

Second dose of Covid-19 vaccine postponed due to short supply

The Ministry of Health has announced the postponement of the second dose of the Covid-19 vaccine for those who received the first dose of this vaccine. "The Ministry of Health would like to point out the postponement of the second dose of the Covid-19 vaccine produced by Pfizer-BioNTech for those who received the first dose of this vaccine. The delay has been caused by the manufacturer in supplying agreed doses to Oman. This delay would include all countries of the world contracted by the company.



Established 1981. Editor-in-chief: Abdullah bin Salim al Shueili

OMAN OBSERVER

www.omanobserver.om editor@omanobserver.om



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OIL UP AS US STOCKPILES DROP FURTHER



P10
THREE OMANI DRIVERS IN FRAY AT QATAR RALLY



P18
REVIVING LOST TALES THROUGH CONCEPTUAL ART

KUWAIT

HM SENDS MESSAGE TO EMIR OF KUWAIT

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a written message to Shaikh Nawaf Al Ahmad Al Jaber al Sabah, Emir of Kuwait. The message was related to the firm bilateral relations binding the two brotherly countries as well as issues of common concern. The message was delivered by Dr Saleh bin Amer al Kharousi, Sultanate's Ambassador to Kuwait, when he was received by Dr Ahmed Nasser Al Mohammed al Sabah, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kuwait.

PHOTO ON P3

NEW DELHI

INDIA'S CAPITAL ON HIGH ALERT

The Indian capital was placed on a high-security alert, a day after protesting farmers broke barricades, clashed with police and stormed Delhi's historic Red Fort. Police said they had detained 200 protestors on charges of assault and vandalism during the violence on Tuesday. Nearby Haryana and Punjab states were also put on alert. Paramilitary personnel were deployed at the Red Fort and protest sites at Delhi's borders. DETAILS ON P7



INSIDE



RESTRICTING INTERNET ACCESS 'ABSOLUTELY WRONG': ROWHANI

P6



IN LEBANON, MANY FEAR POVERTY MORE THAN VIRUS

P9

Social gatherings and direct education suspended

MUSCAT: The Supreme Committee tasked with tackling developments resulting from coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic held a meeting on Wednesday under the chairmanship of Sayyid Hamoud Faisal al Busaidy, Minister of Interior, to study updates on the pandemic and measures to curb the spread of the virus and address its impacts.

The meeting deliberated on the serious developments of the pandemic that emerged in many countries around the world due to risks posed by the new variants of Covid-19 causing a sharp rise



in infections and deaths and putting huge pressure on health systems.

In a statement issued after the meeting, the committee took note of the precautionary

measures undertaken globally to deal with the developments, prompting countries to take decisions to impose lockdowns, suspend economic activities, prohibit travel among countries

and ban movement within their own boundaries.

On the local front, the committee also noted the marked increase in the number of infections and the growing

number of patients admitted to intensive care units and hospital wards in the Sultanate due to non-abidance to precautionary measures endorsed by the authorities concerned.

The committee deplored the fact that large gatherings were held for social events and that many people are not wearing face masks or observing physical distance. Also, some establishments failed to comply with the health procedures announced by the authorities concerned, said the committee in its statement.

TURN TO P3

32,267 jobs for nationals

Fee to recruit and renew expatriate contracts increased

ZAINAB AL NASSRI
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The Ministry of Labour (MoL) came out with major announcements including 32,267 job opportunities for Omanis, besides 10,000 training opportunities, to be announced gradually during the year.

Dr Mahad bin Said bin Ali Baowain, Minister of Labour, made these announcements during the first press conference of the ministry this year.

"Advancement in labour sector is a joint responsibility that needs concerted efforts from all the stakeholders," he added.

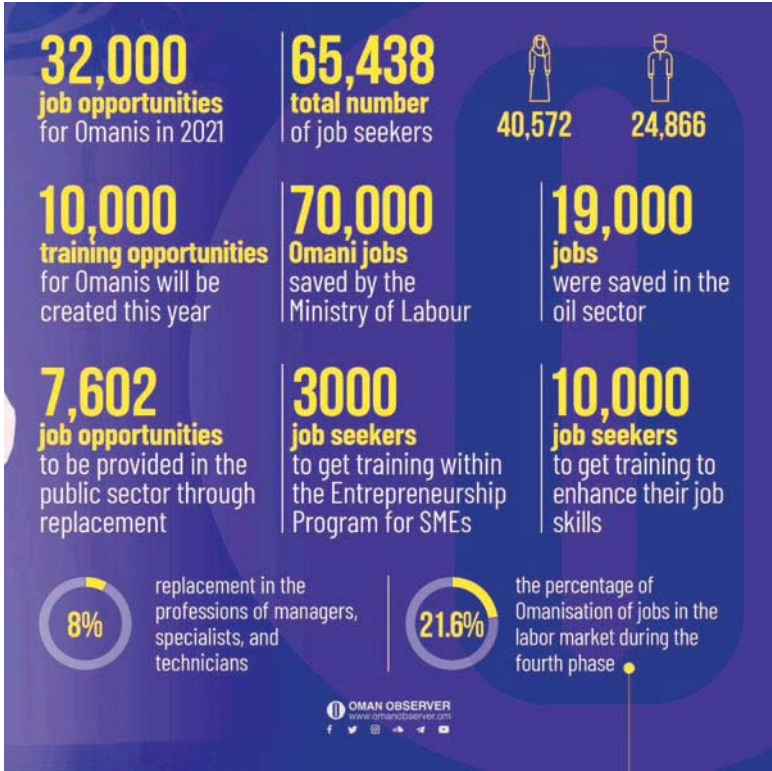
Baowain spoke of the new economic plans and government measures which touched administrative apparatus and some laws and legislations. He confirmed that these measures will bear fruit in five years, and after that new plans will start to



Dr Mahad bin Said bin Ali Baowain
Minister of Labour

coincide with the next phase. The minister also stressed that employment will be based on the actual needs of the institutions and not quantitatively.

Sayyed Salim bin Musallam al Busaidy, Under-Secretary for Human Resources Development at the ministry, said that the ministry's plan of action includes financing replacement



programmes for government sector units by providing 7,602 jobs.

The ministry will train and qualify job-seekers to replace

them with jobs occupied by the expatriate workforce in the public sector and this includes 2,469 jobs from the Ministry of Education...

TURN TO P2

A MONUMENT OF FRIENDSHIP

The gargantuan ship which is standing mighty amid the roads connecting Al Bustan, Sidab and Wadi Kabir, is the epitome of more than 5,000 years old relations between the Sultanate of Oman and India. This is the replica of 'Sohar' that originally sailed in the 8th century, the original version of which was supposed to have been used by Sindbad the Sailor, during the early Abbasid Caliphate for his seven voyages throughout the seas of the east of Africa and south of Asia.

DETAILS ON P4



Oceans warmed steadily over 12,000 years: study

PARIS: Earth's oceans have been warming consistently throughout the last 12,000 years, according to research published on Wednesday that authors said showed clearly humanity's profound effect on the climate.

Previous estimates of sea temperatures stretching back millennia have traditionally been based on analysis of preserved rock, and concluded that oceans hit their temperature peak

around 6,000 years ago before gradually cooling. This is at odds with global air temperature records, which tell the tale of a consistent warming trend, accelerating at the onset of the industrial era.

Researchers in the US and China reassessed sea temperature models and found that they usually represented seasonal temperature variations rather than the annual average. — AFP

Recruitment of expats to cost more



Dr Mahad bin Said Baowain, Minister of Labour, Sayyid Salim bin Musallam al Busaidy, Labour Ministry's Under-Secretary for Human Resources Development, Shaikh Nasr bin Amer al Hosni, Labour Under-Secretary, at the press conference in Muscat on Wednesday. PHOTOS BY MOHAMMED MAHJOUR

SAMUEL KUTTY
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The Ministry of Labour has announced a substantial rise in the fee for the recruitment of expatriate employees in some professions, especially for top-level positions. The announcement was made by Shaikh Nasr al Hosni, Under-Secretary at the Ministry of Labour during a press conference on Wednesday.

“There will be changes in the Labour Law and Civil Service Law, including an increase in the fee for the recruitment of non-labour manpower for positions in the administrative and executive apparatus,” he said.

He said that the rise in the cost of the non-Omani workforce aimed at making the national workforce attractive to the private sector, less expensive, and efficient as well as to liberalise the labour market.

A new employment application system will replace the process of bringing expatriate workers instead of issuing permits. This is considered a radical regulatory action, he said.

While RO 2001 will be the fees for top-level positions, the fee for middle-level has been decided at RO 1001 and RO 601 for technical and specialised professions.

According to Al Hosni, formulation of the policies



Observer

FEES FOR EXPAT RECRUITMENT LICENSES TO BE INCREASED

- 1. TOP/SENIOR-LEVEL OCCUPATIONS: RO 2,001
- 2. MIDDLE-LEVEL OCCUPATIONS: RO 1,001
- 3. TECHNICAL AND SPECIALIZED OCCUPATIONS: RO 601
- 4. ARTISANAL FISHERMEN: RO 361
- 5. UNSPECIFIED OCCUPATIONS: RO 301
- 6. HOUSEMAIDS (FROM ONE TO THREE HOUSE WORKERS): RO 141
- 7. HOUSEMAIDS (FROM FOUR WORKERS AND ABOVE): RO 241
- 8. FARMER AND CAMELS' BREEDER (FROM ONE TO 3): RO 201
- 9. FARMER AND CAMELS' BREEDER (FROM FOUR AND ABOVE): RO 301

includes uniform benefits in both public and private sectors, Omanisation of some professions, setting up of mobile labour court,

and new ministerial decisions to localise some jobs.

Another major decision announced during the press

conference held at the ministry building included the transfer of the end of service benefits of the expatriate workers to the Social Insurance Fund.

According to the new fee structure, recruitment of artisanal fishermen will cost RO 361, non-mentioned (unspecified) occupations RO 301, housemaids (from one to three house workers) RO 141, housemaids (from four workers and above) RO 241, farmer and camels' breeder (from one to 3) RO 201 and farmer and camels' breeder (from four and above) RO 301.

While fees of changing a worker's data have been fixed at RO 5, transferring a worker from a current sponsor to another will cost RO 5.

Fees have also been drawn up for issuing and renewing licenses to recruit non-Omani workforce in small and medium enterprises owned by Omani employers.

“They are fully free to manage their businesses, provided they are registered and insured with the Public Authority for Social Insurance and not more than two years have passed since the inception of the business”, Al Hosni said.

The new fees are RO 101 for one worker up to 5 workers, RO 151 for 6 to 10 workers, provided that one Omani is employed in these enterprises.

Policies to create more investments, jobs for nationals

SAMUEL KUTTY
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Nationalisation of jobs will help enhance investment, and employing qualified and skilled Omanis was the best option for the private sector.

At a press conference held on Wednesday, Shaikh Nasr bin Amer al Hosni, Under-Secretary of Ministry of Labour for Labour, stressed on the need to create an open economy to attract investors, at the same time, create more job opportunities for the national workforce.

For this, said the undersecretary, “localisation of jobs enhances investment through a set of procedures that the ministry is working on in order to enhance the choice of the Omani instead of an expatriate”.

During the conference, which was held to mark the announcement of the ministry's implementation plans for 2021, he said that bringing in an expatriate involves high cost, in addition to various procedures including obtaining licenses, which cost companies a lot.

“While employing an Omani does not require these procedures”, he said.

According to him, the ministry seeks to instil sound concepts of work in society, and empower the national workforce in the private sector by promoting the concept that jobs are originally for Omanis and that Omanisation enhances investment.

“We must make a national commitment, and our procedures must be clear in terms of Omanisation rates in

the private sector,” he said. Al Hosni also stressed on the need to have parity in the benefits offered public and private sectors in terms of privileges, leave, the retirement system and wages if possible.

He said that many unhealthy practices like duplication of human resources management in the Omani – expatriate ratio, making excuses for qualification and training in non-specialised and non-technical professions should be stopped.

Earlier, Sayyid Salim bin Musallam al Busaidy, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Labour for Human Resources Development, said that the Ministry will provide support for entrepreneurship programmes of SMEs by training 3,000 job seekers.

This is in addition to financing programmes of youth's skills through training 10,000 job seekers for jobs required by the labour market in all governorates of the Sultanate”.

Al Busaidy said that the Ministry aims to raise the efficiency of government work by evaluating and developing the efficiency of organisational structures and the system for classification and arranging jobs.

“This will be done in accordance with the standards and global variables and applying the standards of comprehensive quality in the administrative apparatus. Moreover, developing individual and institutional performance and the national system for innovation and change management”, he said.

Plans to make hiring Omanis attractive for private sector

FROM PAGE 1
... 830 jobs from the Ministry of Health, 115 from the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, 151 jobs from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, and 65 from the municipal sector, 292 jobs from the University of Technology and Applied Sciences, and 1,280 from other sectors.

Besides these, the ministry will follow up with a replacement programme supervised by the government agencies and units such as the Communications Regulatory Authority (1,500 jobs) and the Authority for Public Services Regulation (900 jobs).

TRAINING

The plan also includes supporting the various sectors with on-the-job-training and employment of 6,000 job seekers through programmes for holders of General Education Diplomas and below, as well as on-the-job training programmes for holders of a diploma and above.

Al Busiady mentioned, “The ministry will also provide support for entrepreneurship programmes of SMEs by training 3,000 job-

seekers, as well as financing programmes of youth's skills by training 10,000 job seekers in the Sultanate”.

He said that the ministry aims to raise the efficiency of government work by evaluating organisational structures according to global standards. Moreover, there is a plan to design parameters to measure institutional performance.

OPEN ECONOMY

Shaikh Nasr bin Amer al Hosni, Under-Secretary for Labour, spoke about stressed on creating an open economy to attract investors and at the same time to create more job opportunities for all.

He said, “If we want to transform the labour sector into a free sector with high wages, we have to do these things: liberalise employment market by enabling companies to hire job seekers; allow free movement between sectors, and remove job restrictions.”

Al Hosni said that whenever economic growth is diversified, job opportunities increase in quantity and quality.

He reviewed the history of the Ministry of Labour and its stages since its inception in 1972.

“The period from 2011 to 2020 witnessed a rise in the number of the national workforce in the government sector due to direct employment of 50,000 job-seekers. It also witnessed the centralisation of employment by the establishment of the National Employment Centre.

“Additionally, this period saw instability in oil prices, which led to an economic crisis, high operational costs in government, and fall in capital investment. The focus was on empowering small and medium enterprises, so we had less investment in the private sector due to the completion of infrastructure projects in Sultanate.”

“However, after the Royal Decree (89/2020) which stipulates establishing the Ministry of Labour and defining its terms of reference, the ministry formed a team to diagnose and address the challenges of the labour market. The most important of which are: A labour market that is not free and depends on the non-Omani workforce, focus on quantitative and not qualitative employment due to the of Omanisation rates, high job turnover, complete sufficiency of employment in the government

65,434

job seekers, according to the 2020 census, of whom 24,301 holders of university qualification and above, 10,497 holders of university diplomas, 22,163 holders of General Education Diploma and its equivalent, and 8,477 are below general diploma

sector, the absence of a real private investment sector in the Sultanate and its dependence on government projects, unclear procedures that hinder investment and depends on human intervention and constant negotiation, termination of services of the workforce in the private sector due to the economic situation, distorted data that do not serve decision-makers, laws, and legislations that are not compatible with the second phase, and a large

supply and modest demand,” Al Hosni said.

FORMAL REPLACEMENT

He added that many practices should be stopped like a formal replacement to extract and permit the recruitment of non-Omani manpower, duplication of human resources management (Omani - expatriate), making excuses for qualification and training in non-specialised and non-technical professions, the multiplicity of commercial registers, refusal to take a job because of remuneration or the inappropriateness of specialisation, qualification or location, transfer of workers from one activity to another to avoid high rates of Omanisation in some sectors, establishing small and medium companies to benefit from the facilities provided (exploiting the facilities granted to the private sector by the Supreme Committee), failure of private-sector establishments to abide by the provided job opportunities, registering fixed-term contracts more than once for the same person at the same facility.

