

World powers, Iran begin N-talks

European intermediaries began shuttling between Iranian and US officials in Vienna on Tuesday as they sought to bring both countries back into full compliance with the 2015 nuclear deal that Washington abandoned three years ago. Iran has steadily overstepped the accord's limits on its nuclear programme in response to Washington's withdrawal from the accord in 2018 and its reimposition of sanctions that have crippled the Islamic Republic's economy. **DETAILS ON P6**



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COMPETITION HEATS UP AT MUSANNAH OPEN



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A MINIATURE MUSEUM IN SUHAR SHOWCASES OMANI MARINE HERITAGE



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CREDIT SUISSE TAKES \$4.7 BN HEDGE FUND HIT



MUSCAT

HM THANKED BY SAUDI, BANGLADESH

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has received a cable of thanks from King Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud of Saudi Arabia, in reply to His Majesty's condolences cable to him on the death of Prince Badr bin Fahd bin Saud Al Kabeer al Saud. In his cable, King Salman expressed his thanks for His Majesty the Sultan's good feelings and sincere prayers, praying to the Almighty Allah to protect His Majesty against all harms. His Majesty has also received a cable of thanks from President Mohammad Abdul Hamid of Bangladesh, in reply to His Majesty's greetings cable to him on the occasion of his country's Independence Anniversary. President Abdul Hamid expressed his utmost thanks for His Majesty the Sultan's greetings and best wishes. — ONA

HM GREETINGS TO VIETNAM PRESIDENT

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Nguyen Xuan Phuc of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, on the occasion of him being elected as a new president of his country. In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his sincere greetings and best wishes of success to President Nguyen in leading the friendly people of Vietnam towards further progress and prosperity. His Majesty also wished the relations between the two countries to further develop and grow. — ONA

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UK HASN'T GIVEN UP ON MAY 17 RETURN OF FOREIGN TRAVEL

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Oman and Swiss Confederation agree to boost relations

MUSCAT: His Highness Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmood al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers, received Ignazio Cassis, Vice-President of the Federal Council and Head of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA).

The two sides reviewed the relationship between the two friendly countries and ways of bolstering cooperation, exchanged points of view on topics of common concern and discussed regional and international developments.

Ignazio Cassis expressed Swiss' desire to foster bilateral relationship with the Sultanate in several areas, affirming his country's appreciation to the

Sultanate's balanced international policy which earned it praise and appreciation. He commended the results of his meetings with the Omani officials expressing his relief over the future of relations between the two countries.

Meanwhile, a session of political talks between the Sultanate and the Swiss Confederation was held at the Foreign Ministry on Tuesday.

The Omani side was headed by Sayyid Badr Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, while the Swiss side was chaired by Ignazio Cassis, Vice-President of the Federal Council and Head of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. The session discussed aspects of the bilateral



HH Sayyid Fahd with Ignazio Cassis. PHOTO BY MOHAMED AL RASHDI

cooperation between the two friendly countries and means of promoting them in economic, scientific and cultural field.

The two sides exchanged views on several regional and international issues of common concern. They also emphasised supporting all peaceful initiatives to consolidate international peace and stability. The two sides also signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on political consultations between the foreign ministries of the two countries. The session was attended by Balz Abplanalp, Swiss Ambassador to Oman, and officials from both sides. — ONA

SEE ALSO P2

Cheque bounce cases top total crimes in 2020

KABEER YOUSUF @kabeeryousef

Cases related to bank cheque emerged as top ten, and most frequently committed crime in the Sultanate in 2020. Number of crimes, however, has reduced during the pandemic year.

As many as 4,947 cases were registered with the Public Prosecution in which cheques were dishonoured due to lack of funds in respective accounts. Cases related to violation of the Labour Law stood at 2,753, followed by the violation of the Foreigners' Residence Law (2,584).

The index of the total cases dealt with by the Public Prosecution in 2020 fell compared to 2019 as the number of cases in 2020 was 23,831, while in 2019 the number was 28,920. That is, a fall of 5,089 cases (18 per cent) from the



RO 24 million collected as fines

MUSCAT: The Public Prosecution dealt with 132 cases last year related to management of public funds, money laundering, 13 cases of embezzlement of public funds, 16 cases of abuse of positions, three cases of misuse of public funds, three cases of fraud and others.

The Assistant Public Prosecutor said: "Seven cases related to human trafficking were registered with the prosecution in 2020, which is the same in 2019."

previous year.

This was revealed at the annual media briefing held by the Public Prosecution under the auspices of Nasr bin Khamis al Sawai, Public Prosecutor, and Dr Ahmed bin Saeed al Shukaili, Assistant Attorney General at the Head Quarters on Tuesday.

Crimes involving Information Technology stood at 2,292, followed by narcotic and psychotropic crimes (1,962), and violation of Traffic Law.

TURN TO P2

Citizens exempted from institutional quarantine

VINOD NAIR @vinot_nair

The Supreme Committee tasked with tackling developments resulting from coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic has exempted citizens coming to the Sultanate via land, sea and air from mandatory institutional quarantine. At the same time, they will have to subject themselves to home quarantine, in addition to other procedures applicable to all arrivals.

"They do not have to provide proof of hotel reservation for seven days, which is mandatory for institutional isolation. The decision comes into effect from today."

Meanwhile, the Sultanate reported 1,208 new Covid-19 cases on Tuesday, bringing the total number of cases to 165,482. Six deaths were reported, bringing the total death toll to

1,728.

Ninety-four people were hospitalised during the past 24 hours, bringing the total number of inpatients in hospitals to 623, including 196 in intensive care units (ICUs).

The total recovery cases reached 148,303, which is 90 per cent of the total cases reported.

As the period between April 1 and May 31 is expected to be highly critical, the Supreme Committee is expected to take a series of comprehensive measures, including lockdowns and movement restrictions.

Directorate-General of Health Services for Muscat called on visitors and patients to adhere to precautionary measures when they come to health institutions. The target groups will be contacted in advance to take the Covid-19 vaccine as per the appointment system.

Momentum gathers for a low-key Ramadhan this year

SAMUEL KUTTY @samkuttyp

With only a few day left for the start of Ramadhan, like many other countries in the world, Oman too is preparing for a low-key observation of the holy month, due to restrictions.

Ramadhan — which is expected to start on April 13 or 14 depending on moon sighting — is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar. It is observed by Muslims worldwide as a month of fasting, prayer, reflections and community gatherings. For

the second consecutive year, the holy month will be observed under strict restrictions being imposed due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

"We all feel sad that we can't pray or get together. Yet we have enough experience from the previous year when the holy month was observed under full lockdown. So we will follow the instructions given by the authorities", said Mubarak al Wahaibi, a retired school teacher in Ruwi.

Keeping the coronavirus



onslaught in mind and the protocol of observing social distancing, said the veteran teacher, "We should abstain from any kind of gatherings that will spread the pandemic further".

According to new measures announced by the Supreme Committee, the nighttime curfew currently in place between 8 pm and 5 am will be lifted on April 8, but a ban on movement of vehicles and people will be reinstated when Ramadhan starts. **TURN TO P2**

Oman, Swiss Confederation boost cooperation



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ROYAL OFFICE MINISTER RECEIVES SWISS GUEST

General Sultan bin Mohammed al Numani, Minister of the Royal Office, received at his office on Tuesday Ignazio Cassis, Vice-President of the Federal Council



and Head of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA).

The two sides exchanged cordial conversations on march of relations binding the Sultanate

with the Swiss Confederation. They also reviewed a range of fields of joint cooperation and means of promoting them to achieve mutual interests of the two friendly countries. Issues of common concern were also discussed.

The meeting was attended by Balz Abplanalp, Ambassador of the Swiss Confederation to Oman, and the delegation accompanying the guest.

VISIT TO MARITIME SECURITY CENTER

Rear Admiral Saif Nasser al Rahbi, Commander of the Royal Navy of Oman (RNO), received at the Maritime Security Center (MSC) on Tuesday the Swiss

guests. During the meeting, the two sides discussed views on several matters of joint interests between the two friendly countries.

The meeting was attended by RNO senior officers, the Swiss Ambassador to the Sultanate and the delegation accompanying the guest.

The Swiss guest, accompanied by the RNO Commander, toured the MSC's facilities. He was briefed on the tasks and roles of the centre in managing and leading operations of maritime security in terms of maritime hazards, mainly search and rescue operations and protecting marine environment from various risks. — ONA

Momentum gathers for Ramadhan

FROM PAGE 1

All commercial activities will also be closed during those times. Ramadhan gatherings, such as group iftars and tents, are strictly prohibited.

Taraweeh prayers, which are the additional ritual prayers performed by the faithful at night after the Isha prayer during the holy month of Ramadhan, and community iftar meals will not be allowed.

For citizens and residents, preparing for the holy month this year is not as hard as last year as they are already used to the new normal. Since many of them continue to work from home, Ramadhan traditions such as iftar and suhoor have become a family affair.

"It is not only in Oman that the time during the holy month is going to be spent indoors. The pandemic has forced many governments around the world to order restrictions on travel, gatherings and collective prayers", said Ali al Lawati, a bank employee.

But what looks so bleak is that the virus continues to spread without any let-up, he said, adding, "We have lessons from last year when we were fully under lockdown."

DEPRIVED

Ahmed al Yaqoobi was upset that the Ramadhan and Eid this year too will pass off under the coronavirus shade.

"We are going to be deprived of public gatherings of the month for another year. But we are happy

that there is no ban on commercial activities or movement of people till 9 in the night. This provides some solace", he said.

As the coronavirus continues to be a worldwide threat, enforcing distancing and hygiene measures is all the more crucial to avoid a second wave of infections, he added.

An Indian expatriate Mohamed Mustafa hoped that everyone in the country would adhere to the Covid-19 protocol while observing the holy month and continue to keep their guards up.

"This is the second year in a row Ramadhan comes during the pandemic. This year, we have to stay home only during the nights. I believe it has its benefits", he said.

Cheque bounce cases top total crimes

FROM PAGE 1

Crimes involving coercion or threatening, insulting and slandering reached 1,894, violating Consumer Protection Law (1,750), theft and extortion of money (1,699) and 1,205 cases involving frauds were registered last year.

E-LINKAGE

"All our efforts towards codifying the activities of the Public Prosecution are in consistence with the future vision of Oman Vision 2040 on which the future is based on. With this in mind, we have introduced modern technology besides many electronic link packages with a number of government agencies," said Nasr bin Khamis al Sawai, adding that the

Administrative Affairs Council of the Judiciary and the Royal Oman Police, and integration efforts with all relevant partners still continuing.

"The future plan of the Public Prosecution, which has already begun its procedures, is to enable remote investigation in all its departments, and in all cases that can be investigated in this way, especially children and family cases. The public prosecution is in the process of taking the necessary preparations for that," added Dr Ahmed bin Saeed al Shukaili.

He further said that being part of the Supreme Committee tasked with formulating strategies to face the developments resulting from the spread of the Coronavirus (Covid-19), the

Public Prosecution had issued Judicial Decision No. 11/2020 to form a committee named Public Health Investigation Committee. It works to prepare daily reports on issues related to the pandemic, and follows its procedures up-to-date until the implementation of the rulings issued therein.

"And we see that these measures, along with what other relevant authorities have done, have had a positive impact in curbing and controlling violations, and protecting society from its dangers," he adds.

The Public Prosecution received 248 out of which 225 cases were disposed of by referral, and convictions were issued to 180 cases, and 23 twenty-three cases were preserved in various ways.

Muscat Municipality inaugurates Al Khuwair Square



MUSCAT: The Muscat Municipality opened the commercial complex 'Al Khuwair Square' on Monday in the presence of the CEO of Bayan Investment.

The project, which was built as part of an

agreement between the Municipality of Muscat and the Bayan Investment, is spread over 5150 sqm located in the Al prime Khuwair. The construction was completed in 14 months.

The complex includes open-air dining

spaces, 36 commercial establishments over two floors, 200 parking spaces, and a number of public facilities such as prayer halls and public toilets. The project has reached 80 per cent of the rental space.





Oman's own F+95 masks

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
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The pandemic has allowed people to become creatively productive. One such example is 'made in Oman' respiratory F+95 masks developed by Dr Salim al Wahaibi.

An epidemiologist by profession, Dr Salim al Wahaibi, Chairman of Falha Investment, designed the mask and felt like meeting the need.

"As certified industrial innovation specialists, we noticed it were mainly imported N95 and KN95 masks in the market. So taking into consideration the difficulty in importing, we decided to design our own branded masks in Oman to meet local needs," said Dr al Wahaibi.

The Omani brand is called F+95 and 'F' stands for Falha, the mother company for investment.

"The mask has two filters and three layers. Most importantly, we have put it to test through a prominent international laboratory and the result says that it has 99.9 per cent protection," he explained.

Manufactured at the factory at Misfa industrial area, the F+95 masks are for medical purposes and available for the public.

"We have different types, but meant for the medical sector as well as for normal usage, as it gives better protection and confidence compared to a normal mask," he noted.



As certified industrial innovation specialists, we noticed it were mainly imported N95 and KN95 masks in the market. So taking into consideration the difficulty in importing, we decided to design our own branded masks in Oman to meet local needs

DR SALIM AL WAHAIBI
Epidemiologist

The company is not looking at the Omani market alone, as it has already taken steps to move into export.

"Oman is our base, but we are also thinking globally. Moreover, to think on that level, we require many certifications. So we are in the process of a CE certificate which is for the UK, ISO certification for medical devices, additionally, we are in line with the US certification FDA.

That is why we went into international certification because we would also like to enter the EU market. These markets will not accept uncertified masks, so now we are ready to export as well," said Dr Salim al Wahaibi.

State Council's Office discusses economic accelerators



MUSCAT: The State Council's Office discussed a study presented by the Education and Research Committee on the reality of scientific research and the role of the public and private sectors and international firms in supporting the scientific research sector.

The State Council's Office held its third regular meeting of the second annual sitting under the chairmanship of Shaikh Abdulmalik bin Abdullah al Khalili, State Council Chairman, on Tuesday.

The Office discussed a proposal presented by the

Economic Committee on the accelerators of economic growth amid Covid-19 in addition to proposals presented by the Legal Committee for studying the State Council's internal regulation and the mechanisms for dealing with the draft laws and studies presented by the Council's

standing committees during the current period.

Besides, the Office reviewed a report presented by the Enhanced Economic Committee regarding the committee's recommendations on the annual report of the State Audit Institution (SAI) for 2019.

— ONA

Government treasury bills worth RO 65.6m issued

MUSCAT: A tender of government treasury bills, issue number 115, worth RO 65.6 million was announced this week.

Treasury bills are short-term highly secured financial instruments issued by the Ministry of Finance, and they provide licensed commercial banks the opportunity to invest their surplus funds.

The Central Bank of Oman (CBO) acts as the Issue Manager and provides the added advantage of ready liquidity through discounting and repurchase facilities (Repo).

The results of the said issue are as follows: the total value of the allotted treasury bills amounted to RO 65.6 million, for a maturity period of 28 days, from April 7, 2021 until May 5, 2021. The

average accepted price reached 99.950 for every RO 100, and the minimum accepted price arrived at 99.950 per RO 100.

