

EU ramps up pressure on vaccine producers

The European Commission is putting pressure on Covid-19 vaccine producers amid delivery delays and shortages, proposing on Monday a register for exports of the jab, EU sources said. The register should be put into effect within a few days and record which manufacturers send which quantities of vaccines produced in the European Union outside the bloc. In addition, manufacturers would need a licence to export. Obtaining this shouldn't be an issue for humanitarian exports: The focus is on transparency, according to the sources. — dpa



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DUQM SET TO HOST OMAN'S SECOND BIGGEST FOOD INDUSTRIES HUB



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SWEDISH ARCHAEOLOGISTS TAKE TO THE WAVES TO PROTECT BALTIC WRECKS



MUSCAT

HM GREETINGS TO INDIA, AUSTRALIA

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Ram Nath Kovind of the Republic of India, on the occasion of Republic Day. In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his sincere greetings and best wishes of good health and happiness to President Kovind, and the friendly people of India further progress and development. His Majesty has also sent a cable of greetings to David Hurley, Governor-General of Australia, on the occasion of his country's National Day. In his cable, His Majesty expressed his sincere greetings and best wishes of good health and happiness to the Governor-General of Australia, and the friendly Australian people further progress and prosperity. — ONA

INCENTIVES FOR SME OWNERS

The Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises Development (Riyada) announced incentives offered to owners of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) with a view to writing off SME licence fees. The incentives target SMEs operating in the sectors including manufacturing, agriculture and fisheries, services, logistics and related activities, according to the Invest-Easy portal rating specified by the Ministry of Commerce and Industry and Investment Promotion. DETAILS ON P3



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Decree restructures Defence Council

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on Tuesday issued three Royal Decrees.

Royal Decree No 12/2021 regulates/restructures the Defence Council.

Article (1) stipulates that the Defence Council shall be restructured under the chairmanship of The Sultan, the Supreme Commander, and with the following as members: The Deputy Prime Minister for Defence Affairs, The Minister of the Royal Office, Head of Office of the Supreme Commander, The Head of Liaison and Coordination at the Royal Office, The Head of the Internal Security Service, The Inspector General of Police and Customs, The Chief of Staff of the Sultan's Armed Forces.

Article (2) stipulates that, the Defence Council, without prejudice to its other specialisations/functions stated in laws and Royal Decrees, will specialise in reviewing all issues related to safeguarding and defending



the Sultanate's safety and will convene when it is deemed necessary to declare the State of Public Mobilization.

Article (3) cancels Royal Decree No 105/96 on the Defence Council, as well as all that contradicts this Decree or contravenes its provisions. Article (4) says that this Decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced on its date of issue.

Royal Decree No 13/2021 regulates/restructures the National Security Council.

Article (1) stipulates that the National Security Council shall be restructured under the chairmanship of The Sultan, the Supreme Commander, and the following as members: The Minister of Royal Office, Head of Office of the Supreme Commander, The Head of Liaison and Coordination at the Royal Office, The Head of the Internal Security Service, The Inspector General of Police and Customs, The Chief of Staff of the Sultan's Armed Forces. TURN TO P2

Sultanate needs 911,400 more housing units by 2040

VINOD NAIR

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A new draft law will be ready in the last quarter of 2021, which will be also marked as the year of transparency, said the government on Monday.

Dr Khalfan bin Said al Shueili, Minister of Housing and Urban Planning, said: "The new plans and focus are necessary because the population of Oman is expected to reach between 7.1 and 7.5 million by 2040, which may need around 911,400 more housing units", he said.

Speaking to the media, he said that there has been an accumulation of housing applications registered in some governorates since 2008 due to the non-availability of suitable lands in those regions.

"As part of its efforts to achieve the main objective of granting lands to those who deserve it, the ministry continues to necessary plans to accommodate the largest possible amount of these requests. The plan for 2021 includes

The new plans and focus are necessary because the population of Oman is expected to reach between 7.1 and 7.5 million by 2040, which may need around 911,400 more housing units

DR KHALFAN BIN SAID AL SHUEILI
Minister of Housing and Urban Planning

the distribution of 23,066 plots of land in the various governorates of the Sultanate."

Nearly 60 per cent (269,316) of the total requests (447,612,) for land were received from women, the ministry revealed on Monday.

The plan for 2021 will be in

line with the national priorities of Vision 2040 and based on the National Urban Development Strategy — performance indicators, initiatives and ambitious projects. The ministry's strategy is based on a basic foundation, which is the institutional culture. It is based on four priorities and with clear objectives: Competencies and capacity building, digital transformation, governance and legislation, identity and communication.

On the issue of allowing vertical development, the minister said one of the distant features of Muscat is that it is free of skyscrapers, but that does not mean the door to vertical expansion — towers and skyscrapers — is closed. He said the vertical model of development has its benefits in delivering services and infrastructure at lower costs and faster.

Meanwhile, a ministry official said that what is being said about granting of lands worth tens of thousands of square metres to one person is unfounded. TURN TO P2

AMBASSADORS BID FAREWELL



On behalf of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, HH Sayyid Asaad bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for International Relations and Cooperation Affairs, Personal Representative of His Majesty the Sultan, received separately at his office Eid Mohammed al Thaqafi, Ambassador of Saudi Arabia to the Sultanate and Manabile Shogole, Ambassador of South Africa to the Sultanate, at the end of their tour of duty. DETAILS ON P2

Merger of sports clubs to boost performance

SUHAR: HH Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth, affirmed that the structuring and merging of culture, sport and youth sectors at the ministry will improve the work of clubs

and help them deliver their community message.

It is also in line with the objectives of Oman Future Vision 2040 and contributes to better achievements at the international level. DETAILS ON P11

World lost equivalent of 255 million jobs in 2020: UN

GENEVA: The coronavirus pandemic took a huge toll on global jobs last year, the United Nations said on Monday, with the equivalent of more than a quarter of a billion lost.

In a fresh study, the UN's International Labour Organization (ILO) found that a full 8.8 per cent

of global working hours were lost in 2020, compared to the fourth quarter of 2019.

That is equivalent to 255 million full-time jobs, or "approximately four times greater than the number lost during the 2009 global financial crisis", the ILO said in a statement.



"This has been the most severe crisis for the world of work since the Great Depression of the 1930s", ILO chief Guy Ryder told reporters in a virtual briefing.

Since surfacing in China just over a year ago, the virus has killed more than 2.1 million people, infected tens of millions of others and

hammered the global economy.

The UN labour agency explained that around half of the lost working hours were calculated from reduced working hours for those remaining in employment. But the world also saw "unprecedented levels of employment loss" last year, it said. — AFP

WEATHER

MUSCAT: Max 24°C Min 15°C SALALAH: Max 28°C Min 19°C NIZWA: Max 26°C Min 13°C

PRAYER TIMINGS

SUNRISE: 06:49 FAJR: 05:31 DHUHR: 12:24 ASR: 15:32 MAGHRIB: 17:54 ISHA: 19:07

■ SHIHAB RECEIVES BANGLADESHI AMBASSADOR



HH Sayyid Shihab bin Tarik bin Taimour al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Defence Affairs, received in his office at Muaskar Al Murtafa today Mizanur Rahman, Ambassador of Bangladesh, to the Sultanate. They exchanged cordial conversation and reviewed the relations between the two countries. They also discussed matters of common concern. — ONA

Farewell to South Africa envoy

MUSCAT: On behalf of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, His Highness Sayyid Asaad bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for International Relations and Cooperation Affairs, Personal Representative of His Majesty the Sultan, received separately in his office on Monday Eid Mohammed al Thaqafi, Ambassador of Saudi Arabia to the Sultanate, and Manabile Shogole, Ambassador of South Africa to the Sultanate at the end of their tour of duty.

The two ambassadors expressed their sincere thanks to His Majesty the Sultan for the support from His Majesty, the Government and the Omani people, which enabled them to perform their



assignments. They also wished His Majesty the Sultan good health, happiness and a long life, and the Sultanate further progress and growth under the wise leadership of His Majesty. HH Sayyid Asaad expressed his utmost thanks for the two ambassadors' efforts exerted in serving the relations

between the Sultanate and their countries. He wished the two ambassadors continuous success, and peoples of their countries progress and prosperity. The meeting was attended by the Secretary General and the two advisers at HH Sayyid Asaad's Office.

— ONA

■ FROM PAGE 1

His Majesty issues three Royal Decrees



Abdullah al Harthi



Sulaiman al Zakwani



Khalifa al Siyabi

The Council may call for the attendance of whomever it might consider appropriate other than its members. Article (2) states that the National Security Council specialises in all issues related to national security.

Article (3) states that the National Security Council shall convene under the chairmanship of The Sultan, the Supreme Commander, in cases he deems necessary.

Otherwise, it convenes under the chairmanship of the Minister of Royal Office, Head of Office of the Supreme Commander.

Article (4) stipulates that the National Security Council shall have a Secretary-General to be appointed by a Royal Decree.

Article (5) states that the National Security Council shall be assisted by a Secretariat General that reports to the Royal Office and a number of committees reporting to the Council. It also states the Minister of Royal Office, Head of the Office of the Supreme Commander, shall issue a decision to regulate the functions of the Secretariat General and specialisations of the Secretary-General, besides the formation of the committees and determination of their specialisations.

Article (6) cancels Royal Decree No 63/2003 on the



Salim al Hosni



Musalam Jaaboub

National Security Council, as well as all that contradicts this Decree or contravenes its provisions.

Article (7) says that this Decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced on its date of issue.

Royal Decree No 14/2021 on Military Promotions and Appointments. Article (1) promotes Brigadier Nasser bin Saleh bin Saud al Maawali to the rank of Major General and appoints him as Secretary-General of the National Security Council in the Royal Office.

Article (2) promotes Brigadier Sulaiman bin Khalid bin Sulaiman al Zakwani to the rank of Major General and appoints him as Secretary-General of the Military Affairs in the Royal Office.

Article (3) promotes Brigadier Salim bin Ali bin Badr al Hosni

to the rank of Major General and appoints him as Commander of the Royal Guard of Oman.

Article (4) promotes Brigadier Musalam bin Mohammed bin Taman Jaaboub to the rank of Major General and appoints him as Commander of the Sultan's Special Force.

Article (5) appoints Major General Abdullah bin Ali bin Hamad al Harthy as Assistant Inspector General of Police and Customs for Operations.

Article (6) promotes Brigadier Khalifa bin Ali bin Nasser al Siyabi to the rank of Major General and appoints him as Assistant Inspector General of Police and Customs for Administrative and Financial Affairs. Article (7) says that this Decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced on its date of issue.

— ONA



Dr Khalfan al Shueili, Minister of Housing and Urban Planning, gives a presentation in Muscat on Monday. — Photo by Khalfan al Ruzaiqi

911,400 more housing units needed

“The mixing of land uses within a single scheme was common in the past, and during recent years the existence of lands with different uses has become a norm for the purpose of serving the needs of governorates and plans within the community,” he said.

Nearly 40 per cent of the buildable lands owned by citizens are not yet built in Muscat. The rate of reconstruction in residential lands during the past 10 years range between 2-19 per cent.

The number of requests received by the minister earlier was 50,000, at a rate of 150 requests per day. The minister's role is not to work at the executive level, and the minister's office gets only 10 requests per day. The main points highlighted on Monday are while there are large number of land plots available they are scattered with a slow reconstruction rate. The reasons include high costs and poor service delivery, poor quality of urban planning, random urban



expansion, and inconsistency between land use and activities.

Dr Al Shueili stressed that the new team has put in place a structure with a future to push it towards the right direction and to achieve the vision of 2040.

To a question about the ministry's intention to withdraw some large, unused lands, he said, “There is no legal basis and no clause in the laws offers a provision for this.”

The ministry will launch 59 new electronic services in

2021 covering various sectors — housing, urban planning, real estate development, real estate registry, lands, customer services, which will speed up the provision of services and ease of obtaining them.

The government is working on implementing several initiatives aimed at providing adequate housing for low-income groups in partnership with the private sector or through real estate development programmes.

■ 370 GRADUATE FROM VOCATIONAL COLLEGES



MUSCAT: The Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation on Monday celebrated the graduation of 370 students from the vocational colleges and Vocational College for Marine Sciences. The graduation ceremony was held under the auspices of Dr Bakhait bin Ahmed al Mahri, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation for Higher Education.





New labour, civil service laws by April; 15,000 jobs on cards

SAMUEL KUTTY

@samkutttyp

The Ministry of Labour will unveil the new labour and civil service laws after two months as part of its efforts to bring more transparency on Oman's labour market.

"The new laws are being rolled out to create a healthy work environment that will see a productivity-linked work culture in the Sultanate", said Dr Mahad bin Said Baowain.

The minister said in an interview that the new laws, which are weaved to bring both public and private sectors more close, will be unveiled by the end of March or in the first week of April this year.

According to the minister, the new labour and civil laws will have clear definitions with regard to salaries, vacations and working hours.

"An employee should measure the work based on productivity and the work he does", he said, revealing, "there is a plan to unify the benefits between the public and private sectors".

The target is to absorb approximately 40 per cent of those job seekers during this year, and approximately 80 per cent within the next two years

DR MAHAD BAOWAIN

Minister of Labour

In the interview that was given to Oman TV, the minister said that 80 per cent of those registered job seekers will be provided with employment opportunities during the next two years.

According to the minister, through the Omanisation initiative, the ministry plans to create and fill 15,000 to 20,000 job opportunities.

"The target is to absorb approximately 40 per cent of those job seekers during this



year, and approximately 80 per cent within the next two years," Dr Mahad revealed during the interview.

While 70 per cent of the jobs will be in the private sector, the remaining 30 per cent in the public sector depending on the available opportunities. "The labour market is based on supply and demand, and the private sector is a large market, where a large number of job aspirants can be absorbed.

There are many initiatives that will be announced in the coming month", he said.

With regard to terminations and salary reductions, the minister said that companies have been instructed not to take any harsh decisions.

"A total of 300 companies with a workforce of over 70,000 have applied either for terminations or salary cuts. Steps have already been initiated to ensure that Omanis continue to remain in their jobs," Dr Mahad said.

The minister also said that a committee has been formed to negotiate with the various parties to find out solutions to the challenges in the job market arising notably from the coronavirus crisis.

"The Covid-19 pandemic broke out amid a period of economic crisis adding to the challenge in stopping the laying off of Omanis in the private sector. The private sector is central to the economy, and we are confident that it is capable of overcoming the challenges," the minister said.



It is a crime to scribble on banknotes, says CBO

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH

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The seven new banknotes from the Central Bank of Oman have many security features to avoid forgery, at the same time there are features that the keepers of those banknotes can learn many new things from them.

The RO 50 note with the portrait of late Sultan Qaboos has been in circulation since July 2020, while the other seven new notes depict the vision of 2040 and special features of Oman such as infrastructure, values, art, agriculture, and natural wealth of the country. It will take three to four months to reach those notes to the ATMs, according to Shabib al Shabibi, Manager, Currency Management Department.

As a piece of advice, Al Shabibi requested people, "Please do not fold a banknote, it kills the note."

Writing on a banknote is also a crime just like damaging a note.