According to the 2020 census, the number of job seekers stood

at 65,434, of whom 24,301 holders of university qualification and above, 10,497 holders of university diplomas, 22,163 holders of General Education Diploma and its equivalent, and 8,477 are below general diploma.

The Ministry of Labour seeks, during this stage, to activate replacement and Omanisation, instil sound concepts of work in society, and empower the national workforce in the private sector by promoting the concept that jobs are originally for Omanis and that Omanisation enhances investment. The ministry also works to raise the cost of the non-Omani workforce to make the national workforce attractive to the sector.

The laws include facilities and incentives for entrepreneurs. Fees have been drawn up for issuing and renewing licenses to bring non-Omani workforce in small and medium enterprises owned by Omani employers who are fully free to manage their businesses, registered with the Authority and insured with the Public Authority for Social Insurance, provided that not more than two years have passed since the inception of the business.

Agreement to teach primary students IT and coding skills

STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT, JAN 27

The Ministry of Education and Omantel signed an agreement on Wednesday to develop a IT and coding courses for primary school students at a cost of RO 50,000.

The agreement was signed by Dr Madeeha bint Ahmed al Shaibaniyah, Minister of Education and Talal bin Saeed al Maamari, CEO of Omantel.

The agreement aims to develop an educational curriculum to provide students with the skills of the future and the fourth industrial revolution in line with Oman Vision 2040, which aims to create a knowledge-based economy. The curriculum will be applied to students in grades 1-4 in public schools, single-language private schools and schools The Diwan schools, the Royal Omani Orchestra and the Royal Oman Police schools for a period of three academic years, starting from the academic year 2021/2022.

The Minister of Education said, "The process of developing national competencies and capabilities is one of the main pillars of Oman Vision 2040 alongside with the aim of building the capabilities of citizens. In addition to that is preparing them



Dr Madeeha bint Ahmed al Shaibaniyah, Minister of Education and Talal bin Saeed al Maamari, CEO of Omantel, sign the agreement in Muscat on Wednesday.

with a high degree of scientific and practical competence, arming them with strength and will to build a prosperous society capable of facing Global challenges and changes, and equipping them with the skills required for the future in light of the tremendous technical development. Given the rapid technical development and change in many future jobs and the skills needed for them, the Ministry of Education must rely on international standards that are forward-looking to the nature of these jobs."

Al Maamari, CEO of Omantel said, "This agreement comes within Omantel's social responsibility programmes, in

which education is one of its pillars. Our social responsibility resembles investing in young people, enhancing their skills in the field of information technology and programming, and meeting the aspirations of Oman 2040 vision and the needs of digital transformation in the Sultanate.

Adding to that is contributing to building a generation that possesses scientific knowledge in the field of information technology and programming at an early stage of school education."

He added, "While we are keen to provide the latest technologies and services to the various categories of our

subscribers, we are aware of the responsibility entrusted to us as the first leading company in the telecommunications sector in the Sultanate. We also seek to harness our capabilities to support digital transformation and support various national efforts and initiatives aimed at building a knowledge-based economy in the Sultanate."

The CEO of Omantel expressed his gratitude to the long-standing partnership with the Ministry of Education through many initiatives aimed at supporting the efforts made to develop the education system in the Sultanate.

It is worth noting that the implementation of the development of information technology curricula for grades (1-4) is the first stage of the development project.

The stage of the development project will include grades (5-11), where the curriculum is based on advanced skills in text programming, artificial intelligence, the Internet of things, three-dimensional modelling, e-commerce and information security that enables students to pursue university studies in various disciplines of computer science or join the labour market in public and private sectors.



HM sends message to Emir of Kuwait

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a written message to Shaikh Nawaf Al Ahmad Al Jaber al Sabah, Emir of Kuwait. The message was related to the firm bilateral relations binding the two brotherly countries as well as issues of common concern.

The message was delivered by Dr Saleh bin Amer al Kharousi, Sultanate's Ambassador to the State of Kuwait, when he was received by Dr Ahmed Nasser Al Mohammed al Sabah, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kuwait.

— ONA

Oman, Netherlands review bilateral ties



MUSCAT: The Sultanate's Foreign Ministry and its counterpart in the Netherlands on Wednesday held the 27th political consultation session via video conferencing.

The Omani side was chaired by Shaikh Khalifa bin Ali al Harthy, Under-Secretary of the Foreign Ministry for Diplomatic Affairs, while the Netherlands side was led by Paul Huijts, Secretary General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The session reviewed the existing relations between the

two countries and discussed means of promoting cooperation in various fields to serve the joint interests of the two countries.

The session also touched on the regional and international developments of common concern.

The meeting was attended by Shaikh Dr Abdullah Salim al Harthy, the Sultanate's Ambassador to the Netherlands, Laetitia van Asch, Ambassador of the Netherlands to the Sultanate, and officials from both sides.

— ONA

In brief

■ MUSCAT



TIE-UP WITH SAUDI IN TRANSPORT DISCUSSED

Eng Said bin Hamoud al Maawali, Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, held a meeting on Wednesday via video conferencing with Eng Saleh Nasser al Jasser, Minister of Transport in Saudi Arabia. The meeting reviewed fields of cooperation related to land transport and matters of common concern that serve the interests of the two countries.

— ONA

■ MUSCAT



167 NEW COVID-19 CASES, ONE DEATH

The Ministry of Health (MoH) on Wednesday reported 167 new cases of Covid-19, bringing the total number of cases registered in the Sultanate to 133,574. The ministry reported one new Covid 19-related death, taking the total death toll to 1,525. The total cases of recovery reached 126,486, which is 95 per cent of the total recovery rate. Sixteen patients were hospitalised during the past 24 hours, taking the total number of inpatients in hospitals to 93, including 26 in Intensive Care Units (ICUs). — ONA

■ HONEY MARKET FROM TODAY



The Omani honey market, organised by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, will begin on Thursday and will continue until January 31. It aims to empower the beekeepers in the Sultanate and widen the market for their products.

No social gatherings, direct education

FROM PAGE 1

According to the recommendation of the specialised technical team, the Supreme Committee decided that, with effect from Thursday (January 28) till further notice, the following action shall be undertaken: A complete ban on holding social events, irrespective of their nature.

Postponement of direct education in universities and colleges. Postponement of expansion in blended learning at government schools.

Suspension of international events and activities within the Sultanate. Postponement of local events and activities involving mass gatherings, including sports activities and exhibitions, among other events.

The Supreme Committee advises all citizens and residents to avoid travelling abroad during the forthcoming period, except in cases of extreme emergency. It reminded all that many countries have imposed restrictions on travel and movement.

The committee also recommended restricting the dispatch of citizens and residents on official missions abroad.

The Supreme Committee reaffirmed that it will be constantly monitoring the developments of Covid-19 locally and internationally. It cautioned that the pandemic situation arising from the new mutating strains of the disease is extremely delicate and risky. The committee hereby exhorts all citizens and residents to stick to the instructions and measures approved by the authorities concerned, to protect themselves, their relatives and their colleagues at the workplace against the perils posed by the pandemic which may at any time entail death, God forbids.

It also reiterated its pledge that it will take suitable decisions to protect society and individuals from the disease and to enhance the ability of the health system and health workers to handle the situation. — ONA

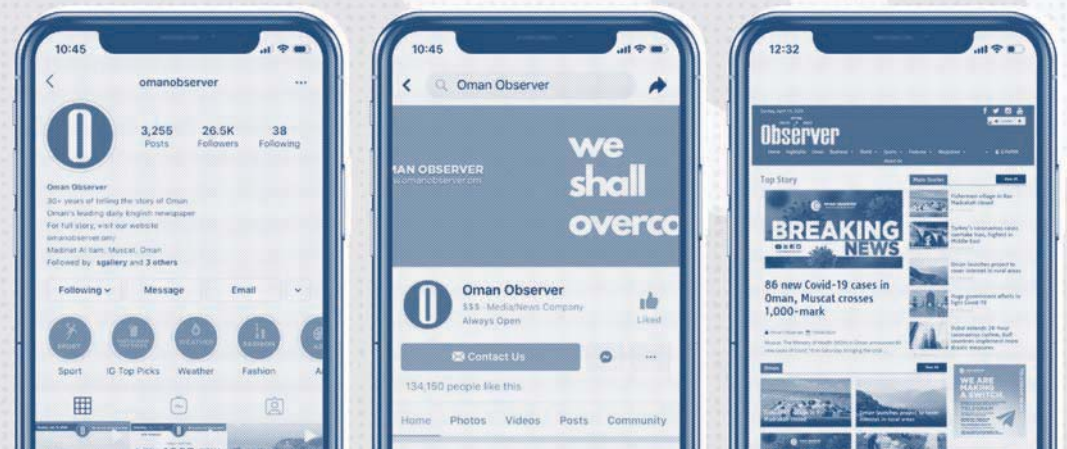
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Top Indian civilan honour for *Sohar* replica builder

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The ship that is standing mighty amid the roads connecting Al Bustan, Sidab and Wadi Kabir, is the epitome of more than 5,000 years old relations between the Sultanate of Oman and India.

This is the replica of ‘*Sohar*’ that originally sailed in the 8th century, the original version of which was supposed to have been used by Sindbad the Sailor, during the early Abbasid Caliphate for his seven voyages throughout the seas of the east of Africa and south of Asia.

The ship was recreated in 1981 by Ali Manikfan, an Indian who has been bestowed with the Padma Shri Award on January 26. The award is the fourth highest civilian honour of India.

He was approached by Irish adventurer Tim Severin to rebuild the trading ship, which was completely hand-made, using four tonnes of traditional coir. He sailed the ship from Oman to China for his epic journey. History has it, that no metal was used in its construction and the four tonnes of coir were used to sew the planks of its hull.

Ali Manikfan, 82, from Minicoy Island, in Lakshadweep, was bestowed with the highest civilian award for his excellence in marine biology, ecology,



Ali Manikfan

cosmology, shipbuilding and multilingualism without any formal training in any of them. He was one of the 102 eminent Indians who has been bestowed with the Padma Shri Award this year.

It all began in 1976 when Tim Severn wanted to sail from Oman to China but the challenge was to build a traditional Arab sailing ship and it took three years for various researches, planning the itinerary.

Tim Severn’s search for an expert shipbuilder ended when he met Ali Manikfan who took thirty shipbuilding experts from Kerala and elsewhere and began the work in Sur.

Tim and his team set to sail on the ship on November 21, 1980, coinciding with the 10th anniversary of late Sultan Qaboos ascension to power. The voyage that followed the sea routes of Sindbad took eight months to cover 9,600 kilometres from Sur to Canton.



Former justice minister, Al Samar, passes away

MUSCAT: Former justice minister Sayyid Hilal bin Hamad al Samar al Busaidy died on Wednesday. A former wali of Suhar, Qurayat, Al Khabourah and Al Rustaq, Al Samar gained special prominence while he was the wali of Nizwa at an important juncture in Oman’s history.

Al Samar had served as the minister of justice, head of the Supreme Court, head of the state security court and adviser for justice affairs.

He is the father of Sayyid



Saud bin Hilal al Busaidy, Minister of State and the Governor of Muscat.

Apply for Indian school admission from February 1

MUSCAT: The online registration for admission to Indian Schools in the Capital area for the next academic year (2021-2022) for Classes KG I to IX will start on February 1, according to a statement.

Online registration for admissions is applicable to seven Indian Schools in the Capital area.

“The closing date of online registration is February 28. For more details, parents are advised to visit www.indianschoolsoman.com”, the statement said.

■ FROM PAGE 1

Fine up to RO 500, six-month jail for unregistered rental agreement

Muscat Municipality has confirmed that unregistered tenancy agreements will be referred to Public Prosecution and a fine between RO 50 and 5,000 and/or a prison term between 24 hours and 6 months will be imposed on the violators.

A copy of the investment contract and a no-objection letter from the landlord should be provided in case the leaser is an investor of the property.

The extension of tenancy agreements service is also available online through the Muscat Municipality website, Baladiyeti app and Sanad offices. The service may also be accomplished by providing the number of the previous agreement without the need for providing new documents.

The tenancy agreement ensures that the landlord or lessor is not allowed to increase the rent in the middle of the lease term. The rent may be increased only after the end of the lease term or every three years.

It’s noteworthy that the urban inspection departments of Muscat Municipality carry out regular inspections to ensure abidance by the registration of tenancy agreements.

Registered tenancy agreement also ensures the lessor right and gives them the right to request an eviction if the tenant failed to pay the rent as per the amount stipulated by the agreement. Besides, the landlord or lessor of property can demand compensation

for damage. Registered rental agreement also ensures that the tenant is not allowed to sublease the property to a third party without the landlord’s consent.

The 2020 data shows that 11,978 new tenancy agreements were registered and 36,743 agreements were renewed in the Wilayat of Seeb. In the Wilayat of Muttrah, 5,302 new contracts were registered and 39,442 agreements were extended. In Al Amerat, 2,083 new agreements were registered and 5,860 agreements were extended. In Qurayat, 344 new contracts were registered and 1,880 agreements were extended. In Baushar, 12,619 agreements were registered and 53,934 agreements were extended.



On the move...



Sultanate of Oman
Consumer Protection Authority



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RECALL CAMPAIGN

FOR CHEVROLET TAHOE, SUBURBAN, SILVERADO / GMC YUKON, YUKON XL, SIERRA MODEL VEHICLES



Date of Recall: 28/01/2021

Campaign Type: Safety

Recall Segment: Seat Belts

Product Description: Chevrolet Tahoe 2021/ Chevrolet Suburban 2021 / Chevrolet Silverado 2019-2021 / GMC Yukon 2021 / GMC Yukon XL 2021 / GMC Sierra 2019-2020

Model Year	Division	Vehicle Model	Affected Vehicle Vin Range	No. of Affected Vehicles in Oman
2021	Chevrolet	Tahoe	1GNSC8ED0MR160432 to 1GNSK8EDXMR186717	13
2021	Chevrolet	Suburban	1GNSC9ED0MR159612 to 1GNSK9EDXMR183161	5
2019-2021	Chevrolet	Silverado	1GC3Y9E70LF275207 to 1GCUY9EF9KZ271553 3GCNW9EF0KG192993 to 3GCUY9EFLG369203	9
2021	GMC	Yukon	1GKS17ED0MR158127 to 1GKS27EDXMR184179	0
2021	GMC	Yukon XL	1GKS18ED0MR160143 to 1GKS28EDXMR159546	0
2019-2020	GMC	Sierra	1GD389E70LF301574 to 1GTU99EDXKZ333571 3GTN89EF0KG194964 to 3GTU99EDXLG228742	51

DESCRIPTION:
In these vehicles, the seat-belt brackets may not be properly secured to the seat frame in the front-row center seating position. If a seat-belt bracket is not secured, the seat belt may not properly restrain an occupant in the front-row center seat position.

PROCEDURE:
Dealers will inspect left-side and right-side front-row center seat-belt bracket attachments and reassemble if necessary.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:
Customers of the above mentioned vehicles may please call Oman Trading Establishment LLC for Chevrolet and Moosa Abdul Rahman Hassan & Co LLC for GMC.

CONTACT DETAILS:
For OTE Toll free No 80050002 on all working days between 8.00pm to 1.00pm and 2.00pm to 5.30pm
Toll free number for MARH 80076200 on all working days between 8.30am to 1.00pm and 4.00pm to 6.30pm.

‘The world is watching us,’ says new top US diplomat

WASHINGTON: Secretary of State Antony Blinken got to work on Wednesday with a warning that the world’s eyes were on the United States to see if it can heal deep divisions.

Blinken, a veteran diplomat and confidant of President Joe Biden, promised to rebuild morale and respect in a welcome ceremony at the State Department front entrance that was extraordinary for what was lacking — crowds.

With Covid-19 raging, Blinken asked that only a bare minimum of employees, all masked, come to see him — and noted that just days earlier, barricades had been protecting the usually staid building near the National Mall in the wake of a failed insurrection at the Capitol.

“The world is watching us

intently right now. They want to know if we can heal our nation,” Blinken said.

“They want to see whether we will lead with the power of our example,” he said, “if we’ll put a premium on diplomacy with our allies and partners to meet the great challenges of our time.”