The average discount rate and the average yield reached 0.65179 per cent and 0.65211 per cent, respectively.

It may be noted that the interest rate on the Repo operations with CBO is 0.5 per cent while the discount rate on the treasury bills discounting facility with CBO is 0.75 per cent.

Furthermore, treasury bills promote the local money market by creating a benchmark yield curve for short-term interest rates.

Additionally, the government may also resort to this instrument whenever felt necessary for financing its recurrent expenditures. — ONA

GCC anti-corruption agencies meet



MUSCAT: The State Audit Institution (SAI) on Monday took part in the 20th specialists' committee meeting of the GCC Anti-Corruption and Integrity Protection Agencies.

Held via video-conferencing, the meeting reviewed the action plan of activating collaboration and coordination activities among international

departments of relations and cooperation of the integrity and anti-corruption agencies.

The meeting also discussed proposals and views of the auditing agencies members on the action plan in light of activating mechanisms of implementing guiding principles, as well as exchanging expertise among the GCC agencies. — ONA

Muscat resident shines at CanSat competition

KABEER YOUSUF
@KABEERYOUSEF

Classrooms are facing forced closure due to Covid-19 that has paved the way for online education.

Using this as an opportunity, a Muscat-resident and some enthusiastic students of Netaji Subhas University of Technology (NSUT) Delhi formed a team to explore space technology and its benefits by participating in the prestigious CanSat competition.

The team, co-led by an Indian student from Muscat, made a mark in the competition by reaching the finals and achieving world rank 2. The competition is organised by the American Astronautical Society (AAS) and the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics (AIAA), sponsored by Nasa, Lockheed Martin, Virginia Tech.

Team 'Gagan' (pictured), co-led by Dhruv Tewari, an ex-student of Indian School Ghubra, and Vaibhav Sharma comprising other eight team-mates — Tushar,



Yogesh, Shivanshu, Khushi, Deshraj, Vicky, Kabir and Piyush — worked under the guidance of faculty in-charge, Prof MPS Bhatia of Netaji Subhas University of Technology (NSUT), and bagged world rank 2.

"The very thought of being able to make something that could transform billions of lives around me, and the power of changing life scenario by writing just a small code, was significant for me. It was very fascinating to me, and that is

what inspired my team members and me," jubilant Dhruv told the Observer.

CanSat is an annual student design-build-launch competition for space-related topics to teach space technology and let the students take their first steps in space. These are worthwhile as they do give students the satisfaction of end-to-end life cycle of a complex engineering project. It tests students' analytical, creative, decision-making, problem-

solving and collaborative skills besides their domain knowledge and expertise.

It also calls for the utilisation of unique skills from different disciplines, which help augment the contestants' skills.

In the annual competition that is open to teams from universities worldwide, teams have to build a space-type system, following the approved competition guide, and then compete. Reaching the finals as world rank 2 is a massive

accomplishment and a reflection that they are the future faces to look for in space research. The team is focusing hard for the finals in June on winning the contest this year.

Dhruv Tewari attended Space School at Houston Nasa in 2014 after acquiring numerous accolades and scholarships across his educational journey and developing his interest in space technology, Artificial Intelligence, Machine Learning, and computer engineering. This led him to work hard and secure a seat in of Netaji Subhas University of Technology (NSUT), Delhi, one of India's leading Engineering Universities.

He did his first training and internship in ML and Data Science with the very prestigious IIT — Kanpur last summer.

He has covered a wide range of future technologies about Machine Learning and Artificial Intelligence.

Very recently, as a part of IOSD (International Organisation of Software Developers), he was instrumental in launching NSUTx a cross platform app made by and

for the students of NSUT, which facilitates access to information and latest college updates. It turned out to be one of the finest and indigenous IT developments. He is currently a Sophomore B Tech (COE).

"My message to all students in Oman who have interest in computers, Artificial Intelligence, space research would be to keep your Maths strong because Maths is extremely important in this field. In general, for computer engineering, starting with web development would be a good way to begin with.

It worked for me, but you can plan what suits you better. Speaking in a broader perspective for all students, study all your subjects and work hard on your shortcomings. Practice and hard work are the keys to success.

"Strike a balance, study hard but pursue a hobby, read books other than your course. In your free time, do what makes you happy. Don't hesitate to learn new things or ask questions," Dhruv leaves a message for his peers.

FALLING GRADES, LOSING HUMANITY COVID-19 IMPACT ON CHILDREN

KABEER YOUSUF[@kabeeryousef](#)

With the education system facing a paradigm shift after the Covid-19 outbreak, children undoubtedly are losing out on the charm of campus life.

The young generation is missing their time spent in the school decorum, books and friends.

“I hope the schools are open and the children are back to normal, as I cannot see my children losing their personality building, as online education keeps them away from many things and are getting addicted to the world of cyberspace” a concerned mother said.

Shocking is the news that it is taking a toll on their grades, education level and understanding of the subject. For parents, it is something alarming which needs to be seriously looked at.

Amita Sharma, Director of Al Injaz Private School, says the pandemic has affected students' levels of learning.

THE FEAR FACTOR

“The children are constantly in an environment at home, society or school, where they are repeatedly told about the dangers of Covid-19 and measures to stay safe. This has, in effect, created in the mind of the child, the fear of falling ill and dying.”

Most of the students were happy when physical school reopened and they could get back to the normal mode of learning at the schools with their friends and teachers. However, the increase in the number of cases has made parents decide to opt for virtual learning for their children once again, keeping in mind their safety.

Many children seem to be heading towards depression as they are missing out social interactions, which is an important factor for the healthy development of a child.

Worldwide, the governments are making efforts to support the schools and the education system by reducing the portions to reduce the pressure to complete lessons.

“We have virtual as well as physical school going on side by side. The school is trying its best to keep up the children's spirits by conducting online activities along with academics and helping them cope with learning. Still the drop in academic levels is noticed”, adds Amita Sharma, Director, Al Injaz Private School.

The deputy head of a leading school told the *Observer* on a lighter note that children might be losing on so many things. However, they are gaining on various aspects such as smartness, technical know-how etc.

“Our children may be losing



on their educational levels but they are getting smarter in the sense that they know how to evade the attention of the teacher online, they know how to outsmart the teachers in terms of technological know-how”, he said.

Another head of an institution said online learning has reduced the studies to 30 per cent from face-to-face

interaction due to so many factors.

STRESSED OUT

“Children are stressed. The online and offline evaluation systems are different. We cannot apply the offline evaluation system to online education.

When I say children are stressed out, I mean they are continuously getting paranoid

towards many factors and they are even afraid if the connection would go out during the course of their studies or exams which badly affects their studies and this is a natural stress while facing a challenge.”

They admit that most of the educationists are not supporting online education due to factors like these. When they are stressed out, studying anything

is difficult.

MISSING ON THE EARLY MORNING STUDY

Children are reluctant to wake up early in the morning and as a result, they are missing out on studying in the wee hours which, according to experts, is the best time to comprehend academics as his or her brain is so fresh and adaptable to ideas. This is

because online studies begin late, say, by 9 or 10 am. No wonder the parents complain that online education is not giving sufficient time as the case used to be during the classroom education

LACKING PERSONAL HYGIENE

Other teachers complained that children are also lax in their personal hygiene whereas they were used to the proper personal hygiene and making their routine work. Many straight head to the computer as soon as they wake up resulting in being unable to maintain decorum in their personal life. “Many times, I’ve seen children yawning and sleeping in front of the computer as parents cannot be blamed because they get busy with their work”, a teacher said.

TENDENCY TO CHEAT ON TEACHERS

They cheat on the teachers as well as parents by keeping themselves busy with online sports and games and they keep many pages open during the course of teaching. “Isn’t it a paradox that we are forced to encourage them to be on phone or laptop or tab continuously whereas we were dead against them spending more time on technical gizmos?”, asks an Indian school teacher, adding that “these unhealthy habits can lead to serious health issues as they spend more time on these gadgets than they are required to.”

PSYCHIC ISSUES

Many parents have complained to the counsellors that their kids are aggressive and violent when they are denied access to these gadgets. Counsellors, when we spoke to them, admitted that the number of parents approaching them for advice has nearly tripled as kids turn rebellious, often violent when they are not given these gadgets which are the only way out for them to vent out their emotions. “This sort of behaviour is the result of some sort of enzymes being produced in the brain while spending time for online games and other activities.”

LOSING HUMAN CONTACT

“Most importantly”, says a senior teacher, “these children are losing on human contact as they create their own world in the virtual space and facing human beings will be a challenge for the future generations. When children are fed with just equations, formulas and information as priorities, they are lacking on humanity because human relations are taking a back seat. He will be far from a human being. In this case, what we, parents can do is to educate them on morals, values and human interactions so that more than an academic product, he would be a true human being in the future”, adds he.

Gunmen free over 1,800 inmates in attack on Nigerian prison

YENAGOA: More than 1,800 prisoners are on the run in southeast Nigeria after escaping when heavily armed gunmen attacked their prison using explosives and rocket-propelled grenades, the authorities said.

Nigerian police said it believed a banned separatist group, the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), was behind the attack in the city of Owerri, but a spokesman for the group denied involvement.

The secessionist movement in the southeast is one of several serious security challenges facing

President Muhammadu Buhari, including a decade-long insurgency in the northeast, a spate of school kidnappings in the northwest and piracy in the Gulf of Guinea.

Buhari said the attack, in a city near the oil-rich Niger Delta region that is the mainstay of Africa's top crude exporter and biggest economy, was an "act of terrorism". He ordered security forces to apprehend the fleeing prisoners.

The attackers stormed the facility at around 2:15 am (01:15 GMT) on Monday, according to the Nigerian Correctional Service said. — **Reuters**

Australia-NZ 'travel bubble' from April 19



New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said on Tuesday Australians would now have open access. — AFP file photo

WELLINGTON/SYDNEY: New Zealand and Australia will create a quarantine and Covid-testing free "travel bubble" from April 19, after effectively eradicating the virus by closing borders last year to stop more infections reaching their shores and stringent lockdowns.

Though most Australian states have allowed quarantine-free visits from New Zealanders for months, New Zealand has continued with enforced isolation for arrivals from its neighbour, citing concern about small Covid-19 outbreaks there.

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said on Tuesday Australians would now have open access, allowing cross-border travel without mandatory Covid-19 testing — one of the first such agreements since the pandemic prompted countries to block foreign arrivals to stop the virus spreading.

"The Trans-Tasman travel bubble represents a start of a new chapter in our Covid response and recovery, one that people have worked so hard at," Ardern told reporters in the New Zealand capital Wellington.

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison called the agreement "the first of many more steps to come ... as we get back to a more normal position, not only over the course of this year but beyond".

The virus has effectively been eradicated in both countries, with minor outbreaks the result of leakage from quarantined returned travellers. Australia has recorded about 29,400 virus cases and 909 deaths since the pandemic began, while New Zealand has had just over 2,100 confirmed cases and 26 deaths.

A man from the nearby Pacific nation of Papua New Guinea died in an Australian hospital, the authorities said on Tuesday, but the death was not included in Australian statistics since he was diagnosed in his home country before being airlifted.

About 568,000 New Zealand-born people live in Australia, according to 2018 figures. — **Reuters**

Maintaining yoga practice can strengthen lungs

MUSCAT: Zamzam who has mastered the benefits of sun salutations from yoga expert Dr Kavitha Ramakrishna has enunciated the benefits of the yoga repertoire surya namaskars.

Dr Kavitha who is an expert practitioner of surya namaskar taught Zamzam, a leading omani fashion designer, the intricacies of sun salutations which is a series of 12 yoga poses done in a continuous flow while synchronising breathing with body movement.

Dr Kavita, who holds the record of performing 648 surya namaskars at a stretch, has inspired Zamzam to practice the yoga technique everyday.

Zamzam said, "Covid-19 has brought attention around the world to many yoga practices that promote and sustain good exercise for mental

and physical health. Practices such as surya namaskar or sun salutations have become especially relevant as Covid-19



is a respiratory infection that attacks lungs. Hence, along with meticulously practicing preventive measures like washing our hands, wearing a mask, and social distancing, we also need to work on practices that can keep

the lungs healthy and strong."

She added, "I am thankful to Dr Kavitha for inspiring me to take up the practice of sun salutations. I have benefited immensely from her style of teaching. Since she is an expert I was able to master the technique quickly."

Dr Kavitha also presented Zamzam with her comprehensively researched book "Tamoghna" which articulately explicates the science behind surya namaskar.

TENDER ANNOUNCEMENT

Nama Shared Services Company LLC (NSS), invites the specialized companies to participate and submit their best offers for the tender below:

Tender Number	Tender Name	Last Date for Collection of Tender Documents	Time & Last Date for Proposal Submission	Tender Fee (OMR)
NSS/2021/3	Deployment of onsite resources to support the Automated Meter Reading System Operations for Nama Group Companies	21 April 2021	16 May 2021	100/-

- Bids shall be submitted in a single envelope and sealed with red wax, addressed to the "Chairman of the Internal Tender Committee", and must write on the envelope the tender name & number.
- 3 separate envelopes shall be included inside the single sealed envelope, and each of these 3 envelopes must be marked with a tenderer name & tender no. as per the below:
 - Commercial Proposal
 - Technical Proposal
 - Bid Bond
- Bids should be dropped in the tender box at NSS reception before 1.00 pm, time of the Sultanate, on Sunday, 16 May 2021.
- Each bid should be accompanied with a temporary insurance, in the form of a bank guarantee or a cheque certified from one of the banks operating in the Sultanate, covering (1%) of the total bid value and valid for a period of (90) days from the last date for submission of offers, addressed to the "Chairman of the Internal Tender Committee". Tenders that do not include the required temporary insurance will not be considered.
- NSS is not obliged to accept the lowest or any other bid
- Registration of the bidders to be done through the company Tender website (www.nama.om).
- Interested party to deposit Tender Fee (Non-Refundable) on: Account Name: Nama Shared Services, Bank Muscat: 0423-048027270-017 Corporate Branch (Bidder name and Tender Number to be clearly mentioned). Tender Documents will be received by email.
- The deposit at the last day of purchasing should be before 1.00pm
- In the event of receipt of the tender document on behalf of another company, the interested purchasers in the above tender document should provide details of the person's name and the company details.



Al Muzn Mall

R - Floor - Al Mawaleh North, Al Seeb
P.O Box C9740, Post Code 900, Sultanate of Oman.
Phone Number: +968 24559200 / 246
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Announcement

Pursuant to the Commercial Companies Law promulgated by Royal Decree No. 18/2019, the Extraordinary General Meeting of the Electricity Holding Company SAOC has resolved on March 31, 2021 as follows:

- "Approval of reducing the share capital of Electricity Holding Company SAOC from five hundred eighty-seven million five hundred sixty-three thousand Omani Rials to four hundred seventy-seven million three hundred and thirteen thousand Omani Rials."

Accordingly, the creditors are kindly requested to submit their objection to the Extraordinary General Meeting decision indicated above to the competent authority within (15) days from the date of this announcement.



Nasa's copter survives first night on Mars

WASHINGTON: Nasa's Ingenuity mini-helicopter has survived its first night alone on the frigid surface of Mars, the US space agency said, hailing it as "a major milestone" for the tiny craft as it prepares for its first flight.