"A torn note is not fit for circulation. It would have to be brought to the Central Bank through commercial banks. They normally do not accept torn or damaged notes or very fact that they would have to come all the way here to exchange it would prevent them from damaging it," pointed out Al Shabibi.

"We tried to take the inspiration from the first set of notes, as when we have a history — we have a future. The merging of the colours makes the notes very special. The work on these notes has been going on for a while

with the vision set as the celebration of the 50th anniversary.

WHAT HAPPENS TO DAMAGED NOTES?

At the Currency Museum of the Central Bank of Oman, on exhibit is cylindrical pulp. On a closer note, a zero is visible and a little further is digit 5.

"This is a pulp of damaged RO 50 banknotes that were damaged after years of use, remaining of the shredded banknotes and made into pulp.

The pulp is so strong that one can even make furniture out of it.

The most annoying part as a manager of the currency department is to see writings on a banknote. Why I get upset is because this is the currency of the country. We have to respect it and we are not meant to write on it. Hopefully in this new series people will not write on them. We have designed the new notes in such a way that hopefully even if they try to write it will not stay."

He pointed out that it is a crime to write or mark on banknotes.

"People can be sentenced to jail because of this practice of writing on the notes. Damaging a national currency is a crime. Most of the time people write their amount. To mistreat the banknote such as throwing it is a punishable crime," explained the Currency Department Manager.

If a note is torn accidentally, the only place it can be exchanged is the Central Bank of Oman.

Riyada rolls out incentives for SME owners

MUSCAT: The Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises Development (Riyada) has issued a detailed statement on incentives offered to owners of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) with a view to writing off SME licence fees.

The incentives target SMEs operating in the sectors of manufacturing industries, agriculture and fisheries, services, logistics and related

activities, according to the Invest-Easy portal rating specified by the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion.

The incentives are a one-activity, one-time offer to Riyada card holders.

It is a condition (for exemption from government licence fees for the target activities) that the licenses be issued for the first time. It is not allowed to sell,

transfer or modify the commercial register of the beneficiary SME for a period of three years, except in the case of transfer of the commercial register to a full-time citizen who is a holder of the Riyada card or in the case of cancellation of the establishment by the cancellation of its commercial register.

According to this statement, the beneficiaries

are exempt from payment of all government licence fees.

Holders of Riyada cards are also exempt from payment of labour licence fees for new activities specified in the sectors covered by the incentives, towards a total of 5 workers and for a single activity. The exemption does not cover payment of fees for renewal of existing government licenses across all sectors.

Palm squirrels could threaten dates

STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT, JAN 25

For the first time, furry and cuddly palm squirrels which could threaten date crops were spotted in the open in the Sultanate. The sightings of these bushy tailed, striped rodents in SQU botanical gardens were published in the *International Journal of Environmental Studies* by the biology department's Dr Erika Cuellar Soto, Biology and Prof Reginald Victor who have been studying invasive species in Oman for the last two decades.

Dr M Barry of the Department of Biology took photographs of this animal and its identity was confirmed as five-striped northern palm squirrel. The animal was first spotted by academic editor and birdwatcher Jamila J Hakam who alerted the sighting to the botany department.

This study reports palm squirrels of the genus



Funambulus as invasive in Oman for the first time. These squirrels have been recorded in seven locations in northern Oman contributing to a total of 11 records. Seven records were of the Five-striped northern palm squirrel, Funambulus pennantii and species identification was uncertain for four records. F. pennantii was supposed to be the only

species in UAE, but here evidence is shown for the presence of the three -striped Indian palm squirrel, Funambulus palmarum in Ras Al Khaimah. So, there is a possibility that this species may also occur in Oman.

These palm squirrels are feeding on the fruits of the jujube trees and the commercially valuable date fruits. There is a strong

indication that these species could become serious pests on date palms. Their numbers are low at present in Oman, but they are well established in the adjacent UAE from where sustained invasion is more than likely.

At present, these animals can be sold through pet shops in Oman. These are liked by pet owners, who may release them into the natural environment for whatever reason or the animals by themselves can escape from captivity. The invasion of Oman by the palm squirrels is in its infancy and strategies should be formulated now to eradicate/control them as a matter of priority.

Dr Cuellar Soto has established a database for monitoring the distribution and population trends of palm squirrels in Oman and would appreciate receiving reports of squirrel sightings from Oman preferably with photographic evidence. Her e-mail is e.soto@squ.edu.om

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WOMEN SILVERSMITHS STRUGGLE
TO PRESERVE RARE SKILL

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
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'Adornment, identity and empowerment: Female Silversmiths in Southern Oman' virtual presentation organised by the Anglo-Omani Society highlighted the importance of the involvement of craftswomen in silver handicraft work. Four experts dwelt upon the continuation of this important tradition in Dhofar.

The sessions presented by Mouza al Wardi, Fahmida Suleman, Aude Mongiatti and Marci Dorr, touched upon the various aspects of Omani silver jewellery — from the use of silver coins to amuletic properties and the varying designs of the ornaments, but most importantly the women silversmiths, who are now rare to find.

The contrasting jewellery style of the north where the pieces are larger compared to the jewellery of the south which is delicate and smaller in size.

According to The Anglo-Omani Society, "Throughout the Arabian Peninsula, silversmithing is almost universally identified as a male occupation, although a large proportion of the articles produced

are for women. However, there is a relatively unknown, endangered tradition of female silversmithing in the Sultanate of Oman. In the talk, the experts shared some of their early research findings from an ongoing collaborative project supported by the British Museum, the Royal Ontario Museum and the National Museum of Oman on the last surviving female silversmiths of Dhofar."

Fahmida Suleman talked about the two established women silversmiths of Dhofar – Ghaliya Ali and Tuful Ramadan whom Marci Dorr met years ago when she was documenting pottery and other crafts. Tuful learned the craft from her brother-in-law at the age of 14 years and the hobby turned out to be her profession.

There is continuity in using the jewellery design as well as in the ancient methodology as can be seen in the granule pyramid used on finger rings. She quoted Tuful, "Accuracy is in the women's nature. Men are good, but women can make delicate designs."

If the silversmiths depended on silver coins or melted old jewellery to create

The Arabian Peninsula, silversmithing is almost universally identified as a male occupation, although a large proportion of the articles produced are for women. However, there is a relatively unknown, endangered tradition of female silversmithing in the Sultanate of Oman

THE
ANGLO-OMANI
SOCIETY

new pieces, today the jewellers have a variety of options.

"They prefer to use highly pure silver," said Marci Dorr answering a query during the Zoom talk. Marci Dorr is the co-author of the book, 'The Craft Heritage of Oman.'

Moza al Wardi, Director of Collections and Senior Curator at the National Museum of Oman, Muscat, spoke about preserving a nation's heritage. She said the history of silversmithing in Oman dates back to the Iron Age. Her presentation had images of Iron Age pendants exhibited at the National Museum of Oman as well as Mid 20th century pendants on display at the British Museum. She threw light on the theme Omani Silver and the World: Coins as jewellery, noting, "A great diversity of coinage once circulated as currency in Omani souks and attractive coins were often made into jewellery. The coin pendants displayed at the National Museum galleries are components of large necklaces that were worn as a form of portable wealth. Together they span a century and represent ten nations including the Sultanate of Muscat and Oman, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Yemen,

Iran, Pakistan, India, Spain, France, the Ottoman Empire and Austro-Hungarian and Austrian thalers."

Dr Aude Mongiatti, Metals Scientist, Department of Scientific Research, British Museum expressed her concern for the profession, "Is the profession of silversmithing slowly disappearing?" She is involved in documenting the ancient techniques. Scientific research uses non-invasive technology such as digital microscopy, scanning electron microscopy-radiography and optical microscopy. Aude Mongiatti is an archaeological scientist in the Department of Scientific Research at the British Museum. She studies ancient metallurgical technologies and metalworking techniques, mainly using microscopy, radiography and X-ray fluorescence. The challenges are quite a few in addition to the endangered silversmithing and they are the changing trends as seen in the 70s the move towards gold and the current generations' interest in western silver jewellery designs. However, the gold jewellery enthusiasts still have a keenness for traditional designs.

ODB grants 11,800 loans worth RO 68.8 million

MUSCAT: Oman Development Bank (ODB) granted in 2020 more than 11,800 development and emergency loans, worth approximately RO 68.8 million, in comparison to RO 60.75 million loans that were granted in 2019, marking a growth rate of 13 per cent.

In 2020, the bank implemented a loan deferral programme to alleviate impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the beneficiaries of its services.

This programme benefited about 2,800 borrowers. The bank launched orientation programmes for entrepreneurs. Those programmes were followed by more than 4,400 entrepreneurs and interested persons in the small and medium enterprises sector.

ODP indicated that the emergency loan programme accounted for 28 per cent of the volume of granted loans. The number of beneficiaries

exceeded 8,000 projects with a total value of approximately RO 19.2 million. The working capital loans constituted the largest value-share of the granted development loans, with a total value of RO 13.9 million granted for 420 loans, out of more than 3784 regular development loans, with a value of about RO 49.53 million, followed by the micro-loans that exceeded last year 3,100 loans with a total value of RO 13.4 million.

The total value of loans granted to large companies surpassed RO 12.5 million for 18 development loans. The number of loans granted to the small and medium enterprises sector reached 192 with a total value of RO 9.6 million. The bank granted 41 seasonal loans with a total value of RO 190,000.

The Bank granted last year 3,000 industrial loans to the manufacturing sector, with a



total value of RO 22.4 million, followed by the professional and public services sector which obtained the largest number of loans with 5588, worth more than RO 17.1 million.

The tourism sector comes third in terms of the value of approved loans in 2020. The Bank granted 470 loans for tourism projects with a total value of approximately RO 8.7 million, followed by the fisheries sector with 1277 loans with a total value of about RO 8.1 million. The loans granted to the educational sector amounted to more than 1,151 with a total value of RO 6.9 million. The bank granted 569 agricultural loans to the agricultural and livestock sector, with a total value of RO 3.9 million. It granted 44 loans to the health sector, with a total value of RO 1.4 million, and 16 loans to the mining sector, with a total value of RO 300,000. — ONA

Early diagnosis vital to cure cervical cancer

KABEER YOUSUF

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Oman recorded 40 cervical cancer cases among women in the age bracket of 25 to 65 years even though the cases are close to 3 per cent of all the cancer cases in the country.

Experts say the number of cases can be avoided if timely care is taken and proper diagnosis is carried out as women between in this age bracket are prone to cervical cancer and early detection is vital.

“Early diagnosis is crucial in cervical cancer just as it is the case in identifying any disease and it’s very easy to treat at the initial stage itself. A great percentage of cervical cancer cases can be avoided if women above 35 years of age undergo mammogram test at least once in two or three years so that early diagnosis is possible,” says Dr Thuria bint Rashid al Rawahiyah, Senior Consultant, Gynaecological Oncologist at the Royal Hospital.

Oman has a population of 1.06 million women aged 15 years and older who are at risk of developing cervical cancer.

Cervical cancer ranks the 3rd most frequent cancer among women in Oman and the 3rd most frequent cancer among women between 15 and 44 years of age.

Doctors said carrying out a pap smear test and making sure that she is free from cervical cancer is highly recommended for any woman above the age of 32.

Meanwhile, the United Nations

Population Fund (UNFPA) will host the second edition of the Cervical Cancer Forum, virtually from January 27 to 28 discuss the establishment of sustainable and equitable cervical cancer and HPV eradication programmes, including in health crisis settings such as the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. It will also review the success of the ‘Sharjah Declaration on Cervical Cancer’ adopted by the debut edition of the Forum in 2019.

The two-day virtual Forum themed ‘Accelerating Action on HPV and Cervical Cancer’ aims at building on the success of the inaugural Cervical Cancer Forum held in Sharjah in 2019 and enjoys the support of local, regional and international health authorities, and centres of medical knowledge such as the UAE Ministry of Health and Prevention, International Atomic Energy Agency — IAEA, Union for International Cancer Control (UICC), and the World Health Organisation.

The Forum will allow active interaction among panelists, speakers and audience members, ensuring the efficiency of discussions and outcomes. It brings together pioneering actors and global stakeholders in the field including, International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), global health Institutes and University Hospitals, pioneer researchers, and policymakers, media and communication experts and academia who will push the agenda

Early diagnosis is crucial in cervical cancer just as it is the case in identifying any disease and it’s very easy to treat at the initial stage itself. A great percentage of cervical cancer cases can be avoided if women above 35 years of age undergo mammogram test at least once in two or three years so that early diagnosis is possible

DR THURIA AL RAWAHI

of cervical cancer prevention and explore ways to foster collaboration, to address regional and national responses to HPV and cervical cancer in the Arab region more effectively.

Second Cervical Cancer Forum will propose a set of recommendations and a call for action that integrates the pillars of prevention, treatment, palliative care, and social aspects globally and specifically in the Arab region.

Cervical cancer caused by human papillomavirus (HPV) is the cause behind the death of nearly 7,600 women in the Arab region died from cervical cancer in 2020, according to the World Health Organization (WHO).

UNFPA aims at mobilising greater support to combat this disease and we count on you in this mission. We want to create awareness so that the high mortality rate from cervical cancer can be reduced through a comprehensive approach that includes prevention, early diagnosis, effective screening, treatment programmes and palliative care.

Cervical cancer is the fourth most frequent cancer affecting women with an estimated 570,000 new cases in 2018, representing 6.6 per cent of all female cancers globally. Approximately 90 per cent of deaths from cervical cancer occurred in low- and middle-income countries. It is estimated that deaths due to cervical cancer had reached around 11,000 deaths in 2018, in the east

Mediterranean region only. The high mortality rate from cervical cancer can be reduced through a comprehensive approach that includes prevention, early diagnosis, effective screening, treatment programmes and palliative care.

There are currently vaccines that protect against the human papillomavirus (HPV), which causes cervical cancer, hence these vaccines can significantly reduce the risk of cervical cancer.

209 new coronavirus cases, 1 death reported

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Health (MoH) on Monday reported 209 new cases of Covid-19, bringing the total number of cases registered in the Sultanate to 133,253.

MoH also reported one new Covid-19-related death, taking the total death toll to 1,522.

The total recovery cases reached 126,334, comprising 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 92, including 31 in Intensive Care Units (ICUs). — ONA



OMAN CRICKET CLUB (OCC)

Invitation to attend the General Body Meeting of the Club for the years 2020 & 2021.

The Board of Management of the Oman Cricket Club (OCC) will be holding its Annual General Meeting of the Club for the years 2020 & 2021. The meeting will be held on Sunday, 28th February 2021 commencing at 7:00 pm at the Al Mirani Meeting Hall of the Al Falaj Hotel. All Members wishing to attend this meeting and whose membership may have expired are requested to proceed with renewal of the membership with effect from the date of this announcement. The last date for renewal of membership is Sunday, 21st February 2021 before 5:00 pm.

As per Article No. 29 of the Statute of the Sports Clubs No.124/2008, the meeting will be considered valid in the presence of an absolute majority of members of the club who are entitled to attend (half + one). If the required number of members are unavailable at 7:30 pm the meeting could be postponed to another date within 15 days from the date of the first meeting, or be held on the same day at 8:00 pm.

The second meeting held on the same day will be considered valid in the presence of (quarter) of working members. Agenda will be available at OCC office before 7 days of scheduled meeting.