He said that the challenges included the pandemic as well as “climate change, the economic crisis, threats to democracies, fights for racial justice and the danger to our security and global stability posed by our rivals and adversaries.”

Blinken said of the turbulent times, “The president is committed to getting us through it as quickly as possible, so that very soon, we can all gather in person again and have confidence that the foundations of



Newly confirmed US Secretary of State Antony Blinken addresses a welcome ceremony after arriving at the State Department in Washington, on Wednesday. — Reuters

our democracy are strong.”

Under former president Donald Trump, close Western allies were rattled by his jarringly undiplomatic approach as he voiced fondness for

autocratic leaders.

The divisiveness spread to the State Department where Blinken’s predecessor Mike Pompeo was a relentless defender of Trump,

using his welcoming speech to vow “swagger” and spending his final days railing against multiculturalism and the media.

Blinken, who served as a deputy secretary of state under former President Barack Obama, promised to listen to dissenting views and said pointedly, “I will have your back.”

Trump fired the US ambassador to Ukraine as Trump sought to dig up dirt on Biden, a scandal that led to his first impeachment.

“I cannot promise that you will support every choice I make as your secretary. But I can promise an open door and an open mind,” Blinken said.

Blinken, known for his even temper, was confirmed on Tuesday by the Senate 78-22 with many members of Trump’s Republican

Party backing him, a turnaround from the narrow approval on partisan lines for Trump’s two secretaries of state.

Blinken got to work Tuesday with calls to his counterparts from neighbours Canada and Mexico as well as top US allies Japan and South Korea, key players in what will likely be a defining issue of his tenure — the rise of China.

He is expected later on Wednesday to hold a news conference, a sign of early commitment to engaging with the media after tensions during the Trump administration.

Blinken in his confirmation hearing signalled a shift from Trump by pursuing diplomacy, including with Iran, but also pledged continuity including in the hard line on China. — AFP

PROTEST AGAINST CURBS



Retailers and owners of cafes, pubs and restaurants and their staff shout slogans and wave flags as they attend a protest against restrictions due to the Covid-19 pandemic in Sofia on Wednesday. — AFP

Italy’s president opens government talks after prime minister quits

ROME: Italy’s president will begin discussions with political leaders on Wednesday on forming a new government following the resignation of Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte.

Conte stepped down on Tuesday after divisions in the ruling coalition left him without a parliamentary majority but is hoping to return at the head of a strengthened government.

President Sergio Mattarella, the ultimate arbiter of Italian politics, asked Conte to stay on while he establishes if this is viable — or if someone else should take over.

The head of state is set to meet the presidents of both parliamentary chambers before talks on Thursday and Friday with party leaders. The turmoil comes at a crucial time for Italy, as it seeks to draft a 220-billion-euro (\$267 billion) spending plan for European Union funds intended to help the country recover from the coronavirus crisis.

The pandemic has hit Italy hard, plunging the eurozone’s third-largest economy into a deep recession and leaving more than 86,000 people dead.

The current ruling parties, including the populist Five



Italian President Sergio Mattarella greets caretaker Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, speaker of the upper house Maria Elisabetta Alberti Casellati and speaker of the lower house Roberto Fico during a ceremony to mark the International Holocaust Remembrance Day, in Rome, on Wednesday. — Reuters

Star Movement (M5S) and the centre-left Democratic Party (PD), are hoping to stay in office and avoid snap elections.

Opinion polls suggest that the opposition coalition, which includes Silvio Berlusconi’s Forza Italia and Matteo Salvini’s far-right League, would win power.

But forming a new government would mean working again with former

premier Matteo Renzi’s Italia Viva party, which sparked the current crisis by leaving the coalition in a row over the handling of the pandemic.

Conte, who cancelled a scheduled speech to the World Economic Forum Wednesday, said after his resignation that Italy required “a clear perspective and a government with a larger and safer majority”

“My resignation serves this

possibility: the formation of a new government that can offer a prospect of national salvation,” he wrote on Facebook on Tuesday.

However, he acknowledged that he himself — a former law professor plucked from obscurity to lead a previous M5S-led government after the 2018 elections — may not necessarily be at the helm.

— AFP

Police search Navalny’s Moscow apartments and office, says aide

MOSCOW: Russian police on Wednesday launched raids on the Moscow apartments and offices of jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny, his team said, ahead of new protests called for the weekend to demand his release.

Ivan Zhdanov, the head of Navalny’s FBK Anti-Corruption Foundation, said police were searching flats linked to Navalny and the foundation’s offices for alleged violations of coronavirus restrictions.

Russia’s Interior Ministry said on Wednesday it had launched a criminal probe into the violation of sanitary and epidemiological measures during a Moscow protest that saw thousands rally in support of Navalny on Saturday.

The ministry’s spokeswoman Irina Volk said the organisers and participants of the rally “created a threat of the spread of the novel coronavirus infection”.

Zhdanov said on Twitter that Navalny’s wife Yulia was at one

of the apartments and posted a video from inside where loud hammering could be heard outside the door. “They are not letting in my lawyer. They broke my door in,” Yulia Navalny yelled to journalists from out of her apartment window, an AFP journalist reported.

Zhdanov posted a screenshot from a security camera at the office of the foundation, showing several masked men there.

The FBK is best known for its investigations into the wealth of Russia’s political elite.

Its most recent report suggested President Vladimir Putin was gifted an opulent property on the Black Sea Coast costing over \$1.5 billion. The investigation was released days after Navalny was arrested on his return on January 17 from Germany, where he spent months recovering from a nerve agent poisoning he blames on the Kremlin. — AFP



Sultanate of Oman Ministry of Agricultural, Fisheries Wealth and Water Resources

TENDER NOTICE

The Ministry of Agricultural, Fisheries Wealth and Water Resources Announces the following Tender:-

Tender no.	Description	Tender documents Price (R.O)	Class	Last date for collection of documents	Last date for Submission of documents
18/2021/1	Rehabilitation of the Seeds & Plant Genetic Resources Laboratory at the Plant Production Research Center at Al Rumais	25/-	Specialised	Wednesday 10/2/2021	Tuesday 2/3/2021

- Interested Companies registered with Tender Board (in the above mentioned Grade) may obtain Tender documents from the E-Tendering website: <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om> against non-refundable payment as mentioned above for each set of document.
- The value of the document will be paid & submitted on line on given website.
- The Tenderer should enclose scan copy of Bank Guarantee issued by any bank in the Sultanate of Oman (as required in the tender), and addressed to the Ministry of Agricultural, Fisheries Wealth and Water Resources.
- All correspondence pertaining to the tender inquiry must be online at e-tendering System.
- All correspondence pertaining to the e-tendering System technical support must be directed to the following helpdesk email address and phone number: **+968 24166670** or **etenderhd@ita.gov.om**
- Note:** Bid Submission will be online only. Scan Copy of Tender Bond needs to be attached in system .

TENDERS COMMITTEE
Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries Wealth and Water Resources

UN report accuses Yemen govt of money-laundering



Workers collect food aid at a foodstuff aid distribution centre in Sanaa. — Reuters

NEW YORK: Yemen's Ansar Allah have diverted more than \$1 billion in state funds to their fight in the country's civil war, according to a confidential UN report.

A panel of experts estimates that the Ansar Allah diverted at least \$1.8 billion in 2019 that was originally intended for the Yemeni government to use to pay salaries and provide basic services for citizens, according to the report.

In addition, corruption and money laundering by Yemen's official government make it difficult for the population to access much-needed food, the panel reported.

In one case, funds from Yemen's central bank worth \$423 million had gone to

private companies at the expense of citizens in the war-torn country, it said.

Representatives of the United Nations have repeatedly warned that Yemen is on the verge of a famine that could kill hundreds of thousands of people.

According to the report, the situation has been complicated by the decision from former US president Donald Trump's administration to place the Ansar Allah on its terror list, as it could deter food importers from making shipments to the country.

So far, President Joe Biden's new administration in Washington has not withdrawn the measure.

— dpa/Reuters

Rouhani: Restricting Internet access 'absolutely wrong'

TEHRAN: Iranian President Hassan Rouhani has slammed opponents of Internet freedom, saying that restricting access would be "absolutely wrong."

"These days, the Internet is like oxygen for people... to want to restrict it would be absolutely wrong," Rouhani said, adding that this was particularly true during the coronavirus pandemic.

"How else can we expect people to do everything from home and teach their children online during the pandemic," the Isna news agency cited the president as saying.

The comments come after Communications Minister Mohammad Javad Azari Jahromi was summoned by judicial authorities last week for allegedly preventing Instagram from being blocked and ignoring instructions on Internet restrictions.

Jahromi was released on bail, but his case is to be pursued further as there have been reports against him from various authorities.

Both the Iranian judiciary and the parliament are in favour of restrictions on the web, arguing that it is responsible for "social immorality" in the country.

Thousands of Internet sites are blocked in Iran, but the restrictions are ignored by most Iranians. It is possible to gain access to blocked pages via data tunnels, which are also officially prohibited.

In another development, a top Iranian official on Wednesday said Israel was waging a "psychological war" after the Jewish state's army said new "offensive options" were being drawn up in case they



Iranian President Hassan Rouhani has slammed opponents of Internet freedom saying Internet is like oxygen for people... to want to restrict it would be absolutely wrong.

were needed against the Islamic republic.

Mahmoud Vaezi, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's chief of staff, also vowed that his country was ready and willing to defend itself.

"We have no intention of going to war, but we are serious about defending the country," he said.

Israel accuses Iran of seeking to build a nuclear bomb, a charge Tehran denies. The Jewish state also frequently targets militant groups in Lebanon, Syria and the Gaza Strip.

Israel's military chief General Aviv Kochavi said on Tuesday he had ordered new plans be drawn up this year to counter Iran's nuclear capabilities, in case political leaders decided to target the country.

"The power to initiate them lies with the political echelon," Kochavi stressed. "However, the offensive options need to be prepared, ready and on the table."

Iran's Vaezi shot back on Wednesday that "they are conducting a psychological war."

Responding to a question on the sidelines of a council of ministers meeting, he charged that Israel has "practically no plans, no capacity".

Iran's recent military manoeuvres, testing missiles and drones, Vaezi added, showed that "our armed forces are trained" to defend Iran.

Kochavi's remarks came nearly a week after the inauguration of US President Joe Biden, who has signalled he wants to return to dialogue with Iran.

His predecessor Donald Trump had unilaterally withdrawn Washington in 2018 from a nuclear deal Tehran had struck with major world powers.

Biden's team has argued Iran must first return to strict compliance with its nuclear commitments under the deal with Britain, China, France, Germany, Russia and the United States.

Tehran has demanded an "unconditional" lifting of punishing sanctions first, and called on Washington to stop seeking to "extract concessions".

Israel rejects the original nuclear deal, and Kochavi reiterated its view that "any agreement that resembles the 2015 agreement is a bad thing, both strategically and operationally".

— dpa/AFP

Russia suggests ME conference, US to renew Palestinian ties

MOSCOW/NEW YORK: Russia backed a Palestinian proposal for a Middle East peace conference, suggesting it could be held at ministerial level in spring or summer, as the US said it would move towards renewing ties with the Palestinians under Joe Biden.

The United States — which had firmly sided with Israel under the administration of Donald Trump — said it intended to "restore credible US engagement with Palestinians as well as Israelis."

Recalling that Moscow had backed Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas' idea for international talks in early 2021 when he first proposed it in September, Russia's foreign

minister Sergei Lavrov offered ideas about who could be invited.

"We propose holding an international, ministerial-level meeting in spring-summer 2021," Lavrov told a UN Security Council meeting about the Middle East held by videoconference.

The roughly 10 participants would include Israel, the Palestinians, the four members of the so-called Middle East diplomatic quartet (Russia, the United Nations, the United States and the European Union), along with four Arab states — Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates, Lavrov said.

"It would also be important to invite Saudi Arabia, which is



Palestinians protest against Israeli settlements in the village of Deir Jarir, near Ramallah in the occupied West Bank. — AFP

behind the Arab peace initiative," he added, without offering a specific date or site for the eventual

conference.

He noted that Moscow remained ready to host a

meeting between Israel and the Palestinians in the Russian capital "at the highest levels."

China voiced its support for Russia's idea at the UN meeting, but most other participants did not offer an opinion on the proposal.

At last year's annual meeting of the UN General Assembly, Abbas — who had rejected a peace plan advanced by then US president Trump — said the Israeli-Palestinian conflict needed to be resolved on the basis of international law, and under conditions agreed by the global community.

On Tuesday, nearly all who spoke at the Security Council

meeting, including the United States, reaffirmed the need for a two-state solution — under which Israel and a future Palestine would coexist.

"The Biden administration will restore credible US engagement with Palestinians as well as Israelis," said Washington's interim UN envoy Richard Mills.

The new Democratic president "has been clear in his intent to restore US assistance programs that support economic development and humanitarian aid for the Palestinian people and to take steps to re-open diplomatic missions that were closed by the last US administration," he added.

— AFP

SHORT TAKES

TUNIS

Parliament confirms cabinet reshuffles

Hundreds of anti-government protesters faced off against riot police outside the Tunisian parliament on Tuesday as lawmakers inside confirmed a cabinet reshuffle amid growing unrest.

Mired in a political and economic crisis worsened by the Covid-19 pandemic, the North African country has been rocked by a wave of anger at a political class seen as obsessed with power struggles and disconnected from the suffering of ordinary people.



Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi told the assembly that by naming 11 new ministers to the interior, justice, health and other key portfolios, he aimed to create a "more effective" reform team. — AFP

TEL AVIV

After closing skies, Govt to seal land borders

Israel is set to close its land borders for several days, starting on Thursday, following an almost complete closure of its international airport.

Interior Minister Aryeh Deri said on Wednesday that "in order to complete the joint efforts to prevent the spread of the disease," the border crossings to Jordan and Egypt will be closed from Thursday morning until Sunday.

The Allenby Bridge crossing between Israel and Jordan, however, will remain open for



West Bank residents. Israel all but shut down its only international airport at midnight between Monday and Tuesday, a measure that is set to last until at least the end of the month. — dpa

ANKARA

Parties at ski resorts banned after backlash

Turkey has banned music and parties at ski resorts after footage of crowded party scenes provoked anger in a country which has endured two months of strict night-time and weekend curfews to contain the coronavirus pandemic.

Ski resorts have been exempt from some of the regulations, which include a total lockdown at the weekend, meaning skiers have been able to enjoy the slopes while most of the population has been stuck indoors.



Videos circulating on social media this week stirred angry headlines, while the main opposition party accused the government of letting the rich party while small businesses and ordinary people suffer. — Reuters

In brief

■ KUALA LUMPUR



MALAYSIAN COURT RELEASES PIA PLANE

A Malaysian court ordered on Wednesday the immediate release of a Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) plane detained in the Southeast Asian nation nearly two weeks ago over a British court case about its lease.

Malaysia seized the Boeing 777 aircraft on January 15 after a court allowed an application by lessor Peregrine Aviation Charlie Limited to keep it grounded until the result of a \$14 million lease dispute with PIA in Britain.

The High Court ordered the release after both sides said they had reached an amicable settlement of the dispute, involving two planes leased to PIA, a lawyer for the airline said.

■ JAKARTA



VOLCANO ERUPTS, SPEWING HOT ASH 3 KM AWAY

One of the world's most active volcanoes, Indonesia's Mount Merapi, erupted on Wednesday, belching out huge clouds of smoke and ash that billowed down the sides of its rumbling crater.

The volcano, near Indonesia's cultural capital Yogyakarta, shot hot ash into the air around three dozen times throughout the day.

Some of it travelled as far as three kilometres away from its peak, Indonesia's geological agency said.

Authorities told residents to stay outside a five-kilometre no-go zone, warning about possible lava flows. — AFP

■ DHAKA



GOVERNMENT BEGINS INOCULATING FRONTLINE WORKERS

Bangladesh on Wednesday kicked off its coronavirus vaccination campaign with workers on the front lines of the pandemic ahead of a nationwide rollout set to begin early next month.

Medical staff and members of the army, police and media were among the 30 recipients of the first day in Dhaka, Health Minister Zahid Maleque said.

