



IBRI-YANQUL
ROAD OPENS
FOR TRAFFIC

The Ministry of Transport on Sunday opened Ibri-Yanqul dual carriageway to traffic. The 39-km road begins at Qarn Kabsh area in the Wilayat of Ibri and ends at Al Buwairda area at Suhar-Yanqul junction. The road serves as a vital link within the Governorate of Al Dhahirah.

SEE ALSO P4

Oman seeks
to procure
700,000
doses of
vaccine

MUSCAT: Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Saeedi, Minister of Health, said that there is continued coordination between the Sultanate, represented by the Ministry of Health, and the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI Alliance), for obtaining 700,000 doses of coronavirus vaccine once it is produced.

In an exclusive statement to Oman New Agency (ONA), the minister said that there are varied efforts exerted by the ministry on several fronts to procure the vaccine once it is declared safe and effective.

The minister stated that the Sultanate is seeking to participate in developing the research related to this vaccine, thereby ensuring the priority right to obtain the vaccine once developed. — ONA

TOGETHER FOR A
'COVID-19 FREE'
SULTANATE



KABEER YOUSUF

MUSCAT: The 'day one' of the lockdown was hugely successful in the Sultanate as everyone was seen following the rules in response to the call given by the Supreme Committee on COVID-19.

A sense of individual

responsibility in achieving the national goal was in the air. A sense of reverence, a common feeling of supporting the nation in the face of a pandemic was felt throughout the 11 hours of lockdown at night.

All roads wore a deserted look. A couple of vehicles which had some emergency,

besides some water tankers, were seen plying on the main highway during the lockdown time.

Supermarkets, hypermarkets and all commercial outlets in different sectors had announced their rescheduled working hours in response to the lockdown orders.

OMAN

Sayyid Badr meets ambassadors



MUSCAT: Sayyid Badr bin Hamoud al Busaidy, Secretary-General of the Foreign Ministry held discussions with the ambassadors of Norway, Finland, Sweden and Denmark, through video conferencing, on Sunday. A number of developments and issues of common concern were discussed during the meeting

as well as the aspects of cooperation between the Sultanate and the Scandinavia region to enhance bilateral and multilateral relations with these countries. The meeting comes within the framework of consultation and cooperation between the Sultanate and the Scandinavian countries. — **ONA**

TOGETHER FOR A ‘COVID-19 FREE’ SULTANATE

FROM PAGE 1

Jayakumar Vallickav, a resident of Oman for nearly four decades, said this lockdown gave mixed emotions as he felt the time stopped for a while.

“In my 34 years in the Sultanate, I’ve never seen such a time when the entire country is in a standstill as if time has stopped for a while. I am proud of the citizens and residents who respected the lockdown orders. The good thing is that we are going to defeat this pandemic and life will be back to normal soon, thanks to the country”.

Sudeep, a travel expert, highlighted the role of media in creating awareness about the pandemic. “The media kept people well informed with the right information”, he said.

“On Saturday, many people seemed confused about the road closures and other regulations. However, there was full clarity by the latter part of the day, thanks to the media”.

“I believe that as residents we should follow rules and support government’s decisions. This is the only way to stop the spread of coronavirus”, said Lijilhas, a shipping and logistics professional.

Aziz Hashim, a resident from Batinah, had an experience which is an indicator of the humanity of the Royal Oman Police officials. He had to visit Falaj area by 4 pm hoping that he could return before the lockdown begins. But his car developed a technical snag, and couldn’t make it on time. He waved at a passing ROP vehicle which took him to Tareef and dropped him at his home.

“I knew the face of the ROP is humanity in my long years in the Sultanate. But this experience was truly touching and I closely felt it”, Aziz shared his experience in an emotional tone.

PHOTO BY MIDHUN RAJ



TENDER NOTICE

The Sultanate of Oman Telecommunication Regulatory Authority (TRA) invites suitable experience and qualified consulting companies to submit their offers for the following:

Tender No. 2/2020

“Engage consultant For Assessment of Electromagnetic Fields (EMF) Exposure of Telecom Sites”

1- TRA is inviting local tenderers to measure EMF radiation for licensees’ mobile sites as specified in the scope of service.

2- The interested party shall submit/send the Tender fee (R.O.50/-) via Bank Draft, Telegraph Transfer or through SWIFT wire in favour of TRA account details as given below:

Bank Muscat
Bait Hatat Branch
Account No. 0335001866100013
Swift code: BMUSOMRXXXX
Telecommunications Regulatory Authority

3- The bidders shall pay the Tender fee by 1:00 P.M 13th August 2020. Notifications of payment shall be sent by email to complete the registration of the prospective bidders.

4- The Tender documents may be obtained from TRA premises located at the address given below. Alternatively, tender document may be requested by letters or email to: standards@tra.gov.om.

5- Tender offers may be delivered by hand at TRA premises or by post to reach on or before the deadline for offers submission by 2:00 P.M 27th August 2020, (Oman Timing) at the following address:

The Secretary, Tender Committee
Telecommunications Regulatory Authority
P.O. Box 3555, P.C. 111, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman

TRA premises location:
TRA Headquarters at Airport Heights,
(Opposite Old Seeb International Airport)
Tel: +968 24 22 22 22 , Fax: +968 2422 2000
Website: www.tra.gov.om

6- Enquiries and requests for clarifications regarding this tender may be sent via letter, email or fax address given above or through telephone no: +968 24 22 20 89/ 24 22 20 90 with the subject “Tender No.: 2/2020/Enquiry” clearly indicated by 13th August 2020.

TRA reserve the right to accept or reject any offer without assigning any reason.

www.tra.gov.om



SAF, ROP ACTIVATE JOINT CHECKPOINTS



MUSCAT: Units from the Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF) and Royal Oman Police (ROP) continue to enforce joint control checkpoints at the entry points in all governorates for the second day, as a complete lockdown came into effect on Saturday in an effort to contain the spread of the coronavirus.

Units in charge of enforcing the joint control check-

points were deployed to implement the Supreme Committee's decision imposing complete lockdown between the governorates until August 8.

Citizens and expatriates have shown understanding of the objectives for activating the joint control checkpoints by complying with the instructions and timing of the lockdown.

— ONA

Summer rains around Al Hajr

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH

MUSCAT: Muscat enjoyed a day under the clouds with gentle breeze even though it is towards the end of July and it is the middle of the summer.

"There is a low pressure in the upper level 800 to 700 millibar, but the weather experienced currently is due to the wind coming from the Arabian Sea," said the weather forecaster at Oman Met Office.

Mohammed al Mashaykhi, weather forecaster noted, "Dhofar has been experiencing drizzle and has received rains in the desert areas. Other than that it has been the active local clouds of Al Hajr Mountains."

The south easterly is in contrast with the north westerly wind, which is dry and hot. The maximum temperature in the mountains of Dhofar ranged between 24 and 25 degree Celsius.

The three governorates that enjoy the monsoon winds coming from the Arabian Sea are Dhofar, Al Wusta and South Sharqiyah.

"During this period Al Wusta and South Sharqiyah enjoy low

clouds and fog during late night and early morning. This helps to increase the humidity in the air to develop local clouds. It is the south easterly wind that takes the humidity to Al Hajr Mountains. Al Hajr Mountains also receive humidity from the Sea of Oman. All of this results in the summer rains around the Al Hajr Mountains," he explained.

This time of the year is also popular for surfing in South Sharqiyah, specifically Al Ashkharah as well as Kalboo, Muttrah.

Along the coastal areas of Oman Sea winds will be easterly to northeasterly light to moderate during the day becoming variable light at night and along the coastal areas of Arabian Sea winds will be southerly to southwesterly moderate to fresh while over the rest of the Sultanate winds will be southeasterly light to moderate occasionally fresh.

The Met Office urges everyone to be cautious when they are in foggy areas as there could be horizontal visibility reduction during thunderstorms and fog.