Secretary of the Club
Chairman of the Board of Directors

SAI participates in GCC anti-corruption meet

STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT, JAN 25

The State Audit Institution (SAI) took part in the 18th meeting of the GCC specialists committee for agencies responsible for integrity promotion and fighting corruption. The meeting, which was convened through videoconferencing on Monday, was organised at the headquarter of the Secretariat General of the GCC in Riyadh and with the participation of members of SAI.

During the meeting,



the participants discussed two main themes. The first highlighted on the review of the draft guiding system (law)

for the protection of public funds in the GCC region and its chapters such as auditing public property, interim measures,

crimes and punishments.

The meeting also focused on discussing member states’ views relevant to the proposed Law and suggesting recommendations where appropriate. The second theme involved suggestions relevant to the mechanism to execute guiding principles for exchanging experiences between anti-corruption agencies in the GCC, collaborating with the civil society institutions in the field of protecting the integrity and combating corruption.

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A' Namaa Poultry Co. S.A.O.C

Job Opportunities

A'Namaa Poultry, is an integrated poultry project, using state of the art technologies in the market for all the project components, to produce a high- quality poultry meat. A'Namaa Poultry currently seek to recruit for the following positions by national candidates to joint Anamaa Poultry team. For more details and apply, Kindly logging to <https://foodjobs.om>. Last date receiving application will be on 01 Feb 2021.

No.	Job Title	Number of Position
1	IT MANAGER	1
2	MANAGER - QUALITY ASSURANCE & CONTROL	1
3	SALES MANAGER	1
4	PROCUREMENT MANAGER	1
5	LOGISTIC MANAGER	1
6	FINANCE MANAGER	1

Sudan police fire tear gas at protesters



Members of Sudanese security forces remove obstacles placed by protesters during a demonstration against rising prices on the main Al Sittin road in Khartoum. — AFP

KHARTOUM: Sudanese police fired tear gas to disperse angry protests in Khartoum over the country’s worsening economic crisis.

Dozens of demonstrators had blocked 60th Street, a major artery in the east of the capital, setting up barricades and burning tyres to voice their anger at soaring inflation, food shortages and power cuts.

“We can’t find a loaf of bread for breakfast at school”, said Hani Mohamed, a young protester in a high school uniform.

Protesters in Khartoum’s sister city Omdurman also blocked a central street by erecting rudimentary barriers made of concrete blocks and used car parts.

Sudan has been reeling from an economic crisis since the

ouster of ruler Omar al Bashir in April 2019 following mass nationwide protests sparked months earlier by high bread prices.

Soaring inflation, exacerbated by the global coronavirus pandemic, has brought more pain to the country of 40 million, where many are forced to queue for hours for a loaf of bread and endure hours-long power cuts.

Inflation reached a whopping 269 per cent last month, according to official statistics, and the country is also struggling with some \$60 billion of debt.

Earlier, this month, Sudan signed a memorandum of understanding with outgoing US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin for a bridging loan to clear \$1 billion of arrears to the World Bank. — AFP

Turkey, Greece resume talks on maritime disputes after 5 years

ANKARA/ATHENS: Turkey and Greece resumed bilateral talks on Monday aimed at addressing long-standing maritime disputes, diplomatic sources said, ending a five-year hiatus after months of tensions in the eastern Mediterranean.

The neighbouring countries, both members of Nato, are at odds over the extent of their continental shelves in the Mediterranean, energy rights in the region, air space and the status of some islands in the Aegean Sea. They made little progress in 60 rounds of talks from 2002 to 2016.

Plans for resuming talks foundered last year over Turkey’s deployment of a seismic survey vessel in contested waters and disagreements over which topics to cover. The vessel was withdrawn to Turkish shores last year.



Representatives of Turkey and Greece attend a meeting as part of the bilateral talks on the maritime disputes in Istanbul. — Reuters

Ankara and Athens agreed this month to resume the talks in Istanbul, in a test of Turkey’s hopes of improving its relations with the European Union, which has supported EU-member Greece and threatened sanctions on Turkey. The exploratory talks are aimed at reaching common ground on disputed issues to allow for formal negotiations. However, despite agreeing to resume talks, Ankara and Athens still appeared to disagree over the topics to be covered in the run-up to Monday’s meeting.

Athens said on Saturday it would discuss only the demarcation of exclusive economic zones and the continental shelf in the eastern Mediterranean, and not issues of “national sovereignty”.

Ankara has said it wants the

talks to cover the same topics as in the first 60 rounds, including the demilitarisation of islands in the Aegean and disagreements over air space.

Greek government spokesman Christos Tarantilis told reporters on Monday Greece was “attending the talks in good faith and expects Turkey to act similarly”, reiterating the Greek position that the talks are unofficial and aimed at reaching common ground on maritime zones only.

Officials did not disclose the agenda of the talks on Monday. Talks began at 0800 GMT on Monday and concluded around 1145 GMT, sources said.

Despite the technical

The exploratory talks are aimed at reaching common ground on disputed issues to allow for formal negotiations. Ankara and Athens still appeared to disagree over the topics to be covered in the run-up to the meeting

disagreements, both sides voiced guarded optimism, though they were still trading barbs in the days leading up to Monday’s meetings.

Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said last week Greece would approach the talks with

optimism but “zero naivety”, while Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan said he hoped the resumption of talks would herald a new era.

Analysts have said an immediate breakthrough is unlikely given decades-old policy differences, but that resuming dialogue is an important first step after EU pressure on Ankara.

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu held talks in Brussels last week to discuss possible future steps to maintain what he called the “positive atmosphere” between Ankara and the EU. In December, the bloc postponed the question of sanctions on Turkey until March.

— Reuters

In Gaza, parkour brings youngsters a taste of freedom

GAZA: Using crutches, Palestinian Mohamed Aliwa leaps from one concrete slab to another, determined that his missing leg won’t stop him doing parkour, a sport that brings respite from grim reality in Gaza. The Palestinian teen’s right leg was amputated near the knee in 2018 after he was hit by Israeli army fire during protests along the fortified border separating the Gaza Strip from Israel.

Along with his lower leg, he lost his dream of being a professional parkour athlete, he said. But watching his friends jumping from obstacle to obstacle, the 18-year-old, who now sometimes makes

Sometimes I feel frustrated. But I told myself that if I could do that (again), then everything else in my life would be easy

MOHAMED ALIWA
Palestinian who practises parkour using crutches

use of a prosthetic limb, decided that his disability shouldn’t bring his moves to an end.



Mohamed Aliwa, a Palestinian youth whose leg was amputated near the knee shows off his parkour skills despite his disability and while on crutches in Gaza City. — AFP

“I asked my friends to help me walk, and little by little I came to move and jump almost like them”, he said, talking in a rehabilitation centre which he visits at least once a week.

Parkour, an extreme sport also known as free-running, originated in France in the 1990s. It involves navigating urban obstacles using a fast-paced mix of jumping, vaulting, running and rolling.

“Sometimes I feel frustrated”, says Aliwa. “But I told myself that if I could do that (again), then everything else in my life would be easy.” He says the sport gives him “incredible energy”.

In Gaza, young people have

been practising parkour for years, bounding from ruin to ruin in an enclave pockmarked by three wars between Israel and Hamas, which has ruled Gaza since 2007. But even the easiest jump carries risks, and that is why Abu Sultan, 32, opened what he says is the “first parkour academy in the Palestinian territories”, with the support of French sporting goods giant Decathlon.

“I started doing parkour in 2005”, he said at his club in Al Shati refugee camp, near Gaza City. “At the time, we didn’t have a dedicated space, we trained in cemeteries and on the ruins of buildings destroyed by Israel”. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

TELAVIV

Israel opens embassy in UAE

Israel opened an embassy in the UAE, its foreign ministry said, in a historic move four months after the Jewish state and the Gulf country normalised ties. “Today the Israeli Embassy in Abu Dhabi has officially been opened, with the arrival of the mission head Eitan Naeh”, the ministry said in a statement.

“The Israeli Embassy in the United Arab Emirates will advance relations between the countries on all levels.” The UAE, along with Bahrain, signed a

US-brokered deal in September to normalise relations with the Jewish state. The agreements, known as the “Abraham Accords”, shattered a longstanding Arab consensus that there should be no normalisation with Israel until it reaches a comprehensive peace deal with the Palestinians.

ROME

Egypt urged to cooperate in murder probe

Italian President Sergio Mattarella on Monday urged Egypt to cooperate with prosecutors seeking to try four Egyptian security officers over the torture and murder of an Italian student in Cairo. In a statement marking five years since Giulio Regeni went missing on January 25, 2016, the head of state called for a “full and adequate response” to the Italian investigation.

The mutilated body of Regeni, a 28-year-old PhD student

researching the sensitive topic of trade unions in Egypt, was found on the outskirts of Cairo days after he disappeared.

His death sparked outrage in Italy and strained diplomatic relations between the two countries, with Italy’s government accusing Egypt of failing to cooperate.

DUBAI

US urged to remove fighters from ‘terror’ list

Twenty-two aid groups working in Yemen urged US President Joe Biden to remove the war-torn country’s Ansar Allah fighters from a terror blacklist, saying it could put millions of lives at risk. The Trump administration’s move against the insurgents had come into effect the day before Biden took office, to resounding criticism from experts, the United Nations and aid groups.

“This designation comes at a time when famine is a very real threat to a country devastated by

six years of conflict, and it must be revoked immediately”, said a joint statement by 22 groups including Mercy Corps, Oxfam and Save the Children.

In brief

■ SEOUL



SENIOR NORTH KOREAN DIPLOMAT DEFECTED TO SOUTH

A senior North Korean diplomat who was acting ambassador to Kuwait has defected to the South with his family, reports said.

Ryu Hyun-woo reached South Korea in September 2019 and sought asylum, according to the Maeil Business daily, but his arrival was kept secret until now.

About 30,000 North Koreans have fled repression and poverty under the communist regime and settled in the capitalist South, mostly by first secretly crossing over the porous border with China.

Defections by senior officials are rare, although Ryu's arrival came just two months after the North's former acting ambassador to Italy Jo Song Gil sought asylum from Seoul.

■ KATHMANDU



NEPAL'S CARETAKER PM EJECTED FROM RULING PARTY

Nepal's caretaker Prime Minister K P Sharma Oli was ejected from the country's ruling Communist party, his opponents said, in protest at his abrupt move in December to dissolve parliament and call for an early general election.

Despite being stripped of party membership, Oli remains in office. Meanwhile, judges in the Himalayan country's top court are hearing more than a dozen petitions from independent lawyers and Oli opponents on whether his move to dissolve parliament and call an early election was legitimate or unconstitutional. The court is expected to deliver its verdict next month.

■ JAKARTA



INDONESIA SEIZES IRANIAN, PANAMANIAN TANKERS

Indonesia has seized an Iranian tanker and Panamanian vessel suspected of illegally transferring oil in the Southeast Asian nation's waters, authorities said.

The crude oil tankers — Iranian-flagged MT Horse and Panamanian-flagged MT Freya — were spotted on Sunday off Kalimantan, Indonesia's section of Borneo island, and were later seized after the crew failed to respond to radio calls, authorities said.

The crew were suspected of a string of violations, including failing to display the vessels' national flags, turning off their identification systems to avoid detection and illegally transferring oil, the Indonesian Maritime Security Agency said.

Japanese premier faces pressure over pandemic response



Japan's Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga during a meeting at the COVID-19 coronavirus infection control headquarters at the prime minister's office in Tokyo. — AFP

TOKYO: Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga faced renewed pressure on Monday over his handling of the coronavirus pandemic, with a new opinion poll showing many believed the government was too slow to respond to the latest wave of infections.

Opposition lawmakers were also increasingly frustrated with Suga's taciturn leadership style, demanding he provides detailed answers to questions about the COVID-19 crisis and the Tokyo Olympics set to start in less than six months.

Suga is struggling to halt a steady decline in support for his four-month-old government even after launching a raft of measures to contain a third wave of coronavirus infections with the Olympics due to begin on July 23.

Support for Suga's cabinet dropped to 33 per cent from 39 per cent last month, with disapproval rising 10 points to 45 per cent, according to a poll published by the Asahi newspaper on Monday.

The poll conducted by

Support for Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga's cabinet drops in latest poll

telephone on the weekend showed 80 per cent of respondents thought the government was too slow to declare a state of emergency in response to the coronavirus outbreak which has swept the country since December.

Critics also say Suga took too long to pause a domestic tourism campaign that experts have blamed for contributing to the spread of the virus beyond the initial hotspots in the Tokyo region.

Yoshihito Niki, an infectious disease specialist and professor at Showa University Hospital, agreed the government should have halted the campaign earlier.

"It is clear that was problematic, not just because it may have contributed to rise in case numbers by people travelling around the country, but

also by giving young people an impression that they could lower their guard," he said.

The government says its decision to stick with the domestic tourism campaign was appropriate based on infection data at the time.

Infection data released over the weekend indicated that Japan's third, and most deadly, wave of COVID-19 infections was peaking.

Tokyo reported 618 new cases on Monday, with daily cases dropping below 700 for the first time since December 28.

Suga said that despite the fall in cases in Tokyo the government was in no rush to lift the state of emergency.

"Experts indicate that it is necessary to look at the situation a little more to determine that it is a decreasing trend," he told parliament.

A decision on whether to extend the state of emergency could be made in the first half of next week, five sources from the government and ruling party

Indian farmers ride caravan of tractors into capital

NEW DELHI: Caravans of tractors clogged a key highway in northern India on Monday as tens of thousands of farmers protesting against agriculture reforms streamed into the capital ahead of celebrations for Republic Day.

India marks its founding as a republic on Tuesday with a military parade in the historic city centre, but the farmers, who are demanding a rollback of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's deregulation effort, plan their own peaceful show of strength. "We will teach Modi a lesson that he will never forget," said one of the protesters, from the district of Ludhiana in Punjab, who drove his own tractor. The 35-year-old, who cultivates 4 hectares, asked not to be identified.

Loudspeakers blared anti-government songs as the long procession of vehicles rolled down National Highway 44, accompanied by dozens of community kitchens to hand out hot meals and beverages in the winter cold.

Farmers mainly drawn from the breadbasket states of Punjab and adjoining

Haryana have blockaded approaches into New Delhi for about two months to protest against three new farm laws they say will hurt their livelihoods and help big companies.

Their unions are pushing for the repeal of the laws, after rejecting a government proposal to suspend the measures it says will usher in much-needed steps to boost farmer incomes.

Several rounds of talks with Modi's government have made little headway, and protesters now aim to up the ante with the procession set to follow Tuesday's military parade.

Top leaders and military officials attend the annual high-security parade to mark the day India's constitution took effect in 1950.

At the weekend, police said they would allow at least 12,000 tractors to traverse a 100-km stretch around the capital, despite some intelligence warnings of possible efforts to disrupt the farmers' peaceful rally.

A farmers' group exhorted its members to refrain from violence in detailed instructions issued for Tuesday's event. — Reuters



An artist holds a model depicting farmers on tractors protesting against the central government's recent agricultural reforms in front of the Red Fort in Delhi in Amritsar. — AFP

Vietnam's Communist Party to pick new leadership

HANOI: Vietnam's ruling Communist Party gathered for its first national congress since 2016 on Monday with a mission to select new leaders and shape policy for the next five years and beyond.

