown lasted for less than three months, so domestic activity was quickly back to normal by June," Nguyen Xuan Thanh, a public policy lecturer at Fulbright University Vietnam, said.

While many Western countries were imploring citizens to stay home mid-year, Vietnamese people were able to flock to scenic beaches as the government tried to give the domestic tourism in-

dustry a much-needed shot in the arm. There were grave fears for Vietnam's export-reliant economy as demand for clothing, footwear and smartphones slumped in some of its biggest markets including the European Union, Japan and South Korea.

"But it turned out that exports still helped promote growth this year," Thanh said. "That's because Vietnam has a very diversified export market — it's not dependent on any single export destination."

Shipments to China grew more than 15 per cent on-year in the first nine months, according to the Vietnam General Customs Administration. — AFP

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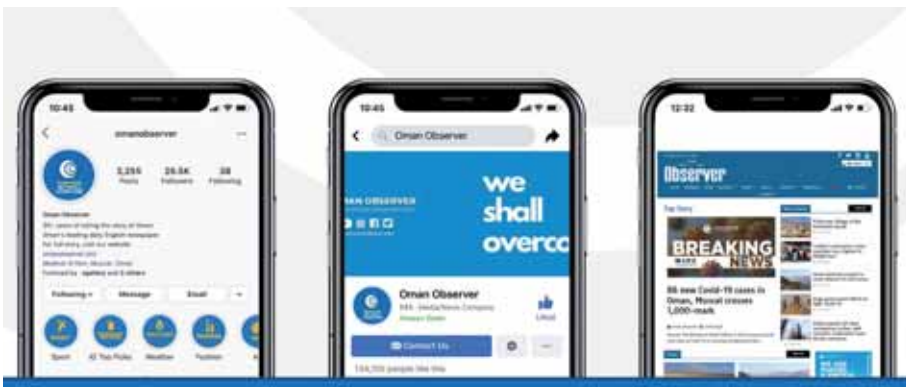
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features



Hope and Memories exhibition celebrates the golden jubilee

On November 17, on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee of Renaissance, a new art fallery Art & Soul, a minimalist gallery opened its doors aiming at becoming the most important cross-roads for local and international artists who want to showcase their artworks in the Gulf... **P18**

INSIDE STORIES

EXHIBITION

TRIP OF LOYALTY ENDS IN MUSCAT

Ahmed al Mahrouqi accompanied by Rachael MacIver Terry and Mohammed, ended their trip of loyalty last Wednesday in Muscat. The trip took eight days from Adam in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate to Muscat... **Story on Page P20**

ENVIRONMENT

INDONESIA'S FEMALE FOREST GUARDIANS FIGHT FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

Sumini gets up at dawn to do her household chores — then leads a team of women into the jungles of Indonesia's Sumatra island, on a mission to battle rampant deforestation and wildlife poaching... **Story on Page 19**

READ

THINKING, FAST AND SLOW

Thinking, Fast and Slow is a best-selling book published during 2011 by Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences laureate Daniel Kahneman. It was the 2012 winner of the National Academies Communication Award for best creative work that helps the public understanding of topics of behavioural science, engineering and medicine.

SCIENCE

A DINOSAUR WITH 'HAIR' AND 'RIBBONS' ENTHRALLED

About 110 million years ago along the shores of an ancient lagoon in what is now northeastern Brazil, a two-legged chicken-sized Cretaceous Period dinosaur made... **Story on Page 19**

CELEBRITY

HARRY AND MEGHAN TO PRODUCE AND HOST PODCASTS FOR SPOTIFY

Britain's Prince Harry and his wife Meghan will produce and host podcasts for Spotify's streaming service, the Swedish company said on Tuesday, starting with a holiday special that will be released this month. Under a multi-year agreement, the couple's newly formed Archewell Audio will produce programming that "uplifts and entertains audiences around the world" and features "diverse perspectives and voices," Spotify said in a statement. The podcasts will be available free through Spotify, the company that leads the streaming music market.



Hope and Memories

exhibition celebrates the Golden Jubilee

2020 has been a year with many difficulties, so that keeping hope alive is something artists need to work for and artists play a fundamental role in it, being like torch bearers of hope and beauty.

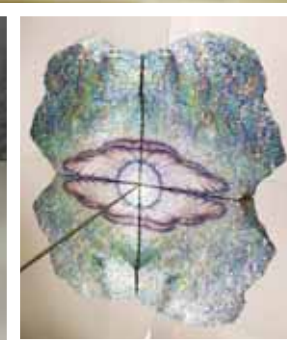
On November 17th, on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee of Oman, a new Art Gallery Art & Soul, a minimalist Gallery opened its doors aiming at becoming the most important cross-roads for local and international artists who want to showcase their artworks in the Gulf. It also targets to become a point of attraction for cultural activities of all kinds. Its huge spaces and the unique location of its venue (Water-Front mall), overlooking the beautiful beach of Qurum, are definitely unique characteristics that will help its management to reach its goals.