Man gets 15 years jail for RO 1.2m fraud

MUSCAT: The Criminal Department at the Court of Appeals has sentenced a public sector employee to 10 years in jail after he was convicted of embezzling RO

1,204,245. It ordered him to pay a fine equivalent to the amount embezzled, the Public Prosecution has said.

The court also sentenced him to five years in prison and a fine of RO 50,000 after he was found guilty of money laundering.

The penalties against the convict will be compiled together. Besides, the judge ordered his dismissal from the job, a permanent deprivation from public job and confiscation of the stolen money.

It's below normal khareef



KAUSHALENDRA SINGH

SALALAH: Salalah is witnessing below normal khareef this year. The annual of khareef (monsoon) season is hampered by two factors one is COVID-19 and the other is weather disturbance that Dhofar witnessed twice since May. The COVID-19 has taken the sheen out of the season, while the weather disturbances didn't allow the monsoon to settle properly even though the weather disturbances brought too much rain and most of the

mountains turned green. But missing is the essence of khareef that includes the onset of the monsoon season, fresh greenery, and cool breeze everywhere, be it mountain or plains of Salalah. Even though it rained in some parts of the city on Sunday morning, the overall impact of monsoon in Salalah is below normal. The weathermen agreed that monsoon this year is below normal and cited the recent weather disturbances the reasons behind the situation. "Every rain is not mon-

soon rain. People got confused when the weather disturbance hit Dhofar in May. It brought too much rain to the extent of breaking the roads and overflowing of wadis (canals). The vegetation on the mountains became green to some extent, but due to lack of continuity of rains, it is not as interesting as it used to be during normal khareef," said a weather expert. He said the two weather disturbances did not allow monsoon situation to build up and carried away the valuable monsoon clouds

that start building up in the deserts. The dryness of the weather is pinching the residents. By the end of June or the first half of July khareef would start settling in Salalah. Till now there is no sign of khareef in the city except for some drops here and there. Some mist is there in the mountains, but it is still hot and humid. People are puzzled over the coincidence of COVID-19, their loss in businesses, and the below normal khareef that is not allowing them to enjoy even the beauty of nature.

Ibri-Yanqul road opens to traffic



MUSCAT: The Ministry of Transport today opened Ibri-Yanqul dual carriageway to traffic on Sunday. The 39-km road begins at Qarn Kabsh area in the Wilayat of Ibri and ends at Al Buwairda area at Suhar-Yanqul junction. The road serves as a vital link within the Governorate of Al Dhahirah and covers a number of villages like Al Aaridh, Al Dhuweihra, Al Raki and Sayya. -- **ONA**



OWNERS OF STRAY ANIMALS TO PAY FINE UP TO RO 100

ZAINAB AL NASSRI

MUSCAT: The animal owners have to bear a fine of up to RO 100 if their animals are found straying, grazing in cities and residential villages or less than one kilometer from public roads, or half a kilometer from sub-roads, according to a decision of the Minister of Regional Municipalities and Water Resources.

The ministry has set RO 100 fine for each camel and horse, RO 50 for cow, and RO 30 for goat, sheep, or other animals. All fines shall be doubled in case the violation is repeated during the same year.

The decision also stipulated that the competent municipality shall set up stray animal enclosures with food, water, isolation of sick animals. It should also provide the necessary treatment as directed by the veterinarian.

The owners of the stray or neglected animals have to bear the 'care charges' upon

a claim for their release. The fee for this is RO 150 per day for camel and horse, RO 50 for cow, RO 10 for each goat, sheep, or other animals.

According to the decision, the competent municipality must hand over the stray animal to its owner by confirming his details after collecting fines. The municipality shall be responsible for the sale of stray animals through auction.

This comes at a time when stray animals on the roads pose a nuisance to passers-by and collision risk to motorists.

This has caused many deaths and fatal accidents, pushing the ministry to set strict penalties for the violators.

In 2019, camels alone caused 520 accidents, according to a media statement by the legal department of the ministry.

For this reason, the ministry began to take legal measures against violators who let the animals loose and refer them to the public prosecutor.

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Fee relief for students of Indian School Muscat

STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT: Parents of students attending Indian School Muscat whose income or employment has been hit by COVID-19 can apply for fee concessions.

Those households which earn less than RO 500 a month can also request a fee concession, the school said in a circular issued on Sunday.

"The above mentioned fee concession will be in addition to the relief measures announced by the Board of Directors, Indian Schools in Oman," read the circular. "We look forward to your support and assure you that genuine requests of the parents will be considered by the school management committee."

Those who wish to avail the concession must submit salary slips from the company, bank statements of the last six months and a letter from the sponsor along with resident cards and passport details. Businessmen must provide documents

to prove loss of income. Parents are requested to submit the required details by filling in the fee concession form available on the school website, at www.ismoman.com/circulars.html.

The filled in form along with the supporting documents can be emailed to feeconcessions@ismoman.com or submit the hard copies to the school office between 8.30 am and 12.30 pm on all working days.

Those who have been granted a fee concession during the previous academic last year are also required to submit a fresh application form and any decision on such concession requests will be addressed based on the school policy on fee concessions.

The last date of submitting the application with the required documents will be August 16. Parents are requested to remit the school fee on time until any decision on the above fee concession, which will be adjusted for in the remaining payments due.

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Companies specialized in the field of this Tender may obtain tender documents for the following tenders, on any working day between 8:00 a.m. and 1:00 Noon, from **Quantity Surveying & Contracts Office, Suhar Municipality** on payment of non-refundable tender fee as noted below:

Tender No.	Description of Work	Tender Fee (non-refundable)	Start Date for Selling Tender	Last Date for Selling Tender	Site Visit Date	Last Date for Queries	Return Date
PRS/20/007	Development Work for the Proposed Natural Park	R.O. 50	Tuesday 11/08/2020	Thursday 03/09/2020	Sunday 06/09/2020	Monday 07/09/2020	Thursday 10/09/2020

The **Form of Tender** (in small envelope) under wax sealed cover shall be placed in the tender box location in our **Quantity Surveying & Contracts Office, by 10.00 a.m.** All envelopes are to be clearly marked with the name of the Tender being presented and no other marks.

The Tenderers shall submit with Form of the Tender (**Financial Offer**) a **Certified Cheque or Tender Bond** in the sum of **2% of the tender value valid for 90 days**, issued by a locally registered bank in the Sultanate of Oman. Tenders without such bond shall be rejected.

Comments:

- The Tender Committee, has the right to distribution items or works or quantities thereof between more than one contractor without giving reasons to the bidder.
- The Tender Committee is not obliged to accept the lowest or any tender that may received.

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Hotline: 80000007



REAL ESTATE ACTIVITIES REACH RO 1.5 BN IN JUNE

SAMUEL KUTTY

MUSCAT: The total traded value of the real estate activity in Oman rose to RO 1.5 billion at the end of June 2020, compared to RO 1.2 billion during the corresponding month last year.

According to figures from the National Center for Statistics and Information, the current value of the real estate activity, the fees col-

lected for all legal actions amounted to RO 29.3 million, a decrease of 33.1 per cent from the end of June 2019.

The current value of the sales contracts amounted to RO 354.2 sales contracts with a decrease in the value of 27.3 per cent compared to the first half in 2019.

At the same time, the number of properties issued at the end of June

2020 reached 76,818 properties, a decrease of 30 per cent from the same period last year.

The number of properties issued to citizens in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries dropped to 180 properties compared to 490 properties at the end of June 2019.

"The sales transactions in South Al Batinah governorate recorded the highest

percentage compared to the rest of the governorates during the first half of 2020, with a total of 4,573 sales deeds," said Dr Ali Azzan Al Hashami, Deputy Secretary of Real Estate Registry in the Ministry of Housing.

According to him, South Al Batinah governorate stood second with 4,170, followed by Muscat governorate with 3,162 sales deeds.

Hotel revenue falls by 51.5 per cent

MUSCAT: The total revenue of three-to-five-star hotels in the Sultanate fell by 51.5 per cent to RO 56.11 million until the end of June 2020 compared to RO 115.75 million for the same period of the previous year.