The event, the 13th congress since the Communist Party of Vietnam was established in 1930, brought nearly 1,600 delegates from across the country to Hanoi. On a foggy morning in the capital, they paid a ceremonial visit to the mausoleum of founding revolutionary Ho Chi Minh before meetings began.

Vietnamese officials traditionally visit the mausoleum ahead of important meetings and national events.

Amid stringent coronavirus testing to preserve Vietnam's comparative success in keeping the pandemic at bay, delegates will pick a new leadership team in nine days of meetings, mostly behind closed doors, aiming to bolster both the country's ongoing economic success and



A military personnel stands in front of a billboard for the Communist Party of Vietnam's 13th National Congress in Hanoi. — AFP

the legitimacy of the Party's rule.

Delegates to the congress, foreign dignitaries, support staff and media attending the event were all tested twice for the

coronavirus in the days leading up to the gathering. According to the health ministry, a total of 10,000 people have been tested in conjunction with the congress.

That approach echoes the tough quarantine measures, testing and tracing that have contributed to Vietnam having far fewer virus cases than most other

Delegates will pick a new leadership team in nine days of meetings aiming to bolster both the country's ongoing economic success

countries: it has reported just over 1,500 COVID-19 infections and 35 deaths in total.

In turn, that has helped Vietnam's economy outstrip much of Asia in the past year. One of the last five Communist-ruled countries in the world besides China, Cuba, Laos and North Korea, Vietnam is already eyeing average annual gross domestic product growth of 7.0 per cent over the next five years.

But a new leadership will be faced with the challenge of balancing relations with China and the United States, for which Vietnam has become an important strategic partner, in a world economy that's become detached from previous certainties. — Reuters

EU urges tighter travel curbs as vaccine delays hit

BRUSSELS: The European Commission on Monday urged tougher Covid-19 screening of travellers as it frantically seeks to get to the bottom of vaccine delivery delays jeopardising its inoculation strategy.

The EU executive called on the 27 member states to impose pre-trip PCR tests for all travellers allowed into the European Union — presently only on “essential” business — and quarantine on arrival if they came from zones where more-contagious virus variants were spreading.

It also recommended a similar heightened testing and quarantine regime, where possible, for essential travellers between — or even within — EU countries with high-risk areas classed as “deep red” by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control.

“The situation in Europe with the new variants have led us to take difficult but necessary decisions. We need to keep safe and discourage non-essential travel”, Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen tweeted.

The recommendations added even more restrictions to the EU’s cherished passport-free Schengen zone, underscoring Brussels’ deepening worries about a looming third wave of the coronavirus pandemic made far worse by the variants.

The sense of urgency has escalated with British-Swedish pharmaceutical group AstraZeneca announcing last Friday it will not meet its Covid-19 vaccine delivery commitments to the EU.



People wear face masks as they walk past a bus during lockdown due to the coronavirus pandemic in Berlin. — Reuters

That came a week after US group Pfizer said its doses, developed with German partner BioNTech and made in Europe in a Belgian factory, would also be delayed.

Together, those announcements risked up-ending vaccination programmes that depend on people getting two jabs weeks apart.

That would potentially trash von der Leyen’s pledge made just a week ago to inoculate 70 per cent of adults in the EU by the end of August.

It would also have a knock-on effect for the EU’s plan to contribute excess doses to a World Health Organization-led COVAX initiative to provide vaccines to

The situation in Europe with the new variants have led us to take difficult but necessary decisions

URSULA VON DER LEYEN

European Commission chief

poorer nations around the world.

Von der Leyen spoke with AstraZeneca CEO Pascal Soriot early on Monday, and member states were pressing the company for answers and a rapid solution

in further talks during the day, Commission spokesman said.

AstraZeneca last Friday blamed “reduced yields” in its European supply chain for the dose delay.

The European Commission did not elaborate on the purported problem or what recourses exist in the contract, but a spokesman said: “The Commission expects contractual obligations to be met. This is crucial for the safety of our citizens.”

The European Union has authorised two vaccines for jabs, the BioNTech/Pfizer and Moderna ones, and is poised to do so with AstraZeneca with the understanding that production and distribution would allow for immediate roll-out. — AFP

Giuliani faces \$1.3 bn lawsuit over election fraud claims

WASHINGTON: A US voting machine company filed a \$1.3 billion lawsuit against former president Donald Trump’s lawyer Rudy Giuliani, accusing him of defamation in what it called his “big lie” campaign about widespread fraud in the presidential election, court documents on Monday showed.

The Denver-based company, Dominion Voting Systems Inc, filed an earlier lawsuit against Trump campaign lawyer Sidney Powell, whom the company also accused of spreading false conspiracy theories about the election that Trump lost to Democrat Joe Biden.

A senior Dominion employee, Eric Coomer, also filed a defamation lawsuit against the Trump campaign, saying he had been driven into hiding because of death threats from Trump supporters. Giuliani and his lawyer, Robert Costello, did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Giuliani has stood by his claims about the election, saying during a radio show last week he is being attacked for “exercising my right of free speech and defending my client.”

Trump and his allies spent two months denying his election defeat, and claiming without evidence that it was the result of widespread voter fraud, before his supporters stormed the Capitol on January 6.

Dominion is seeking \$1.3 billion in damages from the former New York City mayor, alleging in the lawsuit that “he



Rudy Giuliani. — Reuters File Photo

and his allies manufactured and disseminated the ‘Big Lie,’ which foreseeably went viral and deceived millions of people into believing that Dominion had stolen their votes and fixed the election.”

Dominion said it filed the lawsuit “to set the record straight” and to “stand up for itself, its employees, and the electoral process.”

A group of prominent attorneys last week asked New York’s judiciary to suspend Giuliani’s law license because he made false claims in post-election lawsuits and for urging Trump’s supporters to engage in “trial by combat” shortly before they stormed the US Capitol on January 6.

Dominion states in its lawsuit that it has spent \$565,000 on private security to protect its employees, who are facing harassment and death threats.

“Giuliani’s statements”, the lawsuit stated, “were calculated to — and did in fact — provoke outrage and cause Dominion enormous harm.” — Reuters

13 dead, thousands homeless in Africa after storm Eloise

JOHANNESBURG: The death toll from storm Eloise rose to at least 13 on Monday after heavy winds, rain and flooding destroyed buildings, drowned crops and displaced thousands in parts of southern Africa.

Eloise weakened from a cyclone to a tropical storm after making landfall in central Mozambique on Saturday, but continued to dump rain on Zimbabwe, eSwatini — formerly known as Swaziland — South Africa and Botswana.

Six people were killed in Mozambique, the country’s National Institute for Disaster Risk Management and Reduction (INGD) reported, while the

number of displaced people rose to more than 8,000, with thousands of homes wrecked or flooded.

A five-year-old child was killed in South Africa’s eastern Mpumalanga province after being swept away, said George Mthethwa, head of communications for the provincial department of cooperative governance and traditional affairs.

In neighbouring Limpopo, fast-flowing rivers destroyed a makeshift bridge, leaving people hoping to cross stranded on either side. Others waded through the knee-high flood waters.

The death toll stood at two



An image taken from an TV video shows fallen utility poles in a street of the port city of Beira after Tropical Cyclone Eloise hit Mozambique. — AFP

in eSwatini, according to police. Three people had been reported killed in Zimbabwe and one in Madagascar.

“Rainfall is starting to ease off slowly”, said Puseletso Mofokeng, senior forecaster at the South African Weather Service, adding there was still a risk of localised flooding as more rain was expected on saturated ground.

Zimbabwe’s national water authority also warned that dams were spilling over and could cause floods further downstream.

Following Cyclone Idai in 2019, rainwater flowed from Zimbabwe back into Mozambique causing

devastating floods. Over 1,000 people died across the region, with the impoverished coastal nation bearing the brunt.

Eloise struck an area still recovering from that devastation and already flooded in parts.

Evacuations, warnings and higher community awareness have led to a much lower death toll, but some temporary camps, where evacuees were taken, have been cut off.

Sergio Dinoi, head of the advisory team in Mozambique for the UN’s humanitarian arm, said groups were venturing out, in some cases via boat, on Monday to assess the damage. — Reuters

RIGA

New govt in Estonia after PM’s resignation

Estonia has a new government coalition in place, a week-and-a-half after prime minister Juri Ratas resigned in connection with corruption allegations against his Centre party. The liberal, pro-business Reform party of opposition leader Kaja Kallas, who was tasked with forming a new government, signed a coalition agreement with the Centre party in Tallinn.

The alliance comes with a majority of 59 out of 101 seats in parliament. The 43-year-old



Kallas, a lawyer and daughter of former EU commissioner Siim Kallas, can now become the country’s first female prime minister if the parliament votes in her favour. — dpa

THE HAGUE

Dutch PM condemns ‘criminal violence’

Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte condemned “criminal violence” after protesters against a coronavirus curfew went on the rampage in several cities. Police arrested around 250 people after using water cannon and tear gas during demonstrations in Amsterdam, Eindhoven and other towns on Sunday, local media said.

The rioters looted shops, burned cars and torched a coronavirus testing station after the country’s first curfew since



World War II took effect late Saturday. “It’s unacceptable. All normal people will regard this with horror”, Rutte told reporters.

MOSCOW

Putin calls pro-Navalny marches illegal

Russian President Vladimir Putin condemned weekend protests demanding the release of jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny as dangerous and illegal, as the opposition politician’s allies said they planned a similar protest for Sunday.

Police detained more than 3,700 people and used force to break up rallies across Russia on Saturday as tens of thousands of protesters ignored extreme cold and police warnings to demand Navalny be freed from



jail where he is serving out a 30-day stint for alleged parole violations he denies. Putin, who avoids mentioning Navalny by name, told students that nobody should use illegal protest action to further their own political interests. — AFP

The enterprising mynas...

The birds wake you up every day with excitement at the first rays of the sun charged for the day filled with opportunities to find food and feed their young ones.

We often wake up with silent thoughts at times scanning through the dreams, on other days reflecting on yesterday, on most of the days probably thinking about things to do and we cannot rule out worrying either.

But look at the birds — they wind down their day with the sun and begin with its rising. They have learnt to innovate too. There is a pair of mynas at the Qurum traffic light who have learnt the intricate details about the traffic lights. They have learnt that vehicles wait for certain duration and this is their opportunity. They fly down and calmly walk on the road picking on whatever is edible that has popped out from vehicles or they could be dead insects from the windscreen. When the drivers raise their engine to move as the traffic lights change the mynas fly up to perch on the signboards and at times on the traffic lights until the next set of vehicles stop again.

They are even happier when the open trucks arrive because there is so much more to explore in trucks. Mynas are considered territorial at the same time aggressive and most significantly



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intelligent birds. They have adapted themselves to the urban environment and in the process incorporated roads and traffic lights into their lives. They probably have their nests nearby the gardens or won't be surprised if they have their home located somewhere under the Qurum flyover.

If birds can adapt, why not us, humans?

I am sure the mynas had noticed the lockdown and how we had slowed down in our traffic as most of us were working from home. There might have been fewer insects on the road and the limited number of open trucks that went by in those ten months. The mynas must be really pleased that everything is back to normal. They have after all opted to stay away from their normal environment.

How did they come up with the idea?

Mynas feed on insects and fruits and this pair has adapted to the city life but it is the appearance of the dead insects that probably gave them the hint to settle on this site. A few minutes wait at the traffic lights by the vehicles at regular intervals gives them enough time to clean the surface of the road by finding their food. They are calm while they are at it indicating that they have un-

derstood humans at traffic lights. They successfully saw the opportunity and converted it from potential to reality.

In the new norms when people are just picking up pieces after the struggle with the pandemic and its impact on the economy, which has brought in the next challenge with a new strain of COVID-19. While we fight uncertainties at different levels let us learn from the mynas to think differently and be bold with an understanding of the environment, conditions and possibilities and most importantly accepting the situation.

The mynas thought outside the box, it seems their instincts carry logic gathered and absorbed for generations.

We on the other hand seem to always think of the problems first and somehow manage to connect with fear and only when it is left with no choice do we decide to jump out of the comfort zone.

There must be new opportunities lying here and there just waiting to be explored. It is time to evolve and adapt. Entrepreneurship in 2021 means to choose a field one has flair in and has confidence in executing the work that is needed on his/her own. Many businesses decided to wind up due to the losses they incurred while many of them are trying to make a comeback.

RISING FRUSTRATION

Brazil's rocky start on vaccinations fuels public ire

VALERIA PACHECO

Brazil's newly launched vaccination campaign against COVID-19 has gotten off to a late and rocky start — as the country is hammered by a second wave of the disease, it is already close to running out of vaccine, syringes and other vital equipment, according to scientists who blame the government of Jair Bolsonaro.

The campaign only began on Monday in the country of 212 million, weeks after the United States and European countries launched their vaccination programmes. The late rollout, hampered by short supplies, has sparked growing public ire, with widespread complaints about people being vaccinated out of turn.

Thousands of people in several cities mounted protests this weekend demanding Bolsonaro's ouster.

The inoculation drive so far involves six million doses of the CoronaVac vaccine from China's Sinovac, and two million of the British AstraZeneca-Oxford jab, which arrived last Friday after several delays from India where they are

made. The Butantan Institute in Sao Paulo, associated with Sinovac, has also received authorisation for another 4.8 million doses of CoronaVac.

But no sooner had the vaccination programme begun than professionals sounded the alarm about delays.

Any interruption in the supply chain could bring the vaccination programme to a sudden halt

ISABELLA BALLALAI
Vice-President of SBIM

This comes at a time when the pandemic has been surging, claiming more than 1,000 lives a day and more than 215,000 to date, second only to the US total of over 415,000.

Any interruption in the supply chain could bring the vaccination programme to a sudden halt, according to Isabella Ballalai, vice-president of the Brazilian Society for Immunology (SBIM).

She denounced what she called "the incompetence of the Health Ministry" and said greater transparency is needed to restore public confidence.

Bolsonaro, who has long played down the seriousness of COVID-19, on Friday cast doubt on the effectiveness of vaccines. The government acknowledged this month that it lacked 30 million syringes for the first phase of its national plan, which aims — over an unclear timeline — to immunise 50 million people.

On top of the distribution challenges in this vast country, complaints have arisen in several cities about people getting vaccinated even when not in a priority group.

In Manaus, the capital of Amazonas state, where hospitals are overflowing with Covid patients and oxygen supplies are critically short, the outcry of complaints led to a 24-hour suspension of vaccinations.

The Butantan Institute has said it expects eventually to be able to produce 40 million doses of the CoronaVac; the Fiocruz foundation, which has links to the Health Ministry, is supposed to produce the AstraZeneca vaccine but has warned of supply chain problems. Many experts attribute the delays to Bolsonaro's frequent criticism of the CoronaVac vaccine, which they say has offended the Chinese. The only explanation, said Margareth Dalcolmo, a pulmonologist and researcher at Fiocruz, is "absolute negligence, the diplomatic incompetence of Brazil." — AFP

BETTER LIVELIHOODS

Pakistan pins big hopes on small dams to beat drought

IMRAN MUKHTAR

For years, Nangji Mal struggled to scrape together a living growing pulses and pearl millet on his farm in Nagarparkar, a desert area in Pakistan's south-eastern Sindh province.