"HOPE AND MEMORIES" was the homage by the international Italian artist Lucia Oliva to this country, which she deeply loves as her second home. She was honoured to have been chosen to open the new Gallery on such important moments for the country and the event ran under the Auspices of Sayyida Basma Al Said and the Italian Embassy in Oman.

The core of Lucia Oliva's solo exhibition were two peculiar celebrative artworks, based on a unique new concept consisting of sculptural solid canvases rich in movement as a support for the portrait of the late HM Sultan Qaboos bin Said al Said and HM Sultan Haitham bin Tarik al Said: it was quite a long and challenging job for both of them and Oliva never exhibited them to keep the surprise for the special occasion of the Golden Jubilee. The exhibition also offered other recent and previous artworks that represent the influence of the Omani environment on the soul of the artist.

"The inspiration for the surprising artwork dedicated to the late HM Sultan Qaboos 'FRIENDS OF ALL ENEMY TO NONE' was to evoke the idea of the Omani flag, in which He appears in the act of encouraging his people to march on the track of the Renaissance he started almost 50 years ago. A message of hope and a link between past and future with an invitation to keep going with hope and faith.

Then 'HOPE' came as a natural cross out of the of same concept, a



twin artwork but with its unique characteristics" Lucia adds. His Majesty Sultan Haitham's portrait is the focus of a sort of contemporary style draped tapestry that emphasises the importance of the Royal Subject. This style plunges its roots into classical art and reaches its apex in the Baroque era, which boasts many pictorial and sculptural examples with high and low-reliefs.

A bas-relief quote from the Holy Quran, part of verse 59, Surat An Nisaa', completes the artwork and also a few symbols and suggestions find place in it, both for the texture of the background as well as for its colours. The artist freely took inspiration from some engraved motifs on the wall behind the throne in Al Alam Palace and other royal halls, in shades of light blue and turquoise together with burgundy and purple, which recall the colours of the royal mussar.

"Being created in the difficult period of the pandemic, it was not easy to remain focused on them without losing the concentration when all around you was and looked so difficult. I experimented this new concept a few months earlier with the artwork "IN FRONT OF THE OPEN WINDOW", which represents the gaze of the artist on the outside world during the lockdown. I had to face and overcome a few technical difficulties, but in the end the result was exactly as I saw them in my inspiration and this was a great satisfaction. I am happy that so many people were asking and waiting to admire them live. This was my humble contribution in terms of beauty to enthusiastically celebrate the Golden Jubilee.

The exhibition was attended by more than 100 visitors daily, especially young ones, getting in the end to the astonishing number of more than 2000 people in the whole, something really unusual for an art event normally target to a niche of public. The exhibition, which was supposed to run until December 4th, was extended by 5 days due to the incredible response of visitors and it ended last Wednesday. Tens and tens among them wrote the experience of their visit in the Guests book with words of sincere and enthusiastic appreciation for the work of Lucia.

Here is a video of the Opening night. <https://youtu.be/F94IqwU6va8>



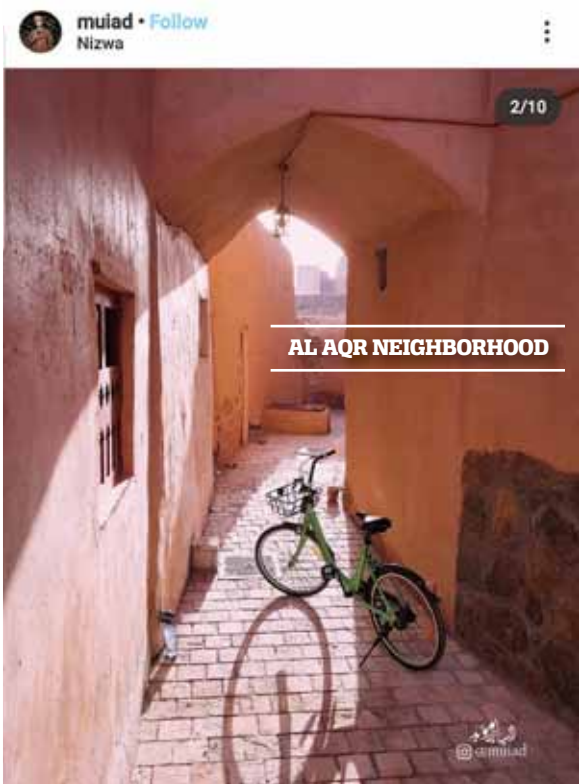
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19