The ultra-light aircraft was dropped on the surface on Saturday after detaching from the belly of the Perseverance rover, which touched down on the Red Planet on February 18.

Detached from the Perseverance, Ingenuity had to rely on its own solar-powered battery to run a vital heater to protect its unshielded electrical components from freezing and cracking during the bitter Martian night.

— **AFP**

SULTANATE OF OMAN MINISTRY OF HEALTH ANNOUNCEMENT

The Ministry of Health invites specialized companies to participate in the following Tenders: -

Tender Ref.	Description	Last date for Collection of tender Document	Closing Time/ Day/ Date	Eligibility	Tender Fee (Non-Refundable)
MOH/HQ-41/2021	Supply of Laboratory Items (covid 19)	08/April /2021	Before 08 am on	Specialized Companies registered with Tender Board	R.O 25.000 Per set
MOH/HQ-42/2021	Provision of Operation and Maintenance of Equipment Services at Massarah Hospital in Muscat Governorate	22/April /2021	Before 08 am on	Specialized Companies registered with Tender Board in the Excellent Grade	R.O 185.000 Per set

- All Specialized and interested Companies registered with Tender Board on the above mentioned Grade may obtain Tender documents from the E. Tendering website: <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om> against non-refundable payment as mentioned above for each set of document.
- Tenders should be submitted on line on the given website signed and sealed. The Tenderer should enclose scan copy of Bank Guarantee or a certified Cheque issued by a Local bank for not less than One percent (1%) for the Tender value validity for (90) days from the Tender Submission date, addressed to The Chairman of the Tender Committee before one day of date submission.
- The Original Bank Guarantee should be submitted to the office of Director of Purchase and Tenders one day before the submission date for all Tenders.
- Ministry is not bound to accept the lowest tender and reserves the right to accepts or reject any tender.

(<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>)

Any Clarification, you may contact via

Telephone: 24166670

Email id etenderhd@ita.gov.om

EXIT OFFER TO THE MINORITY SHAREHOLDERS AN OPPORTUNITY TO SELL THEIR SHARES

United Power Company SAOG (the "Company") with its registered office situated at Jawaharat Al Shatti, P. O. Box 147, Postal Code 134, Muscat Governorate announces that the Company's board of directors at a meeting held on 27 October 2020 unanimously resolved to convert the Company from a public joint stock company to a closed joint stock company ("Conversion from SAOG to SAOC") in accordance with CMA Circular E/8/2017 Issuing the Rules on Conversion of Public Joint Stock Companies and the Executive Regulations of the Commercial Companies Law for Public Joint Stock Companies issued by CMA Decision 27/2021.

In accordance with the said CMA Circular and CMA Decision, the Conversion from SAOG to SAOC remains subject to the shareholders' approval at an extraordinary general meeting. Following the Board's approval, the Company filed an application with the Capital Market Authority (the "CMA") on 24 November 2020 and was pleased to receive the CMA's initial approval on 28 March 2021 to the Company's Conversion from SAOG to SAOC. A disclosure in this regard was also uploaded on the Muscat Securities Market on 29 March 2021.

In accordance with the requirements of CMA Circular E/8/2017 and CMA Decision 27/2021, the Company has obtained written confirmation from Khaled Juffali Co. (holding 55% shares of the Company) ("Khaled Juffali"), Ministry of Defence Pension Fund (holding 5% shares of the Company) ("MODPF"), Civil Service Employee Pension Fund (holding 6.45% shares of the Company), Royal Oman Police Pension Fund (holding 3% shares of the Company), Public Authority for Social Insurance (PASI) (holding 3.15% shares of the Company) and Sogex Oman Co. LLC (holding 4% shares of the Company) (together the "Majority Shareholders") that collectively hold 76.60% of the Company's share capital, that the Majority Shareholders support the Company's Conversion from SAOG to SAOC.

In addition to the above, Khaled Juffali and the MODPF undertakes to purchase all of the shares held by the minority shareholders in the Company at a purchase price of RO 1.015 per share through an Omani Subsidiary i.e. Power Development Company LLC, fully owned by Khaled Juffali and the MODPF, if the minority shareholders wish to sell their shares prior to the Company's Conversion from SAOG to SAOC.

In accordance with the requirements of CMA Decision 27/2021, Khaled Juffali and MODPF will undertake an exit offer in order to provide the Company's minority shareholders an opportunity to sell their shares to them in accordance with the said Decision and CMA Circular E/8/2017.

The Company has appointed Ubhar Capital SAOC P.O. Box: 1137, Postal Code: 111 Muscat, Sultanate of Oman, Tel: +968-24949051, +968-99267286, +968-24949009 and +968-99315839. Email: Talal@u-capital.net and O.qinna@u-capital.net as a broker for the Majority Shareholders of the Company to complete the purchase of shares offered for sale by the minority shareholders with respect to the Conversion from SAOG to SAOC.

The purchase offer period shall commence from 21 April 2021 and shall expire on 12 May 2021.

■ PREPARING FOR HOLY MONTH



A man reads from a large printed version of the Quran at the Grand Mosque of Yemen's capital Sanaa as believers prepare themselves in the week ahead of the holy fasting month of Ramadhan. – AFP

President invites premier Netanyahu to form govt

TEL AVIV: A sceptical president invited Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Tuesday to form a new government, after another inconclusive election deepened political stalemate in Israel.

The country's longest-serving leader, in power consecutively since 2009, now faces the tough challenge of enlisting enough allies for a governing coalition.

Under law, Netanyahu will have 28 days to do so, with the possibility of a two-week extension before President Reuven Rivlin picks another candidate or asks parliament to choose one. Continued deadlock could ultimately result in a new election.

Announcing on television his choice of Netanyahu, Rivlin cast doubt on his prospects for success and on whether any other prospective candidate could complete the task.

"To my great regret, I have



the impression that none of the candidates, at this stage, has a real chance of putting together a government, one that would win a confidence vote in parliament," Rivlin said. He noted that he was legally bound to make the nomination nonetheless.

Israel's election on March 23, its fourth in two years, ended with neither a Netanyahu-led right-wing and religious bloc nor a prospective alliance of his opponents capturing a parliamentary majority.

— Reuters

Iran and US begin indirect talks to revive nuclear deal

VIENNA: Iran and the United States were to begin indirect talks in Vienna on Tuesday aimed at bringing both countries back into full compliance with the 2015 nuclear deal that Washington abandoned three years ago.

Iran has steadily overstepped the accord's limits on its nuclear programme in response to Washington's withdrawal from the accord in 2018 and its reimposition of sanctions that have crippled the Islamic Republic's economy.

While Tehran has repeatedly rebuffed "direct and indirect negotiations" with its old foe, Washington said on Monday it expected the talks to be difficult. Both Tehran and Washington did not foresee any early breakthrough.

"We are not optimistic nor pessimistic about the outcome of this meeting now, but we are confident that we are on the right track, and if America's will, seriousness and honesty is proven, it could be a good sign for a better future for this agreement and ultimately its full implementation," Iranian government spokesman Ali Rabiei told reporters.

US and Iranian officials were to begin indirect talks in the Austrian capital, where the pact was originally reached in 2015, later on Tuesday. Officials from Britain, France and Germany are expected to act as intermediaries. Russia and China, the other parties to the 2015 pact, will also attend.



Austrian police officers stand guard near the entrance of the Grand Hotel in Vienna on Tuesday, where diplomats of the EU, China, Russia and Iran will hold talks. – AFP

A Western diplomat said on Friday that a shuttle-diplomacy approach would be adopted. The diplomat said France would be the main interlocutor for both sides.

According to diplomats, the remaining parties to the deal will first meet at a Viennese hotel for preparatory talks. The US delegation, headed by special envoy Rob Malley, will be based in a nearby hotel.

Adding fresh doubt to chances of a breakthrough, an Iranian official said: "Our agenda during the meeting will be removal of all US sanctions against Iran... as our supreme leader has said

We are not optimistic nor pessimistic about the outcome of this meeting now, but we are confident that we are on the right track

ALI RABIEI
Iran spokesman

repeatedly, anything less than that will not be accepted by Tehran." Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has

the final say on all state matters, has opposed any gradual easing of sanctions.

An EU official said working groups would be created with the aim of marrying lists of sanctions that the United States could lift and nuclear obligations that Iran should meet.

Diplomats said on Tuesday talks could continue for several days to resolve some of the easier issues before resuming next week. The aim is some form of a deal ahead of June's Iranian presidential election, the official said, although Iranian and US officials have said there is no rush.

— Reuters

Lebanon vaccine rollout neglects refugees, migrants: HRW

BEIRUT: Lebanon's vaccine rollout is at risk of marginalising refugees and migrant workers who make up a third of the crisis-hit country's population, Human Rights Watch warned on Tuesday.

"With one in three people in Lebanon a refugee or migrant, a third of the population risks being left behind in the vaccination plan," said HRW researcher Nadia Hardman.

"The government needs to invest in targeted outreach to build trust with long-marginalised communities or the Covid-19 vaccination effort is doomed to fail."

In February, Lebanon started a

mass vaccination campaign that Health Minister Hamad Hassan said would cover everyone living in the country regardless of their nationality.

It aims to cover 80 per cent of the population by the end of the year but the rollout has been slow.

Only 233,934 doses have been administered as of April 5 mostly due to the limited quantity of vaccines available, HRW said.

"Only 2.86 per cent of those vaccinated and 5.36 per cent of those registered to receive vaccinations are non-Lebanese."

More than 19,900 Palestinian refugees and health workers and 6,701 Syrian refugees are eligible



A Syrian refugee woman holds a bag of gloves, due to coronavirus spread, in Al Wazzani area in southern Lebanon. – Reuters file photo

in the first phase of the vaccine rollout, HRW said.

Citing data collected by the United Nations, it warned that "Syrian and Palestinian refugees

have died from Covid-19 at a rate more than four and three times the national average, respectively," and urged authorities to ensure the equitable distribution of vaccines.

Lebanon says it hosts more than 1.5 million Syrians, nearly a million of whom are registered as refugees with the UN.

Official estimates put the number of Palestinian refugees in the country at 180,000 but the actual number could be as high as 500,000. Lebanon is also home to tens of thousands of foreign workers. The small Mediterranean country has recorded 480,502 coronavirus cases, 6,443 of them fatal.

The pandemic piled new misery on a country already grappling with its worst economic crisis since the 1975-1990 civil war.

The World Bank has allocated

\$34 million to inoculate two million of Lebanon's six million inhabitants. The health ministry has allowed the private sector to import additional vaccines to speed up the process.

As a result, "some politicians have already started securing vaccines for their constituents," HRW warned.

This is "raising fears that the distribution of vaccines will be based on political affiliation."

In February, authorities came under fire after 16 lawmakers jumped the vaccine queue and received secret jabs in parliament in violation of a World Bank agreement. — AFP

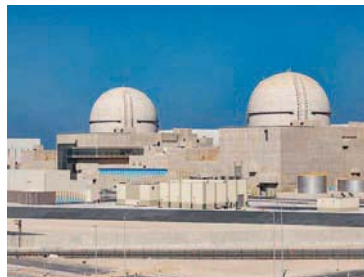
SHORT TAKES

ABU DHABI

UAE begins commercial operation of nuclear plant

The United Arab Emirates announced on Tuesday that its Barakah nuclear power plant started commercial operations in a first for the Arab world. "The UAE has entered a landmark phase today," tweeted Shaikh Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktoum, the Emirates' Vice-President and Prime Minister.

"The first megawatt from the first Arab nuclear plant has entered the national power grid," said Shaikh Mohammed, who is also the ruler of Dubai.



Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Shaikh Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahyan too lauded the "historic milestone". It is a historic milestone for the UAE, he tweeted. — AFP

KHARTOUM

Death toll from Darfur clashes hits 50

The death toll from days of tribal clashes in Sudan's West Darfur has risen to 50, with 132 wounded, the West Darfur State Doctors' Committee said on Tuesday.

The government declared a state of emergency in the state on Monday after three days of clashes in El Geneina, the state capital.

The United Nations said on Monday that at least 40 people had been killed and 58 injured.

The bloodshed is the latest in



a resurgence of violence in the Darfur region since the signing of a peace agreement late last year and the withdrawal of UN peacekeepers.

— Reuters

RAMALLAH

Israeli soldiers shoot Palestinian driver dead

Israeli soldiers shot dead a Palestinian motorist who they said tried to ram them at a checkpoint in the occupied West Bank on Tuesday — an account disputed by his wife, who was with him in the car.

Salem Eid, the mayor of Biddu village, where the man lived, said Palestinians may raise the incident at the International Criminal Court, whose prosecutor announced last month it would formally investigate war crimes in the Palestinian



territories. The Israeli military said the vehicle accelerated towards a group of soldiers "in a way that endangered their lives" and they responded with gunfire "to thwart the threat". — Reuters

In brief

■ ISLAMABAD



PAKISTAN KEEPS MOST SCHOOLS SHUT AS CASES RISE AMONG CHILDREN

Pakistani authorities announced on Tuesday that most schools would remain closed for another three weeks as thousands of children were infected with the virus amid the third wave of cases.

Students in grades one to eight are to remain at home until April 28 before the situation is reviewed again, Education Minister Shafqat Mahmood said in Islamabad.

Classes for grades nine to 12 are to resume on a staggered basis in two weeks, the minister said. The country reported more than 100 deaths in the past 24 hours on Monday, the highest figure so far during the latest wave of infections. — dpa

■ BEIJING



CHINA REPORTS 24 NEW COVID CASES VS 32 A DAY EARLIER

China reported 24 new Covid-19 cases on April 5, down from 32 cases a day earlier, the national health authority said on Tuesday.

The National Health Commission said in a statement that 15 of the new cases were local infections. All of the local infections were reported in Ruili, a city in the Yunnan province that borders Myanmar that has ordered home quarantine and restricted the flow of people after a new cluster emerged.

Authorities said 12 of the new Covid-19 cases in Ruili were previously asymptomatic patients. — Reuters

■ MANILA



DUTERTE CALLS FOR PEACEFUL RESOLUTION OF BOATS IMPASSE

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte is committed to peacefully resolving a diplomatic row with China over the South China Sea, his spokesman said on Tuesday, in a measured response after days of strong rebukes by his ministers and generals.

"We will continue to resolve the issues on Julian Felipe through diplomatic channels and through peaceful means," said a statement from Duterte read by his spokesman Harry Roque. China has maintained that Whitsun Reef, known as Julian Felipe Reef in the Philippines, was a traditional fishing ground where its vessels were seeking shelter from adverse weather. — Reuters

India seeks widening of vaccinations

★ 96,982 new infections, total at 12.7 million ★ 446 new deaths, taking toll to 165,547

NEW DELHI: Many Indian state leaders have asked Prime Minister Narendra Modi to open up vaccinations to most of the country's hundreds of millions of adults, following a second surge in infections that has eclipsed the first wave.

India breached the grim milestone of 100,000 daily infections for the first time on Monday, and cases jumped by 96,982 on Tuesday, data from the health ministry showed. There were 446 new deaths, taking the total to 165,547.

The country of 1.35 billion people has administered 80.9 million vaccine doses, the most after the United States and China, but it lags far behind in immunisations per capita.