"More frontline workers will be given the vaccine in the next two days before we start the nationwide campaign on February 7", he said, calling upon people to register with an online application. — dpa

Alert around Delhi after farmers' riot

NEW DELHI: Indian police imposed heavy security and closed several main roads around New Delhi on Wednesday, a day after farmers went on the rampage in the capital, leaving one person dead and several hundred injured.

The violence marked a dramatic escalation in a standoff between the government and thousands of farmers who have been camped on the outskirts of Delhi since late November demanding that new agricultural reforms be scrapped.

On Tuesday — during the annual Republic Day parade — convoys of farmers on tractors smashed through barricades to converge on the city centre, seeing off police baton charges and



Police officers barricades the site where farmers are protesting against farm laws at Singhu border in New Delhi. — Reuters

volleys of tear gas.

One farmer was killed in what police said was an accident when

his tractor overturned after hitting a barricade. At least 300 officers were injured, a police spokesman

said.

Around the city, security forces fought running battles with demonstrators. Farmers also laid into police with branches and metal bars, and hijacked buses used to block their convoys.

One video showed police jumping down a seven-metre wall to escape baton-swinging protestors near the historic Red Fort landmark.

Farmers there broke through police lines and ran their own emblem up a flagpole to cheers from the large crowd, before being dispersed from the ramparts by security forces.

On one main road, people on rooftops threw petals on the

tractor convoys. Elsewhere people cheered and applauded as farmers went past waving Indian flags and blowing horns.

As night fell, the farmers retreated to the camps outside the city where they have been braving Delhi's chilly winter nights for months now.

Home Affairs Minister Amit Shah ordered 15 companies of paramilitaries to boost security forces in the capital, according to media reports.

On Wednesday major roads were blocked as police and security forces set up barricades, leading to major traffic congestion. Riot police were stationed near the Red Fort. — AFP

Philippines files protest over China's coastguard law

MANILA: The Philippines foreign minister on Wednesday said a diplomatic protest had been filed over China's passing of a law allowing its coastguard to open fire on foreign vessels, describing it as a "threat of war".

China passed legislation on Friday allowing its coastguard to use "all necessary means" to stop or prevent threats from foreign vessels, including demolishing other countries' structures built on Chinese-claimed reefs.

"After reflection I fired a diplomatic protest", Philippines' Foreign Minister, Teodoro Locsin, said on Twitter.

"While enacting law is a sovereign prerogative, this one — given the area involved

or for that matter the open South China Sea — is a verbal threat of war to any country that defies the law; which, if unchallenged, is submission to it", he added.

The law, which permits coastguard to board and inspect foreign vessels in waters China considers its own, could pose problems given the scope of Beijing's territorial claims in the South China Sea.

China's claim of 90 per cent of the strategically important waterway was invalidated by an international arbitration tribunal in 2016, but it does not recognise that ruling.

A spokesman for President Rodrigo Duterte on Monday said the Philippines hopes no country will do anything to increase tensions. — Reuters



Chinese coastguard ships are seen in the South China Sea. China has passed legislation allowing its coastguard to use 'all necessary means' to stop or prevent threats from foreign vessels. — Reuters

■ JAYALALITHAA MEMORIAL



Carders of All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) party gather during the inauguration ceremony of the memorial for late Tamil Nadu chief minister J Jayalalithaa in Chennai on Wednesday. — AFP

Killings of civilians rise as Afghan violence threatens peace moves

KABUL: Killings of civilians in Afghanistan's conflict rose to more than 2,900 last year, the country's human rights commission said on Wednesday, despite stepped up diplomacy to end the war including peace talks taking place in Qatar. The deaths are part of a wider increase in violence that threatens a delicate peace process, undermining international calls for a ceasefire as the Afghan government takes part in peace negotiations with the insurgent Taliban.

There were 8,500 civilian casualties in 2020, according to the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission's (AIHRC) annual report, including 2,958 deaths. That was an increase from the 2,817 civilians killed in 2019, though overall casualties had dropped from more than 10,000 the previous year with fewer civilians injured.

A series of assassinations of human rights officials, mid-level government employees and

journalists began last year as well as attacks on civilians that shocked the country, including a massacre of new mothers and newborn babies at a maternity ward in May.

The AIHRC expressed "grave concern" over the findings, adding just over half of the casualties were caused by the Taliban, 15 per cent by government forces and its international partners and the remainder from groups like the IS and from unknown actors.

— Reuters

Thailand targets vaccination of 19 million people

BANGKOK: Thailand is targeting the immunisation of 19 million people against the coronavirus in a first phase of inoculations starting on February 14, the prime minister said on Wednesday, amid criticism the government has been slow in rolling out vaccines.

Inoculations will begin with 50,000 doses of AstraZeneca's vaccine, Prayuth Chan-ocha said. He gave no timeline for the first phase.

By May, Thailand will have received 150,000 doses from AstraZeneca.

In a broadcast carried on the government's website, Prayuth apologised for not solving Covid-19 related problems as fast as the public had demanded.

"Blaming each other will not solve any problems", he said.

Of the 19 million to be vaccinated, 11 million would be people aged over 60 and 6.1



People queue to be tested for Covid-19 in Samut Sakhon province. — Reuters

million would be those with underlying diseases, he said.

Another 1.7 million would be for medical professionals and 15,000 government workers

involved in managing the virus, he said, adding those under 18 and pregnant women would not be vaccinated. About a fifth of Thailand's population is under 18.

The timeframe would depend on the capacity of hospitals administering the vaccines and number of doses they receive, head of the government's vaccine

management committee, Sophon Mekthong, told Reuters.

Thailand has altogether secured 26 million doses from AstraZeneca to be produced by local firm Siam Bioscience and 2 million doses from China's Sinovac. It has also reserved 35 million doses from AstraZeneca.

Thailand will initially import the vaccines but is expected by June to be producing it locally, Sophon added.

Authorities say they will vaccinate 31.5 million people.

The education ministry on Wednesday said it would reopen most schools from next week, in response to localised declines in new coronavirus infections.

The announcement comes despite the country reporting on Wednesday its second-highest number of new daily coronavirus cases, with 819 infections.

— Reuters

It would have been ‘pity’ to stay in EU vaccine programme: UK PM

LONDON: British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said on Wednesday it would have been a “great pity” if the United Kingdom had followed advice to stay in the European Union’s vaccine programme rather than set up its own plan.

“I do think that we’ve been able to do things differently, and better, in some ways,” he said in parliament.

“But it is early days, and it is very very important to remember that this is an international venture, these vaccines. We depend on our friends and partners, and we will continue... to work with those friends and partners in the EU and beyond.”

Britain left the European Union in January 2020 after 46 years of membership.

Johnson also said it would not be possible to reopen schools in February, but that he hoped the vaccination programme would allow them to open their doors from March 8.

Johnson said that if the government hits its vaccination targets: “We hope it will therefore be safe to begin the reopening of schools from Monday the 8th of March, with other economic and social restrictions being removed (then or) thereafter, as the data permits,” he told parliament.

VACCINE FACTORY EVACUATED

A factory in Wales that produces AstraZeneca’s Covid-19 vaccine was partially evacuated on Wednesday after it received a suspicious package and police said a bomb disposal unit was dealing with the incident.



British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said he was confident that the country’s supplies of Covid-19 vaccine would keep accelerating. – Reuters

Operated by Wockhardt UK, the plant provides so-called fill-and-finish capacity for AstraZeneca’s UK supply chain, which is the final manufacturing step of putting vaccines into vials or syringes and packaging them.

AstraZeneca has agreed to supply Britain with 100 million doses of the vaccine, developed by Oxford University.

It is currently engaged in a dispute with the European Union after it cut supplies to the bloc due to production issues at its Belgian factory.

“Wockhardt UK in Wrexham this morning received a suspicious package to site. All relevant authorities were immediately notified and engaged,” the

company said, referring to its facility outside the town of Wrexham in north Wales.

“Upon expert advice we have partially evacuated the site pending a full investigation. The safety of our employees and business continuity remain of paramount importance,” it said.

‘DISCONTENT’ IN N IRELAND

Police in Northern Ireland said on Wednesday they were noticing “growing discontent”, expressed via graffiti and social media, among the province’s unionists over its post-Brexit divergence with mainland Britain.

Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) Assistant Chief Constable Mark McEwan told UK

lawmakers that the coronavirus pandemic had so far helped in “moderating people’s behaviour in terms of the desire to protest”.

“Were we not in this current environment, we would probably see a more visible outworking of that on the streets,” he said.

Unionists, who want Northern Ireland to remain part of Britain, are angry over the new customs checks required on goods travelling across the Irish Sea, complaining there is now a border between the province and the rest of the UK.

Discontent in the “Protestant, unionist, loyalist community” is being expressed in graffiti and on social media, McEwan told the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.

The new checks came into effect as a result of the Brexit deal struck between Britain and the European Union in December, taking effect on New Year’s Day.

Northern Ireland is still in the EU’s single market for goods, enabling it to keep a soft border with the Republic of Ireland.

However, the rest of the Britain has left the single market so checks are now needed when shuttling goods across the Irish Sea.

Decades of violence between loyalists and republicans, who want Northern Ireland to be part of the Republic of Ireland, ended in 1998 with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement.

Some Northern Ireland politicians have warned that the new arrangements forced by Brexit could shatter the delicate peace that has held for over two decades.

— Reuters/AFP

PROTESTERS OCCUPY TREES



A bailiff talks to activists as they work to remove them from their protest camp against the HS2 hi-speed rail line, near Euston train station in central London on Wednesday. Designed to run to the former industrial powerhouse Birmingham and then Manchester and Leeds, HS2 was supposed to follow on from London’s southern Eurostar connection with Paris. But it has done little but accrue costs since first being formally proposed more than a decade ago. – AFP

YouTube suspends Trump indefinitely

SAN FRANCISCO: YouTube has suspended Donald Trump indefinitely from the platform and said it will also prevent the former president’s lawyer Rudy Giuliani from being able to monetise his clips, US media reported.

It comes a week after the social media giant confirmed it would extend a ban on Trump’s channel — which has just under three million subscribers — joining other social media platforms in banning his accounts following the deadly January 6 Capitol riot.

The Google-owned firm has faced some criticism over its slow response following the violence in Washington, as well as the proliferation of conspiracy theories on the platform.



“In light of concerns about the ongoing potential for violence, the Donald J Trump channel will remain suspended,” a YouTube spokesperson told Politico.

The company said separately that Giuliani’s account would be barred from the Partner Program — which allows creators to make money off their videos — after repeatedly violating its policy against posting misleading information about the US election. — AFP

UN agency seeks \$100m to aid migrants en route to Europe

GENEVA: The United Nations appealed on Wednesday for \$100 million to help it boost support for refugees fleeing escalating conflicts and crises in Africa who embark on risky migration routes to Europe.

The UN refugee agency voiced deep concern over swelling displacement from conflicts in Africa’s Sahel region, as well as in the continent’s east.

This, it said, was driving more people to attempt deadly crossings of the Mediterranean Sea towards Europe, resulting in at least 1,064 deaths along the central and western crossing routes last year alone.

“UNHCR is seeking just over

\$100 million to enhance refugee protection in African countries en route to the Mediterranean,” the agency said in a statement.

“Offering safe and viable alternatives to the perilous journeys marred by abuse and deaths is the critical priority.”

Violence across the Sahel region, which stretches from Senegal through Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Chad and Sudan, has forced around 2.9 million people to flee their homes, according to UN figures.

“With no prospects for peace and stability in the region, further displacement is highly likely,” it warned, stressing that “many



continue to attempt risky sea journeys to Europe.”

ALTERNATIVES

Vincent Cochetel, UNHCR’s special envoy for the situation in the central Mediterranean, said the insecurity had already contributed to rising numbers of people trying to reach Europe.

“We would like to work more effectively on the alternatives to those dangerous journeys,” he told reporters. Departures from Algeria, Tunisia and Libya soared by 141 per cent last year, as nearly 71,000 people tried to cross the central Mediterranean route.

Only 36,000 made it across though — nearly all of them,

more than 34,000, arriving in Italy, which saw arrivals balloon threefold from 2019. At the same time, more than 23,000 people took the western route to the Canary Islands last year — up 753 per cent from a year earlier.

UNHCR pointed to factors driving many to try to make their way towards the Mediterranean, including dire conditions in neighbouring countries where many had already attempted to seek shelter and the economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The sea crossing itself is not the only dangerous part of the journey for many of the refugees and migrants trying to make their way to Europe. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

AMSTERDAM

Over 130 arrested despite much calmer night

Police in the Netherlands arrested more than 130 mostly young people on the fourth night of a strict coronavirus curfew, but fears over the same levels of violence and rioting seen on previous evenings never materialised, police said on Wednesday.

Tuesday evening was far quieter compared to the previous evenings, which saw rioting in several cities across the Netherlands.

Groups of mostly young men



had gathered in cities across the country, with a few isolated clashes with police reported. “Major escalations were prevented,” said police, who had turned out in large numbers.

MOGADISHU

Somalia threatens to leave EAC bloc

Somalia on Wednesday threatened to withdraw from a grouping of East African Community (EAC) after the bloc ruled in favour of Kenya in a diplomatic spat between the neighbouring countries, which have an often-fraught relationship.

Somalia severed diplomatic ties with Kenya on December 15 after alleging its larger neighbour was meddling in its affairs. Nairobi denied any wrongdoing, accusing Mogadishu of seeking a scapegoat for its own problems.



Leaders from the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) regional group tasked a fact-finding mission with investigating Somalia’s complaints that Kenya was violating its sovereignty, in an intervention aimed at easing tensions.

DAKAR

Bird park closed after mass pelican deaths

A major bird park in northern Senegal has been closed to the public after the mysterious deaths of 750 pelicans, with initial analysis ruling out bird flu.

A patrol in the Djoudj National Bird Sanctuary found “740 juvenile and 10 adult” pelicans dead on January 23, the environment ministry said.

The ministry added that it had ordered “on-the-spot autopsies” and that samples had been sent for analysis.

Meanwhile, the pelican



bodies and their waste have been destroyed and public access, including canoe tours through the park’s waterways, has been suspended. — AFP

Monopolising expression on the Internet

Communication power, who holds it? It is tricky to say which is more complex: the effect of misinformation on the masses, or the fact that a few billionaires control social media platforms, or that giant corporations set the norms for millions of people around the world.

Big Techs are under pressure from governments and institutions to regulate user content deemed harmful and to control the use of individuals' data — freely available to them. Efforts are under way around the world to hold these private companies accountable, not to the people, but to governments.

Indeed, it is a tremendous benefit that social media seems to function as mini-democracies that provide a public space for dialogue. On the other hand, many in power seek to suppress people's right to know and right to express themselves — in the middle of the struggle for control, some individuals take advantage of megaphone tools.

As the entire world witnessed and made up their thoughts over the events and discourse that led to the invasion of the United States Capitol Hill, falsehoods can cause violence. Reading the phrase 'Murder the Media', a message carved into a door at Capitol Building rings a bell about the number of journalists arrested or



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killed for their work — but also about the citizen journalists who are arrested or 'invited' to the police station. Murder the Media is not just physical violence against journalists and citizen journalists it is an attack on people's right to know.

Social media has become the primary medium for debate and influence. These platforms function as a conduit for the social construction of reality. This is not just about the selection of events and issues to be reported on but also how they are defined and interpreted. We can see this now in relation to the coronavirus vaccination. Many conspiracy theories fill the digital sphere. Some leaders are inviting influencers to push governments' positions to their millions of followers. The point here is not about vaccination, but about using social media whenever suitable.

BIG TECHS
To be fair, Big Techs are best friends during the coronavirus pandemic, be it as a mechanism for education, business, conferences, shopping, health monitoring — the list goes on. A blessing in disguise. If these gadgets were not available, where would we be today?
Two years ago, Ronald Deibert, a political science professor at the University of Toronto, wrote an article titled 'The Road to Digital Unfreedom: Three Painful Truths about Social

Media' that perfectly fits today's scenario. The flood of information and disinformation on social media is degrading public discourse. Users are steering toward opinions that fit what they already believe or feel comfortable and aligned. Let us face it, truth has a new model; it is now networked by peers.