However, hotel occupancy rates fell by 42.1 per

cent to reach 32 per cent until the end of June 2020 against 55.3 per cent for the same period of 2019, according to the latest monthly statistics released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

The total number of guests in hotels fell by 53

per cent in the first 6 months of 2020, reaching 409,940 guests from 871,595 guests for the same period of 2019.

Among the nationalities, Europeans topped the list at 154,853. This was followed by 134,567 Omanis and 38,672 Asian tourists until the end of June 2020, the data released by NCSI revealed.

There was an overall drop in the number of guests of all nationalities until the end of June 2020, with American

guests and GCC guests falling by 56.1 per cent and 61.7 per cent to reach 14,238 and 32,630 guests, respectively.

There was also a drop in the number of African, Oceanian and other Arab guests by 52.1 per cent, 41.9 per cent and 63.4 per cent to reach 2,784; 4,589, and 13,371 guests, respectively.

The hotels received 1.77 million guests and the hotels generated a total revenue of RO 229.5 million in 2019. — **ONA**



Black Lives Matter clashes spark arrests, police injured

SEATTLE: US police used flashbang grenades, pepper spray and tear gas as protestors marched in cities across the country amid a wave of public anger over Donald Trump's planned "surge" of federal agents into major metropolises.

The demonstrations against racism and police brutality — sparked by the death in Minneapolis of unarmed African-American George Floyd — come as the US president faces an increasingly tough battle for re-election, and is campaigning heavily on a platform of "law and order".

Protesters marched in Austin, Texas, as well as Louisville in Kentucky, New York, Omaha, California's Oakland and Los Angeles, and Richmond in Virginia — where riot police fired chemical agents at a Black Lives Matter march, according to US media.

In Seattle the sounds of repeated small detonations rang out in some streets, and smoke rose from an area where demonstrators had set fire to trailers by a construction site for a youth detention facility, an AFP reporter observed.

Protesters slashed car tyres and smashed trailer windows.

Police in riot gear faced off against the protesters, some holding

umbrellas against falling pellets of pepper spray.

Late on Saturday, Seattle Police said 45 people were arrested in connection with the demonstrations, which they designated a riot, according to the force's official Twitter account.

Police Chief Carmen Best implored people to "come in peace to the city", and castigated the demonstrations.

"The rioters had no regard for the community's safety, for officers' safety or for the businesses and property that they destroyed" local media reported her as saying.

The latest violence came after police and federal agents fired tear gas and forcefully dispersed protesters further south in Portland early on Saturday, also in anger over Trump's heavily-criticised surge of security forces.

The city, the biggest in the state of Oregon, has seen nightly protests against racism and police brutality for nearly two months, initially sparked by Floyd's death.

Portland is also a stage for the highly controversial crackdown by federal agents ordered by Trump — one that is not supported by local officials, and which many say smacks of authoritarianism. — AFP

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IN BRIEF

UK to unveil obesity plan after PM's near-death experience

LONDON: British Prime Minister Boris Johnson is set to roll out a £10 million anti-obesity campaign, including junk food advert bans, following his own brush with death that he partly blamed on his weight. Johnson will announce his "Better Health" campaign on Monday, which is expected to include encouraging doctors to issue "cycling prescriptions" for overweight patients, more segregated cycling lanes and a ban on junk food television ads before 9 pm, according to British media reports. "COVID-19 has given us all a wake-up call of the immediate and long-term risks of being overweight, and the Prime Minister is clear we must use this moment to get healthier, more active and eat better" said a government spokesman on Sunday.

Tunisian president appoints Hichem Mechchi as new PM

TUNIS: Tunisian President Kais Saied has appointed the country's interior minister to form a new government to replace outgoing prime minister Elyes Fakhfakh, who resigned earlier this month. Hichem Mechchi, a 46-year-old independent politician, was appointed to the interior minister post when parliament approved the Fakhfakh government in February. He has one month to form a new government, which then needs to be approved by parliament with a simple majority. Mechchi's name was not among the those proposed to the president by parties and parliamentary groups.

24 Rohingya migrants feared drowned off Malaysia

KUALA LUMPUR: A Rohingya migrant is feared to be the only survivor from a boat carrying at least two dozen asylum seekers that is believed to have run into difficulty off the Malaysian coast near Thailand, a coastguard official said on Sunday. Mohamad Zawawi Abdullah, coastguard chief for the northern states of Kedah and Perlis, said the 27-year-old named Nor Hossain was detained by police after he swam to shore on the resort island of Langkawi. "Based on the information from the police, the illegal Rohingya migrant had jumped off the boat that had 24 other people and that he was the only one who managed to swim to the shore safely", Zawawi said.

— Agencies

WORLD

North Korea on alert over first suspected infection



In North Korea, it is compulsory for people to wear masks in public places. — Agencies

SEOUL: North Korea declared its first suspected coronavirus case on Sunday, becoming one of the last countries to do so as the number of people infected worldwide passed 16 million.

The isolated, impoverished state had until now insisted it had not detected a single COVID-19 case — even as the pandemic swept the planet, overwhelming health systems and trashing the global economy.

At least 645,000 people around the world have succumbed to the respiratory disease, with North Korean arch-rival the United States the worst-hit country by far.

“The vicious virus could be said to have entered the country,” leader Kim Jong Un said, according to the official KCNA news agency.

Authorities locked down the city of Kaesong, near the frontier with South Korea, as state media said a defector who left for the South three years ago had returned and was suspected to be infected with the coronavirus.

But experts believe the contagion is likely to have already entered North Korea from neighbouring China, where the new disease emerged late last year.

The pandemic's spread is still accelerating, with more than five million cases declared since July — a third of the total number of cases since the catastrophe began.

Even in recent days there has been an alarming uptick in infections, including in places that had appeared to have controlled their outbreaks.

One of those was Australia, which on Sunday suffered its deadliest day since the pandemic began, with 10 fatalities and a rise in new infections despite an intense lockdown effort.

“These things change rapidly, but we have to say these numbers are far too high,” said Daniel Andrews, premier of Victoria state, where the latest outbreak is centred.

Around a quarter of the world's 16 million confirmed COVID-19 cases are in the United States, which recorded more than 68,000 new infections in the past 24 hours.

After a drop in transmission rates in late spring, the country has seen a virus surge — particularly in California, Florida and Texas, which is also bracing for the first Atlantic hurricane of the year.

Daily US fatalities have exceeded 1,000 for the past four days, rapidly increasing the country's death toll to more than 146,000.

“I'm still concerned that America doesn't take it as seriously as the rest of the world,” said British golf star Lee Westwood, voicing his hesitation to travel there despite a new quarantine exemption for professional golfers. — AFP

IN BRIEF

Modi warns of rapid spread as cases near 140,000

NEW DELHI: The novel coronavirus is spreading rapidly in several parts of India and the public should remain extremely vigilant, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Sunday as the number of infections in India neared 140,000. “We must understand that the virus is as deadly today as it was at the beginning and we need to be even more careful,” Modi said during his monthly radio address. He advised people to continue wearing masks, washing their hands and upholding social distancing and hygiene rules, referring to the measures as “our weapons to fight the virus.” India's Health Ministry reported 48,661 new infections and 705 deaths on Saturday.

Australia reports highest daily toll of deaths

MELBOURNE: Australia reached a grim milestone on Sunday, recording its highest ever daily tally of deaths from the novel coronavirus, as authorities in Victoria state battled scores of clusters of infection and intensified efforts to trace their contacts. Victoria's leader, Daniel Andrews, told a media briefing the state had reported 10 COVID-19 deaths in the past 24 hours, Australia's highest ever daily toll. Victoria also recorded 459 new cases of the coronavirus, its second highest tally ever, he said, falling short only of the 483 last Wednesday, and up from 357 on Saturday, as infections remained persistent despite a two-week lockdown of its biggest city, Melbourne.