India, the world's biggest vaccine maker, this month expanded its inoculation programme to include everyone above the age of 45. But so far it has vaccinated only about 1 in 25 people, compared with nearly 1 in 2 in Britain and 1 in 3 in the United States, according to the Our World in Data website.

"If a larger number of young and working population is vaccinated, the intensity of the cases would be much lower than the treatment that they need today," Uddhav Thackeray, chief minister of India's worst-affected Maharashtra state, wrote in a letter to Modi on Monday.

Delhi Chief Minister Arvind



People stand in a queue to cast their votes at a polling station during the last phase of the Assam's legislative elections, in Guwahati on Tuesday. — AFP

Fresh violence as 175 million vote in state polls

KOLKATA: Fresh violence rocked the restive state of West Bengal on Tuesday as India held its biggest democratic exercise in two years with 175 million people eligible to vote in five regional elections.

West Bengal in eastern India was the most important with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's BJP party attempting to win power there for the first time.

The state, home to about 90 million people, has seen thousands killed in decades of political violence and the current campaign has triggered deadly clashes between supporters of the BJP and

the ruling TMC party.

The TMC, headed by fierce Modi critic Mamata Banerjee, has accused the BJP of attempting to import divisive sectarian politics into the state.

On Tuesday shots were fired outside several polling stations during clashes in areas outside the state capital Kolkata, leaving at least 20 people injured, police said.

The southern regions of Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Puducherry also went to the polls, with local parties dominating the race but the BJP hoping to make inroads. — AFP

South Korea seeks to secure Covid-19 shots

SEOUL: South Korea is considering all options to secure enough coronavirus vaccine supplies, a top vaccine official said on Tuesday in response to questions about possible export curbs on locally made vaccines.

The remarks come as authorities face a backlash for relying on global vaccine-sharing scheme COVAX for a bulk of the country's Covid-19 shots as shipment delays threaten to slow the inoculation programme.

Last week's announcement

that South Korea would only receive 432,000 doses instead of 690,000, and that delivery would be delayed to around the third week of April, is the second time that the country's vaccine rollout has been hit by supply delays.

Asked whether authorities were considering export curbs on AstraZeneca Plc shots produced by SK Chemicals Co Ltd unit SK bioscience, a vaccination management task force team lead told reporters all options were on the table. — Reuters

Flood death toll surges past 160

LEMBATA, Indonesia: Rescuers were searching for dozens of people still missing Tuesday after floods and landslides swept away villages in Indonesia and East Timor, killing more than 160 people and leaving thousands more homeless.

Torrential rains from Tropical Cyclone Seroja turned small communities into wastelands of mud, uprooted trees and sent around 10,000 people fleeing to shelters across the neighbouring Southeast Asian nations.

Indonesia's disaster management agency said it had



Damaged homes after a flash flood in Waiwerang village, East Flores, in Indonesia — AFP

recorded 130 deaths in a cluster of remote islands near East Timor, where another 34 have been officially listed as dead since the disaster struck on Sunday.

Search and rescue teams in Indonesia were racing to find more than 70 people still missing and using diggers to clear mountains of debris. — AFP

Protesters paint Yangon red, call for boycott of water fest

YANGON: Myanmar's pro-democracy protesters sprayed red paint on roads in Yangon on Tuesday in a reminder to the junta that it had blood on its hands as the crisis created by a military coup in the Southeast Asian nation dragged on with no end in sight.

Several groups called for a boycott of next week's Thingyan Water Festival, which marks the Buddhist new year. Leaflets calling for the ban, distributed in Yangon, said it would be a sign of compassion for the families of those killed.

About 570 people have been killed during two months of unrest since the February 1 coup, and security forces have arrested close to 3,500 people, with about four-fifths of them still in detention, advocacy group the Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) said on Tuesday.

Demonstrators woke early in



A child is carried next to carts with vegetables and fish being distributed during a "Donate your extras, take what you need" donation drive aimed at helping low-income households in Thaketa township in Yangon on Tuesday. — AFP

Yangon, Myanmar's biggest city, to spray and splash pavements, roads and bus shelters with red paint in

protest at a sweeping crackdown by security forces that has caused weeks of international outrage.

"The blood has not dried," said one message in red. Another daubed across a bus

shelter implored rank-and-file soldiers not to be exploited by kleptocratic generals clinging onto power.

"Don't kill people just for a small salary as low as the cost of dog food," it said in a message that went onto accuse junta leader, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, of stealing from people.

Anger has swept Myanmar in the past two months over the return of a military government and an abrupt end to a brief era of democratic and economic reform and international integration that was absent under the military's oppressive 1962-2011 rule.

Some protesters have called their movement a "spring revolution", characterised by street marches, quirky acts of non-violent rebellion and civil disobedience campaigns aimed at crippling the government apparatus. — Reuters

UK hasn't given up on May 17 return of foreign travel: PM

LONDON: Britain hasn't given up on resuming international travel on May 17, but needs to be cautious given rising Covid-19 infections in Europe, its prime minister said on Tuesday, amid pressure from hard-hit airlines to give the green light for foreign holidays.

British Airways (BA) and Virgin Atlantic both urged the government to help secure a swift recovery for the industry.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson now has to weigh up the uncertainty over whether vaccination campaigns can improve the situation in Europe this summer, against the weeks of notice the travel industry needs to restart.

"We have to be realistic... we can't do it immediately", he told reporters. "But that doesn't mean that we've given up on May 17", he said, of the country's original reopening plan.

"We want to make things as easy as we possibly can", he added, when asked if fast and cheap lateral flow Covid-19 tests could replace the gold-standard PCR tests for travellers.

Covid-19 status certificates will not be required to go to a pub or restaurant in England when they first reopen, but no decisions have been taken on their use in the longer term, Johnson said.

Johnson on Monday gave the green light for England to take the next step in easing its third national lockdown since March 2020, but he gave few details on how any possible vaccine certification scheme would work.



Prime Minister Boris Johnson gestures during a visit to AstraZeneca in Macclesfield, Cheshire, northwest England on Tuesday to learn more about their \$500 million investment into the Macclesfield site. — AFP

Step 2 of a roadmap charting plans to gradually reopen the economy over coming months will see shops and pub gardens reopen next week, while the reopening of indoor hospitality venues in step 3 is scheduled for May.

Airlines are pinning their hopes on vaccinations and the government's proposed "traffic light system" — tailoring rules to the risks in each country — to help revive travel.

"We see nothing in the data that suggests that we shouldn't be opening up travel on the 17th of May", BA CEO Sean Doyle told a

We have to be realistic... we can't do it immediately. But that doesn't mean that we've given up on May 17

BORIS JOHNSON
Prime Minister

media briefing.
The UK government has said it will provide more details on restarting foreign travel this week

after holidays were banned in the latest Covid-19 lockdown.

Speaking alongside Doyle, Virgin Atlantic CEO Shai Weiss said the rapid roll-out of vaccinations in the United States meant it should be on Britain's "green" list of countries qualifying for lighter travel rules.

Those heading to green list countries will need to take two Covid-19 tests, but will avoid quarantine. Speaking on BBC radio, EasyJet boss Johan Lundgren said costly Covid-19 tests should not be needed for low-risk countries.

— Reuters

'Chauvin violated policy in George Floyd arrest'

MINNEAPOLIS: Derek Chauvin violated Minneapolis Police Department rules and its ethics code on respecting the "sanctity of life" during the deadly arrest of George Floyd last May, the city's police chief testified at the former officer's murder trial on Monday.

"It's not part of our training, and it is certainly not part of our ethics and our values", said Chief Medaria Arradondo, referring to how Chauvin, who is white, held his knee on the neck of Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man, for more than nine minutes. A bystander's video of Floyd's dying moments sparked global protests against police brutality.

Over 3½ hours of testimony, Arradondo disputed the defence's claim that Chauvin, who has pleaded not guilty to murder and manslaughter charges, was following the training he had received in his 19 years on the force.

According to law experts who

track police prosecutions, it is highly unusual for a city's senior police official to testify that one of his former subordinates used excessive force. Chauvin, who along with three other officers was fired by Arradondo a day after the arrest, sat nearby in a suit, taking notes.

In opening statements last week, a prosecutor told the jury that it would hear from Arradondo, who would not "mince words." Last year, the chief released a statement castigating Chauvin, saying: "This was murder — it wasn't a lack of training."

On Monday, he appeared dressed in a blue uniform, placed his chief's hat on a ledge in front of him with its golden badge visible to the jury, and spoke with his hands clasped in front of him.

"I vehemently disagree that that was appropriate use of force for that situation on May 25", he said.

— Reuters



A Black Power fist statue, flag and flowers adorn "George Floyd Square", on Monday in Minneapolis, Minnesota. — AFP

40,000 children in US have lost one parent to Covid-19

NEW YORK: A "staggering" 40,000 children in the US have lost at least one parent to coronavirus, three-quarters of them teenagers, a new model has calculated.

Researchers at Stony Brook University on Long Island estimated the number of children of each adult to have died of Covid-19 and extrapolated to arrive at that conclusion.

The model suggested that each such death left 0.078 children between infancy and age 17 "parentally bereaved", the researchers said in a letter published in *JAMA Pediatrics*, 17.5 per cent to 20.2 per cent more

than it would have been without Covid-19.

"Although the bereavement multiplier is small, it translates into large numbers of children who have lost a parent", wrote Rachel Kidman of the Program in Public Health at Stony Brook University.

"As of February 2021, 37,300 children aged 0 to 17 years had lost at least 1 parent due to Covid-19, three-quarters of whom were adolescents."

Judging by excess deaths overall, the estimate goes even higher — to 43,000 children who've lost a parent in the past year.



Judging by excess deaths overall, the estimate goes even higher — to 43,000 children who've lost a parent in the past year.

Beyond the grief of losing a parent during one's formative years is the difficulty of supporting the bereaved children during this time of heightened social isolation, as the pandemic drags on. Further, the authors said, deaths will mount, which means even more children will suffer this loss.

In comparison, she noted, the September 11, 2001, attacks led to 3,000 children losing a parent.

"The number of children experiencing a parent dying of Covid-19 is staggering," Kidman wrote. "The burden will grow heavier as the death toll continues to mount."

Moreover, Black children are disproportionately affected, given that they comprise 14 per cent of US children but 20 per cent of those who have lost a parent to Covid-19, the letter said.

The paper, based as it is on estimates built on demographic modelling rather than data from a survey or statistical information, is painting a broad, inexact picture, Kidman noted. It also does not include primary caregivers who were not a child's parents.

She and her co-authors called for "sweeping national reforms" to support children who are in this situation. — dpa

NARAYANGANJ

Bangladesh ferry disaster death toll hits 34

The death toll from a ferry accident in Bangladesh at the weekend rose to at least 34 after six more bodies were retrieved, officials said on Tuesday. The ferry packed with around 50 passengers heading home from the central city of Narayanganj ahead of an impending coronavirus lockdown had collided with a larger cargo vessel late on Sunday.

Authorities called off a search-and-rescue mission on Monday after salvaging the ship from the



heavily polluted Shitalakshya river and recovering 22 bodies.

But under pressure from relatives of people still missing, rescuers late on Monday resumed operations for any more bodies.

DUBAI

Etihad starts direct passenger flights to Israel

Abu Dhabi state carrier Etihad Airways began direct commercial passenger flights from the United Arab Emirates capital to Tel Aviv in Israel — the latest direct air link between the two countries that established diplomatic relations last year.

UAE Ambassador to Israel Mohamed Al Khaja and Israel's head of mission to the UAE Eitan Na'eh were on the inaugural flight.

"As our countries recover from the Covid-19 pandemic,



we have much to look forward to in commercial, diplomatic, technological, health and tourism exchanges", Khaja was quoted as saying by UAE state news agency WAM. — Reuters

BEIRUT

IS group abducts 19 people in Syria

The IS group on Tuesday abducted 19 people, mostly civilians, in the centre of war-torn Syria, the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

The militants attacked regime forces in the Badia desert, before kidnapping eight policemen and 11 civilians from a small village.

Syria's state news agency SANA said the militants had taken "a number of inhabitants" from the village of Al Saan in Hama, after they went looking for



truffles, fungi used in cooking. IS fighters have ramped up attacks in the past months against regime forces in the desert that stretches across central Syria to the eastern border with Iraq. — AFP

Turning a ‘new page’ on relations...

RAZIYE AKKOC

The European Union’s top two officials paid a rare visit to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Tuesday aimed at testing his avowed commitment to revamp ties.

Years of disputes over a growing list of issues threatened to boil over last summer when Turkey sent warships to support an energy exploration mission in waters claimed by EU members Cyprus and Greece.

Tensions cooled somewhat when Turkey withdrew the vessels and this year engaged in its first maritime talks with Greece since 2016. The bloc pulled back from its threat to sanction Turkey as a result.

European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen and European Council President Charles Michel will now see how Erdogan intends to follow through on his repeatedly stated intention to “turn a new page” in relations.

The talks in the Turkish capital Ankara were their first personal meeting since Erdogan paid a visit to Brussels in March 2020.

TOP EUROPEAN OFFICIALS SEE HOW TURKISH PRESIDENT ERDOGAN INTENDS TO FOLLOW THROUGH ON HIS REPEATEDLY STATED INTENTION TO “TURN A NEW PAGE” IN RELATIONS

The Turks say they want to move forward from “positive” talks held in a series of calls to “concrete action” — especially on migration. But EU officials warn that any improvement depends on how Erdogan — who was leader when Turkey formally opened talks to join the bloc in 2005 — acts and whether he remains a constructive partner. The possible thaw coincides with a toughening on Turkey from the White House after the election of President Joe Biden.

The EU is dangling the possibility of visa liberalisation and more money for millions of refugees that Turkey is hosting under a 2016 deal.

But an EU official insisted that Tuesday’s meeting “will not be a moment of negotiations” but rather a chance for the sides to lay out their terms for improved ties.

The meeting comes on the heels of Turkey’s withdrawal from a treaty combating violence against women and the launch of a formal bid to shut down the country’s main pro-Kurdish party. The decisions put Brussels in a tough spot since EU officials were then

in the process of laying the groundwork for Tuesday’s meeting in Ankara.

The bloc ended up issuing statements condemning Erdogan’s actions but stating that it remains committed to working with Turkey if the “current de-escalation is sustained”.

Both EU and Turkish officials say they could be ready to upgrade the customs union they reached in 1995.

A Turkish diplomatic source said that Ankara also expects greater emphasis on Turkey’s candidacy status to join the EU and more regular meetings. Ankara also urgently wants to update an expiring deal the sides struck in 2016 that saw the bloc promise billions of euros in exchange for Turkey exerting control over the flow of migrants and refugees into Europe.

Turkey is now home to more than four million refugees and migrants — the vast majority of them from Syria. But Brussels accuses Ankara of not following through on its commitment to take back migrants who make it to Europe but whose asylum applications fail. — AFP

WRITE FOR US

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MUCH, MUCH WORSE

India’s richest state swamped by second wave

SHILPA JAMKHANDIKAR AND RAJENDRA JADHAV

Hospitals in Maharashtra are running short of beds, piped oxygen and a key anti-viral drug as a second wave of coronavirus infections has swamped India’s richest state, doctors and patients’ families said.