It is important to understand that mass communication is vital — but also fragile. Depending on who is behind the disinformation or information, people can blindly believe in what is being said. Trust is also fragile. The transmission of culture, the sharing of knowledge, visions of the future, and motivation for action are all part of the human communication process — the narratives can be as bleak or as rosy as one wishes. Whether it is right or not for the Big Techs to control the content on social media, and block or ban people is debatable. However, it shows the power these companies have over global speech. From the perspective of social media and those in power, the path leads to the same perception: censorship.

It is striking that Big Techs, governments, and institutions, including opportunists, are for a show of force. Whether it is technology governance under the guise of national security, social stability, user privacy, or disinformation — the tension will have long-term consequences.

INDUSTRY BACKLASH

Biden poised to halt fossil fuel leasing

ISSAM AHMED

US President Joe Biden was planning to announce new bans on oil and gas drilling on federal lands as part of a raft of actions that take aim at climate change, according to reports and a White House memo.

The administration has drafted an order imposing a moratorium on oil and gas auctions on federal land and water, the *Washington Post* and other US media reported.

The moratorium wouldn't affect existing leases, but would fulfil a pledge that became a major issue during the election campaign, especially in the battleground state of Pennsylvania where fracking led to a natural gas boom.

The US would also pledge to conserve 30 per cent of all federal land and water by 2030, part of an international push to stem biodiversity loss and confront climate change, according to reports.

Other actions include "elevating climate change as a national security priority," according to a White House memo seen by AFP, an order re-establishing a presidential council of science advisors and another directing science-based decision making in federal agencies.

The US will further announce a US-hosted Climate Leaders' Summit on April 22 — Earth Day and also the fifth anniversary of the signing of the Paris Agreement — according to the memo.

A l m o s t a quarter of American carbon dioxide emissions come from energy produced on public lands, according to a government report from 2018. The drilling generated \$11.7 billion in revenue in 2019, according to official data.

The measures are therefore significant steps towards Biden's campaign pledges to transition away from fossil fuels on the way to net zero emissions in the power sector by 2035 and the economy as a whole by 2050.

Taken together, the actions are "consistent with President Biden and Vice-President Harris raising global climate ambition starting here at home," Sherri Goodman, deputy Under-Secretary of defence for environmental security under former president Barack Obama, said.

Nonprofit Oceana has called on Biden to go further and turn the moratorium into a ban.

It released an analysis on Tuesday that found making offshore drilling protections permanent for unleased federal waters could prevent over 19 billion tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions and more than \$720 billion in damages.

"By permanently protecting our coasts from dirty offshore drilling and advancing clean energy sources like offshore wind, we can simultaneously combat climate change and safeguard our clean coast economy," said Oceana campaign director Diane Hoskins.

But the proposals have triggered a backlash by the fossil fuel industry.

"Restricting development on federal lands and waters is nothing more than an 'import more oil' policy," said American Petroleum Institute President and CEO Mike Sommers.

"Energy demand will continue to rise — especially as the economy recovers — and we can choose to produce that energy here in the United States or rely on foreign countries hostile to American interests." — AFP

EKE OUT A LIVING

In locked-down Lebanon, many fear poverty more than virus

JANA DHAYBY AND BACHIR EL-KHOURY

Lebanon may be under a strict pandemic lockdown to stem raging coronavirus rates, but father-of-six Omar Qarhani is still working, desperate to support his family.

"I'm not scared of corona — what scares me is being in need and poverty," the 38-year-old said, selling vegetables on the side of a road in the northern port city of Tripoli.

Lebanon has imposed a round-the-clock curfew nationwide since January 14, barred non-essential workers from leaving their homes and restricted grocery shopping to deliveries. The drastic measures came after daily Covid cases suddenly shot up following gatherings during the holiday season, overwhelming hospitals.

The country has recorded over 280,000 coronavirus cases and more than 2,400 deaths stemming from the disease since the pandemic began. On paper, its Covid-19 restrictions are among the strictest in the world, but in reality grinding poverty is pushing many back onto the streets to eke out a living.

Standing beside his vegetable boxes in Tripoli, Qarhani said he was already barely making ends meet after he gave up his job at a flower shop to sell fresh produce.

"We need 70,000 Lebanese pounds a day to put food on the table, but this job only provides half," he said,



People walk past closed shops in Lebanon's northern port city of Tripoli. — AFP

LEBANON HAS
IMPOSED A
ROUND-THE-
CLOCK CURFEW
NATIONWIDE SINCE
JANUARY 14

implying he was earning less than \$8 a day at the market rate.

Security forces have set up checkpoints across the country to check Lebanese are complying with measures in force until February 8 to protect the health sector from collapse. But many people in poorer areas have been forced to defy the rules and keep working, especially in the poverty-stricken city of Tripoli.

Tensions have risen, and dozens of protesters clashed with security forces in the city late on Monday, although it was not immediately clear if the unrest

was spontaneous or organised. Tripoli was already one of the country's poorest cities before the pandemic, and before a crippling economic crisis hit Lebanon in 2019.

Mohamed al Beiruti, an anti-poverty activist in the city, said most of those ignoring the curfew were day labourers living from hand to mouth, earning barely \$2 a day.

"If they don't work that day, they don't eat," he said. "Living conditions in Tripoli are bringing popular anger to a boil. What happened last night is just a prelude." — AFP

sport

ANUROOP ATHIPARAMBATH

MUSCAT, JAN 27

Abdullah al Rawahi, Zakariya al Aufer and Zakaria al Amri will be the three Omani Rally drivers in action at the Qatar International rally, the first round of Middle East Rally Championship (MERC) 2021.

The rally will start in Al Khor area in Qatar on January 29.

While Abdullah will compete in the main category, Al Aufer and Al Amri will try their luck in Group N category.

The event will start with a 3 km super special stage in Qatara, where the spectators will have a chance to view the talent of rally champions.

The race stage will be hosted in Al Khor area where 10 stages will showcase the rally drivers experience and skills over two days of hard competition between champions like Nasser al Attiyah and AbdulAziz Al Kuwari and Kris Meeke.

Oman's Abdullah al Rawahi along with Navigator Atta al Hamood from Jordan is aiming to keep up the performance of the last year when he finished runner-up in Muscat.

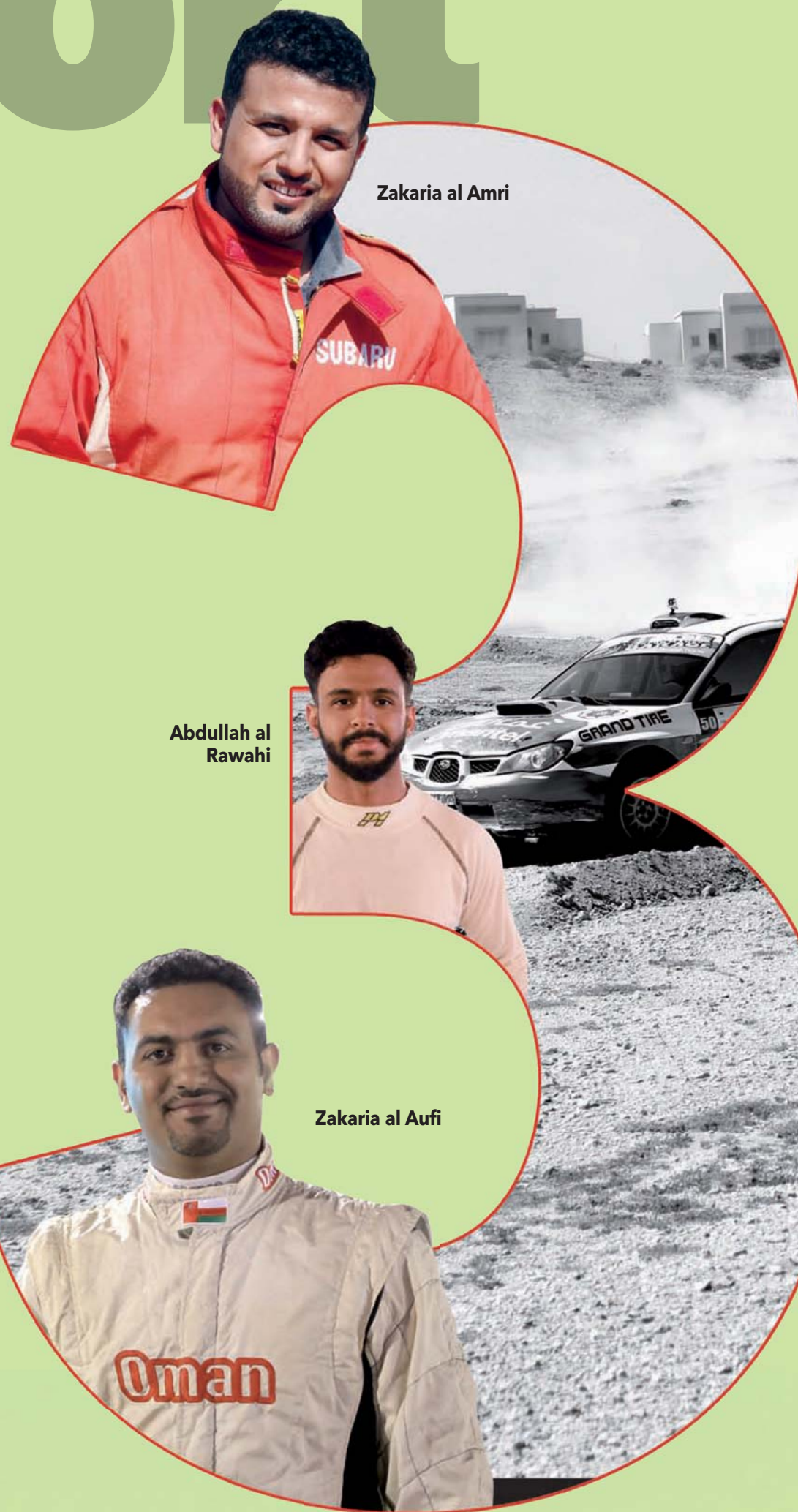
He said: "It is not easy this year especially in Qatar to be on the podium because there are many good drivers and the competition is very strong. The stages are very tricky and we should be very careful with it, but I hope for a positive result."

Another Omani driver, Zakaria al Aufer, on Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution IX with co-driver Ammar al Balushi is looking forward to putting his name on top of the results as he will be competing again with some experienced names this year.

Al Aufer said he is hoping for a place in the podium, but added it's always difficult in Qatar to win.

"We had some good hard practice sessions. The stages are tough and can expect few punctures also during the stages in Al Khor," the Oman rally champion said.

Zakaria al Amri with his navigator Mohamed al Mazroui on Subaru Impreza N14 had finished third last year in Qatar international rally (local group).



The Omani duo is looking to replicate the same form of last year on his new car which he is driving for the first time in a rally.

Al Amri said: "The car we bought currently has been tested and we need to do some setups before entering the rally. Let us hope for better results and gear up for Oman International Rally in next month."

Aufer finished fourth overall behind Nasser Saleh al Attiyah, Abdullah al Rawahi and Nasser Khalifa al Attiyah to pip Meshari al Thefiri to the MERC 2 section win in Oman last year and that was sufficient to see the Omani finish the shortened season in second place in the rankings.

OAA DELAYS RALLY BY A WEEK

The Oman Automobile Association (OAA) will hold its premium rally event, Oman Sohar International Rally, from February 25 to 27 after a week's delay due to the implementation of the Covid-19 medical protocols.

The Oman International Rally, newly branded as Oman Sohar International Rally, the second round of the MERC, was originally scheduled for February 18 to 20.

The one-week delay will help the teams, especially from outside the Sultanate, to confirm their participation.

The rally will attract the likes of Qatar's world champion Nasser al Attiyah, Omani youth sensation Abdullah al Rawahi and veteran Omani champion Hamad al Wahaibi, who is making a return to the sport.

Abdullah will participate in R5 category in his Ford Fiesta along with the top drivers including Qatari giants Nasser al Attiyah, Nasser Khalifa al Attiyah and Abdulaziz al Khuwari, British champion Kris Meeke and Khaled al Suwaidi.

Zakaria al Aufer, champion in N class in the last Oman International Rally, will compete on Mitsubishi Evo 9, young contestant Zakaria al Amri will compete in his Subaru Impreza N40 in N class.

There are possibilities of participation of and Shaikh Suhaim al Thani from Qatar, in addition to Kuwaiti N class champion Mishari al Dhafiri.

OMANI DRIVERS IN FRAY AT QATAR RALLY

OMAN RALLY SOHAR INTERNATIONAL POSTPONED TO FEB 25



It is not easy this year especially in Qatar to be on the podium because there are many good drivers and the competition is very strong. The stages are very tricky and we should be very careful with it, but I hope for a positive result

**ABDULLAH
AL RAWAHI**

Omani Rally driver





In brief

■ KOLKATA



BCCI CHIEF GANGULY BACK IN HOSPITAL AFTER CHEST PAIN

India's cricket chief Sourav Ganguly was taken to hospital with chest pain on Wednesday, nearly three weeks after being discharged following a heart operation. The 48-year-old former captain suffered a heart attack early this month and underwent a successful angioplasty operation in his hometown Kolkata. "Ganguly was rushed to Apollo Hospital after he experienced chest pain and uneasiness on Wednesday afternoon", Manotosh Panja, a senior doctor, said.

The left-handed opener retired from Test cricket in 2008 having accumulated 7,212 runs including 16 centuries — his first made at Lord's on debut.

■ SYDNEY



CRICKET AUSTRALIA CONFIRMS INDIANS RACIALLY ABUSED

A Cricket Australia probe Wednesday concluded Indian players were racially abused during the third Test at the Sydney Cricket Ground, but cleared six people who were kicked out of the stadium.

Cricket chiefs and New South Wales police launched investigations after fast bowlers Mohammed Siraj and Jasprit Bumrah complained about being targeted while they fielded by the boundary ropes on day three of the clash this month. The findings have been forwarded to the International Cricket Council, while NSW Police's investigation is continuing.

■ SYDNEY



AUSTRALIA AXE WADE, KEEP PAINE FOR SA TEST TOUR

Matthew Wade was axed on Wednesday for Australia's Test series in South Africa after failing to fire against India, while under-pressure Tim Paine retained the captaincy.

Wade played all four games in the tense 2-1 home summer series loss to India, including two as makeshift opener in place of the injured David Warner. But he managed just 173 from his eight innings, with some rash shots ultimately costing him his place in the side and seeing him replaced by Alex Carey as back-up wicketkeeper.

Instead, Wade will join Australia's T20 squad on their tour of New Zealand as vice-captain to the out-of-form Aaron Finch. Australia are due to play 3 Tests in South Africa.

Fawad hits 'dream' century to put Pakistan in charge

KARACHI: Fawad Alam gave further evidence of his considerable patience with a grafting century which helped Pakistan take a useful first innings lead over South Africa on the second day of the first Test in Karachi on Wednesday.

The 35-year-old left-hander, who returned to the side last August after a decade in the international wilderness, scored 109 in almost six hours to anchor Pakistan's 308-8 at the National Stadium, lifting the team from a precarious overnight total of 33-4. Azhar Ali and Faheem Ashraf also weighed in with half-centuries as Pakistan closed with a lead of 88 after bowling South Africa out for 220 on the first day.

Just four wickets fell on the second day which was in stark contrast to the opening when 14 wickets tumbled on the grassless pitch. It would have been different had South Africa not dropped four catches.

Fawad, relishing his first Test at his home ground, added 102 runs for the seventh wicket with Faheem who cracked a relatively rapid 64 from 84 balls.

Resuming on five and with Pakistan in serious trouble, Fawad led the recovery with an invaluable 94-run stand for the fifth wicket with Azhar, who played within himself for three hours 40 minutes for his 51.

Fawad had a life on 35 when Dean Elgar failed to cling on to a sharp edge off Keshav Maharaj in the slips but he and Azhar, who survived a tight leg before shout and review from left-arm spinner George Linde, batted right through the morning to take Pakistan to 104-4 at lunch.

Fawad added another 55 for the sixth wicket with Mohammad Rizwan who made a counter-attacking before edging Lungo



Pakistan's Fawad Alam plays a shot during the second day of the first Test against South Africa at the National Stadium in Karachi. — AFP

Ngidi to Faf du Plessis at first slip.