British decision on Spanish travellers causes anger

MADRID: British tourists flying home on Sunday from holidays in Spain reacted angrily to the UK government's abrupt decision to impose a two-week coronavirus quarantine on everyone travelling from there. The move to take Spain off a safe-travel list was announced late on Saturday and took effect from midnight, leaving travellers with no time to dodge it or plan ahead. Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government was slammed for its handling of the measure, taken as Spain sees a surge in COVID-19 cases. “I can understand why the government have made this decision ... but of course the way in which this decision has been made in the last 24 hours is frankly shambolic,” said the Labour Party's health policy chief, Jonathan Ashworth, speaking to Sky News.

— Agencies



Migrant labourers rest in cement pipes during an extended nationwide lockdown in Lucknow, India. — Reuters

INDIAN FIRMS STRUGGLE TO LURE MIGRANT WORKERS BACK

VISHAL MANVE

Spurning free air tickets, accommodation and higher pay, millions of migrant workers who fled India's cities when coronavirus hit are too scared to return, with grim implications for the already crumbling economy. Migrant workers form the backbone of Asia's third-biggest economy toiling in every sector from making consumer goods and stitching garments to driving cabs.

But when India went into lockdown in late March, vast numbers lost their jobs, prompting a huge heart-rending exodus back to their home villages, sometimes on foot, their children in their arms. Some died on the way.

Mumbai's swanky high-rises, for example, were built and largely staffed by people from poorer states such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Odisha, who worked

as security guards, cooks and cleaners. But as the city became a virus hotspot, around 80 per cent of construction workers left the financial hub after work came to a standstill, according to the Maharashtra Chamber of Housing Industry.

Four months on, with lockdown measures eased, some workers have trickled back but more than 10,000 building sites are lying virtually abandoned due to severe labour shortages across the city.

"We are trying our best to bring back migrant workers, even going to the extent of giving them air tickets, COVID-19 health insurance ... (and) weekly check-ups by doctors," real estate developer Rajesh Prajapati said.

"But it has not reaped any positive signs yet," he said. Property giant Hiranandani Group which — unusually — continued to pay its workers during lockdown, has had more success, but has still only managed to convince around 30 per cent of its 4,500 workers to stay on site. — AFP

Lockdown to slow down the radar



ABDULAZIZ AL JAHDHAMI
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The nightmare of coronavirus is still going on and so does the fear and panic spread by this pandemic! Day and night, people are being threatened by the virus wherever they go and whenever they leave home.

What a horrible life we are living and tolerating over the past seven months. Most of them spend their days as if they are in a war fighting and probably expecting a bullet or a sword to strike on their back any time.

The whole world is sparing no effort to combat the spread of coronavirus; countries, governments and individuals are leaving no stone unturned in this battle. All are living with the hope of a vaccine to be out soon to announce the game is over, and the humanity has won the battle. Possibly, all are believing that only those who keep trying will eventually win! It's a fact worth believing.

The battle which the world is fighting is totally unfair. However, there is no choice, but to fight back and be patient. As life is valuable and beautiful, it is worth getting hurt. Though the sacrifice is too big with thousands of people getting infected with the virus, while hundreds of thousands dying all over the world. As far as Oman is concerned, the numbers are extremely frightening and increasing day by day.

We should thanks the authorities for the great efforts accorded to combat the spread of the virus. With different weapons that have been used to fight this pandemic, the battle is not yet over, but it's getting even harder. However, we all believe that the harder the battle is, sweeter the victory will be. One day, life will be normal with a better look and clear direction. All that happens could be a turning point to the best which is yet to come!

In a bid to control the situation in the Sultanate, as it sees rapid increase in infections and deaths, the Supreme Committee concerned with following up the developments of coronavirus (COVID-19), issued a decision for total lockdown of the all governorates of the Sultanate. Hopefully, this will work in reducing the number of infections. To have a positive impact of this lockdown, individuals should shoulder the responsibility along with the government bodies by adhering to stay home, social distancing and minimise their movement during daytime. The more people abide by the lockdown, the more effective it will be. Let us all work towards lowering the bar of infections in Oman.

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this page are solely those of the authors and do not reflect the opinion of the *Observer*.



Cost-reflective tariffs force large power customers to cut usage in Oman

Significantly, CRT also contributed to the goal of enhancing energy efficiency, according to the Authority. "In overall terms, industrial customers were more likely to respond to the CRT than commercial or government customers and, in some cases, customers reported that they were already planning to introduce efficiencies," it added.

CMA issues regulations for health insurance Third Party Administrators

MUSCAT: Abdullah bin Salim al Salmi, Executive President of the Capital Market Authority (CMA), said the issuance of licensing requirements for third party administrators (TPAs) will further strengthen the regulation of the health insurance sector in Oman.

TPAs play an important role in the ecosystem, by providing outsourced post-sales administrative services to insurance companies by facilitating cost effective claims operations with high efficiency and quality, while ensuring a seamless and pleasant consumer experience to the insured policyholders when seeking covered treatment from health service providers.

Decision 34 /2020 covering the licensing of TPAs will add to the readiness of the infrastructure of the insurance industry in the Omani market, improve quality of services related to health insurance and complete the legislative and regulatory framework



of the health insurance scheme for the employees of the private sector, expatriates residing in Oman and the visitors.

In 2019, health insurance valued at RO 170 million topped the list of insurance products, accounting for 35 per cent of the total insurance market. "The sector witnessed considerable growth in the past five years by more than 25 per cent year-on-year growth,

and we expect that health insurance products will see a higher turnout," he said.

The regulations allow licensed TPAs to render services to more than one insurance company. It outlines the framework for contracting health service providers. Besides enabling ease of investment by nationals, the regulations also promote Omanisation, and recruitment of fresh graduates from local col-

leges and universities. The CMA's Dhamani portal, said Al Salmi, will be the centralised health insurance exchange platform that will integrate and link the regulators, insurers, TPAs, private health institutions, insured members and all other relevant stakeholders to seamlessly interact and conduct all transactions electronically, thereby improving efficiency and reducing administrative overhead costs.

TPAs are required to have a minimum capital of RO 200,000 and focus exclusively on providing TPA services with minimum overlap with the functions of brokers and agents. The TPAs are required to have a full time manager with university degree in medicine, health care or insurance with no less than 5 years of experience after completion of the degree in addition to having a full time doctor with no less than 5 years of experience.

Reverse vending machines to be rolled out in Muscat



MUSCAT: Oman Environmental Services Holding Company SAOC (be'ah) has signed an agreement with Oman Oil Marketing Company (OOMCO) to launch the Reverse Vending Machine (RVM) initiative.

Reverse Vending Machines are automated machines that utilize

technology to identify, sort and collect used beverage containers. These machines will collect Polyethylene terephthalate (PET), commonly known as plastic water bottles.

This initiative will promote the culture of recycling and sustainable behavior among local

communities solidifying OOMCO and be'ah strong green presence.

"Our strategies are focused on working hand in hand with the community to protect Oman and instill a culture of environmental responsibility to sustain our environment for future generations.

Signing this agreement with OOMCO will deliver our message to a much wider audience and is a step forward towards achieving Oman Vision 2040 environmental goals. As the country moves towards a plastic-free future, these RVMs will serve as efficient drop boxes for plastic waste and will constantly remind everyone how important it is to reduce, reuse and recycle," said

Kumayl al Lawati, Head of Business Development at be'ah.

"We are excited to partner with be'ah for this initiative, which reaffirms our stance to support the Sultanate's long-term sustainability goals. We are pleased to be utilising OOMCO's wide network of service stations to support this cause.

The main aim of this collaboration is to integrate these Reverse Vending Machines into the daily routines of our customer-base. We want to make recycling convenient, efficient, and above all rewarding for the entire community as they contribute to a more sustainable future for all of us," said Mohammed al Mujaini, Senior Manager - HSEQ-T & SD at OOMCO.

BUSINESS

Be'ah launches sustainability training programmes

MUSCAT: Be'ah Academy, part of Oman Environmental Services Holding Company (be'ah), is launching two sustainability training programmes: IEMA Foundation Certificate in Environmental Management and the Certified Advanced Sustainability (CSR) Practitioner Programme in September.