Home to India’s financial capital Mumbai, Maharashtra accounts for nearly a quarter of India’s 12.7 million coronavirus infections. If the state were a country, its caseload of more than 3 million would be tenth largest in the world. The western state has been reporting the



This is much, much worse than the September wave. We know of hospitals in Mumbai that are giving out tokens for Covid-19 beds... but patients end up waiting for three days or more for their turn

SANDHYA FERNANDES
SOS Saviours Group

most number of daily infections nationally for weeks. India’s overall daily cases rose above 100,000 for the first time on Monday, taking it past the peak of the first wave of infections last September. “This is much, much worse than the September wave,” said Sandhya Fernandes, whose SOS Saviours group helps patients and relatives

track beds in hospitals in and around Mumbai.

“We know of hospitals in Mumbai that are giving out tokens for Covid-19 beds... but patients end up waiting for three days or more for their turn.”

Farah Pavri went to hospital after hospital for five hours seeking a bed for her 75-year old aunt on Monday, until a desperate plea on Twitter caught the attention of local authorities and help was extended.

“Everywhere I went, there were people already in line, waiting for beds, and there were more coming behind us,” Pavri said. Maharashtra’s health ministry did not respond to an e-mail seeking comment.

Desperate to slow the spread of the disease, the state imposed a night curfew since Monday for the rest of the month, shut down restaurants, malls and places of worship and barred the movement of most people on weekends. The plight of Maharashtra, a state where the health infrastructure is among the best countrywide, augurs poorly for rest of the country. It could also delay India’s recovery from the economic hit, as Maharashtra is the country’s most industrialised state.

Critical care beds in many hospitals in at least four major cities in Maharashtra — Pune, Nagpur, Aurangabad and Nashik — are now full, said six senior doctors Reuters spoke with in the state. They described the situation in their hospitals and what they had heard from patients seeking admission. — Reuters

KEEPING ALIVE

Biden faces distrust in Tehran and US on reviving Iran deal

DAVID S CLOUD AND TRACY WILKINSON

With the first serious efforts to revive the Iran nuclear deal unfolding this week, President Biden faces an increasingly urgent dilemma: He can go slow, risking war and a collapse of talks, or move fast, even if it means a possibly flawed deal that damages his ambitious domestic agenda.

Iran, the US, the European Union and the five other nations that signed the 2015 nuclear pact, including China and Russia, will gather in Vienna starting on Tuesday in hopes of salvaging an agreement that the Trump administration set ablaze but that other world powers struggled to keep alive.

The new talks — the first public meetings involving all parties since former president Donald Trump withdrew from the deal in 2018 — are aimed at returning both the US and Tehran into compliance. Washington would ease sanctions that have crippled Iran’s economy, and the Islamic Republic would cut back production of nuclear materials, which it had increased to prohibited quantities. Until now, each side insisted the other go first, locking the two into a stalemate.

“This is a first step,” Biden’s special envoy for Iran issues who helped negotiate the 2015 pact, Robert Malley, said on Twitter. “Difficult discussions ahead but on the right path.”

But technical and, more important, political challenges remain for all parties that could easily scuttle any progress.

Some US officials and analysts think Biden should delay dealing with Iran, focusing on his domestic agenda instead. Others think he has already waited too long.

And some Pentagon officials think



US President Joe Biden disembarks from Marine One upon arrival at the Ellipse near the White House in Washington, DC. — AFP

IRAN, THE US, THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE FIVE OTHER NATIONS WILL GATHER IN VIENNA IN THE HOPE OF SALVAGING THE AGREEMENT

the tensions are so severe that it might not be possible to delay further. Without a deal restricting the Iranian nuclear programme, the choice becomes to watch Iran march closer to the ability to build a bomb, or to go to war to stop it, US military officials say.

As evidence of the urgency, the UN atomic watchdog agency’s latest report says Iran has installed a set of sophisticated centrifuges at its underground Natanz plant that will further expand its capability to enrich uranium.

The longer Iran is outside the deal,

the closer it gets to having a nuclear weapon; the closer it gets, the more likely Israel is to strike Iran’s nuclear facilities, potentially setting off a regional war that would be almost certain to draw in the United States. Biden first made overtures to Iran in February, hoping to unlock the stalemate, but those were rebuffed.

In the weeks since, European diplomats led by Josep Borrell, foreign minister for the European Union, lobbied Iranians, Russians and others to agree to move past the initial objections. — dpa

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sport



BARCELONA: Barcelona forward Ousmane Dembele struck in stoppage time to snatch a vital 1-0 win at home to Real Valladolid in La Liga on Monday to pull his side one point behind leaders Atletico Madrid.

Valladolid produced a disciplined yet bold performance and could have taken an early lead when Kenan Kodro headed against the bar, while Roque Mesa had two clear sights at goal from outside the box but failed to hit the target each time.

Barca came close to scoring right before halftime when their former goalkeeper Jordi Masip palmed a strike from Pedri on to the post.

The keeper thwarted Dembele in the second half and then watched on in relief as Antoine Griezmann headed the rebound just wide.

The Catalans were dealt a helping hand when Valladolid's Oscar Plano was shown a straight red card in the 79th minute for a tackle from behind on Dembele.

The sending off was fiercely protested by the visitors, who had appealed for a penalty earlier in the second half when the ball struck the hand of Barca defender Jordi Alba. However, the referee decided the handball was accidental after a VAR review.

Barca finally took advantage of having an extra man when French forward Dembele caught a loose ball in the air with his left foot, slamming it inside the near post.

A sixth consecutive league win took Barca back into second place and moved them on to 65 points, two above third-placed Real Madrid and one behind Atletico, who were beaten 1-0 at Sevilla on Sunday.

Barca visit Real Madrid next Saturday with the chance to go top of

the table a day before Atletico visit Real Betis.

"My sensation from the dugout was that we were always capable of winning the game right until the end. The players proved that they always had faith until the last minute," said Barca coach Ronald Koeman.

"Sometimes you have to really suffer to win and that's good too. La Liga is also about suffering."

PRAISE FOR DEMBELE

The Dutchman also heaped praise on Dembele, who was beset by injuries and criticised for lacking professionalism in his first few years at Barca but has hit the best form of his career this season.

"It's vital for us for him to be at the top of his game, he gives us a lot when it comes to taking on opponents and he can play all across the front line," Koeman said.

"You can play in different ways when he is in the team and today he scored the goal we needed."

Barca defender Clement Lenglet added: "This shows how difficult this league is and that we'll have to really fight in every game to win it.

"We faced a great side who played out of their skin, it was a really difficult game for us but an important victory. This run is all down to hard work, things weren't clicking for us earlier in the season but now they are."

Valladolid keeper Masip said his side left the Camp Nou "with a bittersweet taste", feeling pleased with their performance but aggrieved at not earning a point, especially after having Plano sent off.

"It's a real shame that all that hard work was thrown away because of a one-off incident," he added.

— Reuters



DEMBELE VOLLEY
TAKES BARCA ONE POINT BEHIND ATLETICO



My sensation from the dugout was that we were always capable of winning the game right until the end. The players proved that they always had faith until the last minute

RONALD KOEMAN
Barcelona coach



Euro 2020 host city Munich urged to allow fans

The German FA has urged health authorities in Munich to make it possible for spectators to be admitted to Euro 2020 matches at the Allianz Arena, ahead of Uefa's deadline for host cities on Wednesday. "I call on the city of Munich and Bavaria's regional government to make every effort to present a solid scenario that will allow for, at least, a partial public attendance of matches in Munich," Koch of GFA said.



Cala denies racially abusing Diakhaby

Cadiz defender Juan Cala denied racially abusing Valencia's Mouctar Diakhaby during Sunday's 2-1 win in La Liga, saying he had been caught up in "a media circus" and "a public lynching". In a first in Spanish football, Valencia's players left the pitch after Diakhaby reacted furiously following an altercation with Cala in the first half. Diakhaby told the referee he had been racially abused.

Competition heats up at Musannah Open

OLYMPIC QUALIFICATION STILL UNDECIDED AT HALFWAY POINT

MUSANNAH: Competition is heating up at the Musannah Open Championship where, at the midway point of the event, all classes remain incredibly close. Conditions were perfect once again, with winds up to 15 knots and clear blue skies ensuring racing went down to the wire with no interruptions.

The 49er class is wide open, with yet another new leader on top of the rankings at the close of Day Three. Indian duo KC Ganapathy and Varun Thakkar ended the day in the first place from Benjamin Talbot and Alex Burger of South Africa and the Chinese pairing of Hong Wei and Chao Xiang.

KC Ganapathy, leader of the 49er class representing India, said, "We started off the event a bit shaky, we hadn't raced for a year and a half coming into this, but my coach and I have been working each day to correct the previous day's mistakes. So, overall, we are happy with how the event is progressing and we want to stay focused and keep improving each day."

The top two in the 49er FX class switched places from yesterday with the team of Molly Highfield and Sandy Wing Chi Choi from

Hong Kong taking over at the top from China's Ye Jin and Chen Shasha. Thai pair of Kamonchanok Klahan and Nichapa Waiwai stay in third place.

After a full day of racing, the Laser class and Laser Radial class rankings remain unchanged from yesterday. In the Laser, Singapore's Ryan Lo Jun Han leads Keerati Bualong of Thailand and India's Vishnu Saravanan and in the Laser Radial, Indian sailor Nethra Kumanan leads Dutch sailor Emma Savelon with Indian teammate Ramya Saravanan in third.

In the RS:X class, Thai windsurfer Natthapong Phonoppharat continues out in front in the men's race with Filipino duo Yancy Kaibigan and Geylord Coveta following closely behind in second and third respectively. In the female class, Charizanne Napa from the Philippines still holds a narrow from Singapore's Amanda Ng Ling Kai and India's Ishwariya Ganesh.

Yancy Kaibigan, RS:X windsurfer representing the Philippines, said, "The weather was good today, with a strong wind for the first two races but it suddenly dropped in the third



The Thai sailor, winner of day 3.

race which made the conditions challenging, but I managed three second-place finishes today. We had to prepare at home for this

event because of the cancellation of scheduled events, so I am pleased with my performance. I hope for good wind tomorrow

and to continue performing well."

With Olympic qualification up for grabs, the Musannah Open Championship is being

held under strict regulations to ensure all equipment adheres to World Sailing specifications and the rules of each class. Prior to the event, all the boats and equipment were inspected and recorded by an International Measurer appointed by World Sailing to make sure sailors do not change the equipment and continue to use the approved equipment.

Ajit Diaz, Chief of the Technical Committee, said, "It is important to ensure that all the classes of boats are complying with the class rules. We must also check for the mandatory safety equipment and be sure that all competitors use legal equipment for every day of the championship. The integrity of the competition is of utmost importance."

Racing in Musannah continues tomorrow with three full days remaining. The Musannah Open Championship is supported by host venue Millennium Resort Musannah with additional sponsorship from the International Maritime College Oman (IMCO), Salsabeel water from National mineral water company, Carrefour Oman and OHI Telecommunications.

Andreescu climbs to sixth, Barty holds on to top

PARIS: Bianca Andreescu climbed three places to sixth in the WTA rankings on Monday, following her run to the final where she lost to Ashleigh Barty, who remains the world number one.

Andreescu, a 20-year-old Canadian who was forced to retire in the second set in Miami after turning her ankle, is approaching her best ranking since winning the 2019 US Open when she reached fourth.

Barty, who retained her title in Florida, shrugged off criticism of her continued presence at number one on Saturday, saying "I thoroughly deserve my spot at the top of the rankings".

The Australian has benefited from a tweak into the way rankings are calculated which takes into account the disruption caused by last year's pandemic shutdown. Barty skipped last year's rescheduled US and French Opens to remain at home.

In spite of Barty's victory, her nearest challenger Naomi Osaka closed the gap by 150 points although the Japanese player remains more than 1,000 points behind.

The best progression of the week came from the Greek Maria Sakkari who reached the semifinals in Florida after knocking out Osaka. The 25-year-old Athenian moves up six places



Bianca Andreescu of Canada hits a forehand against Ashleigh Barty of Australia in the Miami Open final. — USA Today Sports

to 19th, her highest ranking yet.

Belarusian Aryna Sabalenka, who made it to the last eight in Miami, climbed one step to seventh place with Serena Williams dropping down to eighth and Karolina Pliskova going down three places to ninth.

— AFP

WTA rankings as of April 5:

1. Ashleigh Barty (AUS) 9186 pts
2. Naomi Osaka (JPN) 7985
3. Simona Halep (ROM) 6965
4. Sofia Kenin (USA) 5915
5. Elina Svitolina (UKR) 5750
6. Bianca Andreescu (CAN) 5265 (+3)
7. Aryna Sabalenka (BLR) 5085 (+1)
8. Serena Williams (USA) 4850 (-1)
9. Karolina Pliskova (CZE) 4660 (-3)
10. Kiki Bertens (NED) 4490 (+1)
11. Petra Kvitova (CZE) 4476 (-1)
12. Belinda Bencic (SUI) 4315
13. Garbine Muguruza (ESP) 4120
14. Jennifer Brady (USA) 3765
15. Victoria Azarenka (BLR) 3625
16. Iga Swiatek (POL) 3615
17. Elise Mertens (BEL) 3400
18. Johanna Konta (GBR) 3236
19. Maria Sakkari (GRE) 3020 (+6)
20. Marketa Vondrousova (CZE) 2862

Teenage prodigy Gauff plotting own path to glory

WASHINGTON: American teenage prodigy Coco Gauff says she is spending less time on social media now as she focuses on charting her own course to success in tennis.

Gauff has been in the spotlight ever since her astounding run as a 15-year-old at Wimbledon in 2019, where she knocked out her idol and five-time champion Venus Williams after becoming the youngest player in the professional era to survive the qualifying draw.

Her dream run at the grass-court Grand Slam continued until the fourth round, and the following year she reached the same stage at the Australian Open on the hardcourts of Melbourne Park.

Expectations for the now 17-year-old Gauff have remained high, and she is constantly trying to live up to them.

Part of that entails focusing on her tennis more and social media less, she told reporters at the WTA 500 event in Charleston.

"I think I was just trying not to be on social media as much because a lot of people have opinions on you and how they think you should play," Gauff said.

"But I think it's important that you focus on your journey, your path, and you're going to have a different path than other players. That's what I've been working



on lately, is just focusing on my journey and my path."

African-American Gauff also emerged as a leading voice in the fight against racial injustice in America last year.

Gauff, currently ranked 36th in the world — one spot below the career-best ranking she reached last month, said she is ready to be patient in her bid for success.

"I think you want results to happen fast, but I'm also still developing my game and figuring out how I want to play on the court and how I want to construct my points," she added.

"So it's just definitely a learning process and I feel like with every tournament, even though some tournaments I don't do as well as others, I feel like with each one I'm getting better and getting closer to figuring out my game and figuring out what I like to do." — Reuters

OFA mulls participation in Arab Cup events



ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, APRIL 6

The Union of Arab Football Association has sent invitations to Oman Football Association (OFA) for taking part in three football championships.

The Arab football body will organise Arab Cup Championship for Under-20 from June 17 to July 3, Arab Futsal Cup Championship during May 20 to 30 and Arab Women Football Championship from August 24 to September 6.