But these days his land is lush and fertile, after the government constructed new water-harvesting dams nearby.

Using irrigation water from one of the small dams, Mal is growing onions, wheat and other crops on his 40-acre plot and says he has seen his income increase more than 60 per cent.

"It had never occurred to me that I might be able, in my lifetime, to earn a handsome amount from my fields, but this reservoir has made it all possible," Mal, 59, said.

Pakistan, a nation of about 220 million people, faces increasing water scarcity driven by worsening climate-related drought and an agriculture industry that is pushing itself to meet the demands of a growing population, say water experts. Less than 20 per cent of the water the country's farmers use for irrigation is captured rainwater, with most coming from ground and surface water, according to a paper published in 2020 by a group of agricultural and environmental researchers.

The Sindh provincial government hopes the new rainwater harvesting dams will not only provide farmers with a reliable water supply but also help recharge groundwater levels, as some of the water from the dams sinks into the earth, said Murtaza Wahab, environment adviser to the chief minister of Sindh. Since construction started six



A motorcyclist rides on the Kowardu suspension bridge over the Indus River on the outskirts of Skardu on Tuesday. — AFP

THE PLAN IS TO
BUILD AT LEAST 23
MORE IN THE NEXT
TWO OR THREE
YEARS

years ago, the provincial government has built 60 small rainwater-fed dams — each with an average storage capacity of 100,000 gallons — in the remote drought-hit areas of Nagarparkar and Kohistan, Wahab added. The plan is to build at least 23 more in the next two or three years, he said.

Wahab noted that because those areas have such scattered populations, there are no reliable figures on how many people are benefiting from the new dams. Mal said the dam in his area has transformed his farm, as he can

now use water from it year-round to irrigate his crops.

In Tharparkar, the district where Mal's farm is located, the average annual rainfall can be as low as 9 mm and the area frequently experiences drought, according to international charity WaterAid.

"(Before) my farming was on a very small scale, really not enough to meet my expenses, as it was all dependent on only rainwater throughout the year," the farmer said.

— Thomson Reuters Foundation.

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CHELSEA SACK LAMPARD AFTER NEW YEAR SLUMP

LONDON: Chelsea dismissed manager Frank Lampard after 18 months in charge on Monday after the man at the heart of much of their greatest success as a player failed to deliver as coach despite spending over 200 million pounds in the summer transfer window.

Former Paris St Germain manager Thomas Tuchel is the favourite to replace Lampard, British media reported.

Lampard, who led the club to a top-four finish and the FA Cup final in his managerial debut 2019-20 campaign, leaves with Chelsea ninth in the Premier League after a run of five defeats in eight league games.

Lampard, a former midfielder who won three Premier League titles and the Champions League and is the club's record scorer, becomes the 12th Chelsea manager to be fired since Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich took over in 2003.

The 42-year-old was hired in 2019 following a stint with Championship (second-tier) club Derby County and won praise last season, giving several youngsters a chance, after inheriting a squad that could not be strengthened due to a Fifa-enforced transfer ban which was eventually lifted.

His dismissal was criticised by former England international Gary Lineker.

"Utterly ludicrous after his first bad run," Lineker said on Twitter.

Former Liverpool and England striker Michael Owen described the decision as "madness".

"Absolutely staggering decision from Chelsea to sack Frank Lampard," Owen said. "Where do you begin? Against the odds made top four last season and qualified impressively to the knockout stages of the Champions League this season. Bought some good players who will settle in given time. Madness. I'm convinced there's been plenty of politics going on

in the background for some time at Chelsea. Hardly a surprise as it's always been that type of club."

Lampard beat off strong opposition to sign some of the game's most sought-after emerging talents in the close season but most have struggled to make an impact.

The biggest outlay was for German duo Kai Havertz (71 million pounds) and Timo Werner (50 million euros) but both have remained somewhat peripheral. Werner has worked hard enough and could yet develop into a top Premier League player but after a bright early few weeks, little has gone right for him - topped off by having a penalty saved near the end of Sunday's win over Luton.

Havertz has made almost no impact, leaving fans checking if he really cost that much. Moroccan Hakim Ziyech (38 million pounds) has also failed to establish himself after an injury-hit first season.

Ben Chilwell (50 million pounds) has also failed to bring the attacking verve that elevated him to the England team.

SMALL PLAYERS

Alongside Mason Mount and Christian Pulisic, Lampard seems to have decided to rely for his creativity on a collection of small, lightweight players, hoping their skill would flourish amid the physicality of the Premier League.

When the team ran to join lanky striker Tammy Abraham in celebrating his hat-trick on Sunday he looked like a teacher surrounded by primary school boys at playtime.

Torn between trying to give the new men game but needing to find someone to actually create and finish chances, Lampard has never been able to settle on a preferred lineup and seemed to rely almost entirely on Mount and full back Reece James to create chances.

His best signing was probably Thiago Silva on a free transfer.

— Reuters



WHAT THEY SAID

Reactions to sacking of Lampard

"This was a very difficult decision for the Club, not least because I have an excellent personal relationship with Frank and I have the utmost respect for him. He is a man of great integrity and has the highest of work ethics. However, under current circumstances we believe it is best to change managers."

Chelsea owner
ROMAN ABRAMOVICH

"Utterly ludicrous after his first bad run. It was always going to need time given so many new signings feeling their way into a new club. Patience being a virtue is seldom recognised in this sport. They never learn."

Former England striker
GARY LINEKER

"It took him a little bit too long to get his team playing the way he wanted it, and I think the price tag he had on it really was one of the crucial decisions for the club."

Former Chelsea defender
MARIO MELCHIOT

"Absolutely staggering decision from Chelsea to sack Frank Lampard. Where do you begin? Against the odds made top 4 last season and qualified impressively to the knockout stages of the Champions League this season. Bought some good players who will settle in given time. Madness."

Former England striker
MICHAEL OWEN

"I think the minute that the club spent the money that they did in the summer, and brought the players in that they brought in, it was always going to bring a lot more expectation and we know what happens at Chelsea with expectation."

Former England defender
GARY NEVILLE

"It saddens me. I thought he did an excellent job last season. I was rather hoping that the idol of the fans and Chelsea legend that he is, he'd get a longer shot than 18 months."

Crystal Palace manager
ROY HODGSON

"People talk about projects and ideas. They don't exist. You have to win or you will be replaced. I am not judging Chelsea's decision. I respect their decision. But our world is to win as much as possible."

Manchester City manager
PEP GUARDIOLA



Bale must battle to earn his Spurs, says Mourinho

Gareth Bale must earn his place in the Tottenham team on the training pitch and will not be picked so he can boost his match fitness, said manager Jose Mourinho. The 31-year-old Wales international is back at Spurs on a season-long loan deal from Real Madrid.



Korda tops Kang for LPGA win

Jessica Korda rolled in a 30-foot birdie putt at the first playoff hole to win the LPGA Tournament of Champions on Sunday, rallying from two shots down to beat Danielle Kang. Korda fired a five-under-par final round of 66 for a 24-under total of 260 at the Four Seasons Golf & Sports Club in Lake Buena Vista.

Sibley shines as England win second Test



GALLE, Sri Lanka: Dom Sibley scored an unbeaten half century as England chased down a target of 164 to secure a sweep of the series on Monday, beating Sri Lanka by six wickets in the second Test on a day of drama at Galle International Stadium.

England scored 164-4, with Sibley 56 not out and Jos Buttler unbeaten on 46 as they overcame jittery moments to complete a 2-0 series triumph.

The tourists overturned a 37-run deficit after the first innings to win a sixth successive Test in Sri Lanka. England earlier dismissed Sri Lanka for 126 in their second innings, giving themselves a confidence boost ahead of next month's start of a four-test series in India.

England's run chase began nervously as they lost their first four wickets for 89 runs, including a tired-looking Joe Root, with Sri Lanka's dangerous spinner Lasith Embuldeniya threatening with the new ball and taking three wickets for a match tally of 10.

But an unbeaten 75-run partnership between Sibley, who had previous failed with the bat on tour, and Buttler carried England home as they showed the

“I was pleased to be able to spend time at the crease and get the boys over the line

DOM SIBLEY
England batsman

application their hosts lacked in their batting.

“I was pleased to be able to spend time at the crease and get the boys over the line,” said Sibley.

England, who added only five runs to their overnight tally before being dismissed for 344, took just over a session to turn the match on its head as Dom Bess and spin partner Jack Leach claimed four wickets each in Sri Lanka's second innings.

Bess took 4-49 and Leach 4-59 as the home batting line-up was undone by the turn of the wicket and rash shots. It included a wild sweep from veteran Angelo Mathews as he was bowled by Bess for five, and a slog that was top-edged by captain Dinesh



Chandimal (9) and expertly caught by James Anderson off Leach.

“There are no excuses from us, we made mistakes and we were outplayed,” Chandimal said.

Embuldeniya, with a quickfire 40 off 42 balls, was the only home batsmen to make more than 20 and his 48-run ninth wicket partnership with Suranga Lakmal helped set England a tougher target.

But he was eventually dismissed off the part-time bowling of Root, who claimed another wicket with his next ball by bowling Asitha Fernando to wrap up the innings. Root finished with figures of 2-0 off 11 balls.

“It was great to come out on

top after losing the toss on a wicket that had us under pressure for much of the match,” said the England captain.

England won last week's first test by seven wickets in a victorious start to a year in which they will play 17 Test matches.

— Reuters

SCOREBOARD

Sri Lanka first innings:	381
England first innings	344
Sri Lanka second innings	
K Perera lbw Leach.....	14
L Thirimanne c Crawley b Leach	13
O Fernando c Crawley b Bess.....	3
A Mathews b Bess.....	5
D Chandimal c Anderson b Leach.....	9
N Dickwella c Lawrence b Bess.....	7
R Mendis c Buttler b Leach	16
D Perera c Crawley b Bess.....	4
S Lakmal (not out).....	11
L Embuldeniya c Bairstow b Root	40
A Fernando b Root	0
Extras (B-3, NB-1)	4
Total (35.5 overs, all out)	126
Fall of wickets: 1-19, 2-29, 3-37, 4-37, 5-47, 6-66, 7-70, 8-78, 9-126.	
Bowling: Anderson 2-0-6-0, Curran 2-0-9-0, Bess 16-1-49-4, Leach 14-1-59-4, Root 1-5-10-2.	
England second innings	
Z Crawley c Fernando b Embuldeniya	13
D Sibley (not out).....	56
J Bairstow lbw Embuldeniya	29
J Root b Mendis.....	11
D Lawrence c Dickwella b Embuldeniya ..	2
J Buttler (not out).....	46
Extras (LB-4, NB-3)	7
Total (43.3 overs, for 4 wkts)	164
Fall of wickets: 1-17, 2-62, 3-84, 4-89.	
Bowling: Embuldeniya 20-3-73-3, Perera 13-3-1-39-0, Mendis 10-0-48-1	



Sports minister meets with clubs' heads in Suhar

SUHAR: HH Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth, affirmed that the structuring and merging of culture, sport and youth sectors at the ministry will improve the work of clubs and help them deliver their community message.

It is also in line with the objectives of Oman Future Vision 2040 and contributes to better achievements at the international level.

This was stated at an enhanced meeting held by the minister of culture, sports and youth with heads of sports clubs in Suhar in North Al Batinah Governorate, on Monday.

HH Sayyid Theyazin affirmed during the meeting that the merger will result in clubs assuming more constructive roles in the three sectors since clubs constitute a significant place for cultural, sporting and youth activities.

The minister directed the heads of sports clubs to maximise their roles in various

activities, urging them to double their efforts in order to activate cultural and youth activities while committing to openness to the surrounding communities and adopting joint programmes that serve the social and environmental issues.

The minister noted that the new basic system of the sports associations will soon be finalised hoping that the elected sports associations will fulfil aspirations and contribute to developing sports in the Sultanate.

HH Sayyid Theyazin emphasized the roles of general meetings being the legal framework of the work of sports clubs.

He highlighted the importance of activating those roles calling sports clubs to pay attention to investments to enhance their financial resources.

He noted that there will be a dedicated department at the ministry to manage clubs' investments.

— ONA

Mazoon Up, Ghantoot, BSI, Y Horizon claim victories

MUSCAT: Muhammed Ali's superb 64 helped Mazoon Up to a 6-wicket victory against OCT Al Nahdha in an E Division T20 League game at Muscat Municipality ground 4 in Amerat on Friday.

Batting first, OCT Al Nahdha scored 138 for 5 thanks to Rafeeq Mohammed's vital 64 off 58. It took Mazoon only 14.4 overs to surpass the target, scoring 139 for 4 thanks to Ali's 40-ball knock. Nathar Pashambeh picked up 3 for 21.

Kamesh stars in Ghantoot win

In another E Division match, Kamesh Maharaja's unbeaten 67 off 32 steered Ghantoot Group to an exciting 36-run win over Sam Royals at Muscat Municipality ground 3.

Apart from Kamesh, Arumugam Kuppan was the



other notable scorer with 54 off 32. Ghantoot then bowled well to restrict Royal to 152 for 8 for a deserving victory. Arjun Rajesh

top-scored with a strokeful 51.

Sankit bats BSI to victory

Opener Sanket Cyril's splendid

65 was the highlight of BSI CT's 37-run victory against Team Coorg Muscat (TCM) in an F Division game at OAC 3 ground

OMAN CRICKET LEAGUE BRIEF SCORES

E Division

OCT Al Nahdha 138 for 5 in 20 overs (Rafeeq Mohammed 64 - 6x4, Fahad Mohamed 2-21, Ashfakh Chaikinakath 2-28) lost to Mazoon Up 139 for 4 in 14.4 overs (Muhammed Ali 64 - 8x4, Khader Mohammad 30 - 4x4, Nathar Pashambeh 3-21) by 6 wickets. Ghantoot Group 188 for 5 in 20 overs (Kamesh Maharaja 67 - 9x4, Arumugam Kuppan 54 - 8x4, 1x6, Shejeer Abdul 2-24) beat Sam Royals 152 for 8 in 20 overs (Arjun Rajesh 51 - 6x4, 2x6, Sinu Thankachan 35 - 2x4, Saravanan Manickam 3-59, Kirit Tandel 2-17) by 36 runs.

F Division

BSI 180 for 8 in 20 overs (Sanket Cyril 65 - 7x4, Fajes Mp 22 - 3x4, Prabakaran Ranganathan 3-22, Thimman Chola 2-27) beat Team Coorg Muscat (TCM) 143 for 5 in 20 overs (Poonacha Pattada 54 - 7x4, 1x6, Milind Bhujwala 32 - 2x4, Fajes Mp 2-33) by 37 runs. Y Horizon 182 for 6 in 20 overs (Rudhi Rasheed 81 - 8x4, 1x6, Thiru Mothilal 34 - 1x4, 1x6, Mohammad Ali 2-32) beat ACT Cricworld 116 all out in 19.3 overs (Dileep Chandran 35 - 6x4, Prashant Rana 3-18, Ashwinkumar Dave 3-23) by 66 runs.

in Seeb.

Chasing BSI's 181 to win, TCM could collect only 143 for 5 in 20 overs, Poonacha Pattada top-scoring with a fine 54.