This comes after the success of the programmes conducted last year. It is part of be'ah's mission to build Omani capacity and expertise in areas of sustainability and is a step forward towards achieving Oman Vision 2040 environmental goals.

The Academy is collaborating with the Institute of Environmental Management and Assessment (IEMA), a membership body for more



than 15,000 environmental and sustainability professionals worldwide. This collaboration brings the intensive virtual training programme, IEMA Foundation Certificate in Environmental Management, which will be conducted during September 5-7. The Certified Advanced Sustainability (CSR) Practitioner Programme will follow during September 15-17, in collaboration

with the Centre for Sustainability and Excellence (CSE), based in Chicago, an organisation specialized in consulting, training, and global sustainability.

Eng Muhannad Yahya al Juma, be'ah Academy Manager at Environmental Center of Excellence explained about the IEMA Foundation Certificate in Environmental Management: "The wide range of environmental, sustainability and governance principles covered in these programs ensures that learners appreciate and understand the breadth of the sustainability agenda, and focuses on specific management tools and skills that provide learners with an introduction to practical applications that they will need when working within this arena."

Malabar Gold launches discount campaign

MUSCAT: Global investors and central banks continue to invest in gold as a safe haven asset, making the yellow metal hit record high prices.

Malabar Gold & Diamonds further increases the attractiveness of the yellow metal by making it an easy buy for consumers through the Shubh Aarambham Price Promise discount campaign, offering them attractive discounts on gold and diamond jewellery.

For the first time, the campaign will offer customers a 20-50 per cent discount on making charges of 18K, 21K and 22K gold jewellery and up to 25 per cent discount on diamond jewellery. Additionally, there will also be an exclusive display of 'Special Buy' products at attractive bargains.

Besides, customers can pay 10 per cent advance for their favorite jewellery and benefit from increasing Gold Rate for 30 days from the date of booking, protecting themselves from the increase in gold rate during this period.

This way, if gold rate increas-



es at the time of purchase, customers can avail the booked rate and if it reduces they can still draw mileage of the reduced rate.

"Considering the all-time favorability of gold as a value-appreciating lifestyle article, it is the best time now for consumers to invest in the metal and ensure savings through the Shubh Aarambham Price Promise campaign. This is the first time Malabar Gold & Diamonds is offering such discounts and we hope to see our customers use this opportunity to invest in the metal.

We are certain that they will be delighted with the incredible collection and prices," said Shamlal Ahamed, MD - International Operations of Malabar Gold & Diamonds.

Bank Nizwa signs MoU with Waqf Foundation



MUSCAT: Bank Nizwa signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Imam Jabir Bin Zaid Waqf Foundation to help them enhance their marketing and communication services.

The agreement will help the foundation in raising awareness and its impact on humanitarian causes and wellbeing of the society at large.

The MoU was signed by Arif al Zaabi, Retail AGM at Bank Nizwa, and Eng Ahmed al Rashdi, Board Member and Chief Executive Officer of Imam Jabir Bin Zaid Waqf Foundation.

Arif al Zaabi, Retail AGM at Bank Nizwa said, "Guided by the principles of Sharia and a firm dedication to give back to Omani society, our Bank remains at the forefront in promoting social development and investment through our impactful partnerships and programmes.

Our collaboration with the Imam Jabir Bin Zaid Waqf Foundation endeavours to create awareness about the Foundation's efforts to generate funds and invest in initiatives for humanitarian causes and assets that are in line with Shari'a principles."

BUSINESS

UK retail sales surge close to pre-lockdown levels

It will be a matter of some relief to those involved in the retail sector in the UK that sales practically recovered in June from their staggering drops during the country's coronavirus lockdown.

According to official data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS), the volume of retail sales jumped 13.9 per cent from May to June as shops and non-essential stores opened their doors to customers once again following a lockdown that started on March 23.

Non-food store sales rocketed month on month in June, and fuel leapt 21.5 per cent. But levels were still impacted by the plunges experienced in March and April during lockdown.

Supermarkets hit new highs in June with food sales 5.3 per cent higher. And online shopping was 53.6 per cent higher than in February – just before the pandemic hit the UK.

**ANDY JALIL**

andyjalil@aol.com

The proportion of UK retail sales taking place online slipped slightly from a record 33.3 per cent in May to 31.8 per cent in June. But that was much higher than the 20 per cent ratio reported in February.

"The retail sector bounced back as the reopening of shops released pent-up demand for some retailers," Richard Lim, CEO, Retail Economics, said. "But the recovery is being felt unevenly across the sector with clothing retailers remaining under significant pressure."

"Some consumers searching to break the monotony of being at home headed for the high street, but numbers remained considerably lower than pre-COVID level. UK retail

sales enjoyed a sharp V-shaped recovery in June, ONS data showed."

Jeremy Thomson-Cook, chief economist at currency exchange firm Equals Money, also said the retail sector enjoyed a V-shaped recovery in June.

But he warned the initial bounce back will fade away, leaving Brits waiting to see the true extent of the damage lockdown has caused.

"There were a number of driving forces at play which saw sales rise; pent up demand following an easing of lockdown conditions, a lack of alternatives, good weather and the furlough scheme still running at full steam," he said.

"All four of these driving forces are likely to dwindle in the coming months and

that's when we'll see just how strong demand is. At that point the economy will have to deal with the triple cocktail of uncertainties that an end to the furlough scheme, a winter wave of COVID-19 cases and Brexit all represent."

Ruth Gregory, senior UK economist at Capital Economics, said online spending exaggerated the extent of the recovery of UK retail sales in June.

"Since the sector has benefited disproportionately from online spending and a switch away from other types of spending, this overstates the extent of the recovery in the wider economy," she said.

Still, the recovery in UK retail sales impressed economists. Sales sank 22 per cent at their nadir during April's lockdown. But a 45.5 per cent June surge in non-food products left UK retail sales just one per cent below their pre-pandemic level.

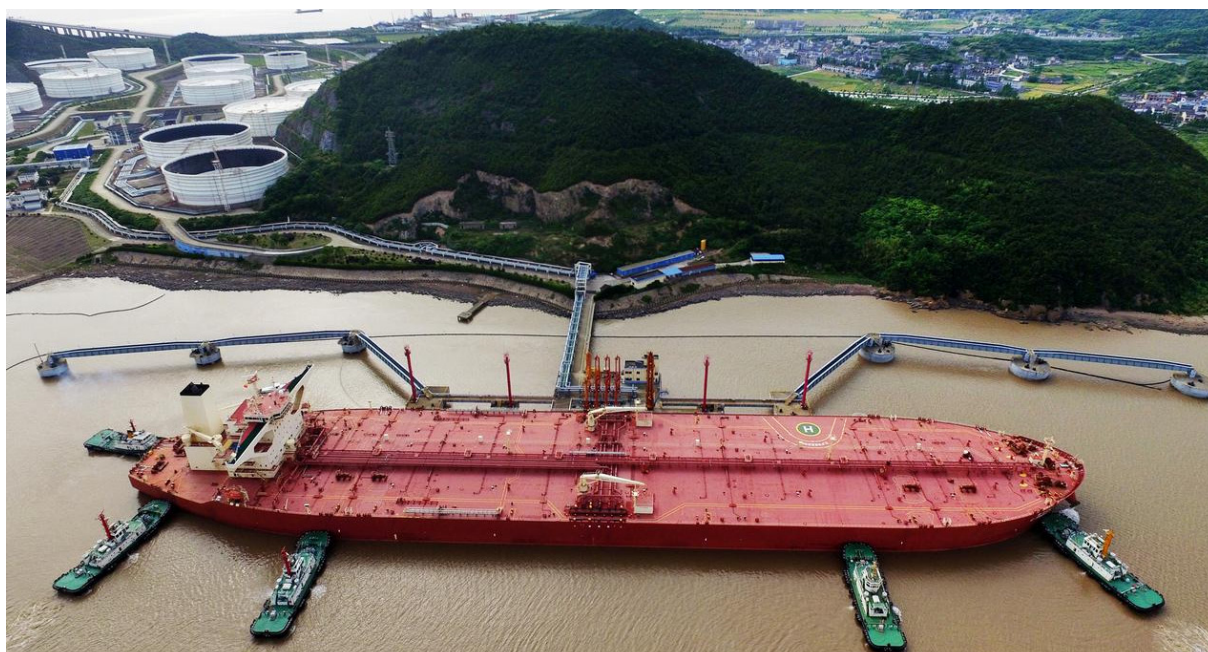
China imports more oil from Saudi than any other country in June

BEIJING: China's crude oil imports from Saudi Arabia rose 15 per cent in June from a year ago, as refiners ordered record volumes of the fuel in March and April when oil prices tumbled, cementing the kingdom's position as the top oil supplier to China.