The national teams committee will study taking part in all the above football championship events.

The Oman national under-20 football team is dissolved after the team did not succeed to advance to the Asian Cup Championship. The participation of the Sultanate under-17 team and some players from the Olympic team who are below 20 years are an available and open solutions for the committee.

On the other hand, the futsal team under supervision of the head coach Younis al

Fahdi, may participate in the Arab futsal event after cancellation of the AFC Futsal Championship in Kuwait 2020. However, Kuwait Football Association will host the next edition in 2022.

The national women's futsal team, under direct supervision of the experienced Syrian coach Maha Janoud, will may commence the first regional participation at Arab Women Football Championship during August 24 to September 6.

The OFA has launched the 2020-21 Oman Women's Futsal League this month but was cancelled later by the OFA due to ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.

As many as 23 clubs took part in the Oman Women's Futsal League including Oman Club, Muscat, Al Ittihad, Al Shabab, Al Khabourah, Saham, Ibri, Masirah, Al Kamil W'al Wafi, Qurayat, Bahla, Al Bashayer, Al Talia, Sohar, Al Suwaiq, Al Rustaq, Ahli Sidab, Yanqul, Salalah, Al Nahda, Al Nasr, Al Ittifaq and Mirbat. All the teams were divided into six groups.



West Ham tame Wolves to break back into top four

WOLVERHAMPTON: West Ham United boosted their hopes of finishing in the Premier League top four and earning a Champions League berth after an impressive first half helped them to a 3-2 win at Wolverhampton Wanderers on Monday.

West Ham moved three places up to fourth on 52 points from 30 games, one more than fifth-placed Chelsea and three ahead of sixth-placed Tottenham Hotspur and Liverpool in seventh. Wolves stayed 14th on 35 points.

West Ham also equalled the club's Premier League record of seven away wins in a season and gave themselves every chance of breaking it with eight games remaining.

Jesse Lingard, Pablo Fornals

and substitute Jarrod Bowen, who replaced the injured Michail Antonio, fired the Hammers into a 3-0 lead before Leander Dendoncker pulled one back for the home side in an action-packed first half.

Fabio Silva struck for the resurgent Wolves midway through the second but the home side were unable to make their late pressure count as the visitors held out in the closing stages. Lingard fired West Ham ahead after he capped a darting solo run from his own half with a fine left-footed finish in the sixth minute after Antonio had hit the post with a ferocious long-range effort.

Fornals made it 2-0 in the 14th with a deft side-footed finish after good work from

Lingard and Arthur Masuaku, who squared the ball back to the Spaniard.

Bowen added the third in the 38th minute, shortly after coming on for Antonio, as he found space in the heart of the penalty area to beat home goalkeeper Rui Patrício with a firm low shot inside the near post.

Wasteful Wolves, who compounded their poor defending in the first half by wasting several gilt-edged chances, hauled themselves back into the contest when Dendoncker headed home an Adama Traoré cross in the 42nd minute.

West Ham midfielder Tomas Soucek had a goal disallowed for handball on the hour and the

visitors were forced to hang on in the final 20 minutes after Silva beat visiting goalkeeper Lukasz Fabianski with a neat finish midway through the second half.

Wolves were missing Spanish defender Jonny who was ruled out for the rest of the season shortly before kick off with a recurring knee injury.

The home team's Manager Nuno Espírito Santo rued their sloppy defending.

"We were very poor in defence and it takes away from all the good things we did in attack", he told Sky Sports.

"The reaction was good but we started very bad. Conceding three goals against a top team like West Ham makes it very difficult to reverse the result."

— Reuters

AFC bans Brazilian striker Jaja for four years over doping violation

KUALA LUMPUR: The Asian Football Confederation (AFC) has banned Chiangrai United striker Jaja from all soccer-related activity for four years after he violated anti-doping regulations, Asian soccer's governing body said on Tuesday.

The AFC said the Brazilian,

whose full name is Jakson Avelino Coelho, was found guilty of the violation following tests conducted at the 2020 AFC Champions League group stage game between the Thai side and Melbourne Victory on November 30.

The governing body said he violated Article 6 of its anti-

doping regulations of 2019 and that the ban covered domestic, international, friendly and official fixtures.

"The AFC remains committed in its stance to keep football free from doping and in upholding the integrity of the sport", it said in a statement.

— Reuters



features

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A miniature museum in Suhar showcases Omani marine heritage

A quick visit to the home of Abdullah al Muqbali in the village of Afifa in Suhar would take you on a trip down memory lane. Inside his home is a mini-museum dedicated to ancient maritime artefacts that demonstrate the strong connection shared by the Omanis with the sea ... **P15**

INSIDE STORIES

HUMAN INTEREST



A YOUNG OMANI, BUSY LIVING, THROUGH SPORT, ART, FAMILY AND CULTURE

Talking to young Izki mother of two, Rahma al Yahyai, is easy as she speaks immaculate English, something she gives credit to her father Nasser for, the Izki businessman inspiring her love of the language, discussion, conversation, and literature... **Story on P16**

TRAVEL TALES



HOW DO YOU LIKE YOUR EGGS? THIS CHEF FROM ROME SURPRISED CUSTOMERS ON HOLIDAY

In a working-class neighbourhood of Rome, crowds gather in front of a pastry shop window to see sumptuous Easter eggs turned into works of art... **Story on P15**

READ



THE ARTIST'S WAY

BY JULIA CAMERON

The book was written to help people with artistic creative recovery, which teaches techniques and exercises to assist people in gaining self-confidence in harnessing their creative talents and skills.

HERITAGE



PERSEVERING CRADLE MANUFACTURING IN AL MAZYOUNA

The manufacturing of baby cribs is a traditional craft inherited by citizens in Al Mazyouna, Dhofar Governorate which continues to the present day... **Story on P14**

CELEBRATE



SHOULD MUSEUMS SELL TREASURED WORKS? PANDEMIC REVIVES DEBATE

American museums hit hard by the pandemic are selling paintings to bridge revenue gaps, with some going further and using the funds to diversify collections, but critics say the sales betray the institutions' mission of preserving artwork for the public... **Story on P14**



Should museums sell treasured works? Pandemic revives debate

American museums hit hard by the pandemic are selling paintings to bridge revenue gaps, with some going further and using the funds to diversify collections, but critics say the sales betray the institutions' mission of preserving artwork for the public.

US museums were only able to sell works, known as deaccessioning, in order to buy back others until April 2020 when the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD) lifted the ban for two years to allow institutions to compensate for coronavirus-era losses.

Some museums are seizing the opportunity to renew and diversify their collections but others have been forced to backtrack after opposition from local communities.

In September, the Brooklyn Museum, already struggling financially before the pandemic, put 12 works, including one Monet and two Dubuffets on sale to raise funds to maintain its collection.

Earlier this year, the director of New York's Metropolitan Museum, Max Hollein, indicated that money raised from the sale of works would be spent covering costs related to collection care such as the salaries of staff.

Hollein played down the significance of the sales and stressed the move is only temporary.

"American institutions have been deaccessioning for decades," he said, adding that the Met had no plans to sell more works in 2021 than it has in previous years.

"We are very versed in doing it, we believe in it, we feel that there is a benefit for our collection, development," Hollein said.

The sale of artworks was already controversial within

the museum community. Generally speaking, institutions in Anglo-Saxon countries have been open to controlled sales while museums in Latin culture nations have opposed it.

Serge Lasvignes, President of Paris's Pompidou Center, says he "doubts the value of embarking on this path."

"It's extremely worrisome if the art on the walls turns into a financial asset," said lawyer Laurence Eisenstein, who recently led a revolt against officials at the Baltimore Museum of Art.

The museum hoped to raise \$65 million by selling three major works including a Warhol.

The sale was intended to create a preservation fund for the main museum in the city with a predominantly Black population and to "rebalance" its collection by acquiring works by women and minority artists.

In the face of criticism, the museum cancelled the plan and opted to raise funds through donations instead.

'SLIPPING INTO IRRELEVANCE'

Most museums refuse to part with their most important pieces, believing that their mission is to preserve essential works.

The Met mainly sold works of which it had several copies or pieces by that artist for the same period, according to Hollein.

Other less prestigious institutions have taken more drastic measures. The Everson Museum of Art, in Syracuse, New York state, sold a Pollock it had been given for \$12 million in October.

The museum used the money to diversify its collection but drew ire in some quarters.

"An art museum sells its soul," wrote Wall Street Journal columnist Terry Teachout.

"(It) is using the laudable aim of funding a more diverse collection as an excuse to betray the public trust," he said.

Eisenstein, the Baltimore lawyer, fears that donors and authorities will withdraw financial support from establishments that sell lots of works.

"At that point it becomes very difficult for museums to become faithful and trusted custodians of cultural assets in the US," he said.

Adding works by artists from minorities, however, is a response to strong demand, reinforced by the 2020 Black Lives Matter marches against racial inequalities.

Many in the museum community believe it is possible to diversify collections without replacing works.

While the Met has made diversification a priority, "We don't use our current existing collection to succeed in these goals," said Hollein, saying the establishment prefers to look to its donors.

For Brian Frye, professor of law at the University of Kentucky, the statutes of American museums, almost all not for profit, should be sufficient to protect against a drift towards deaccessioning.

"Do I think that museums are going to start monetizing their collection kind of willy-nilly? No, I really don't. I think a lot of people are sort of having a big freak-out about this," he said.

Baltimore Museum of Art director Christopher Bedford says the long-term framework set by the AAMD "must be revisited" so that institutions can financially meet their mission to diversify.

In the meantime, "We're slipping into irrelevance, because we refuse to update our models of thinking and doing," he added. — AFP

HERITAGE

Persevering cradle manufacturing in Al Mazyouna



THE MANUFACTURING of baby cribs is a traditional craft inherited by citizens in Al Mazyouna, Dhofar Governorate, which continues to the present day.

Maryam Zaabnout, head of the Omani Women Association in the Wilayat of Al Mazyouna, said that while there is a proliferation of ready-made cribs in the market, they continue doing the traditional baby cribs to make sure that this important part of culture is not forgotten.

Zaabnout is proud that the crib manufacturing handicraft continues to this day as she said, this is an important part of Oman heritage that the Sultanate should not allow to be gone.



Making a cradle manually according to Zaabnout goes through several stages. She explained that it starts with tanning and cleaning sheepskin, then quantities of leaves are placed inside the skin and kept in a small hole for three days.

She added that after that period, the skin is rubbed for an hour, then another amount of leaves are placed inside the skin again to be placed in a saucepan for another three days. This helps the skin get more thick and strong and it also changes its colour.

After that, she explained that the skin is taken from the pot, washed with water and dried in the sun for an hour to two, then an amount of oil is put on it, rubbed, and separated into 4 pieces of leather, two pieces from the top and two pieces from the bottom. Small sticks of trees are placed on it in addition to being sewn from the palm tree leaves and decorated with beads.

It should be noted that the use of the cradle in the past was to protect the child from the heat during the summer and from the cold in the winter, in addition to protecting him from the rain. Water is sprayed on the cradle so that the gets enough cold inside.



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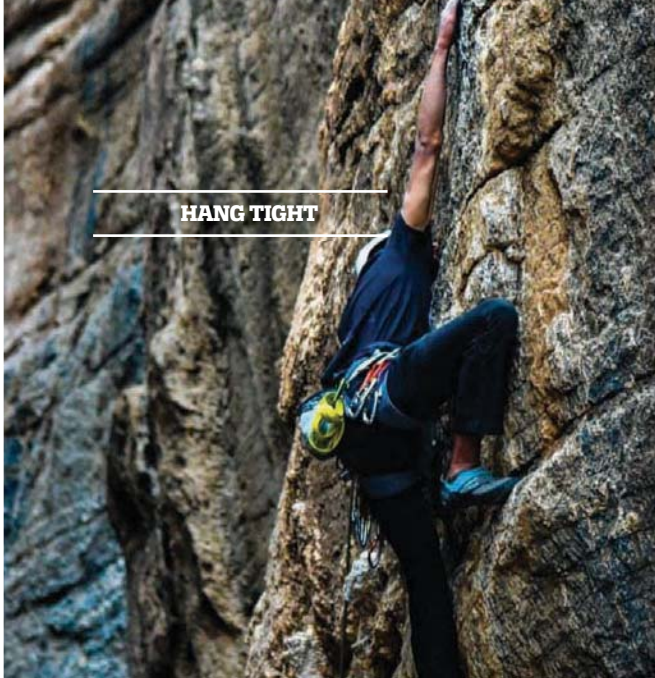
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LOCAL SCENE

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TRAVEL TALES

How do you like your eggs? This chef from Rome surprised customers on holiday



IN A WORKING-class neighbourhood of Rome, crowds gather in front of a pastry shop window to see sumptuous Easter eggs turned into works of art.

Laid out like brightly coloured pieces of jewellery, each of Walter Musco's chocolate eggs is created as a tribute to a particular artist.

One is adorned with two people holding up a heart, after US pop artist Keith Haring, while another is crafted all in yellow with slashes reminiscent of Argentine-Italian painter Lucio Fontana.

"It's a simple idea — I'm really passionate about art and I expanded my field to include literature, music and cinema," Musco said.

The 47-year-old Roman, wearing an impeccable white chef's uniform, has been making this kind of eggs for a decade and has now put a selection on show ahead of the Easter weekend.

The eggs on display are the "ones that have pleased me the most", and include one decked with a dove-like the bird in Robert Mapplethorpe's famous photo of Patti Smith, and a red-dressed egg inspired by fashion designer Azzedine Alaia.

Each of these eggs will set you back between 150 and 400 euros, depending on how long they take to make.

But you don't have to eat them, and if looked after, they can last for years.

"The main thing is to keep

them out of the heat, so not next to a chimney or a radiator, or near a window exposed to the sun. There's no problem up to about 26 or 27 degrees celsius," Musco said.

Self-taught

The eggs on display are all for sale, except a few which are part of private collections of clients. But customers must buy them in person due to the risk of damage if sent by post.

Musco uses a 55 per cent dark chocolate from France for his eggs, making shells that he puts together before adding the decorations — all of them edible.

In his laboratory in the basement of the pastry shop in the Tor Marancia district in southern Rome, he is keen to show off his skills.

Armed with a warm knife, he carves designs into the chocolate with the concentration of a surgeon.

"I am self-taught. I had an art gallery years ago, I mainly sold African, South-East Asian, Oceanic and Australian Aboriginal art," he said.

"Then I developed this passion for another form of more Eurocentric art," he added, smiling.

When choosing his inspirations, he looks at "everything that is abstract and not obvious to understand, but has a big emotional impact".

In the future, he wants to keep making his eggs but in direct collaboration with artists, "a way to exchange opinions and ideas, and thus evolve".—AFP

A miniature museum in Suhar showcases Omani marine heritage

Being invited to the home of Abdullah al Muqbali in the village of Afifa in Suhar is like taking a trip down memory lane. It is an invitation that you would gladly accept as this gentleman from North al Batinah Governorate has converted a portion of his home into a miniature museum dedicated to some ancient marine tools and mementoes — his way of restoring the memory of ancient Omani maritime heritage.