THIRD TEST CENTURY

Shortly after tea, Fawad opened his shoulders to hit a flighted delivery from spinner Keshav Maharaj for a six over long-on which brought up his third Test century in just his eighth Test.

"It was my dream to score a hundred at home and what better time to do it then when the team was in a difficult situation," said Fawad, who now has 38 hundreds in first class cricket.

"Azhar and I decided that we should bat long and take the total

as close to South Africa as possible and I am happy that we have done close to that."

He was finally caught at mid-wicket off Ngidi after batting for six minutes under six hours, hitting nine boundaries and two sixes.

Fawad's ton marked yet another remarkable milestone in his return to international cricket.

After making a debut hundred in Sri Lanka in 2009, Fawad played just twice more that year before being dropped — for 10 years and 259 days.

Despite scoring heavily in Pakistan's domestic matches, he was constantly overlooked, primarily because of his peculiar stance — facing front-on to the bowler before turning side-on when playing the ball.

He was recalled for Pakistan's tour of England in August last year but his first innings back ended with a four-ball duck in Southampton.

But he followed up with another gutsy century in the first Test defeat by New Zealand in Mount Maunganui in December.

Ashraf's entertaining 64, which included nine boundaries, ended in unorthodox fashion when he jammed down on a yorker from Anrich Nortje only to see the ball backspin into his stumps.

The two-match series marks South Africa's first trip to Pakistan in 14 years, after a deadly 2009 attack on Sri Lanka's team halted visits by foreign sides. — AFP

SCOREBOARD

South Africa 1st innings	220
Pakistan 1st innings	
Imran Butt c Bavuma b Rabada	9
Abid Ali b Rabada	4
Azhar Ali c de Kock b Maharaj	51
Babar Azam lbw b Maharaj	7
Shaheen Shah Afridi b Nortje	0
Fawad Alam c Bavuma b Ngidi	109
Mohammad Rizwan c du Plessis b Ngidi	33
Faheem Ashraf b Nortje	64
Hasan Ali not out	11
Nauman Ali not out	6
Extras: (b1, lb4, nb9)	14
Total: (107 overs, eight wickets) ..	308
Fall of wickets: 1-5, 2-15, 3-26, 4-27, 5-121, 6-176, 7-278, 8-295	
Bowling: Rabada 23-7-45-2, Nortje 24-4-84-2, Ngidi 15-0-55-2, Maharaj 29-4-71-2, Linde 13-3-38-0, Markram 3-0-10-0	

Young soars as Hawks halt Clippers' win streak

LOS ANGELES: The short-handed Los Angeles Clippers couldn't overcome the loss of stars Kawhi Leonard and Paul George on Tuesday as they surrendered a first half lead and were beaten by Atlanta, snapping their seven-game NBA win streak.

Atlanta all-star Trae Young scored 38 points in his return as the Hawks rallied to defeat the Clippers 108-99 at the State Farm Arena.

Hawks top scorer Young, who sat out one game with a back problem, shot 12-of-23 from the field and scored 26 points of his 38 in the first half. He finished a perfect 11 of 11 from the free-throw line.

George and Leonard were ruled out of the contest but the club did not release any details other than to say they were sidelined due to Covid-19 "health and safety protocols".

"It's just how this year is going to go," said Los Angeles centre Ivia Zubac of the Clippers who had not been affected by the coronavirus so far this season.

"We were lucky to have everyone so far. It's going to be this



Utah Jazz's Royce O'Neale (23) gets past New York Knicks' RJ Barrett (9) and to the basket at Vivint Smart Home Arena. Utah won 108-94. — USA Today Sports

type of season for everyone."

The club is leaving open the prospect that the players could join their teammates later on in their six-game road trip which will also take them to Miami, Orlando, New York and Cleveland.

Despite the ongoing global pandemic that has killed 425,000 Americans — including over

13,000 in Georgia — organisers for the first time allowed 1,180 spectators into the State Farm facility to watch the game live.

The Clippers, who entered Monday tied with the reigning league champion Los Angeles Lakers for top spot in the Western Conference, were also missing guard Patrick Beverley with a

right knee injury.

Also returning for Atlanta was Clint Capela, who missed the last game with right hand soreness.

Capela had 13 points and 19 rebounds, his third consecutive game with at least 19 rebounds for the Hawks, who have won four of their last five.

"We just upped our intensity and played a little bit harder", Young said.

Atlanta also got 22 points from DeAndre Hunter, 13 points from Kevin Huerter, while John Collins delivered 11 points and 11 rebounds.

The Clippers were led by Reggie Jackson with 20 points, seven rebounds and eight assists and Serge Ibaka scored 15 points. Zubac and Luke Kennard both scored 13.

The Clippers led 48-43 at the half thanks to an Ibaka hook shot late in the third quarter.

WALL BEATS FORMER TEAM

But the Hawks roared back in the second half as Hunter scored off a Solomon Hill steal with just under eight minutes to go to make it 86-79 for Los Angeles and they

held on from there.

Elsewhere, John Wall scored a team-high 24 points in his first match-up with his former team as the host Houston Rockets earned a 107-88 victory over the Washington Wizards.

"I haven't played in two years so this is fun", Wall said.

"To be somewhere where you're wanted, that's the most important thing. I never want to be anywhere where I'm not wanted and I feel like this organisation wanted me here."

Eric Gordon and Victor Oladipo added 20 apiece for Houston, while DeMarcus Cousins tallied 19 points, 11 rebounds and five steals for Houston.

Also, Royce O'Neale scored a career-high 20 points and Rudy Gobert dominated the paint as Utah Jazz defeated the New York Knicks 108-94 for its ninth straight victory. — AFP

NBA RESULTS

Atlanta bt LA Clippers	108-99
Utah bt New York	108-94
Houston bt Washington	107-88



LONDON: If their Premier League title rivals hoped the absence of injured Kevin De Bruyne might slow down Manchester City's charge they were left disappointed on Tuesday as Pep Guardiola's side annihilated West Bromwich Albion 5-0 to go top.

The Belgian playmaker faces several weeks out with a muscle injury but City's 11th successive win in all competitions showed they have the firepower to cope without him.

City scored three times in the opening half hour at The Hawthorns as they moved to 41 points from 19 games, one more than Manchester United and significantly seven more than struggling champions Liverpool.

Two goals from Ilkay Gundogan and one from Joao Cancelo finished the match as a contest and Riyad Mahrez made it 4-0 just before the break. The only surprise was that City only added a Raheem Sterling goal to their tally in the second half.

While City are threatening to take a stranglehold at the summit, the situation below them remains fluid with West Ham United the latest team to break into the top four.

Two goals from Thomas Soucek earned West Ham a 3-2 victory at London rivals Crystal Palace who had taken the lead in the second minute through Wilfried Zaha.

West Ham's fourth successive league win moved them above Tottenham Hotspur and Liverpool who meet on Thursday.

"The players have been exceptional with how they have played, they really have been and they want more," West Ham manager David Moyes said.

ARSENAL AVENGE DEFEAT

Arsenal avenged Saturday's FA Cup defeat by Southampton to beat the Saints 3-1 on the south coast — their fifth win in six league games moving them up to eighth.

Stuart Armstrong had put the hosts in front but goals from Nicolas Pepe, Bukayo Saka and Alexandre Lacazette sealed an impressive win for Mikel Arteta's rejuvenated side.

The pressure continues to pile up on Newcastle United manager Steve Bruce after they lost 2-1 at home to Leeds United — a defeat that leaves them in 16th place with 19 points, but having played more games than the two sides immediately below them.

Raphinha put Leeds ahead and although Miguel Almiron levelled, Leeds went ahead again almost instantly through Jack Harrison, leaving Newcastle with only two points from the last 27 available in the league. "This league is demanding and cruel at times," Bruce said. "I don't know if I've been on a worse run in 20 years but tonight I've seen a little bit of something and we will start again tomorrow."

Manchester United can reclaim top spot if they beat Fulham on Wednesday while on the same night Thomas Tuchel will begin his reign as Chelsea manager against Wolverhampton Wanderers.

— Reuters



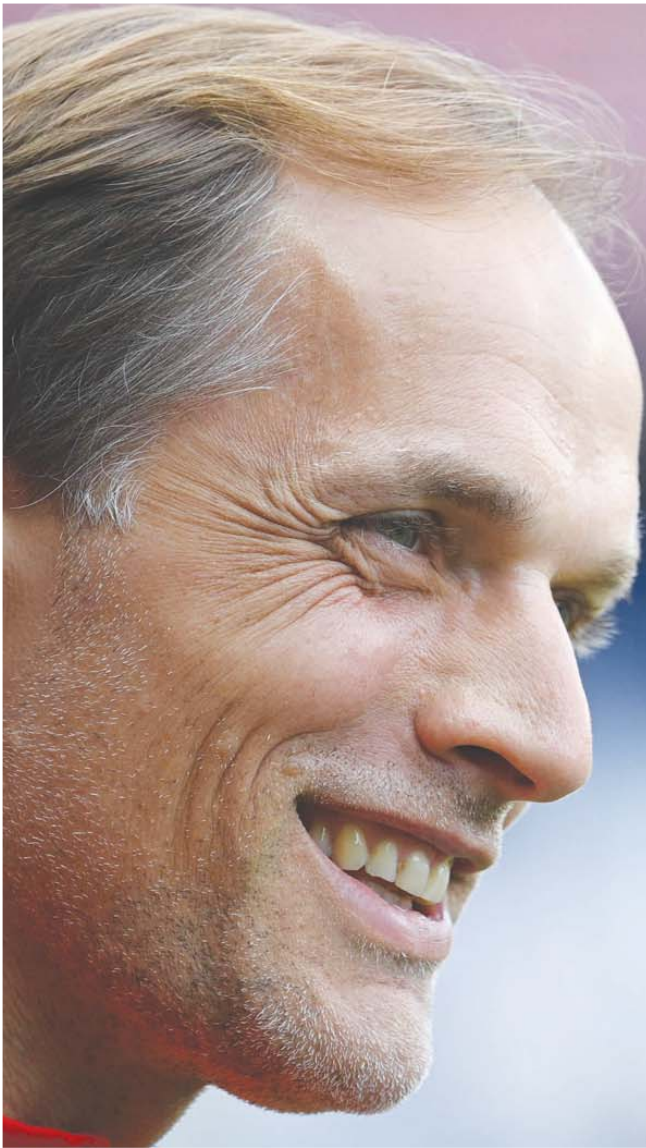
Manchester City's Ilkay Gundogan celebrates scoring their third goal. — Reuters

ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE TABLE AFTER TUESDAY'S MATCHES (PLAYED, WON, DRAWN, LOST, GOALS FOR, GOALS AGAINST, POINTS):

Man City	19	12	5	2	36	13	41
Man Utd	19	12	4	3	36	25	40
Leicester	19	12	2	5	35	21	38
West Ham	20	10	5	5	30	24	35
Liverpool	19	9	7	3	37	22	34
Tottenham	18	9	6	3	33	17	33
Everton	17	10	2	5	28	21	32
Arsenal	20	9	3	8	26	20	30
Aston Villa	17	9	2	6	31	18	29
Chelsea	19	8	5	6	33	23	29
Southampton	19	8	5	6	27	24	29
Leeds	19	8	2	9	32	35	26
Crystal Palace	20	6	5	9	24	36	23
Wolves	19	6	4	9	21	29	22
Burnley	18	5	4	9	10	22	19
Newcastle	20	5	4	11	19	34	19
Brighton	19	3	8	8	22	29	17
Fulham	18	2	6	10	15	27	12
West Brom	20	2	5	13	15	48	11
Sheff Utd	19	1	2	16	10	32	5

ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE RESULTS On Tuesday

Crystal Palace 2 (Zaha 3, Batshuayi 90) West Ham 3 (Soucek 9, 25, Dawson 65)
Newcastle 1 (Almiron 57) Leeds 2 (Raphinha 17, Harrison 61)
Southampton 1 (Armstrong 3) Arsenal 3 (Pepe 8, Saka 39, Lacazette 73)
West Brom 0 Manchester City 5 (Gundogan 6, 30, Cancelo 20, Mahrez 45, Sterling 57)



LONDON: Thomas Tuchel was appointed Chelsea manager on an 18-month contract on Tuesday, tasked with hauling the under-performing Blues back into the Champions League next season.

The 47-year-old German replaces the sacked Frank Lampard to become the 13th Chelsea boss since Russian oligarch Roman Abramovich bought the club in 2003. "I would like to thank Chelsea FC for their confidence in me and my staff," said Tuchel.

"We all have the greatest respect for Frank Lampard's work and the legacy he created at Chelsea.

"At the same time, I cannot wait to meet my new team and compete in the most exciting league in football. I am grateful to now be part of the Chelsea family — it feels amazing!"

Tuchel will take charge for the first time when Wolves visit Stamford Bridge in the Premier League on Wednesday.

Tuchel appointed Chelsea manager on 18-month deal

Lampard, Chelsea's record goalscorer as a player, was dismissed on Monday after a run of five defeats in eight league games that saw his side slide to ninth in the table, 11 points behind leaders Manchester United.

That was not the return Abramovich expected after a £200 million (\$300 million) spending spree in the summer transfer window at a time when most of Europe's top clubs were scaling back due to the economic consequences of the coronavirus pandemic.

"It is never easy to change head coach in the middle of the season

but we are very happy to secure one of Europe's best coaches in Thomas Tuchel," said Chelsea director Marina Granovskaia.

"There is still much to play for and much to achieve, this season and beyond."

WERNER, HAVERTZ CONUNDRUM

Tuchel's task will be to get the best out of German compatriots Timo Werner and Kai Havertz, who have struggled to live up to their price tags in their first few months in England.

Despite guiding Paris Saint-Germain to their first Champions

League final in August, Tuchel was sacked himself by the French champions last month.

His falling out with PSG sporting director Leonardo played a large part in that and his habit of fractious relations with his employers does not bode well for his prospects at a club with such a famously impatient owner.

"Tuchel will be exposed to exactly the same rules as Frank," said Lampard's former England team-mate Gary Neville.

"We'll be talking about him being let go in the next 18 months to two years, I'm pretty sure of that." — AFP

business

MUSCAT STOCK MARKET

3,660.16



CRUDE OIL PRICE

Oman Crude	\$55.77
Brent Crude	\$55.71
Light Crude	\$52.65



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OQ names new Acting Group CEO



Salim bin Nasser al Aufi

MUSCAT: The Board of Directors of OQ, the global integrated energy group of the Sultanate, has announced that Talal bin Hamid al Awfi, Chief Executive – Commercial, will take on the additional role of Group CEO of the wholly government-owned energy conglomerate.

It follows the resignation of incumbent Group CEO Musab al Mahrouqi who leaves the organisation on March 31, 2021.

The latter had assumed his current role in December 2018 with the task of integrating the erstwhile Oman Oil Group and the country's refining flagship Orpic.

“We would like to inform that OQ's Board of Directors has decided to designate and assign GCEO authorities and responsibilities to Talal bin Hamid al Awfi in addition to his current responsibilities with immediate effect,” said OQ in a post on Wednesday.

“The Board has also expressed its thanks and appreciation to Musab al Mahrouqi for his dedication and hard work throughout his journey with the company. We wish him success in his future endeavours,” it added.

Oman to allow bilateral power pacts, introduce energy efficiency ‘credits’

AMBITIOUS STRATEGY: Slate of initiatives unveiled by the Ministry of Energy and Minerals to accelerate energy efficiency goals and boost energy market competition

CONRAD PRABHU

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Eager to add new momentum to the country's nascent energy conservation efforts, the Ministry of Energy and Minerals has unveiled a slate of initiatives designed to further liberalise the electricity sector and pave the way for further market competition – moves ultimately aimed at driving energy efficiency across the board.

They include new regulation authorising bilateral electricity deals between large consumers and generators, bypassing for the first time the longstanding off-taker, the Oman Power and Water Procurement Company; the mandatory appointment of Energy Efficiency Officers to oversee conservation measures by large consumers; and the planned introduction of a credit trading system to monetise energy efficiency gains.

Delivering the keynote address at an Energy Efficiency Conference organised by OQ, the global integrated energy group of the Sultanate, Salim bin Nasser al Aufi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry, said the planned moves seek to build on recent government-led reforms of the energy sector.