Imports from Saudi Arabia rose to 8.88 million tonnes in June, or 2.16 million bpd, in June, according to data from the General Administration of Customs on Sunday.

That was in line with May's volumes, but well above 1.89 million bpd during the same period last year.

The record imports follow a price war between Saudi Arabia and Russia, the



A VLCC oil tanker is seen at a crude oil terminal in Ningbo Zhoushan port, Zhejiang province, China. — Reuters

world's top oil exporters, during March and April when the coronavirus pandemic dampened demand and caused a global fuel glut.

Shipments from Russia

were at 7.98 million tonnes last month, or 1.95 million barrels per day (bpd), up around 7 per cent from 1.82 million bpd in May and 1.73 million bpd in June 2019.

Saudi, however, delivered

bigger oil cuts from June and raised crude prices as a plunge in oil prices weighed on the kingdom's budget.

China, the world's biggest crude oil importer, took in a record 53.18 million tonnes last month, according to customs data.

China also boosted inflows from Brazil, Norway and Angola, said Emma Li, analyst from Refinitiv.

Brazil, whose massive offshore projects are coming online, offered Asian refiners competitive deals on relatively high-quality oil just as China and other Asian countries contained the coronavirus and reopened their economies.

— Reuters

BUSINESS

1MDB:

Malaysia's extraordinary financial scandal

KUALA LUMPUR:

Malaysia's extraordinary 1MDB corruption scandal allegedly saw top officials loot billions from state coffers and go on a worldwide spending spree — buying a \$250 million yacht and a painting by Van Gogh, and financing a Hollywood blockbuster.

Najib Razak, the then-prime minister, was accused of involvement in plundering the fund and the controversy helped sweep his long-ruling coalition from power in 2018. He is currently facing three court cases over the scandal. The verdict in his first trial, over allegations he pocketed around \$10 million, will be handed down on Tuesday.

Here is a look back at the saga:

WHAT WAS 1MDB?

1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) was a state investment fund which Najib launched in 2009 shortly after becoming prime minister. Its portfolio included power plants and other energy assets in Malaysia and the Middle East, as well as real estate in Kuala Lumpur.

The fund was closely overseen by Najib.

Whistleblowers say Low Taek Jho, a jet-setting Malaysian financier close to Najib but with no official position, helped set up 1MDB and made key financial decisions.

Concerns escalated in 2014 as 1MDB slid into an \$11-billion debt hole, and intensifying public scrutiny revealed missing funds.

The scandal first came to light through the Sarawak Report news portal, and gained further traction in 2015 when *The Wall Street Journal* published documents showing Najib received at least \$681 mil-



A student activist marches during a protest over a financial scandal involving 1MDB in Kuala Lumpur, in this file photo. — AFP

lion in payments to his personal bank accounts.

RICH LIVING

The US Justice Department launched its own probe after claims that stolen Malaysian public money was laundered through the US financial system, and has filed lawsuits seeking some \$1.8 billion in assets allegedly purchased with the cash.

The department said more than \$4.5 billion was stolen from 1MDB between 2009 and 2015 by high-level officials at the fund and their associates.

Tens of millions of dollars were used in 2012 by Najib's stepson Riza Aziz, an aspiring film producer, to fund the Hollywood film "The Wolf of Wall Street", starring Leonardo DiCaprio.

Hundreds of millions were also used, mainly by Riza and Low, to purchase high-end real estate in Beverly Hills, New York and London.

A Monet painting bought for \$35 million, a Van Gogh for \$5.5 million, a \$35-mil-

The scandal first came to light through the Sarawak Report news portal, and gained further traction in 2015 when *The Wall Street Journal* published documents showing Najib received at least \$681 million in payments to his personal bank accounts.

lion Bombardier jet, a \$100-million stake in EMI Music Publishing, and a \$250 million yacht were also ticked off the shopping list.

POLITICAL TURBULENCE

Najib desperately sought to contain the scandal, targeting critics and introducing repressive laws, but the allegations hit the popularity of his long-ruling coalition and contributed to a shock election defeat in 2018.

A new government headed by veteran politician Mahathir Mohamad, now aged 95, came to office on a

wave of public anger, and re-opened investigations.

Najib was hit with dozens of charges, and his first trial over the scandal finally started in April last year.

But in February, the reformist alliance collapsed after bitter infighting, and a new coalition that included Najib's scandal-plagued party seized power.

Some have raised concerns that the change of power could impact Najib's trials.

Charges against Riza were unexpectedly dropped in May after he agreed to return assets to Malaysia.

A month later, corruption and money-laundering charges against a key Najib ally, Musa Aman, were also dropped.

THE TRIAL

Najib's first trial linked to the 1MDB scandal centres on allegations that 42 million ringgit (\$9.9 million) was transferred to his bank accounts from SRC International, a former unit of the fund. — AFP



ABSENT STRASBURG, NATS TAKE DOWN YANKEES

WASHINGTON, US: Victor Robles homered and drove in four runs as the host Washington Nationals overcame five errors and the absence of Stephen Strasburg to record a 9-2 victory over the New York Yankees on Saturday night.

After the Nationals were held to one hit in Thursday's rain-shortened loss, they totalled 13 on Saturday, and every starter except shortstop Trea Turner had a hit.

Robles fell a triple shy of the cycle and produced his second career game with at least four RBIs. The centre fielder had a two-run double down the left-field line in a three-run second off New York left-hander James Paxton (0-1) and added a two-run homer in the fourth off rookie Mike King.

Erick Fedde started for Strasburg (scratched because of a nerve issue in



his hand) and allowed two runs (one earned) on four hits in four innings. He struck out three, walked one and threw 68 pitches to 19 batters. Tanner Rainey (1-0) came in for Fedde and threw one scoreless inning.

GIANTS 5, DODGERS 4
Wilmer Flores hit a home run, and Logan Webb pitched

four strong innings after getting the late call to start as San Francisco held on for a win at Los Angeles.

Donovan Solano hit a two-run double as the Giants won their first game of the season in three tries. San Francisco ended a six-game losing streak to their National League West rivals going back to last season.

AFTER THE NATIONALS WERE HELD TO ONE HIT IN THURSDAY'S RAIN-SHORTENED LOSS, THEY TOTALLED 13 ON SATURDAY, AND EVERY STARTER EXCEPT SHORTSTOP TREJA TURNER HAD A HIT.

Webb was not revealed as the Giants starter until a few hours before Saturday's game. He gave up one run on six hits over four innings with a walk and two strikeouts. Rookie left-hander Caleb Baragar (1-0) followed with two scoreless innings to earn the win in his major league debut, retiring five consecutive All-Stars. — Reuters

SPORTS

Jones' 2-run blast lifts Tiger over Reds

CINCINNATI, US: JaCoby Jones hit a tiebreaking, two-run home run in the top of the ninth inning, and the visiting Detroit Tigers overcame an early deficit to beat the Cincinnati Reds 6-4 on Saturday.