The idea of the museum came through making various miniature models of marine tools that sailors used in ancient times to search for pearls.

The museum boasts a group of natural seashells of various shapes and sizes and several ancient marine tools such as the "din"

which is used for diving and is worn around the neck.

There is also the "kibal" which is used to be tied to fishing nets to make them float above the water. The "kibal" is made from the trunks of palm trees, and the diving stones which a diver wears on the leg and weighs about four kilograms.

Abdullah al Muqbali,

through his mini collection, has participated in many international exhibitions where he displayed these tools used in ancient times in diving and fishing. His collection drew a crowd as the pieces that are part of the collection introduce the Omani marine heritage to visitors. Abdullah is proud of his efforts to collect these items over the years.





A young Omani, busy living, through sport, art, family and culture

By Ray Petersen

Talking to young Izki mother of two, Rahma al Yahyai, is easy as she speaks immaculate English, something she gives credit to her father Nasser for, the Izki businessman inspiring her love of the language, discussion, conversation and literature. A quiescent poet, she hesitated to share her prose but was less reticent about sharing her artistry, another of her passions. Married to policeman Malik, and with children three-year-old Qabas and one-year-old Assad increasingly demanding of her time and energy, Rahma's current priority is to manage their time and their development, with her mother Nassra "the perfect mother and a great example of how to manage a house and home. Growing up, our parents loved, protected and provided for us, taught us good habits and behaviour, and Mum has taught us to be good cooks, but they also made us aware that we need to be challenging ourselves all the time, and that is why I have tried so many different hobbies and interests."

Schooled locally, and a student of Majan University College, Rahma joined the extracurricular Chess Club and learned to play creditably saying, "I became quite good, and was competitive, and a semi-finalist, but could not win. I like painting too and may start that again soon." She has prioritised her health and fitness as early as Grade Six saying, "I stopped doing workouts when I was in Grade Eleven or Twelve at school but started again during my second year of college, where I tried to get a proper gymnasium established, but it didn't happen."

Mostly, however, and somewhat unusually within the Islamic culture, it is the outdoor sports that have taken her fancy. A tall athlete she has played table tennis, basketball too, and liked it a lot, but volleyball probably ranks as her favourite sport. "I played for the Oman Women's Association, and for a long time was

the youngest player in a team that won a lot of medals. The sport is still close to my heart."

Like most Omanis, Rahma is a football fan, with Christiano Ronaldo, Lionel Messi and Ronaldinho her favourite players. Unlike most, she doesn't have a favourite club team though, as her favourite team is always that which she is playing in. Yes, she plays football! "I found it difficult at first because volleyball and basketball are played with the hands, and in my first game I got yellow carded as I 'caught' a throw-in. And to be fair, though most of the technique in football revolves around the feet, my feet may not be the most blessed, and I don't kick the ball very hard either", she laughed, "I've been trying to master Archery too, which is not as easy as it looks. My technique and results are showing improvement now, and I'm becoming quite a good shot!"

Steeped in her faith, Rahma is a thoroughly modern woman who lives within Oman's cultural and traditional modesty, who is herself not given to demonstrativeness, but who confesses to "red as my favourite colour, while I like Skechers shoes and Nike sportswear."

Pressed to identify her favourite food and knowing the active young woman in front of me, I should have expected the response I got: "I love seafood. Oh, you guys are fishermen, can you teach me to fish?" How could we say no? It's just another way to get busy living.



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making life easy

Oman welcomes launch of new trading platform for multiple crude grades



BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 6

Dubai Mercantile Exchange (DME), an international energy futures and commodities exchange in the Middle East, announced on Monday the launch of Alternative Crude Ecosystem (ACE) — a bilateral trading platform to trade multiple crude grades through the exchange.

DME will make the platform available for all participants and will offer traders the opportunity to trade bilateral barrels of Dubai, Upper Zakum, Murban, Basrah Light, Basrah Heavy, Al Shaheen and Oman versus the DME Oman Sour Crude Benchmark futures.

Commenting on the announcement, Salim bin Nasser al Auqi, Under-Secretary of Oman's Ministry of Energy and Minerals, said: "The Ministry of Energy and Minerals (MEM) supports all continuous improvement initiatives in the oil markets as it enhances the price discovery and offers a fair price for the key commodity of the region. DME Oman has been the benchmark for us since 2007.

We believe DME has successfully passed a major stress test in 2020 and presented itself as the natural benchmark for crudes produced in our region. With the launch of ACE, national oil companies across the region will have the opportunity to discover the fair price for grades based on the DME Oman benchmark."

This new functionality allows the Middle East Crude participants a way to execute multiple Over Counter (OTC) crude grades as differentials against DME Oman futures. The new service offered by DME will shed the light on the growing importance and the status of DME Oman as a strong and reliable Benchmark for the Middle East, representing consistent fair value for Sour Crude barrels to the East of Suez.

Raid al Salami, Managing Director, DME said: "We are always looking to enrich our customers' experience and enable them to benefit from what the market has to offer. ACE is a unique platform where it combines Futures and OTC in one transparent window for the very first time, offering all participants opportunities to optimise their trading activities and manage their exposure across multiple crude grades."

OIA-backed Utico wins largest Dubai plant

NEW INROADS: Leading private utility looks at sustainable investments in Oman water sector by offering lowest tariffs

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 6

Leading private utility Utico, which recently won the largest Independent Water Project (IWP) in Dubai and signed water purchase and shareholder agreements with the Dubai Electricity & Water Authority (DEWA), says it is looking at sustainable investments in Oman offering consumers the world's lowest tariffs.

The Oman Investment Authority (OIA)-backed company through its wholly-owned subsidiary, Majis Industrial Services, said in a statement that it is positioning itself to bring value to Oman's water sector in a sustainable manner and hopes to invest this year, leading to channelling capital and know-how back to the country, as well as contributing to socio-economic progress.

Utico said it scored a major milestone by winning the Dubai IWP contract with the world's lowest water tariff in a tough and challenging procurement model of DEWA, demonstrating its capacity and quality to negotiate at an arm's length basis to deliver sustainable development. The project capacity is 120 million gallons per day with facilities to expand to 240 migd (million imperial gallons per day)



production per day, which would make it the largest desalination plant in the world.

Hussain al Lawati, CEO of the MENA region and Head of Global Investments, said: "The Dubai win shows the company's ability to deliver sustainable returns to its shareholders in addition to bringing in efficiencies to government long term concessions. This has been made possible with Utico's innovative approach and the vertically integrated model encapsulating all elements of the value chain."

Governments in the region are continuing to expand the desalination capacity and they are looking to enhance the contribution of key sectors such as agriculture for which efficient and cost-effective supply of water

is a key enabler, he said.

"We are well-positioned to capture the opportunities in the sector and is currently evaluating public markets for both debt and equity to expand our capital base. Our competitive position in a growing sector will deliver superior risk-adjusted returns to our investors and capital providers," Al Lawati said.

Adapting the same successful model, Utico is keen to bring benefit to the Omani water sector by providing the most efficient technology with affordable economical scale. One of these achievements so far is Utico being selected as a winning bidder to supply Diam with desalinated potable water of 20,000 m3/d capacity. The water tariff of the project is the lowest in Oman.

It is key to also bring down the water tariff in the commercial space, which will position Oman competitively with respect to other industrial areas to attract FDI.

"In line with the government's 2040 vision, we will invest into sustainable projects in Oman; Oman will be in the top three countries in terms of our investment target in the next five years. This will also bring the subsidies lower and protect consumer tariffs from the increase," Al Lawati said.

Utico said it has continuously demonstrated its ability to innovate and sustain its unique business model, which despite the Covid-19 pandemic has supported and enabled all its customers and consumers to adapt and adopt



The Dubai win shows the company's ability to deliver sustainable returns to its shareholders in addition to bringing in efficiencies to government long term concessions

HUSSAIN AL LAWATI
CEO of the MENA region and Head of Global Investments

sustainability as well.

Utico is the largest full-service private utility company in UAE. It is a major utility infrastructure developer with its strength in offering full serviced solutions from concept to operation and maintenance. Utico also has full-spectrum engineering capabilities to associate with turnkey projects with strong customer satisfaction. The company is specialised in providing a range of utility services including water production, power production & transmission, turnkey EPC projects, district cooling, wastewater treatment and utility investment.

Omantel launches 5G international roaming

Global solutions: With the 5G mobile service, Omantel's customers will be able to enjoy high speed and seamless connectivity while abroad

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 6

Omantel has announced the introduction of 5G international roaming, offering its customers a convenient and seamless experience to enjoy high-speed data services while travelling abroad.

As part of the initial phase in its push towards secure, consistent, and fast global 5G connectivity, Omantel has made this international roaming facility available in the GCC through regional partners, becoming the only mobile network operator in Oman to offer 5G international roaming. Omantel is working



with its vast list of regional and global partners to announce more 5G international roaming destinations in the coming few weeks.

As 5G gains a more important role in how individuals, businesses and economies function, comprehensive solutions suite from Omantel will continue to meet subscribers' current and future needs as it



has already proved by making the technology an integral part of its offerings.

Awatif al Mandhari (pictured), Manager of Roaming Services at the Wholesale Business Unit of Omantel, said "When we talk about 5G, Omantel is on the fast track. The company has proved its agility in bringing the best global telecom solutions to the people of Oman. After being the

Besides 5G, Omantel is already offering an impressively wide international roaming coverage, reaching to more than 700 roaming partners in more than 200 countries

first mobile network provider to launch 5G for mobile devices, Omantel is now taking its reach beyond the borders.

The service will be beneficial for individuals and business travellers who need fast access to information and data on the go. At Omantel, we always keep our customers' convenience as our end goal to ensure the highest level of satisfaction and best possible experience when enjoying our services."

The 5G international roaming service introduction enforces Omantel's position as a key player in Oman's telecom sector, staying

ahead of the game through foresight and investments in state-of-the-art infrastructure. The launch is the latest in a series of achievements by Omantel in adapting future technologies and further solidifying Oman's image as the region's ICT gateway.

Besides 5G, Omantel is already offering an impressively wide international roaming coverage, reaching more than 700 roaming partners in more than 200 countries.

Being capable of offering such advanced services to its customers has always contributed in positioning Omantel as a telecom pioneer in the region and beyond.

Omantel's mobile network has been recently rated as the fastest in Oman by Ookla, a neutral online platform dedicated to measuring the performance of broadband networks around the world. This achievement yet another acknowledgement of the excellence Omantel has shown through innovative technologies and smart solutions.

Women bosses speak out as Covid affects equality

The fight for gender equality in the UK enters a defining era with the recent news that all-male boards had disappeared from the FTSE 350, which was an achievement for diversity, but the economic challenges posed by Covid-19 has put gender equality under scrutiny.

Research from City & Guilds (body for developing skills in trades) revealed that the Covid-19 fallout could threaten to set the clock back on progress made towards female empowerment and equality in the workplace.

Campaigners are calling on employers and the government to ensure gender equality does not fall behind by taking active steps such as flexible working policies.

Executive vice-chair of

Mastercard, Ann Cairns, believes Covid-19 has put women in a more vulnerable position.

“Clearly the pandemic has led to a step back in the fight for diversity within business, as a crisis can always lead to the retreat of those who would otherwise strive to make a change in times of prosperity,” she said.

“I say differently, and will continue to work with Mastercard to use action rather than words to create more diverse businesses across the globe,” Cairns added. One in four women have experienced a fall in income over the past year, and more than half have seen their career and mental health deteriorate, according to Fidelity International (a company that provides investment management services).

As the firm puts it, the financial challenges of Covid-19 must not be a permanent blow for women



ANDY JALIL
andyjalil@aol.com

RESEARCH FROM CITY & GUILDS (BODY FOR DEVELOPING SKILLS IN TRADES) REVEALED THAT THE COVID-19 FALLOUT COULD THREATEN TO SET THE CLOCK BACK ON PROGRESS MADE TOWARDS FEMALE EMPOWERMENT AND EQUALITY IN THE WORKPLACE

and unwind years of progress. Alexandra Altinger, CEO of J O Hambro Capital Management, urged businesses to ensure the equality issue remains at the forefront.

She said: “Gender pay gap enforcement may have been delayed due to the pandemic, but the chickens will come home to roost before the year is out,” she said. “With the pandemic having huge consequences for women in the workforce, businesses will have to act fast to avoid action being taken by the equalities watchdog.”

Pandemic has somewhat dented female career confidence. New data from the Equal Power campaign, which is working to get more women into politics, showed that action on female representation is needed now more than ever.

The movement found that

74 per cent of women would be unlikely to stand as an MP, compared to 59 per cent before the pandemic.

Three-quarters of the women surveyed felt their diverse needs had rarely been represented in the UK during the crisis.

While the pandemic has shifted some attention away from social issues, finding new ways to maximise women’s access to professional development must remain a priority in every sector. Gender equality wins have been met by unprecedented hardship.

The UK Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) has taken a major step in promoting gender equality by appointing five women in top new positions of chief operating officer, chief data information and intelligence officer, executive director of markets, executive director of authorisations and director of

market oversight who will lead the FCA’s response to listings review for strengthening the UK’s capital markets.

These appointees will sit on the executive committee — the regulator’s most senior executive decision-making body. The moves come amid change at the regulator, which has committed to become a data-led regulator in order to be able to react more quickly and effectively to what is going on in financial markets.

FCA chief executive Nikhil Rathi said: “As we continue transforming the FCA – building a data-led regulator – their global experience and leadership, drawn from a variety of backgrounds, will be vital in ensuring we can act more quickly to reduce harm to consumers and ensure market integrity” *(The writer is our foreign correspondent based in the UK)*

High demand for Golf Beach Residences



BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 6

Following an exceptionally high demand for Golf Beach Residences villas at Al Mouj Muscat, where 90 per cent of the collection sold within just weeks of their release last month, the premier lifestyle and leisure destination has launched more homes for sale within this exclusive gated neighbourhood.

The second and final phase is within the southern sector and includes a choice of two outstanding designs; Golf Boulevard Villas which are luxurious 6-bedroom villas, and Golf Park Villas, the collection’s impressive 5-bedroom homes.

Connected by beautiful boulevards and walkways, all homes have direct access to Al Mouj Golf, are a short stroll from pristine sandy beaches and the 5-star St. Regis Al Mouj Muscat

Resort. Each home comes with exclusive resident privileges including complimentary golf carts and parking, electric charging and preferential rates at Al Mouj Golf. As well, each property boasts a Garden Suite giving owners the flexibility to configure the space to suit their personal lifestyle preferences, and as their family’s needs change, by using it as a playroom, a gym, music room or home cinema, for example.

Nasser bin Masoud al Shaibani, CEO of Al Mouj Muscat says: “We are delighted with the overwhelmingly positive response to Golf Beach Residences made all the more rewarding given we have launched during such challenging times. Al Mouj Muscat is an exceptional destination where we put in place everything needed for how people want to live, work and relax.”

Shareholders give nod for conversion of United Power into SAOC

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 6

United Power Company SAOG which until recently owned and operated the region’s first privately-developed Independent Power Project (IPP) at Manah in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate, says it has secured the approval of a majority of its shareholders to convert the publicly traded company (SAOG) into an SAOC entity.