They include the rollback of subsidies for electricity supply and the enlargement of the target base covered by Cost-Reflective Tariffs (CRT).



“Once we get the transmission tariff in place, the generator can go to the transmission company and start negotiating a transmission cost. After all, there are times when the transmission network is not fully utilised

SALIM BIN NASSER AL AUFİ

Under-Secretary,
Ministry of Energy and Minerals



mandated to buy electricity in order to give it to a large consumer, such as an industry.

This new regulation is coming very soon – hopefully within the next few months.”

In tandem with this initiative, the regulator is also discussing with Oman Electricity Transmission Company (OETC) an agreed tariff that will be added to the price agreed in a bilateral arrangement.

“Once we get the transmission tariff in place, the generator can go to the transmission company and start negotiating a transmission cost. After all, there are times when the transmission network is not fully utilised,” Al Aufi noted.

Also on the drawing board is a proposal to make it mandatory for large consumers to appoint Energy Efficiency Officers

(EEOs) whose brief is to chalk out and implement measures to make energy consumption more efficient across the organisation.

“The idea, once we decide who constitutes a major consumer, is for such organisations to designate a certified individual to serve as EEO. Their job is to put in place programmes, mechanisms and measures to reduce consumption in the organisation or building based on a certain baseline.”

Significantly, the Ministry is also contemplating the introduction of a credit system – broadly based on the international carbon credit model – to incentivise energy efficiency efforts in the Sultanate.

Under the proposal, a company or organisation that has achieved certifiable gains in lowering its consumption beyond an agreed target can convert these gains into credits.

These credits can be traded with, or sold to, those that fail to meet their reduction targets – thus creating a marketplace for trading in Energy Efficiency credits similar to carbon credit trading, the Under-Secretary said.

Wednesday's conference, which was a physical and online hybrid event, also featured speeches and presentations by, among others, Dr Salim al Huthaili, CEO of Alternative Energy at OQ; Mahmood al Wahaibi, Urban and Infrastructure Planning Expert - Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning; and specialists representing Petroleum Development Oman, BP Oman, Total, OQ, Clean Energy Business Council (CEBC), Ejaad, Sultan Qaboos University, Schneider Electric and Hasa Energy.

Practice of online AGMs to continue: CMA

BUSINESS REPORTER

MUSCAT, JAN 27

The Capital Market Authority (CMA) has issued a circular to the public joint-stock companies, investment funds, audit firms and law firms emphasising the importance of complying with the provisions of the Commercial Companies Law governing general meetings as well as the rules for convening general meetings of companies and funds via electronic means.

Circular 4/2021 includes the procedures to be taken into account for convening general meetings such as specifying the venue of the meeting in the notice whereas the shareholder or unitholder can exercise the right attend the general meeting and vote on its resolutions whether attending personally or via electronic means administered by Muscat Clearing and Depository Company (MCD).



The circular urged the directors and those who are legally required to attend the meeting to be present in the venue of the meeting to interact with the shareholders and unitholders attending personally or via the portal.

The circular states the notice and the agenda of the general meeting must be sent to the shareholders and unitholder 15 days

before the date appointed for the meeting.

The circular points out that the notice to the shareholders and unit holder will be through the general meetings portal administered by MCD without the companies being obliged to send the notice to each shareholder on the address registered in the shareholders' register.

General meetings of companies and funds

have broad powers and the shareholder has the right to vote or object the resolutions further to measuring the efficiency of the directors and their ability to direct the executive management of the company in addition to electing the members of the board of directors to achieve the interests of the shareholders.

Last year, 171 general meetings were approved before the spread of the pandemic. But following a decision to suspend physical general meetings and to convene such meetings via the electronic portal, 174 general meetings were held through the portal.

Two general meetings were also held for the bondholders of Dhofar Insurance Company through the portal in 2020.

The Authority is now preparing to receive requests for convening annual general meetings of public joint-stock companies and investment funds electronically.

Integrated car trading city planned in Suhar

MUSCAT: The Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn) has unveiled plans for the establishment of an integrated city specialised in car trading, car spare parts, accessories and services to be established in Suhar Industrial City.

Dubbed 'Motcar', the city will serve as a regional centre for the import and re-export of cars, machinery and related services to and from various countries with a focus on the Middle East and North Africa region.

The announcement came during the unveiling of Madayn's 2040 Vision strategy on Tuesday.

Preparing for jobs in the era of automation

Innovations, discoveries and modern technologies will undoubtedly cause a paradigm shift in the work how we work and do business in the future.

Take for example the small video camera attached to the fuselage of a plane to capture events, activities and people's movements from above without anyone on the ground even realizing it.

In the past, aerial photography typically required a team of specialists to suitably equip a helicopter for such task, in addition to a film crew.

With the advent of remote-controlled photography and related advances, sophisticated devices are now supplanting humans in undertaking tasks that once the preserve of professionals.

Similarly, many professions and job will begin to likewise disappear as technology and innovation advance.

Even complex surgeries can be done through the use of computers and robotics.

The jobs report for 2020, which was issued by the World Economic Forum in its third edition, included a lot of data related to these issues, along with skills that the youth will practice in the future.

The report is based on the studies, surveys, and assessments of human resources departments of companies.

The current pandemic has been accelerating technological development. The global



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MANY PROFESSIONS AND JOB WILL BEGIN TO LIKEWISE DISAPPEAR AS TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION ADVANCE. EVEN COMPLEX SURGERIES CAN BE DONE THROUGH THE USE OF COMPUTERS AND ROBOTICS

workforce will get rid of 85 million jobs in the next five years as a result of programme automation.

Technology companies will overhaul tasks, jobs and skills by 2025, according to the report.

It is also evident from the agency data that about 43 per cent of businesses surveyed confirmed that they are ready to reduce the number of their employees, while moving online or automating within the next five years, which will lead to a roughly equal division of work between employers and machines.

This does not mean that the role of individuals will be negated or reduced. On the contrary, there will be ample opportunities for those familiar with modern

science and technology.

The robotics revolution will create 97 million new jobs in labour markets on the world. This requires governments in the region to rehabilitate and train their youth to consider specialising in such sought-after technological areas such as artificial intelligence, in addition to acquiring skills that can enhance productivity and quality.

Future markets will have an increasing role and a continuous demand to achieve the functions of a green economy that depends on the exploitation of solar and wind energy and reduce environmental challenges, in addition to working on artificial intelligence and cloud engineering, and so on.

Bank Muscat Board proposes 35pc dividend

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 27

Bank Muscat has proposed a 35 per cent dividend for the year 2020. Continuing the bank's dividend payment track record and considering the current economic situation, the Board of Directors has proposed a 25 per cent cash dividend and a 10 per cent dividend in the form of bonus shares for the year 2020.

The Bank's Capital Adequacy Ratio (CAR) after the cash dividend payout will be 20.77 per cent, which is well above the regulatory minimum.

The meeting of the Board of Directors chaired by Shaikh Khalid bin Mustahil al Mashani, Chairman, on Tuesday, approved the 2020 financial results and dividend payout, subject to the approval of the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) and shareholders of the bank.

Shareholders would receive a cash dividend of RO 0.025 per ordinary share aggregating to RO 81.238 million on the Bank's existing share capital.

In addition, they would receive bonus shares in the proportion of 1 share for every 10 ordinary shares aggregating to 324,952,253 shares amounting to RO 32.495 million. The proposed cash dividend and issuance of bonus shares are subject to the formal approval of the Annual General Meeting of the shareholders and regulatory authorities.

The bank posted a net profit of RO 163.36 million for the year 2020 compared to RO 185.55 million reported in 2019, a decrease of 12.0 per cent.

Agreement inked for new ceramic tile unit at Sohar Freezone



BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 27

Sohar Port and Freezone signed an agreement with Eagle Ceramics FZC for the establishment of a ceramic tiles manufacturing unit at Sohar Freezone. The signing took place under the auspices of Eng Ahmed Hassan Alawi al Dheeb, Deputy Chairman of Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ). Omar Mahmood al Mahrizi, CEO of Sohar Freezone and Deputy CEO of Sohar Port signed the pact with Manoj Valamji Panchotiya, partner at Eagle Ceramics FZC LLC.

The new facility will be established on a 20,000 sq metre site within the free zone with

a capital investment of \$1.2 million. The finished products from the facility will be exported to markets in the GCC.

Omar Mahmood al Mahrizi stated, "We believe that the introduction of the new ceramic manufacturing unit will enhance the offerings of the Freezone, especially with regard to ceramic products. Apart from generating value-added services, the project is in line with our overall objective to increase the attractiveness of Sohar Freezone to regional and global investors. This, in turn, will allow us to boost our contribution to the GDP of the Sultanate and further the development of the logistics sector, alongside the creation of several job opportunities in the long-run."

BANK NIZWA APPOINTS NEW CHAIRMAN OF SHARIA SUPERVISORY BOARD



Recognised as the only listed fully-fledged and most trusted Islamic bank in Oman, Bank Nizwa remain dedicated to promote Sharia-compliant banking in the Sultanate.

Bank Nizwa in its recent SSB meeting has collectively agreed to appoint Shaikh Dr Mohammad bin Rashid al Gharbi (pictured) who has been a member of the Sharia Supervisory Board at Bank Nizwa since July 2012 as its new SSB's Chairman.

Shaikh Al Gharbi retired as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Islamic Sciences at Sultan Qaboos University and is a polished academician with an extensive research portfolio. He has delivered his research on Sharia subjects through numerous academic papers on financial transactions within Islamic jurisprudence.

PRESS RELEASE

MAZOOON ELECTRICITY HOLDS WORKSHOP ON ELECTRICITY TARIFF



To spread awareness about the newly announced electricity tariff, Mazoon Electricity Company, the leading electricity provider in Oman organised a special workshop which was attended by Shaikh Hilal bin Said bin Hamdan al Hajri, Governor of Al Dakhiliyah Governorate along with several other officials.

The workshop covered the new electricity subsidy reformed policy and timeframe; types of target tariff; tariffs for residential groups; available channels for customers to update data; national support system and examples of changes in electricity bills for customers according to the new tariff.

The workshop was part of a wide awareness campaign Mazoon Electricity has planned to educate different stakeholders about the new tariffs using different channels.

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Completely revamped inside-out, the 2021 Cadillac Escalade is here to turn every journey into a luxury experience and one that you look forward to.

From confident performance with advanced chassis technologies, a more spacious interior and leading driver-assistance technologies, this luxury SUV is for those who want to move and be moved in style giving drivers a sense of power and enhanced driving experience you can only get from driving the Escalade.

The all-new 2021 Escalade elevates the standards of luxury and comfort in its segment, and makes every seat onboard, the best seat in the house. Building on decades of Cadillac craftsmanship, its new design, architecture and new chassis technologies have significantly expanded its interior space.

Solar EPC contractor commissions second project in Oman

GROWING PORTFOLIO: Last year, SWSL commissioned the 125 MWp Amin Solar Project - the first solar PV project in the Sultanate

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 27

Indian headquartered global solar EPC contractor Sterling and Wilson Solar Limited (SWSL) announced on Wednesday that it has successfully commissioned its second project in Oman — a 25 MW solar project at Sohar Freezone developed by Sohar Solar Qabas, a subsidiary of Oman Shell.

The 25 megawatt (MW) capacity solar plant is located on

a 50-hectare site within Sohar Freezone and consists of over 88,000 solar modules.

The renewable electricity output from Qabas is supplied to a large ferrochrome production facility, displacing the equivalent gas-fired power generation taken from the grid and avoiding more than 25,000 tonnes of CO2 emissions annually.

SWSL, which was awarded the contract, said it commissioned the project on time with more than 300,000 safe manhours during the pandemic by following all the necessary safety protocols and measures set by the local authorities.

Bikesh Ogra — Director and Global CEO, Sterling and Wilson Solar Limited said, "Oman is experiencing a rapid rise in



domestic energy demand as more urbanised populations are consuming greater amounts of power.

The country wants to expand its electricity generation capacities through renewable independent

power projects and aims to derive 30 per cent of electricity from renewable sources by 2030. It gives us immense pride to commission our second project in Oman during such difficult times. We feel honoured to have the

The renewable electricity output from Qabas is supplied to a large ferrochrome production facility, displacing the equivalent gas-fired power generation taken from the grid and avoiding more than 25,000 tonnes of CO2 emissions annually

opportunity to support Shell and contribute to Oman's journey of a clean and sustainable future."

Last year, SWSL became the first Indian company to commission a solar photovoltaic (PV) project in Oman. The Amin Solar Project,

with an installed capacity of 125 MWp, is Oman's first renewables-based Independent Power Project (IPP).

Sterling and Wilson Solar Limited has been executing projects globally and has to its credit more than 10.6 GWp of solar power projects (commissioned and under various stages of construction) in various geographies. This portfolio includes a 1,177 MWp Solar PV plant in Abu Dhabi — the world's largest single-site solar plant.

The Company also manages a portfolio of 8 GWp of O&M projects globally. SWSL, a Shapoorji Pallonji Group company, is a global pure-play, end-to-end solar engineering, procurement and construction (EPC) solutions provider.



ByteDance to cut India workforce

China's ByteDance is cutting the size of its India team and is unsure when it will make a comeback, the company told employees in an internal memo on Wednesday. — **Reuters**



Iraq, Total sign energy pact

Iraq has signed a memorandum of understanding with Total to execute 'large and promising projects' in the country, particularly regarding use of natural gas and clean energy. — **Reuters**



Thai factory output falls 2.4 per cent

Thailand's manufacturing output in December dropped a bigger- than-expected 2.44 per cent from a year earlier as a fresh wave of Covid-19 infections hit business activity. — **Reuters**

\$10m pay-cut for Goldman Sachs CEO over 1MDB scandal



SAN FRANCISCO: Goldman Sachs cut its CEO David Solomon's 2020 salary by \$10 million to \$17.5 million because of the bank's role in the 1MDB Malaysian bribery scandal.

"The amounts of remuneration reflect the decision announced by the board of directors," said a securities filing that also detailed pay-cuts for COO John Waldron and CFO Stephen Scherr.

Although the three were not "aware of the firm's participation in any illicit activity at the time the firm arranged the 1MDB bond transactions, the Board views the 1MDB matter as an institutional failure," it said.

Goldman Sachs pleaded guilty in October over its role in the scandal, and agreed to pay nearly \$3 billion to close US investigations. — **AFP**

US consumer confidence edges higher

WASHINGTON: US consumer confidence rose moderately in January while lingering concerns about the Covid-19 pandemic led to a further deterioration in households' perceptions of the labour market, raising the risk of a second straight month of job losses.

But the survey from the Conference Board on Tuesday showed consumers more than willing to buy homes and automobiles in the next six months, indicating that the housing market and manufacturing industry will continue to underpin the economy.

"The slow rollout of the vaccines and the still-raging pandemic continue to depress consumer confidence despite the prospect of further fiscal aid and a brighter health situation," said Kathy Bostjancic, chief US financial economist at Oxford Economics in New York.

The Conference Board's consumer confidence index increased to a reading of 89.3 this month from 87.1 in December. The slight gain likely reflected nearly \$900 billion in additional pandemic relief provided by the government on December, which lifted consumers' near-term expectations.

There was no indication that the January 6 storming of the US Capitol by former President Donald Trump's supporters had impacted on confidence. The cut-off date for the survey was Jan. 14. Economists polled had forecast the index little changed at 89 in January.



A man wearing a face mask wheels a shopping trolley through a supermarket in New York. — **Reuters**

The survey's present situation measure, based on consumers' assessment of current business and labour market conditions, fell to a reading of 84.4 from 87.2 in December.

The expectations index based on consumers' short-term outlook for income, business and labour market conditions increased to 92.5 from a reading of 87.0 in December, suggesting households foresee conditions improving in the near term.

President Joe Biden has unveiled a \$1.9 trillion recovery plan from the pandemic. The new Biden administration has pledged to speed up and simplify the distribution of vaccines.

More than 25 million people

have been infected by the virus, with the death toll over 420,000 since the pandemic started in the United States in early 2020. About 6 per cent of the US population has so far been vaccinated.