After Austin Romine singled to open the ninth of a 4-4 game, ninth-place hitter Jones belted a pitch from Cincinnati closer Raisel Iglesias over the wall in left-centre field to put the Tigers ahead in a game that featured a combined six home runs. Closer Joe Jimenez overcame a walk in the bottom of the ninth to earn the save and help Detroit even the three-game set that concludes on Sunday.

Detroit did not have many answers for Reds starter Luis Castillo, who allowed a run and struck out 11 in six innings.

However, after Castillo left the game, Romine opened the seventh with a solo homer to left field off Robert Stephenson to make it 3-2. With two outs and a man on in the same inning, Miguel Cabrera crushed the ball just fair to left field off

DETROIT DID NOT HAVE MANY ANSWERS FOR REDS STARTER LUIS CASTILLO, WHO ALLOWED A RUN AND STRUCK OUT 11 IN SIX INNINGS.

Michael Lorenzen for his 478th career homer to put the Tigers up 4-3.

Cincinnati catcher Curt Casali, though, tied it at 4-4 with an opposite solo shot off Tyler Alexander with two outs in the bottom of the seventh.

The Tigers opened the scoring on C J Cron's two-out, first-inning double down

the left-field line that scored Jonathan Schoop from first base. Cron, who homered on Friday, is 3 for 8



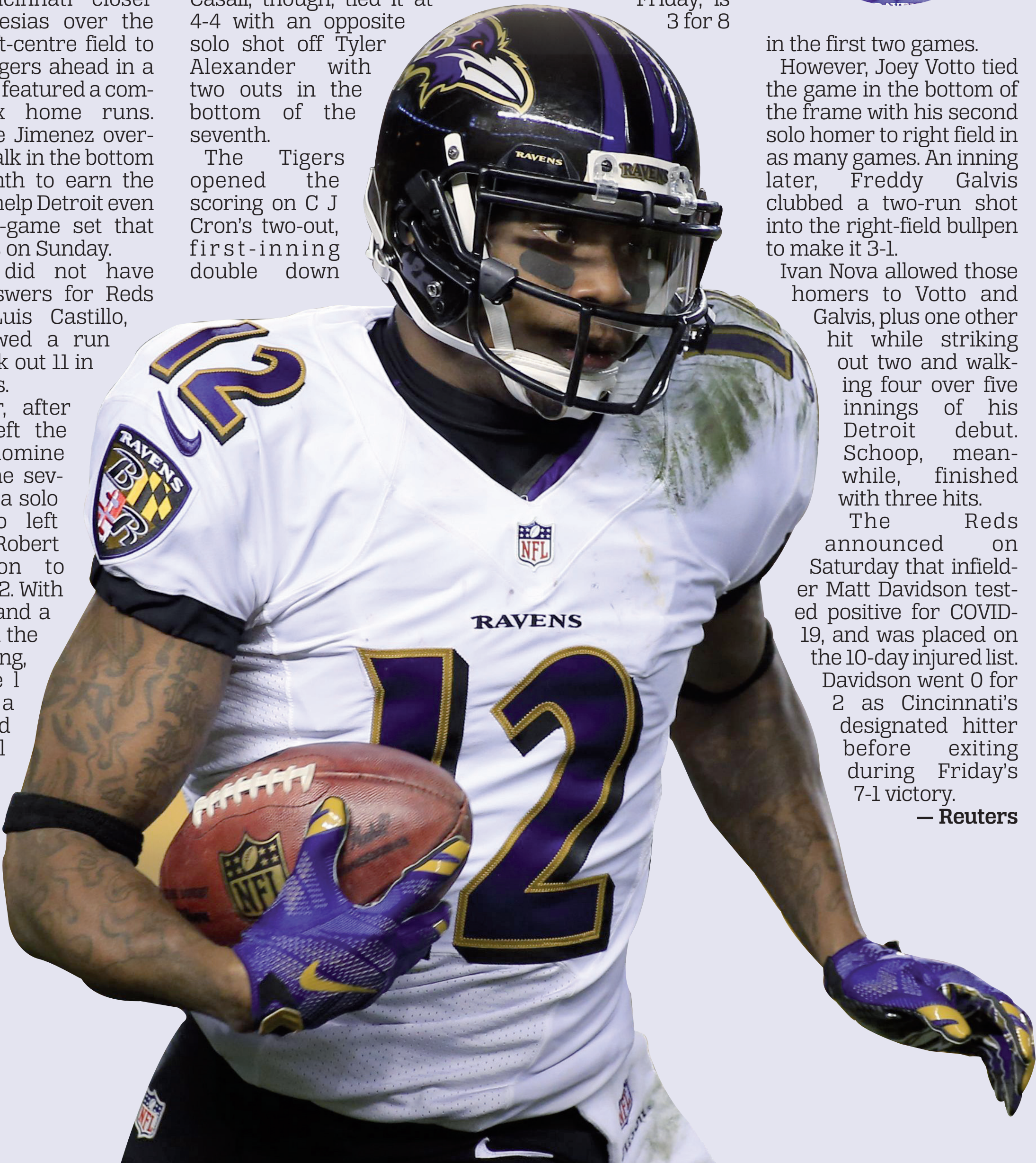
in the first two games.

However, Joey Votto tied the game in the bottom of the frame with his second solo homer to right field in as many games. An inning later, Freddy Galvis clubbed a two-run shot into the right-field bullpen to make it 3-1.

Ivan Nova allowed those homers to Votto and Galvis, plus one other hit while striking out two and walking four over five innings of his Detroit debut. Schoop, meanwhile, finished with three hits.

The Reds announced on Saturday that infielder Matt Davidson tested positive for COVID-19, and was placed on the 10-day injured list. Davidson went 0 for 2 as Cincinnati's designated hitter before exiting during Friday's 7-1 victory.

— Reuters



WERENSKI, THOMPSON TIED FOR LEAD AFTER SECOND ROUND



It's definitely good to have a strong finish like that. I did a good job of just kind of hanging in there, grinding along, giving myself looks

RICHY WERENSKI, US



BLAINE, Minnesota: For the second day in a row Richy Werenski and Michael Thompson found themselves knotted atop the leaderboard at the 3M Open with the two Americans poised to settle the score in Sunday's final round in Blaine, Minnesota. Werenski sank a long putt on the par-five 18th for birdie to finish level with Thompson as both players carded second round 68s to sit 15-under par 198 for the tournament.

"It's definitely good to have a strong finish like that," the 28-year-old Werenski said. "I did a good job of just kind of hanging in there, grinding along, giving myself looks."

South Africa's Charl Schwartzel and in-form American Tony Finau lurked two strokes back at the tournament, which is being played without fans in attendance to stem the spread of the novel coronavirus.

Thompson, who adopted a baby girl just as the pandemic began to take hold, said he felt blessed to have extra time with his daughter during the PGA Tour's hiatus.

"It was really a joy for me to be able to stay home those first three months of her life and really get to care for her and learn her little nuances and see her smile," he said.

"It definitely puts perspective in your mind when you have kids because golf is very important and it's what I love to do, but our kids are what we live for.

"I'm very, very thankful that I had that time with her."

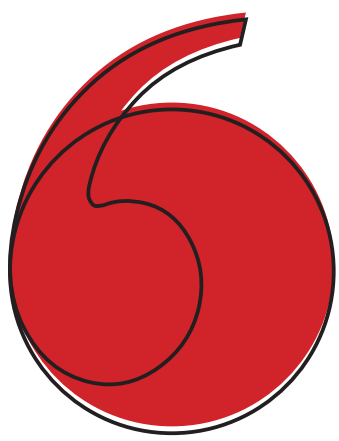
— Reuters



SPORTS



NEW MUM STOSUR TO SKIP REST OF 2020 BUT VOWS RETURN



With the schedule coming up, with COVID, with quarantine and with all the other things that you're going to have to deal with, I've decided that I'm going to take the rest of the year off

SAMANTHA STOSUR,
FORMER US OPEN CHAMPION

NEW YORK: Former US Open champion Samantha Stosur has decided to sit out the rest of 2020 amid the COVID-19 pandemic after becoming a mother last month but the 36-year-old Australian has vowed to return to court next year.