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ENVIRONMENT

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SCIENCE

A dinosaur with 'hair' and 'ribbons' has scientists enthralled



ABOUT 110 MILLION years ago along the shores of an ancient lagoon in what is now northeastern Brazil, a two-legged chicken-sized Cretaceous Period dinosaur made a living hunting insects and perhaps small vertebrates like frogs and lizards. On the inside, it was ordinary, with a skeleton similar to many small dinosaurs from the preceding Jurassic Period, scientists said on Tuesday.

On the outside, it was anything but. This dinosaur, called Ubirajara jubatus, possessed a mane of hair-like structures while also boasting two utterly unique, stiff, ribbon-like features probably made of keratin — the same substance that makes up hair and fingernails — protruding from its shoulders. "There are plenty of other strange dinosaurs, but this one is unlike any of them," said palaeobiology professor David Martill of the University of Portsmouth in England, who helped lead the study published in the journal Cretaceous Research.

Ubirajara's hair-like structures appear to be a rudimentary form of feathers called protofeathers.

This was not actual hair, an exclusively

mammalian feature. Many dinosaurs had feathers. In fact, birds evolved from small feathered dinosaurs about 150 million years ago. "Likely from a distance it looked hairy rather than feathery," Martill said. "Likely it had hair-like protofeathers over much of its body but they are only preserved along its neck, back and arms. The ones on its back are very long and give it a sort of mane that is unique for dinosaurs." Ubirajara's ribbon-like structures may have been used for display, possibly to attract mates or intimidate adversaries or in inter-male rivalry, Martill added.

Such displays often are made by male animals — think of a peacock's elaborate tail feathers — leading Martill to make an "educated guess" that this Ubirajara individual was male. "The ribbons that seem to come from the shoulders are like nothing I have seen in nature before," Martill said. While it is impossible to know from the fossil, Martill said Ubirajara may have been colourful. "I bet it was," he added.

— Reuters



Sumini gets up at dawn to do her household chores — then leads a team of women into the jungles of Indonesia's Sumatra island, on a mission to battle rampant deforestation and wildlife poaching.

The 45-year-old mother of five heads a unique team of female rangers taking on illegal loggers and hunters threatening Sumatran tigers, pangolins and other at-risk wildlife.

The culprits are mostly men, including neighbours or even the husbands of team members, who live together in Damaran Baru village in the north of Sumatra.

Along the way, the 30-member team grapples with sexist stereotypes in ultra-conservative Aceh province, and authorities who are indifferent to the environmental destruction wrought by illegal logging and land clearance for the region's many coffee plantations.

Deforestation and habitat loss have long been a problem across the vast Southeast Asian archipelago, which is among the most biodiverse nations on Earth.

"The forest has always been associated with men," said Sumini, who like many Indonesians goes by one name.

"But we want to change

Indonesia's female forest guardians fight for the environment



that and say it's also about women. Women who are angry about environmental destruction and who are taking action to fix the problem."

So angry

The group, which now includes one of Sumini's sons and his wife, got its start in 2015 after a flash flood destroyed a dozen houses in the community of about 1,000 residents.

Sumini's husband relented after repeated demands that he show her why so much wood and debris was mixed in with the floodwaters barrelling down from a nearby volcano.

"When we got there, I saw the mountain had been deforested," she said.

"I said to my husband 'Well, so this is the reason. The forest has been destroyed by men.' I was so angry that, from that moment on, I told myself I'd take on the role of protecting the forest."

The fledgling squad got no help from authorities when they complained about hillsides scarred by tree loss.

"They thought we made it up. That is why we established the team," Sumini said.

Twice a month, the hijab-clad women strap on floppy hats and rubber boots before setting off for about five days at a time, navigating the steep, mountainous terrain. — AFP

Ahmed al Mahrouqi accompanied by Rachael MacIver Terry and Mohammed ended their trip of loyalty last Wednesday in Muscat. The trip that took eight days from Adam in al Dakhiliyah Governorate to Muscat, aimed to celebrate the 50th National Day of the Renaissance and to continue the support to HM Sultan Haitham bin Tarik.

It also aimed at introducing new places to the public and showing the beauty of Oman to the world, as well as supporting hikers in their search for adventure.

"we do 7.5 Km per hour. It is a lot faster than I do. It was an amazing experience", says Rachael.

TRIP OF LOYALTY ENDS IN MUSCAT