Rudhi bats Y Horizon to easy win

In another F Division match,

Rudhi Rasheed struck a sizzling 81 to steer Y Horizon to an emphatic 66-run win over ACT Cricworld at OAC 3 ground.

Facing 183 to win, Cricworld failed to fight, getting bowled out for 116 in the final over. Prashant Rana and Ashwinkumar Dave claimed three wickets each.

BRILLIANT BRUNO SETTLES CUP CLASSIC

ANDY JALIL,
MANCHESTER, JAN 25

In terms of entertainment this pulsating match was a reversal of the dour, goalless draw last week in the Premier League. With a score-line of 3-2, Manchester United knocked Liverpool out of the FA Cup in the fourth round after Bruno Fernandes provided the winner with a wonderful, pinpoint free-kick 12 minutes before the final whistle.

United manager, Ole Gunnar Solskjaer, whose side has had a remarkable turnaround in form, said: "It's fantastic to win games over last year's champions. We played on our terms and we found a way the players believe in. We are getting stronger and stronger, we had the mentality to come back after being 1-0 down."

He added: "Look at the difference to six months back. We're getting better and winning tight games. The morale and confidence is very good. Everyone is elated and on a high. Today we had a positive selection and that's the statement to ourselves. It's a confidence boost that we can match the best with our style of football."

In this fast, all action match, it was Liverpool who took the lead in the 18th minute. Mo Salah slid between Luke Shaw and Victor Lindelof to reach a through ball from Roberto Firmino to execute a superb chip over the advancing goalkeeper. United didn't take long to equalise when eight minutes later Marcus Rashford received a pass from Donny von de Beek

and sent a great cross-field ball to Mason Greenwood for a low finish inside the far post.

Just three minutes into the second half, United were in front with Greenwood, this time, being the provider. Rookie defender Rhys Williams tried to intercept but missed his kick completely and Rashford finished to the left of Alisson for his 15th goal of the season.

Play continued at a furious pace from end to end, and the Liverpool equaliser came in the 59th minute. A sloppy pass from United's Edinson Cavani went to James Milner who found Roberto Firmino. The midfielder then fed Salah whose shot found the net, through Henderson's legs for his 19th goal of the season.

United's lead was restored by Bruno Fernandes who had come on as substitute and produced a superb free-kick from 20 yards in the 78th minute. His firm shot went to the left of the wall formed by Liverpool giving no chance to a surprised Alisson. Fernandes said: "I am happy because we won. I work a lot on these kinds of goals, free-kicks. Before the free-kick Cavani told me 'try it, try to put one on the side of the keeper', I tried and it went well."

Liverpool manager, Jurgen Klopp said: "If you want to win here you have to be on the absolute top form and we weren't. We can take things out of this game, which we have always done when we lost games, we will learn." He added: "It's not what we wanted so it's frustrating. But we made a lot of steps in the right direction."





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Oil prices down on signs of weaker demand market



A man checks the price of petrol at a petrol station in Tehran. — AFP

SINGAPORE: Oil prices slipped for a second straight session on Monday as renewed COVID-19 lockdowns raised fresh concerns about global fuel demand.

Brent crude futures for March fell 8 cents, or 0.1 per cent, to \$55.38 a barrel by 0717 GMT, while US West Texas Intermediate crude for March was at \$52.26 a barrel, down 1 cent.

“Signs of weaker demand weighed on the market,” ANZ analysts said, pointing to lockdowns in Hong Kong, China and possibly France as COVID-19 cases rise, restricting business activity and fuel consumption.

China reported a climb in new COVID-19 cases on Monday, casting a pall over demand prospects in the world’s largest energy consumer, the main pillar of strength for global oil consumption.

Last Friday prices came under further pressure after data from the US Energy Information Administration showed US crude inventories surprisingly rose by 4.4 million barrels in the week to January 15, versus expectations for a draw of 1.2 million barrels.

The number of oil and natural gas rigs added by US energy firms rose for a ninth week in a row in the week to January 22, but are still 52 per cent below this time last year, data showed. — Reuters

Duqm set to host Oman’s second biggest food industries hub

MULTIPURPOSE GATEWAY: Strategic decision by OPAZ bodes well for growth of food related investments, not limited to fisheries alone, in Duqm SEZ

CONRAD PRABHU
[@conradprabhu](https://twitter.com/conradprabhu)

A strategic move by Oman’s authorities to scale up a fisheries port and adjoining fish processing complex under construction at the Duqm Special Economic Zone (SEZ) into wider hub for all kinds of food industries, effectively paves the way for the establishment of a dedicated food cluster on the Sultanate’s southeastern coast.

A decision to this effect was adopted at the maiden meeting of the Board of Directors of the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ) late last year.

The Authority, which governs all of Oman’s SEZs and free zone developments, has since authorised a study to chart the way for the conversion of the fisheries port and fish processing park into a multipurpose gateway equipped to handle, in addition to fisheries, agro and meat produce as well.

Plans for the adjacent fish processing park will be similarly revamped to accommodate all kinds of food, agro and fisheries related investments.

Details about the emerging food cluster in Duqm have been outlined in the latest edition of *Duqm Economist*, the quarterly newsletter of OPAZ, issued earlier



Plans for the adjacent fish processing park will be similarly revamped to accommodate all kinds of food, agro and fisheries related investments.

this week.

When operational, in a phased manner, Duqm has the potential to replicate the model adopted by Sohar Port and Freezone, which currently hosts the country’s biggest food cluster anchored by an Agro Terminal on the waterfront.

A grain silo, flour mill and sugar refinery under various stages of completion and operation within the port are connected to a sprawling food cluster located in the adjoining free zone development.

But given Duqm’s proximity to some of the richest fishing grounds in the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean, fisheries-based investments are expected to take precedence.

Fisheries Development Oman (FDO), the wholly government-owned fisheries sector investment flagship — part of Oman Investment Authority (OIA) — has already taken the lead in kickstarting the growth of a fisheries hub at Duqm.

Its wholly owned subsidiary Al Wusta Fisheries Industries LLC is set to play a pivotal role as well.

FDO is heading a consortium of local and international companies that has signed a deal with OPAZ to develop, operate and manage the multipurpose port at Duqm.

A key partner in the joint venture is French-based Lorient Keroman SEM, a specialist in the management and operation of fish harbours. Al Wusta Fisheries

Industries and Oman Fisheries are partners as well.

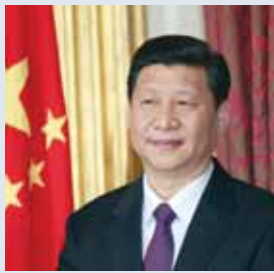
Total investment pledged by the consortium into the development of the multipurpose port is RO 50 million.

As the leading player in the development of the port and Food Industries Cluster, Al Wusta Fisheries Industries is currently formulating a strategy to enhance food-related investment inflows into Duqm.

The company has also committed to investing in a major fish processing plant on a 100,000 sq metre site within the cluster. Authorities also see the potential for food shipments to be airfreighted to international markets via Duqm Airport.

Excellent road connectivity between the SEZ and the airport will ensure that chilled and frozen agro, fish and meat products can be ferried to a modern air cargo terminal at the airport for temporary storage before they are loaded onto air-freighters.

Xi calls for greater role for G20 in global economic governance



BEIJING: China’s President Xi Jinping (pictured) on Monday called on the world to strengthen macroeconomic policy coordination and bolster the role of the G20 in global economic governance as he pointed to a “rather shaky” recovery from the coronavirus pandemic.

Speaking at a virtual meeting of the World Economic Forum — a gathering usually held in a Swiss ski resort — Xi said the global economic outlook remained uncertain and public health emergencies “may very well recur” in future.

Xi, making his first appearance at the forum since his vigorous defence of free trade and globalisation in an address in Davos in 2017, struck a similar tone this time around, advocating multilateralism as the way out of current challenges in a roughly 25-minute speech.

“We should build an open world economy... discard discriminatory and exclusionary standards, rules and systems, and take down barriers to trade, investment and technological exchanges,” he said.

The G20 — an international forum grouping 19 of the biggest developed and emerging economies, plus the European Union — should be strengthened as the “main forum for global economic governance” and the world should “engage in closer macro-economic policy coordination”, Xi added.

The international community should be governed in accordance with rules and consensus reached by all countries, instead of by one or several issuing orders, he said, without naming the countries. — Reuters

Omani lenders report RO 39 million in total exposure to beleaguered Darvesh Group

NPLs: Capital Market Authority directs listed banks, NBFCs to disclose details of non-performing loans of struggling conglomerate

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 25

Omani banks and financial institutions have so far revealed direct and indirect exposure to the tune of RO 39 million to companies belonging to the embattled Darvesh Group, a multinational conglomerate with business interests in Oman, UAE,



India and a number of European and African countries.

It follows a directive issued by the Capital Market Authority (CMA) requiring all publicly listed lenders in the Sultanate to share details of their exposure to the struggling business house.

Darvesh Group’s interests in

the Sultanate include the well-known building materials firm Abou Nabil LLC, its associate Technovaa LLC, and Gulf Star Global LLC.

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Darvesh Group’s interests in the Sultanate include the well-known building materials firm Abou Nabil LLC, its associate Technovaa LLC, and Gulf Star Global LLC.

10 million in legacy outstanding direct exposure to Abou Nabil and RO 3.921 million to Technovaa LLC.

HSBC Bank Oman announced an exposure of RO 1.95 million to Abou Nabil and RO 0.82 million to Gulf Star Global. Bank Muscat said it had a total exposure of RO 3.1 million, which include RO 2.1

million to Abou Nabil and RO 1 million to another Darvesh Group member. Ahli Bank said it is owed RO 3.711 million by Abou Nabil and RO 2.588 million by Gulf Star.

National Bank of Oman (NBO) announced exposures totalling nearly AED 63 million (approximately RO 6.6 million) to Darvesh Group members Elegant Industries and Megastar Industries.

National Finance, a non-banking financing company, said it is owed a total of RO 6.342 million by group members Abou Nabil, Gulf Star LLC and Mega Muscat International LLC. Further disclosures are expected in the coming days.

Robotics: A historic leap and an every-day solution



ANAS ABDUL-HAIY

In a train of thought trailing back to 2002, one cannot help but come across iRobot's Roomba, a vacuum cleaning robot and one of our first encounters with machines performing human tasks. Since then, robotics has come a long way, with its growth trajectory moving at a speed we never imagined possible. Looking back, we have visited the idea of a robot takeover in science fiction myth, with films and novels envisioning a future where robots could speak, walk, react and even feel. Interestingly, this is a description of the world we live in today; we have arrived at the future poets and writers once equated with fiction. How real is

this 'futuristic now' in reality? Does the word 'future' describe progress or growth, with timelines and deadlines predicting smart cities due within time periods that are not long enough to even be fragments of history? The future is now; it happens every day. For humanity, technology catapulted the human lifestyle and changed it drastically. For robotics, Artificial Intelligence reduced myths and legends into real physical experiences. Robots have emerged from tech labs onto the forefront of business. We no longer have to wait for the general masses to interact with robots; they do it every day when they perform simple tasks such as calling their bank. In the region, one leading bank has adopted a Chatbot, automated to respond to repetitive client inquiries, and reducing human workload. This is only the tip of the

Looking back, we have visited the idea of a robot takeover in science fiction myth, with films and novels envisioning a future where robots could speak, walk, react and even feel

iceberg when it comes to what robotics is doing for the world. Robotics falls perfectly into a puzzle of technological leaps we have made in the past twenty years, all leading to new heights for humanity; discovering new depths in the oceans and never-before-seen territories in space to developing smart cities like NEOM, a planned area in Saudi Arabia set to feature the latest, most jaw-dropping technologies. Today, Proven Arabia is in the process of marketing humanoid robots that might be filling in typically human spots. One such semi-humanoid robot is capable of reading human emotions and reacting accordingly. His programmed social skills

can place him as a host from spaces ranging from dinner parties to hospital reception areas. This checks the hospitality box, a field of work that requires years of experience and special skills from a human perspective. The business-minded would have been sceptical perhaps five years ago, but today an opportunity like a robot can mean a great customer experience and a chance to cut long-term costs like monthly salary and social insurance. Furthermore, robotics is entering the education field in two very different ways. As a teacher's assistant, humanoid robots can co-host classes, engage students and share exciting inputs that

might be repetitive from a human perspective. For example, NAO, a programmable humanoid robot can be incorporated in storytelling, history or geography classes. This adds excitement and engagement in the classroom. Another way robotics is being incorporated in education is by including it in the curriculum. Robotics is a practical science that students can learn about and apply, as well as grow with. As a school subject, robotics can help educate and inform about an array of fields, such as mechanics, physics, math and engineering; and this one class can develop into a university major given its rapid growth as an industry, providing jobs for millions. Finance, a fast-growing field fueled by the latest technology, is using robotics to provide a digital workforce to match and validate data and submit finalised reports into document management

systems. Other applications are using RPA (Robotic Process Automation) to automatically settle trades and confirm allocation, a time-consuming process formerly performed manually. RPA bots are also found in finance transferring verified data into systems. Verification of licenses and identification has now become a much easier and much more productive process thanks to robotics. The process now digitizes documents and uses native optical character recognition to save time and effort. It is evident that robotics has become part of our everyday lives. From using a simple vacuum cleaner to building a smart city, there has been a massive shift in the way activities are performed, ranging from simple to complex world-building. (The author is Director and Deputy CEO at Proven Consult)

Oman LNG, UTAS ink deal



BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 25

Oman LNG signed an agreement with the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS) to support the provision of certified training opportunities for 200 instructors and students on cybersecurity. The agreement translates the company's bold commitment towards supporting and nurturing local talents and skills. The agreement was signed by Dr Saeed al Rubaie, President of the University of Technology and Applied Sciences, and Harib al Kitani, Chief Executive Officer of Oman LNG. Dr Al Rubaie said: "We extend our warmest gratitude and appreciation to Oman LNG for their funding and contribution to this project. Through this project, we target enhancing the readiness of our students in cybersecurity-related majors to compete with international and local labour markets. Such partnerships assist us in achieving our goal of having a joint co-operation whose

scientific and cognitive benefits accrue to students, faculty members and technicians. Cybersecurity has become a basic requirement and a renewed skill needed by students and all workers in the educational institutions alike. In the future, the university looks forward to expanding areas of cooperation with companies and relevant authorities to contribute effectively to achieving the priorities and objectives of the Oman Vision 2040." Harib al Kitani, CEO of Oman LNG, said: "We are delighted to collaborate with the University of Technology and Applied Sciences on this initiative to nurture local talents and boost skills development. We have great plans to further develop our ICV portfolio with initiatives we supported recently, and plan for many to come. Through such initiatives, we reflect our robust commitment towards supporting the youth by developing their career capabilities and partnering with different academic institutions."