Stosur recently announced this month that her partner Liz Astling gave birth to daughter Evie in June.

The women's WTA Tour is scheduled to restart with the Palermo Ladies Open on August 3 after the COVID-19 outbreak forced the suspension of professional events in early March. The US Open and French Open Grand Slams are still on the 2020 calendar.

"With the schedule coming up, with COVID, with quarantine and with all the other things that you're going to have to deal with, I've decided that I'm going to take the rest of the year off," Stosur told Tennis Australia.

"I'm going to stay here, enjoy being with my family, go through all those little milestones that Evie is going to have in the next six months and just really enjoy being home."

Stosur reached a career-high ranking of fourth in 2011 and defeated Serena Williams in New York for her maiden Grand Slam singles title the same year.

She hopes family bliss would work in her favour when she returns to playing.

"Many players have done this same thing and I think the resounding comment is 'I actually played better and I enjoy it' and you come off the court and you don't worry about whether that was a bad loss, or whatever happened on court," she said.

"Probably help relax me a little bit more as well because there is something bigger and essentially more important than that one tennis match that you've just played. — Reuters

FEATURES

FIVE WAYS TO SAFEGUARD YOUR MENTAL HEALTH DURING A PANDEMIC

With Oman being placed on a two-week lockdown anew, many will find home isolation challenging and depressing. There had been series of global reports exploring the increase of depression as the COVID-19 cases escalate. We compiled five tips to help you cope up with the new normal... **page 20**

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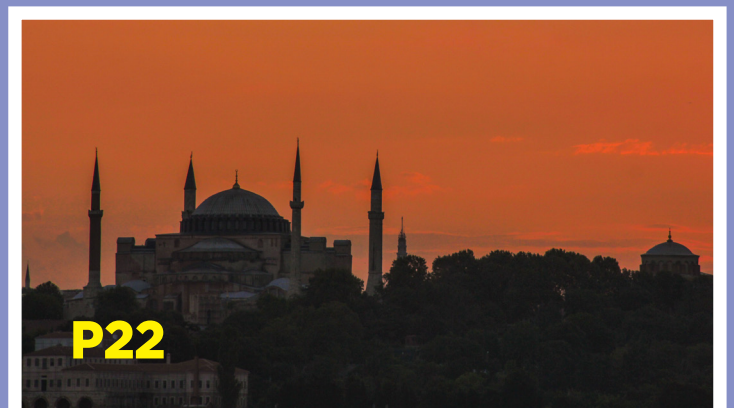
WHAT'S INSIDE

**Cuban dons full-body
cardboard shield against
coronavirus**



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**Changes to Istanbul's
Hagia Sophia could trigger
heritage review: UNESCO**



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FEATURES

Five ways to safeguard your mental health during a pandemic

TITASH CHAKRABORTHY

Whether it's banana-bread making or a new workout routine, all of us seem to have found ourselves in the midst a mental low, where life seems a bit down. In the Sultanate, we have all been spending a lot more time indoors since March, either social distancing or in self-isolation. And with the newly implemented mandatory lockdown, being away from friends and family along with the stress of life during a pandemic can really affect your mental health. We're focused on trying to help the vulnerable where we can, staying updated with the most accurate information, and of course, coping. What can you do to lower your stress level and stay as sane as possible during preventative quarantine?

LIMIT YOUR NEWS & SOCIAL MEDIA INTAKE

— You may feel more stressed and even experience panic after reading the news. Decide which topics you need to know more about. Also, decide which topics you will stay away from because additional information either doesn't help you or works against you. Be sure to keep updated with the rules and regulations being set out by the local authorities but sometimes a little more news can lead to a big meltdown of fear and anxiety. Keep it in moderation.

BE EASY ON YOURSELF

— We are all just making this up as we go along. No one expects you to be a perfect parent and employee right now. Besides, being perfect at anything is nearly impossible. We're all just doing the best we can. Have

some downtime by video chatting with friends who help you feel better. And sometimes it is perfectly okay to sit on the couch in yoga pants and eat cookies. You and your family will be okay.

FIND A NEW HOBBY OR TRY A FREE CLASS

— The internet is a wonderful place, especially for those looking to pick up on an old hobby or learn a new one. Whether it's on Youtube or online courses, now is the time. The internet also gives you the flexibility of doing lessons at your own time and space. So go on then, explore your options, find hobbies for you and your families to enjoy.

BECOME YOUR OWN MASTERCHEF

— Food means a lot to us. It provides comfort and nourishment, and it connects us with our families and communities. Whether you're a passionate cook or a non-chef in need of guidance, Youtube, Pinterest or a quick google search with your available ingredients is the perfect way to make your time in the kitchen as easy, fun, and creative and healthy!

CHECK-IN WITH YOUR FRIENDS & FAMILY

—What we can't afford to lose sight of: We're all connected and in this pandemic together. With video calls now possible and us spending so much time in our own homes, it is easy to lose track of time, especially with the stress of this "new normal".

Pick up your phone, tablet or laptop, send out a "hey, how are you" to friends and family, especially those you've seemed to have lost touch with. A little gesture could go a long way, making both your day and theirs a little bit less mundane.



INSTAGRAM TOP PICKS



Cuban dons full-body cardboard shield against coronavirus



HAVANA: Ever since the novel coronavirus reached Cuba, a tall cardboard box with arms and legs can be seen tottering around a Havana suburb, popping into the bakery or butchers, or browsing the newspaper stand.

This is Feridia Rojas, 82,

who decided to build and wear mobile housing to shield herself from the virus that is particularly deadly to seniors in a country where personal protective equipment is not sold at stores.

"I am at home, what about you?" reads a message on her box, in a witty

nod to Cuba's coronavirus slogan "Stay at home." "I was worried about the asymptomatic cases who could cough just as I passed," she said. "So I thought: I'll do a little house with a cardboard box and wear it."

The retired Cuban nurse salvaged the box

from the pharmacy in her Palatino neighborhood and cut arm holes and a window for her face that she covered in clear plastic.

On top, she glued cake boxes to make it look more like a house with a roof than a flat-topped apartment building.

The widower, whose daughters both live in the United States, said that with no one to run her errands she had to find a way to do so safely by herself, illustrating the resourcefulness and humor for which Cubans are renowned.

"She's very creative," chuckled her neighbor Zayda Echemendia, adding that Rojas still helped locals with injections at home and the like.

While her mobile home may be less necessary as Cuba's outbreak appears to have come under control, Rojas said it still provided necessary comic relief.

"In the midst of this pandemic, this stress and anxiety all the time, my little home makes people laugh," she said. —**Reuters**

FEATURES

Changes to Istanbul's Hagia Sophia could trigger heritage review: UNESCO

PARIS: UNESCO must be notified of any change in the status of Istanbul's sixth-century Hagia Sophia museum and the changes may have to be reviewed by its World Heritage committee, the United Nation's cultural body said on Thursday.

Turkey's top administrative court is likely to announce on Friday that the 1934 conversion of the Hagia Sophia to a museum was unlawful, two Turkish officials said, paving the way for its restoration as a mosque.

UNESCO told Reuters that the Hagia Sophia was on its list of World Heritage

Sites as a museum, and as such had certain commitments and legal obligations.

"Thus, a state must make sure that no modification undermines the outstanding universal value of a site listed on its territory," UNESCO said.

"Any modification must be notified beforehand by the state to UNESCO and be reviewed if need be by the World Heritage Committee," it added.

UNESCO said it had expressed its concerns to Turkish authorities in several letters and conveyed the message to Turkey's ambassador to the institu-

tion on Thursday.

"We urge Turkish authorities to start a dialog before any decision is taken that could undermine the universal value of the site," UNESCO said.

The World Heritage site was at the centre of both the Christian Byzantine and Muslim Ottoman empires and is today one of Turkey's most visited monuments.

The prospect of a change in the museum's status back to a mosque has raised alarm among U.S., French, Russian and Greek officials, as well as Christian church leaders. — Reuters