Economists said though Biden's rescue plan was facing resistance from some lawmakers, that was unlikely to derail the recovery from the pandemic.

"It is not likely we will see any household and business subsidy plan passed before March or April," said Joel Naroff, chief economist at Naroff Economics in Holland Pennsylvania. "That should be early enough to get us through the year, even if there are significant cuts to the subsidies."

US stocks were little changed.

The dollar slipped against a basket of currencies. US Treasury prices were lower.

The survey's so-called labour market differential, derived from data on respondents' views on whether jobs are plentiful or hard to get, deteriorated to a reading of -3.2 this month from -1.9 in December. That measure closely correlates to the unemployment rate in the Labor Department's employment report.

The economy shed jobs in December for the first time in eight months.

"Jobs are harder to get or not as plentiful for a second month in a row and we will see if this means a second month of negative payroll jobs is in store for the markets in

The slow rollout of the vaccines and the still-raging pandemic continue to depress consumer confidence despite the prospect of further fiscal aid and a brighter health situation

KATHY BOSTJANCIC

Chief economist
Oxford Economics

the report for January due out next Friday," said Chris Rupkey, chief economist at MUFG in New York.

The share of consumers expecting an increase in income decreased to 14.4 per cent from 15.7 per cent last month. The proportion anticipating a drop declined to 14.2 per cent from 14.6 per cent in December.

More consumers expected to purchase homes and motor vehicles in the next six months. Though buying plans for major household appliances were little changed, more expected to purchase refrigerators and washing machines.

The pandemic has disproportionately affected lower-wage earners mostly in the services industry. It has fuelled a migration from city centres to suburbs and other lower-density areas as Americans seek more space for home offices and schooling. — **Reuters**

Oil rises as US oil stockpiles drop

MELBOURNE: Oil prices climbed on Wednesday after industry data showed US crude stockpiles fell unexpectedly last week and China, the world's second-biggest oil user, reported its lowest daily rise in Covid-19 cases, bolstering hopes of a pick-up in demand.

US West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude futures rose 10 cents, or 0.2 per cent, to \$52.71 a barrel at 02:29 GMT, reversing some of Tuesday's loss.



A woman fills a car with fuel at a gas station in Quito, Ecuador. — **Reuters**

Brent crude futures climbed 11 cents, or 0.2 per cent, to \$56.02 a barrel, adding to a small gain on Tuesday.

The American Petroleum Institute (API) reported crude oil inventories in the United States, the world's biggest oil consumer, fell by 5.3 million barrels in the week to January 22 compared with analysts' expectations in a Reuters poll for a build of 430,000 barrels.

However, the data showed gasoline stocks rose by 3.1 million barrels, which was much more than expected. — **Reuters**

Philippines cancels \$10bn airport plan with Chinese-led group

MANILA: A Philippine province has cancelled a decision to award \$10 billion airport project to a consortium led by a Chinese state firm, dealing a blow to President Rodrigo Duterte's infrastructure ambitions and to his policy shift towards Beijing.

The consortium of China Communications Construction Co (CCCC) and Philippine firm MacroAsia Corp was the only bidder in

the 2019 auction to help the Cavite provincial government upgrade Sangley airport, in what would have been one of the country's most expensive infrastructure projects. Cavite's governor Juanito Victor Remulla said on Wednesday the consortium's documentation was "deficient in three or four items".

"We saw it as a sign they were not fully committed," Remulla said. — **Reuters**

Saudi Arabia raises \$5.5 billion via dual-tranche bonds

DUBAI: Saudi Arabia launched \$5.5 billion in a dual-tranche bond sale on Tuesday with tenors of 12 and 40 years, a document showed, as it seeks to plug a large fiscal deficit.

The world's top oil exporter has taken a severe blow from the pandemic, which, along with an oil price war between Saudi Arabia and Russia last year, sent oil prices tumbling.

The kingdom sold the 12-year bonds at 130 basis points (bps) over 10-year US Treasuries and the 40-year notes at 3.45 per cent, the document from one of the

banks on the deal showed.

It tightened the 12-year tranche by 35 bps and the 40-year by 30 bps from initial price guidance.

It drew more than \$13 billion in orders for the 12-year bonds and over \$9 billion in orders for the 40-year paper.

"The final pricing is in line with the sovereign curve and the high order book shows robust investor appetite for the region's debt markets. This is sure to be the first of many deals by the kingdom this year," a fixed-income strategist said.

The government expects to post



A man shows Saudi riyal banknotes at a currency exchange shop in Riyadh. — **AFP**

a fiscal deficit of 141 billion riyals (\$37.59 billion), or 4.9 per cent of

gross domestic product, this year after an expected deficit of 298

billion riyals (\$79.45 billion), or 12 per cent of GDP, in 2020.

Saudi Arabia expects public debt to increase to 937 billion riyals this year from 854 billion riyals last year.

"The Government expects to finance the budgeted deficit for the fiscal year 2021 primarily through a combination of raising domestic and external indebtedness, to the extent necessary," according to a bond prospectus.

Its fiscal balance programme foresees the ratio of public debt to nominal GDP reaching up to 30 per cent by 2023, the prospectus

said.

Saudi Arabia hired Goldman Sachs International, HSBC and JPMorgan as global coordinators for the debt sale. BNP Paribas, Citi, NCB Capital and Standard Chartered joined them as book runners and were also passive joint lead managers.

Last year, Saudi Arabia raised \$12 billion via two international bond sales. Its oil giant Aramco raised \$8 billion from a five-part bond sale in November, in part to pay out dividends — the bulk of which goes to the Saudi government. — **Reuters**

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THURSDAY JANUARY 28, 2021 JUMADA AL THANIA 14, 1442 AH

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features

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Reviving lost tales through the conceptual art

As a conceptual artist, Safa al Fahdi loves going back to her roots for inspiration. In her latest work, she cleverly looks into ancient tales and through symbolism and creative formatting, she allows people to have a quick glance into the stories many Omanis have grown up listening... **P18**

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LOCAL SCENE



WHY FINS IS THE IDEAL WEEKEND ESCAPE

Whenever you want to escape the busy life in Muscat, a drive to the beaches of Fins will definitely give you the relaxation and escape you crave for... **Story on Page P20**

FASHION



CHIC ABAYAS ON THE CATWALK IN RARE SAUDI FASHION SHOW

Donning chic neck-to-toe abayas, models saunter in high heels around a swimming pool in a glitter-filled fashion show staged in the unlikelyst of places: Saudi Arabia... **Story on Page 19**

READ



THE MIDNIGHT LIBRARY

BY MATT HAIG

Nora Seed finds a library beyond the edge of the universe that contains books with multiple possibilities of the lives one could have lived.

ART



POMPIDOU CENTRE: PARIS ARTS 'MACHINE'

The Pompidou Centre in Paris, home of Europe's biggest contemporary art museum, is to close for four years from 2023 for a massive refit... **Story on Page 19**

WILDLIFE



RARE SIGHT: WHITE SQUIRREL SPOTTED IN ENGLISH PARK

A rare albino squirrel has been sighted in a park in Sussex, England, the Press Association news agency reported on Sunday. Although squirrels are relatively common in England, white squirrels are not, and only one in 100,000 squirrels are born an albino, according to figures from 2010 cited in the report.



Reviving lost tales through conceptual art

BY MAZOUN AL GHAILANI

An old Omani tale named “The Vow baby” tells us about an Omani woman who was deprived of motherhood. In the past, women were blamed for their inability to procreate, and this woman desperately wanted a child. One day, she went to the wilderness to collect wood from the Sidr and Acacia trees. She wantonly said that if Allah blessed her with a baby girl, she will make her marry the falcon who had sheltered in one of the Acacia trees. It was said that this falcon is a wizard. After some time, that’s what happened, Allah blessed that woman a beautiful girl. But the falcon did not forget what the mother vowed. He came asking to marry that beautiful girl. So the daughter became a victim of that ominous vow.

“I began to imagine how harsh this vow would determine the fate of that beautiful girl! Although the tale is imaginative and illogical, and how much that girl would suffer the pain of fate, and what would be her fetus when she marries the falcon!” Safa al Fahdi, an Omani artist said.

The conceptual artist Safa al Fahdi, embodied this tale in a combination of artwork,

mixed with a song that the women in the past sang when a baby goes to sleep, documenting those traditional anthems that were preserved and survived until today.

She inspires the Vow baby tale from the ancient Omani tales. She is very keen to show the legacies of Omani culture in her artwork. Taking the artistic responsibility to preserve the ancient tales that are almost disappearing and replaced according to the modern requirements of the current era.

“I chose a baby’s (fetus) symbolism to express the essence of the story. However, the mother’s utmost wishes were to have a child, except that her daughter had a falcon’s baby, but her wish was to have a human child. The repetition of the baby symbolism is an affirmation of the true meaning for the craving desire to have a normal child,” Safa shared.

Artist Safa has studied art and she is a researcher of the conceptual art and folklore. She began her first step in conceptual art after reading about psychology and the problems that people suffer from.

She made a survey study on the most important psychological problems that society suffers from in general, then she wrote about these problems and extracted emotions from them. She

got the assistant of a photographer friend who captured the works of Safa while attempting to convey the feelings that she wanted to represent.

“I found that I could send a specific message through conceptual art. It addresses an issue, problem, or phenomenon that I would like to highlight in a way that reaches the audience logically and touches their feelings smoothly. I also take complete freedom to tell my own beliefs through this art. In my view, I see it as a powerful means of displaying art,” Safa added.

Her focus usually is the life’s reflections, digging into myths, tales and societal beliefs, concepts that are related to oneself.

The artwork “what is (still) hidden is more than what has been revealed” tells implicitly the situations of people in our current reality and the cohesion of societies. The work includes three windows that symbolise three cases which convey the different conditions of people in societies.

“The decorative iron fence symbolises safety, reassurance and beauty. However, what is hidden behind this? what is visible in front of us doesn’t reflect the real situation of people. This artwork sends the viewer a message that we must work on what is hidden and make it be better,” she said.





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FASHION

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Chic abayas on the catwalk in 'rare' Saudi fashion show

Donning chic neck-to-toe abayas, models saunter in high heels around a swimming pool in a glitter-filled fashion show staged in the unlikely of places: Saudi Arabia.

Haute couture displays are rare in the kingdom and have usually been restricted to women or avoided female models altogether.

But a private event in Riyadh last weekend — which showcased a new collection of abayas, a billowy, figure-concealing robe — opened up to a small but mixed-gender audience at a time when social restrictions are slowly being eased in the country.

Draped in shimmering embellishments, half a dozen models, most of them Saudi or of Saudi origin, displayed the collection that sought to redefine the abaya as a stylish overcoat suitable not just for Muslims but for women everywhere.

"The stigma around the abaya and the hijab around the world — I wanted to change that", said Saudi Princess Safia Hussein Guerras, a former model who designed the collection in collaboration with Belgian designer Christophe Beaufays.

"If I bring it to a level of chicness and acceptance... maybe our generation will (fully) embrace the abaya."

Fashionable' In 2018, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman — who has spearheaded a sweeping modernisation drive — said during an interview with broadcaster CBS that the robe was not mandatory in Islam, hinting the dress code may be relaxed.

But while it was announced the following year that it was not obligatory for foreigners, Saudi women are still required to wear the garment in public.

However, the once all-black garment is now repurposed in bright colours and many women leave their cloaks open at the front.

But Princess Safia, 50, said she hoped to make the garment "fashionable", a crossover between tradition and modernity that blends Arab motifs and patterns with contemporary fabrics.

The designs would appeal to women from different cultures and religions who share views on "modesty and elegance", said Beaufays, who is based in the kingdom and works for Jeddah-based Lomar which designs traditional "thobes" for men.

Liberalisation drive

The fashion show was organised at the residence of the Belgian ambassador to Saudi Arabia.

It comes amid Prince Mohammed's drive to shake off his country's image by allowing cinemas, mixed-gender concerts and sporting extravaganzas.

The event toasted the stylish abayas, which Princess Safia says will go on sale in the kingdom.

There was however hardly an abaya in sight in the audience, which was restricted to roughly three dozen people amid the coronavirus pandemic, including royal family members, diplomats and social media influencers.

Despite the small crowd, the show marked progress compared to previous fashion events.

In April 2018, Jean Paul Gaultier and Roberto Cavalli headlined the kingdom's first-ever Arab Fashion Week — a women-only event. — **Reuters**

ART

Pompidou Centre: Paris arts 'machine'



THE POMPIDOU Centre in Paris, home of Europe's biggest contemporary art museum, is to close for four years from 2023 for a massive refit.

Here are some key facts about the iconic building, which rewrote the rules of architecture in the 1970s:

INSIDE OUT

The Pompidou Centre's radical design pushes almost all of its structural and mechanical elements to the outside — the building appears to have been turned inside out.

That leaves pure gallery space inside a futuristic glass facade laced with multi-coloured pipes — blue for air conditioning, green for water and yellow for electricity.

Wags nicknamed it "The Gasworks" and "Notre-Dame of the Pipes" when it opened in 1977.

Yet it quickly became one of France's top cultural attractions, drawing more than five million visitors a year.

The Pompidou now ranks after the Louvre museum and the Eiffel Tower as the French capital's third most visited site.

Its huge success is one of the reasons it now needs to close, with so many visitors taking their toll on the building.

REVOLUTIONARY

While its revolutionary design is now celebrated, it was hugely controversial at the time and even the subject of several lawsuits.

For its young architects Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers, who met in the revolutionary year of 1968, the Pompidou represented a "joyful urban machine".

Unknowns at the time,

they went on separately to design some of the world's most iconic buildings.

The third member of the team, Peter Rice, often called "the James Joyce of structural engineering", also worked on the Sydney Opera House, the Louvre Pyramid and London's Stansted Airport.

ALL UNDER ONE ROOF

The Pompidou houses France's National Museum of Modern Art, an exceptional collection of 120,000 works including masterpieces by Henri Matisse, Wassily Kandinsky, Marcel Duchamp and Joan Miro.

As well as being the biggest contemporary art collection in Europe, it is the second largest in the world after MoMA in New York.

Named after former French president Georges Pompidou it was meant to be a meeting point for the arts, music, literature and film.

Its vast and hugely popular public library spread over three storeys contains 360,000 titles, spanning literature to science, history to philosophy.

It also has vast exhibition spaces, cinemas, auditoriums, and a music research institute.

GLOBAL BRAND

The centre has an equally eye-catching outpost in the eastern French city of Metz near the border with Belgium, Germany and Luxembourg.

It then spread its wings to China, inaugurating a riverside branch in Shanghai in November 2019.

The Pompidou Centre also has satellite museums in the Spanish city of Malaga and the Belgian capital Brussels. — **AFP**



Why Fins is the ideal weekend escape

TEXT BY MOHAMMED AL SHABIBI



WHENEVER YOU want to escape the busy life in Muscat, a drive to the beaches of Fins will definitely give you the relaxation and escape you crave for.

With its incredible rock formations and pebble to sandy beaches, it's like a masterpiece that an accomplished painter has illustrated meticulously.

Barely an hour drive away from the capital and located between the beautiful valleys of Qurayat and the scenic topography of Sur, it's a kind of place that would inspire poets captivating visitors with its pristine beauty.

Fins is a coastal village located in the Wilayat of Qurayat and around 150 km from Muscat. Whether you'd visit it on weekdays or weekends, it offers the same level of comfort and entertainment.

It is a stone's throw away to tourist havens like Wadi Shab, Wadi Tiwi, and Hawiyat Najm park.

Now that the cold breeze of winter embraces the city, it's not a surprise that many residents of Muscat head towards it shored for camping, fishing or just to hang out.

"It's one of my favourite beaches in Oman. Having visited so many coastal villages, I like it for its strategic location and proximity to Muscat," said Diana Matran, a regular visitor to the area.

"The pocket of beaches in between beautiful cliffs create a unique atmosphere. We regularly visit this place every weekend & winter for relaxation, swimming & camping. We will leave the country shortly because of work, but whenever we have a time to visit Oman, Fins is our destination" she added.

She also said that she loves how watching the sunset from here. Along with the small boats of fishermen who live nearby, setting up a tent by the beach creates a very beautiful and worthwhile trip.