Attackers use COVID-19 vaccine lures to spread malware

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 25

Enterprise security specialist Proofpoint has observed the use of COVID-19 in broad-scale social engineering attacks leading to malware, credential phishing, and business email compromise (BEC) since the beginning of the pandemic. COVID-19 themes are consistent with current events throughout this healthcare crisis and while initially, those lures were around the virus's existence, those then turned to ancillary lures such as medical supply shortages. As anticipated, Proofpoint researchers observed more attacks that leverage the COVID-19 vaccine news, such as approvals of the vaccine by world governments, logistics of vaccine deployment, and distribution of the vaccine to frontline responders and other individuals. Given the hype around the COVID-19 vaccines topic, there is also an expected rise of email-borne attacks spreading malware, phishing, and BEC. These exemplify abuse of popular brands such as WHO, DHL, and vaccine manufacturers delivered to users in organisations



located in the United States, Canada, Austria, and Germany. The lure themes leveraged a range of topics, including the fear that a person had encountered an infected individual; government vaccine approvals and economic recovery fueled by the vaccine; as well as sign up forms to receive the vaccine, information updates, and vaccine shipment delivery. From December 1 to December 15, 2020, Proofpoint observed a large BEC campaign with thousands of emails spoofing executives and attempting to illicit the recipient's support in a bogus merger and/or acquisition. These emails targeted various personnel in roles such as Vice President, General Manager, and Managing Director in the United States and projected that COVID-19 vaccines would fuel the world's economic recovery. In this medium-sized campaign (hundreds of messages), threat actors began delivering messages on January 1, 2021, over four days, targeting dozens of different industries in the United States and Canada. The emails urged the potential victims to click a link to "confirm their email to receive the vaccine". The goal of this phishing campaign was to steal Office 365 login credentials (email and password). This campaign was notable because it capitalised on the recent government approval of

vaccines and the rush to receive it. The campaign also abused the brands of COVID-19 vaccine manufacturers as the lure in some of the emails. On January 11, Proofpoint researchers observed another small (under 100 emails) BEC email campaign. The emails targeted various industries in the United States. This campaign is another excellent example of BEC actors picking vaccine lures in an attempt to exploit their targets. This specific email only mentions the COVID-19 vaccine meeting in passing; however, it adds urgency—a common BEC technique—to the follow-up request: "Please give me your personal number?." This attempts to increase the stress by giving the recipient less time to think about their response and allowing the attacker to pivot outside of a protected ecosystem. On January 12, 2020, Proofpoint observed a medium-sized email campaign targeting many industries in the United States. The email contained an attachment which included an embedded executable file which, if run by the user, drops and runs the AgentTesla keylogger.

PRESS RELEASES

MAKE ROOM FOR MORE DATA WITH OOREDOO'S MONTHLY INTERNET ADD-ON

Continuing to give its customers more of what they want, Ooredoo is offering extra bonus data absolutely free with RO 5 and RO 10 monthly Internet add-ons. Valid until April 3, prepaid users can unlock up to 4GB of bonus data to enjoy on all their favourite social media apps. The best part is, users can subscribe as many times as they like. It's all part of Ooredoo's commitment to enriching its customers' digital lives. Ooredoo's popular Shababiah prepaid plans provide the perfect mix of flexibility and convenience, with a choice of add-ons to fit all communications needs. Purchase an add-on quickly and easily through the Ooredoo Oman App, or activate by dialling *555*23# for RO 5 or *555*26# for RO 10.



KR GROUP ADDS ICONIC WATCHES BRAND TITAN TO ITS LIFESTYLE PORTFOLIO

Known for bringing leading brands from around the world to Oman's discerning consumers, Khimji Ramdas has announced its partnership with the iconic Indian watches brand — Titan. Under the partnership, Khimji Ramdas will house watches from Titan and its popular mass brand, Fastrack, across its retail stores network. Recognised as one of the largest and most trusted watch brands in India, Titan is widely known for transforming the watch industry in India and for shaping India's retail market by pioneering experiential retail, to cater to a wide segment of consumers. Sachin Malhotra, Chief Operating Officer - Lifestyle Cluster at Khimji Ramdas, said, "We are delighted at the addition of India's iconic watch brand, Titan, to Khimji's Lifestyle portfolio in Oman. Being entrenched in the Sultanate's



premium lifestyle space through our extensive distribution network, Khimji Lifestyle is uniquely positioned to sell leading global labels that resonate with our versatile service and product offerings."

BEST CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE AT BANKDHOFAR'S SALALAH INDUSTRIAL BRANCH

With the aim of providing top-of-the-line experience to its customers, BankDhofar has opened its revamped Salalah Industrial branch. The new branch translates BankDhofar's vision to provide unparalleled customer experience through its various channels.



On the launch of the new branch, Talib Mohammed al Hajri (pictured), Acting AGM & Head of Distribution Network, at BankDhofar noted: "At BankDhofar, customers' satisfaction is our priority, thus, we exert our efforts to enrich their banking experience through various touchpoints. Our new branches, which are customer-centric, guarantee the best experience for our customers from the moment they step into the branch."



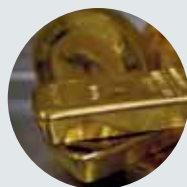
Rouble firms, recouping some losses

The Russian rouble firmed on Monday, recouping some losses sustained on Friday when geopolitical risks sent the currency spiralling to a near one-month low. — Reuters



Indian shares rise as stocks shine

Indian shares rose on Monday after ending the previous session lower, boosted by gains in banking and finance stocks in an upbeat Asian market. — Reuters



Gold recovers from sharp decline

Gold prices rose on Monday, recovering from a sharp decline in the previous session, as investors hoped that a economic stimulus would revive the economy of US. — Reuters

US oil refiners set for worst quarter earnings

NEW YORK: US refiners are girding for a painful slate of fourth-quarter earnings, reflecting the pressure of rising crude prices, weak demand due to renewed Covid-19 travel restrictions, and higher costs of associated with blending of renewable fuels into their products.

Seven US independent refiners are projected to post an average earnings-per-share loss of \$1.51, down from a loss of \$1.06 in the third quarter of 2020, according to IBES data from Refinitiv.

Both Credit Suisse and Tudor Pickering Holt cut lowered the price estimates of every US independent refiner for the fourth quarter.

“[This] would mark the weakest quarter of the year”, said Matthew Blair, analyst at Tudor Pickering Holt and Co. In the fourth quarter, independent refiners including Marathon Petroleum, Valero Energy and Phillips 66 coped with uneven demand due to a resurgence of coronavirus cases worldwide.

Consumption of liquid fuels globally is estimated to have fallen by 9 million barrels per day in 2020, according to the US Energy Information Administration.

Crude oil benchmarks rallied more than 20 per cent in the quarter, which squeezed US refining margins to less than \$10 a barrel on average — the threshold for which most refiners make



Crude oil storage tanks are seen in an aerial photograph at the Cushing oil hub in Cushing, Oklahoma. — Reuters

money — for the majority of the fourth quarter.

Meanwhile, tougher restrictions on socialising and businesses clamped down on traffic in states like California, the most populous US state and one of the largest driving markets in the world.

Travel on US roads fell by 11 per cent in November from the year-ago period, after a 9 per cent drop in October, according to the

US Transportation Department.

Lockdowns in various European countries suppressed international flights and jet fuel demand in the quarter.

Delta Airlines’ refinery in Trainer, Pennsylvania, in early January posted a \$102 million refining segment loss in the fourth quarter, and a \$441 million loss on third party fuel sales.

In the fourth quarter, refiners also had to pay more for US

renewable fuel credits, which reached a three-year high earlier this month. The cost for Renewable Identification Numbers — the credits used for compliance with US biofuels blending laws — increased by 47 cents per barrel from the third quarter due to rising ethanol and biodiesel prices.

Refiners are required, by law, to blend biofuels into their gasoline pool, or pay up so others can do

Seven US independent refiners are projected to post an average earnings-per-share loss of \$1.51, down from a loss of \$1.06 in the third quarter of 2020, according to IBES data from Refinitiv

the same.

The pandemic has reduced blending activity generally, and as a result, fewer credits have been issued, increasing their costs.

Credit Suisse analyst Manav Gupta said Phillips 66 will lose \$1.16 per share in the quarter. He had originally anticipated a 30- per cent loss, but changed that due to lower refining earnings in the Gulf Coast, West

Coast and Midwest markets. “Sales will also see earnings down as crude price rose sharply quarter over quarter and lockdowns impacted volumes”, said Gupta in a note.

US refining margins started to improve around the holiday season, and were around \$12.50 per barrel. Refining rates rose last week to their highest since March, government data showed.

However, at about 80 per cent of capacity, refiners are producing approximately 2 million fewer barrels than at the same time last year. — Reuters

Samsung chief will not appeal jail term



SEOUL: The de facto chief of South Korea’s Samsung business empire will “humbly accept” the court ruling that sentenced him to 2.5 years in prison for corruption and will not appeal, his lawyer said.

Lee Jae-Yong (pictured), Vice-Chairman of Samsung Electronics, the world’s biggest smartphone and memory chip maker, was found guilty of bribery and embezzlement in connection with the scandal that brought down former president Park Geun-Hye.

The Seoul Central District Court jailed him in a retrial last week.

But the decision not to appeal could mean that Samsung is looking to draw a line under the issue: with time already served, Lee will be eligible for parole as soon as September — as long as prosecutors do not successfully appeal for a longer sentence.

“Vice-chairman Lee will humbly accept the ruling and has decided not to appeal”, his lawyer Lee In-jae said in a statement. The 52-year-old was first jailed for five years in 2017, after Park’s ouster.

He walked free the following year when an appeals court dismissed most of his bribery convictions and gave him a suspended sentence, but the Supreme Court later ordered Lee to face a retrial. — Reuters

Saudi sovereign fund to double assets to \$1.07tn

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia’s Public Investment Fund plans to double its assets to 4 trillion riyals (\$1.07 trillion) by 2025, Prince Mohammed bin Salman said on Sunday, a move that would make it one of the world’s biggest sovereign wealth funds.

The fund would invest 3 trillion riyals in new sectors over the next 10 years, said the prince. A new five-year plan would

make the fund “the leading catalyst for Saudi Arabia’s economic transformation and diversification”, the prince added in a speech on state TV.

The prince has long pushed the Public Investment Fund as a central plank in his plan to find ways of driving growth while weaning the economy off its dependence on oil. Crude exports still account for more than half the kingdom’s income. — Reuters

Green bond issuance hit new record

LONDON: Global green bond issuance reached a record high of \$269.5 billion by the end of last year and could reach \$400-\$450 billion this year, a report by the Climate Bonds Initiative (CBI) showed on Monday.

Green bonds are a growing category of fixed-income securities that raise capital for projects with environmental benefits, such as renewable energy or low-carbon transport.

Although issuance reached a new record in 2020, the figure was just above 2019’s total of \$266.5 billion as issuance slowed in the second quarter due to the effects of the coronavirus crisis before rebounding in the third quarter.

“The impact of Covid-19 in 2020 proved a huge economic and social negative. In that context, the resilience of green finance markets led to a record year of issuance”, the report said.



Workers install solar panels on a rooftop at a home in Palmetto Bay, Florida. — AFP

“2021 may enable a sustained resurgence”, the CBI added.

The CBI is a London-based non-profit which promotes investment in the low-carbon economy. — Reuters

BP’s oil exploration team swept aside in climate revolution

LONDON: Nothing escapes the winds of change now sweeping through BP, not even the exploration team that for more than a century powered its profits by discovering billions of barrels of oil.

Its geologists, engineers and scientists have been cut to less than 100 from a peak of more than 700 a few years ago, company sources said, part of a climate change-driven overhaul triggered last year by CEO Bernard Looney.

“The winds have turned very chilly in the exploration team since Looney’s arrival. This is happening incredibly fast”, a



BP’s Chief Executive Officer Bernard Looney gives a speech in central London, in this file photo. — Reuters

senior member of the team said.

Hundreds have left the oil exploration team in recent months, either transferred to help develop new low-carbon activities or laid off, current and former employees said.

The exodus is the starkest sign yet from inside the company of its rapid shift away from oil and gas, which will nevertheless be its main source of cash to finance a switch to renewables for at least the next decade.

Looney made his intentions clear internally and externally by lowering BP’s production targets and becoming the first oil major

CEO to promote this as a positive to investors seeking a long-term vision for a lower-carbon economy.

BP is cutting some 10,000 jobs, around 15 per cent of its workforce, under Looney’s restructuring, the most aggressive among Europe’s oil giants including Royal Dutch Shell and Total.

The 50-year-old, a veteran oil engineer who previously headed the oil and gas exploration and production division, aims to cut output by 1 million barrels per day, or 40 per cent, over the next decade while growing renewable energy output 20 fold.

Despite the changes, oil and gas will remain BP’s main source of revenue until at least 2030.

And Looney’s drive to reinvent BP has done nothing to boost its shares, which hit their lowest level in 25 years late in 2020 and dropped 44 per cent in the year, mostly over doubts whether it will be able to transform and make the profits it aims for.

The change marks the end of an era for exploration teams from Moscow and Houston to BP’s research headquarters in near London, with farewell gatherings held on Zoom in recent months, they added. — Reuters

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features



It's time to spy on Oman's night sky

Mohammed al Kamli has a degree in Geology with minor in Astronomy. Born and raised in Al Sharqiyah, his home is a few kilometres away from the Rimal Al Sharqiya (Wahiba Sands) where the night sky was his constant source of entertainment. It is his passion for stargazing that would propel him to buy his own gear to share his passion for the night sky and stargazing to people in Oman .. **P20**

INSIDE STORIES

CHANGING WORLD



SWEDISH ARCHAEOLOGISTS TAKE TO THE WAVES TO PROTECT BALTIC WRECKS

On a small boat on the choppy waters of Stockholm's archipelago, four maritime archaeologists pulled on wetsuits and prepared to dive into the Baltic to survey a merchant ship that sank nearly 500 years ago... **Story on Page P19**

DISCOVERY



PRE-HISTORIC EUROPEANS USED BRONZE OBJECTS AS CURRENCY

Central Europeans of the Bronze Age used bronze rings, ribs and axe blades that were roughly standardised in their shape and weight as an early form of "euros", according to a new study... **Story on Page 18**

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THE SCORPION'S TAIL

BY DOUGLAS PRESTON AND LINCOLN CHILD

The second book in the Nora Kelly series. An FBI agent and an archaeologist identify a mummified corpse and its gruesome cause of death.

SCIENCE



GERMAN SCIENTISTS MAKE PARALYSED MICE WALK AGAIN

German researchers have enabled mice paralysed after spinal cord injuries to walk again, re-establishing a neural link hitherto considered irreparable in mammals by using a designer protein injected into the brain... **Story on Page 18**

HUMAN INTEREST



PUPPY LOVE: POOCH WAITS SIX DAYS OUTSIDE TURKISH HOSPITAL FOR SICK OWNER

A faithful dog waited for her owner outside a hospital in Turkey for almost a week until he was released after undergoing treatment for a brain condition. The small, mix-breed dog named Boncuk was rewarded for her loyalty with an emotional reunion when 68-year-old Cemal Senturk finally left the hospital in the northeastern city of Trabzon. Senturk was taken to hospital on Jan. 14 after a brain embolism, according to media reports.