This follows a decision by the Capital Market Authority (CMA) granting initial approval for the conversion.

In a filing on Tuesday, United Power Company said it had secured the written approval of shareholders collectively holding 76.60 per cent of shares in the company supporting its conversion into an SAOC entity.

Confirmation has been received from Khaled Juffali Co (55 per cent shares), Ministry of Defence Pension Fund MoDPF (5 per cent), Civil Service Employee



Pension Fund (6.45 per cent), Royal Oman Police Pension Fund (3 per cent), Public Authority for Social Insurance (3.15 per cent) and Sogex Oman (4 per cent).

“In addition to the above, Khaled Juffali and MoDPF undertake to purchase all of the shares held by the minority shareholders in the company at a purchase price of RO 1.015 per share through an Omani subsidiary, ie Power Development Company LLC, fully owned by Khaled Juffali and MoDPF, if the minority shareholders wish to sell their shares prior to the company’s conversion from

SAOG to SAOC,” said Zohar Karachiwala, CEO, United Power Company, in the filing.

Khaled Juffali and MoDPF will then undertake an exit offer to provide an opportunity to the company’s minority shareholders to sell their shares, the statement further added.

Ubhar Capital has appointed as a broker for the majority shareholders to complete the purchase of shares offered for sale by the minority shareholders in this regard. The purchase offer period starts from April 21 and concludes on May 12, 2021, it added.

Oman-Swiss association elects new Board

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 6

The Oman-Switzerland Friendship Association held its Annual General Meeting online last week. Shaikh Saif bin Hashil al Maskery chaired the meeting. He thanked the membership for their continued support, and also thanked His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for their guidance and support since the Association’s inception over four years ago.

The meeting discussed the activities of the Association during the past two years and approved the audited financials for the years 2019 and 2020.

The meeting also appointed a new board of directors for the next three-year term. Hani al Zubair and Luca Decarli were re-elected and were joined by Mohammed Abdullah al Kharusi, Dr Anka Kaestner (the first woman to join the OSFA Board), Said bin Saif al Maskry, Lateef Shahdad and Khalid Said al Wahaibi.

Shaikh Saif wished them good luck and said, “I look forward to seeing the new, younger and more dynamic board in action,” a sentiment echoed by Sayyid Abdulla bin Hamed al Busaidy, the Patron of the Association, who was also in attendance.

After the meeting, the new board held its first board meeting and appointed Hani al Zubair as Chairman of the Association. Luca Decarli was appointed as Vice-Chairman and Mohammed al Kharusi as Treasurer.

PRESS RELEASE

AHLIBANK’S RO 30 MILLION RIGHTS ISSUE OVERSUBSCRIBED 1.29 TIMES

ahlibank has announced an oversubscription of its rights issue by 1.29 times.

This marks the successful closure of the Bank’s rights issue of ordinary shares of RO 30 million. ahlibank had proposed an additional 300 million shares at 101 baizas per offer share, including issue expenses of 1 baiza per share.

Said Abdullah al Hatmi, CEO, ahlibank, said, “The purpose of the rights issue was to strengthen the Tier I capital of the Bank and to meet the capital requirement for business growth. I am proud to share that despite a challenging



local and global economic environment, there has been an overwhelming response from shareholders, and I would like to thank them for their continued trust and confidence in ahlibank. The issuance reaffirms the Bank’s positive market position and strong investor confidence.”

Post issue, the Bank’s issued and paid-up share will increase to RO 194.9 million from the current RO 164.9 million. The rights issue subscription, managed by Ubhar Capital, opened from March 1 until March 15, 2021. Ahlibank is a full-fledged commercial bank, focusing its operations and providing services in retail banking, corporate banking, investment banking and Islamic banking in Oman.

MUZN LAUNCHES SALARY TRANSFER CAMPAIGN OFFERING UNBEATABLE RATES ON FINANCING

Continuing to create value for its customers while meeting their needs and aspirations, Muzn, National Bank of Oman’s (NBO) Islamic banking window, has launched its new salary transfer campaign. Customers who transfer their salaries to the bank are eligible for exclusive low financing rates starting at just 4.99%. Available for a limited time only on all personal and housing financing packages, the offer also includes customers who already have their salaries with the bank.

Salima al Marzouqi (pictured), Chief Islamic Banking Officer (CIBO), said, “Our new salary transfer campaign is designed to give our customers the best value on their investments while covering all of their

financing needs. Availing this scheme is quick and easy, and, along with discounted rates, customers will also discover all the unique benefits that come with our financing facilities. We are very much looking forward to welcoming new customers to Muzn with this exciting promotion and supporting them on their financial journey.”

Utilising approved Islamic concepts, Muzn’s financing facilities offer an easy application process, fast processing and low monthly instalments, providing tailored options for life’s biggest investments. Muzn Home Financing is available to Omani nationals and is based on the concept of Ijarah and Diminishing Musharakah.



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Sage Group to sell Swiss business

The Sage Group agreed for the sale of its Swiss business to Infonika for 39 million pounds subject to adjustment for net debt and working capital. — Reuters



Number of jobless in Spain falls

The number of people registered as unemployed in Spain fell. Jobless claims fell by 1.48 per cent in March from a month earlier data from the Labour Ministry showed. — Reuters



EU nods Air France's 4 bn euros aid

The EU approved a plan on Tuesday by the French government to inject up to four billion euros into Air France, hit by a collapse in passenger traffic during the pandemic. — Reuters

Credit Suisse takes \$4.7 bn hedge fund hit

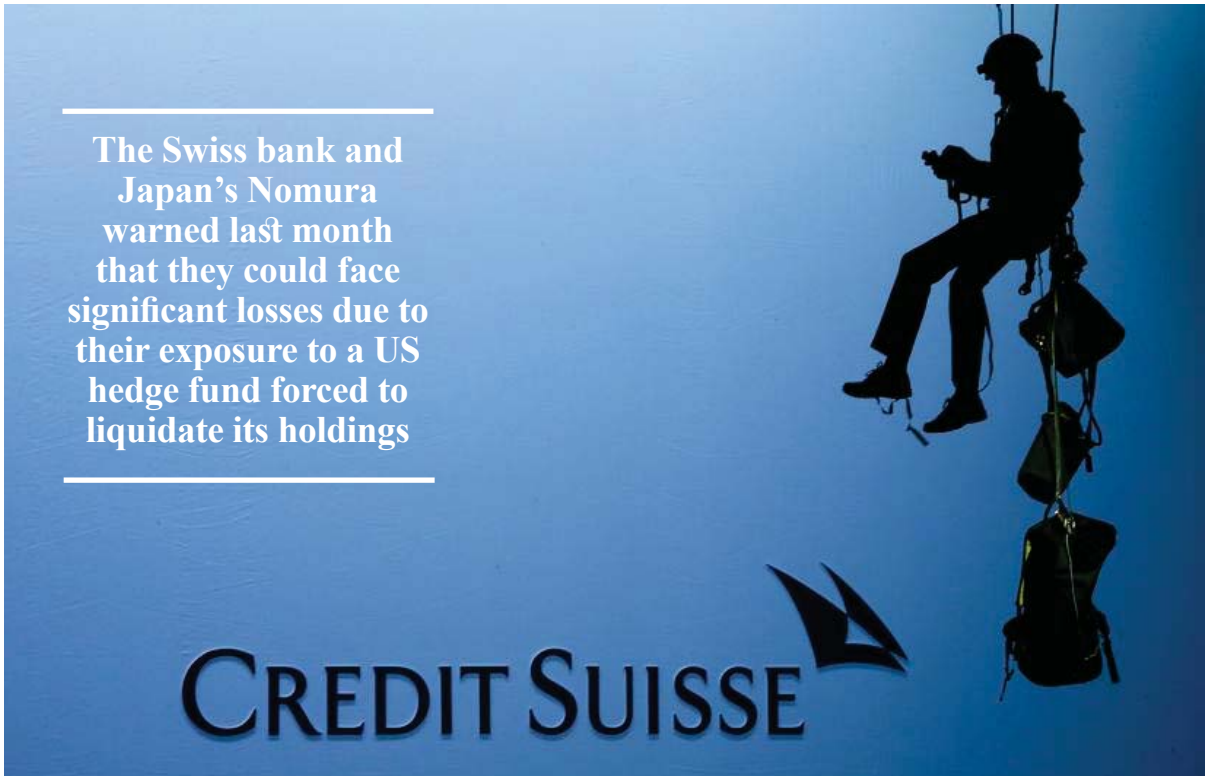
ZURICH: Credit Suisse said on Tuesday that it had taken a \$4.7 billion hit from its links to troubled hedge fund Archegos Capital Management, cut dividends and announced the departure of two senior executives.

The Swiss bank and Japan's Nomura warned last month that they could face significant losses due to their exposure to a US hedge fund forced to liquidate its holdings.

"The significant loss in our Prime Services business relating to the failure of a US-based hedge fund is unacceptable", CEO Thomas Gottstein said.

Bloomberg News has reported that the fund was little-known Archegos Capital Management, which sold more than \$20 billion in stocks from US media and Chinese companies as it sought to cover its obligations to its lenders.

Credit Suisse said its pre-tax loss of 900 million Swiss francs in the first three months of the year includes 4.4 billion Swiss francs (\$4.7 billion) related to "the



A Greenpeace activist is seen beside the logo of Swiss bank Credit in Zurich, Switzerland. — Reuters

failure by a US-based hedge fund to meet its margin commitments as we announced on March 29".

Trading on margin is the practice of using borrowed funds to invest in financial assets such as stocks. It can be very profitable

for borrowers as they are often only required to put down a small percentage in cash while the stocks serve as collateral for the lender.

But large shifts in share prices can force borrowers to put

up more money to meet their margin commitments, or sell the shares and potentially lose more than their investment and default on their loan.

Credit Suisse also announced the departure of the head of its

investment bank and chief risk and compliance officer, pulled bonuses for senior executives and chopped its proposed dividend payment to shareholders.

The bank's board of directors opened an investigation into the matter. It also pulled a traditional resolution for shareholders to discharge the board and executive committee members of responsibility for actions taken during the previous year.

"The Board of Directors believes it is in the best interest of the shareholders to consider this proposal when the internal investigations into the recent developments have been completed and the outcome communicated", it said.

AvaTrade analyst Naeem Aslam said "the Archegos fallout... has become a significant nightmare for Credit Suisse, and the bank has to take the right steps for its survival as losses are just too big to digest."

Shares in Credit Suisse shed 1.1 per cent in morning trading, while the main Swiss market index was up 0.3 per cent. — AFP

Oil rebounds on economic data, bargain hunting



A man pumps gas into a car at a gas station of PDVSA in Caracas, Venezuela. — Reuters

SINGAPORE: Oil prices rose on Tuesday as investors looked for bargains following the previous day's plunge on rising output from the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, while strong economic data from the United States and China brightened recovery prospects.

Brent crude futures rose 78 cents, or 1.26 per cent, to \$62.93 a barrel by 0646 GMT, after falling 4.2 per cent on Monday.

US West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude futures rose 81 cents, or 1.38 per cent, to \$59.46, after sliding 4.6 per cent on Monday. — Reuters

BP to reach \$35 billion net debt target in Q1

LONDON: British oil major BP, in an update on progress towards \$35 billion net debt target, said that it now expects to have reached its \$35 billion net debt target during the first quarter 2021.

It is a result of earlier than anticipated delivery of disposal proceeds combined with very strong business performance during the first quarter.

BP said it has received around \$4.7 billion of disposal proceeds during the first quarter.

BP now expects disposal proceeds in 2021 to be at the top end of the previously announced \$4-\$6 billion range.

BP's target of \$25 billion of disposal proceeds between the second half of 2020 and 2025



A plane flies above BP petrol station in Kloten, Switzerland. — Reuters

is now underpinned by agreed or completed transactions of around \$14.7 billion with about \$10.0 billion of proceeds received.

BP said that, on reaching the net debt target, it is committed to returning at least 60 per cent of surplus cash flow to shareholders by way of share buybacks. BP's net debt at the end of the Q4 2020 was \$38.9 billion. — dpa

US auto industry calls for government help

WASHINGTON: A US auto industry group urged the government to help as it warned the global semiconductor shortage could result in 1.28 million fewer vehicles built this year and disrupt production for another six months.

The US Commerce Department should dedicate a portion of funding in a proposed bill to expand US semiconductor production to auto sector needs, the Alliance for Auto Innovation said in written responses to a government-initiated review.

US President Joe Biden in February ordered several Federal agency actions to address the chip crisis and is also seeking \$37 billion in funding for legislation to supercharge chip manufacturing in the US.



A man works inside GM's Fairfax plant in Kansas. — Reuters

Some funding should "be used to build new capacity that will support the auto industry and mitigate the risks to the automotive supply chain evidenced by the current chip shortage", the group's Chief Executive, John Bozzella, wrote.

The group said the US government could specify "a particular percentage — that is reasonably based on the projected needs of the auto industry — be allocated for facilities that will support the production of auto grade chips

in some manner."

The group represents nearly all major automakers with factories in the United States including General Motors Co, Ford Motor Co, Volkswagen AG, Toyota Motor Corp and Hyundai Motor Co.

Automakers have been hit particularly hard by the global chip shortage after many cancelled orders when auto plants were idled during the coronavirus pandemic.

When they were ready to recommence production, they found that chipmakers were busy fulfilling orders for the consumer electronics industry which as seen demand for premium devices boom as people spent more time at home.

— Reuters

Yellen pledges US cooperation, calls for global minimum tax

WASHINGTON: US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said on Monday that she is working with G20 countries to agree on a global corporate minimum tax rate and pledged that restoring US multilateral leadership would strengthen the global economy and advance US interests.

In a speech ahead of her first International Monetary Fund and World Bank Spring Meetings as Treasury chief, Yellen signalled stronger US engagement on issues from climate change to human rights to tax base erosion.

A global minimum tax proposed by the Biden administration could help to end a "thirty-year race to the bottom on corporate tax rates",



US President Joe Biden meets with Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen in The Oval Office at the White House in Washington. — Reuters

Yellen told an online event hosted by the Chicago Council on Global

Affairs. The proposal is a key pillar of

A global minimum tax proposed by the Biden administration could help to end a "thirty-year race to the bottom on corporate tax rates"

JANET YELLEN
US Treasury Secretary

President Joe Biden's \$2 trillion infrastructure spending plan, which calls for an increase in the US corporate tax rate to 28

per cent while eliminating some deductions associated with overseas profits.

Without a global minimum, the United States would again have higher rates than a number of other major economies, tax experts say, while the US proposal could help jump-start negotiations for a tax deal among major economies.

World Bank President David Malpass said finance leaders from the Group of 20 major economies on Wednesday would discuss global tax issues, including for digital services, adding that international attitudes were shifting away from continual tax reductions.

"Taxes matter to development, and it's important that the world get it right", Malpass told CNBC television.

Separately, a group of Democratic senators unveiled a legislative proposal to roll back parts of former president Donald Trump's 2017 US tax cuts.

Yellen also said she would use the IMF and World Bank meetings this week to advance discussions on climate change, improve vaccine access for poor countries and push countries to do more to support a strong global recovery from the coronavirus pandemic.

"We will fare better if we work together and support each other", Yellen said. — Reuters