The long-legged migrant waders that signpost a wetland eco-system

TEXT BY RAY PETERSEN
PHOTOS BY LENA PETERSEN

The Omani Lesser Flamingo their larger, less common, Greater Flamingo, and hundreds of other waders make their temporary homes in as places as diverse as Al Mughsayl, Bar Al Hikman, Khor Rori, Masirah Island, Muscat, Raysut, Qurayat, and Wadi Darbat along the shallow coastal waters and wetlands of the Sultanate through September and October, and their return journey in March and April. Like the giraffe, they bely their ungainly appearance and stature with the elegance and grace for which the animal kingdom compensates its 'ugly ducklings.'

The flamingo is probably the 'film-star' of the wetland's scene, but the Herons, Oystercatchers, Stilts, Cranes, Storks, Egrets, Cormorants and Spoonbills offer remarkable drawing power. Cormorants for example, may not be beautiful, but are graceful movers, Herons and Egrets for just two, are all put in the shade by the grace, elegance, and lazy economy of movement of the Flamingoes who socialise, come, and go with a remarkable lack of fuss, taking off with a fluidity that must be seen to be appreciated, while landing is done almost in slow-motion, and on tippy toes. They are incredibly beautiful to watch, and time passes quickly as you can get 'lost' in their comings and goings.

The colouring of the majestic flamingoes is diverse, not species oriented, but those with more of the fluorescent pink colour have greater carotene intake from their shrimp



and spirulina algae diet. They are quite delicate too in the feeding, as they agitate the mud and water around them with their broad webbed feet, and then filter the bugs, shrimps, and algae through their bills. A passive creature, the calm of the flock is only occasionally disturbed by fighting, but it tends to be very short-lived, and more 'spats' than bitter rivalry.

With significant breeding grounds in Africa, and traditional migration to South and South-East Asia every year as hundreds of species escape the cold, the Sultanate has become a welcome place, a haven for their annual migratory odysseys to Gujarat and



Rajasthan in India. The African breeding nurseries are under considerable ecological threat from industrial pollution in the form of heavy metal poisoning, and urban development, threatening the future of many of these species. Wetlands International said recently that surveys have demonstrated that the Omani wetlands and salt plains environments are exceptionally important environmental sites for these hundreds of bird varieties and deserve a sustainable management plan.

You will probably not see the lizards, snails, snakes, frogs, toads, of the tidal mangrove, rush, and seagrass salt flats, and lagoons of the Sultanate,



but they are there, mostly out of sight, if not out of mind, along with the shellfish, mussels, cockles, and oysters, the crabs, and crayfish, the worms, algae, and larvae, that all contribute to the ecological richness of the wetlands. You will also rarely see the fish life, but shads, eels, sole, flounders, carp, sand sharks, even tilapia and bream inhabit the shallows. The flies, nymphs, gnats, sandflies, and mosquitoes all contribute to the overall ecology. However, what you will see, in all its glory, is birdlife, and the long-legged, slim-shanked waders are not only interesting and elegant, but draw our attention, signpost, the remarkable ecosystems of the wetlands of Oman.

DISCOVERY

Pre-historic Europeans used bronze objects as currency



CENTRAL EUROPEANS of the Bronze Age used bronze rings, ribs and axe blades that were roughly standardised in their shape and weight as an early form of "euros," according to a new study. The paper by researchers at Leiden University in the Netherlands appeared in the journal *PLOS One* on Wednesday. Money is a defining aspect of modern life, and standardisation of currency is one of its key features. But since ancient people lacked precise forms of measurement, archaeologists had disagreed about whether bronze items discovered in "hoards" in modern-day

Germany, Austria, the Czech Republic and other places were a real currency, or just metal blocks for melting into other products. These objects date back to around 4,000 years ago, when Central Europeans lived in farming societies characterised by the use of bronze tools, weapons, armour, building materials and more. Lead author Maikel Kuijpers, an assistant professor in European Prehistory, said the research was based on a new methodology he had developed "that is more attuned to how people would weigh items in the Bronze Age." —**AFP**

SCIENCE

German scientists make paralysed mice walk again



GERMAN RESEARCHERS have enabled mice paralysed after spinal cord injuries to walk again, re-establishing a neural link hitherto considered irreparable in mammals by using a designer protein injected into the brain. Spinal cord injuries in humans, often caused by sports or traffic accidents, leave them paralysed because not all of the nerve fibres that carry information between muscles and the brain are able to grow back. But the researchers from Ruhr University Bochum managed to stimulate the paralysed mice's nerve cells to regenerate using a designer protein. "The special thing about our study is that the protein is not only used to stimulate those nerve cells that produce it themselves, but that it is also carried further (through the brain)," the team's head Dietmar Fischer told Reuters in

an interview. "In this way, with a relatively small intervention, we stimulate a very large number of nerves to regenerate and that is ultimately the reason why the mice can walk again." The paralysed rodents that received the treatment started walking after two to three weeks, he said. The treatment involves injecting carriers of genetic information into the brain to produce the protein, called hyper-interleukin-6, according to the university's website. The team is investigating if the treatment can be improved. "We also have to see if our method works on larger mammals. We would think of pigs, dogs or primates, for example," Fischer said. "Then, if it works there, we would have to make sure that the therapy is safe for humans too. But that will certainly take many, many years." — **Reuters**



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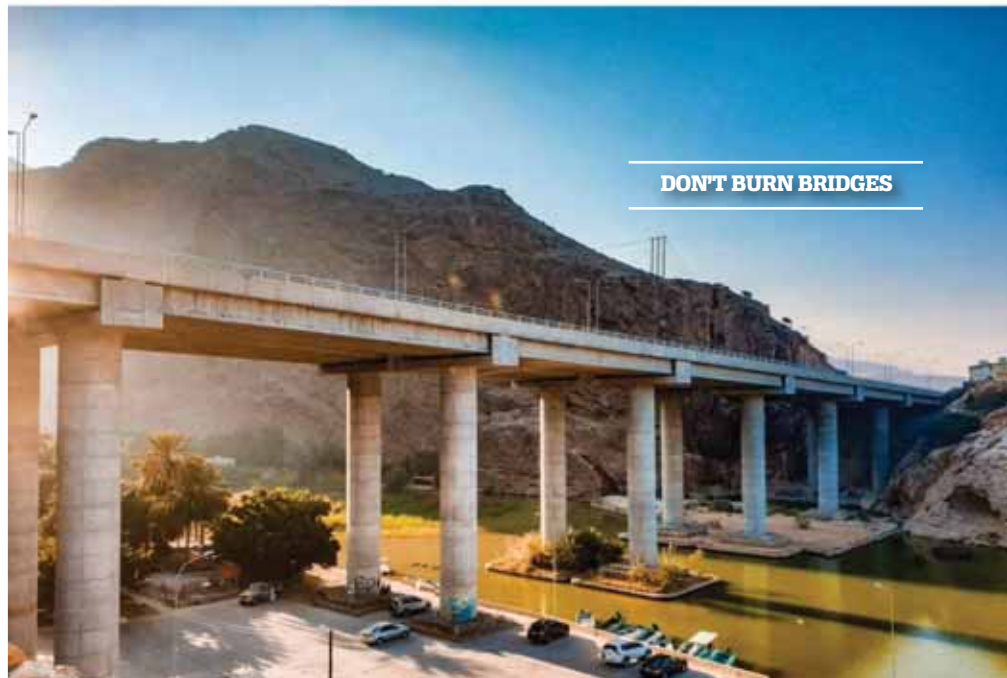
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CHANGING WORLD

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Swedish archaeologists take to the waves to protect Baltic wrecks

On a small boat on the choppy waters of Stockholm's archipelago, four maritime archaeologists pulled on wetsuits and prepared to dive into the Baltic to survey a merchant ship that sank nearly 500 years ago.

The team from Stockholm's National Maritime and Transport Museums are racing to protect wrecks along Sweden's Baltic coast from looting, which they say has been on the rise since 2017.

They have called in the navy, coast-guard and police since the spring to help document the wrecks, so they can monitor them more carefully for signs of interference.

Plunging into the murky waters, two divers descended to the preserved timbers 28 metres (92 feet) below, photographing items used by the sailors on the deck before resurfacing.

When the team discovered the wreck in 2017, they realised it could

Although the law forbids theft from wrecks like this near the waterside town of Dalaro, archaeologists believe the artefacts are being taken by collectors or put up for sale.

reveal long-lost historical details about the Baltic Sea trade that brought riches to the region.

But returning months later, one of the archaeologists, Jim Hansson, noticed that a three-legged cooking

pot left on the wreck where it had settled five hundred years before had vanished.

"I was cursing in my facemask down at 30 metres," the 47-year-old said as he sat drying out in his wetsuit on deck.

Although the law forbids theft from wrecks like this near the waterside town of Dalaro, archaeologists believe the artefacts are being taken by collectors or put up for sale.

"If everything is still there at the wreck, we can tell a story as close to reality as possible, because there are no books, sketches, blueprints on these things," Hansson said.

RICH MARITIME HERITAGE

Experts believe up to 20,000 shipwrecks lie on the floor of the Baltic Sea, many of them well preserved by its brackish waters, a mix of salt and freshwater.

In 1961, divers found the wreck of the Vasa, a magnificent 69-metre warship carrying 64 cannons, which had sunk on its

maiden voyage in 1628.

It was salvaged, put on display, and is now one of Sweden's most popular tourist attractions.

Then, last November, Hansson and his colleagues discovered a wreck they believe to be the Vasa's sister ship in the Stockholm archipelago.

They came across it as they searched for sites to feature in a new museum — the Museum of Wrecks — dedicated to the sea's underwater archaeological sites.

There have long been cases of looting in the area, and the archaeologists also noticed signs of recent interference with the wrecks as they began research for the museum in 2017.

They discovered that items such as porcelain and tableware were missing from at least four 17th-century wrecks in the archipelago — all of which require diving permits. Exploring further, they found items such as dive masks and knives left behind by the intruders.

From the beginning of the year, Hansson and his colleagues decided to step up their surveys of the wrecks, to chart more clearly if other divers had tampered with key sites.

After one dive on the merchant ship, Hansson and his colleagues gathered round a table below deck on their dive boat to check the latest 3D map of the site that they had produced.

Noting the untouched items — barrels of iron ore, the ship's beams — they satisfied themselves no one had interfered with the wreck.

And now they have a record for future use.

"We can come back and check... if people have been here looting or if natural causes have made the wreck

fall apart," said Patrik Hoglund, an archaeologist with the Maritime Museum.

HIGH-VALUE ARTEFACTS'

But the team has 1,500 kilometres (900 miles) of Sweden's Baltic Sea coast to watch, so Hansson organised a seminar in January 2020 to persuade the Swedish navy, coast-guard and police to help them.

Now the archaeologists are sharing the photos, videos and 3D maps of the wrecks they survey with the authorities so they too can track any changes to the sites.

So now, the coast guard uses its daily surveillance flights over the archipelago to monitor wreck sites for signs of unauthorised dive boats.

And Hansson and Hoglund travelled to a coastguard corvette moored in the archipelago to train a team of divers how to inspect a site.

They showed them a 3D model of a wreck on the seabed nearby — a 17th-century vessel known as the Bodekull. They realised someone had tampered with it when they noticed a serving bowl was missing.

A coastguard team headed out on a small launch to carry out the dives, dropping into the icy green water and descending to the wreck.

They relayed their observations to the surface by radio and photographed the site for future reference.

Their new tasks are unlike their usual work, said the corvette's commander, Patrik Dahlberg. But he added: "We understand the value, it feels meaningful."

It will be hard to deter all thieves, given the value of some of the artefacts, said Hansson.

"If there's money then people will try to take it, so our mission now is to try to have a better system with the navy, coast guard and police." — **AFP**



It's the perfect time to spy Oman's night sky

BY YERU EBUEN

It took less than a minute for him to find what he was looking for. With one eye on the narrow viewing scope of his Celestron EdgeHD 11" optical tube, he addressed the four people who joined the first batch of his Stargazing camp. "To the naked eye, we can see but a few of the brightest stars in this part of the sky. Using this HD telescope, you will learn and see that there are more stars in this small patch of darkness beyond what the naked eye can see", he said.

Mohammed al Kamli has a degree in Geology. Born and raised in Al Sharqiyah, his home is a few kilometres away from the Rimal Al Sharqiya (Wahiba Sands). Many of his fun childhood memories included different adventures in the desert and growing up in a time that Oman was just developing, he used to look up at the night sky and wondered what the universe was like.

He ended up taking a minor in Astronomy in college. At this time, he learned from some of the best minds and professors of Sultan Qaboos University.

After graduation, he worked for several years in the desert for one of Oman's biggest oil companies. In the darkness and silence of Oman's oil field, the night sky was his constant escape and entertainment. There were weeks when he has no access to the Internet. During those long nights, his passion for astronomy got even deeper.

It didn't take long when he left his job at the oil field and moved towards hospitality and tourist guiding. Fuelled by his desire to showcase Oman's night sky, he worked for Alila Jabal Akhdar as its in-house stargazing expert. It is here where he realized that there was so much more to learn about the night sky – from the legend and history of how they got their shapes to how they have constantly influenced the lives of humans even in the ancient times.

He asked the participants of the stargazing camp to look at the scope one after the other. Each one of them gave a deep gasp surprised that they knew so little. The session can take an hour or two depending on the interest of the participants. In that period, Mohammed moves from science to history, to legends with little tidbits of how Bedus or Omanis used the stars as reference.

He can talk for hours about Orion's belt, of how one can spot Polaris – the north star, or how one can tell which is south from the east basing only on the stars.

"This is how people in the past travelled. Without a compass or GPS,

it's hard for us to imagine how one can travel with such restrictions. Even the Bedus rely on this ancient knowledge and that is how they know where to go when they explore the vast desert", he said.

While still employed by Alila Jabal Akhdar, Mohammed has decided to buy his own gear. He opted for a Celestron that allowed him to spy into the sky 280 or more times than a regular telescope.

"You can see the creases on the moon. You can make out some of its landscape. You can spot some of the galaxies, one that we usually just see on TV", he said.

Mohammed is proud that Oman has some of the world's best stargazing spots.

"When you're doing stargazing, you need to have as little light pollution as possible. The desert of Oman's and the different mountains are well-suited for that", he said.

Oman has a decree that protects some areas from light pollution and for this, Mohammed was very thankful because it allowed people to see a different spectacle.

Aside from Mohammed, there are barely other fun stargazing camps in Oman. Telescopes like the one he has is really expensive, Mohammed decided that in his off-days, he organises camps or collaborate with hotels in the desert who wanted to give their guests a different experience.

His latest venture was a partnership with Sama Al Wasil Desert Camp that has made the right move of providing a different attraction for their guests. He currently has an agreement with them to do it every weekend while on weekdays, he is in Alila Jabal Akhdar.

"I'd like to do more of this, to let people in Oman have a different experience. For some of the Omanis, they can't seem to appreciate what a stargazing camp is all about. Many of them find it boring to peer through a telescope and stare at a night sky that they can see the stars already. I think in some way, I wanted to open their understanding especially the younger generations. I wanted them to look up a dark night sky and imagine far beyond what they can see", he said.

"The night sky has stories to tell and whether it's the moon or the star formations, they had been influencing human civilisation for a long time. We are blessed to be living in a country where we have access to this. I wanted to share that beauty to as many people as possible", he said.

To learn of Mohammed's stargazing schedule, follow him on Instagram at [@geoaastro_oman](#) or contact him at [+968 9289 4665](#).

