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22°C/15°C

CARBON FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION

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His Majesty approves Tenth Five-Year Plan, state budget

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik issued two Royal Decrees on January 1, reading as follows:

Royal Decree No 1/2021 approves the Tenth Five-Year Development Plan 2021-2025.

Article 1 endorses the Tenth Five-Year Development Plan (2021-2025) the goals of which are indicated in Annex 1, attached to the decree.

Article 2 stipulates that the Tenth Five-Year Development Plan will be implemented in accordance with its financial structure stated in the attached Annex 2, and in line with the Medium-Term Fiscal Balance Plan issued by the Ministry of Finance.

Article 3 approves the national economy's strategic approaches /guidelines of the plan as indicated in the attached Annex 3.

Article 4 approves the Five-Year Plan's projects in accordance with the general guidelines/precepts indicated in the attached Annex 4.

Article 5 states that the Ministry of Economy will publish the details of the plan in reports to



be drafted exclusively for this purpose.

Article 6 instructs all units of the state's administrative apparatus and other public legal entities to

execute the Tenth Five-Year Development Plan without prejudice to the provisions of enforced laws and bylaws.

Article 7 states that the Ministry

of Economy will issue the Ledger of Strategic Programmes of the plan during the first quarter of 2021 provided the plan's first year projects are specified in coordi-

nation between the Ministry of Economy and other concerned departments.

Article 8 instructs the Ministry of Economy to conduct regular assessment of the Tenth Five-Year Development Plan in light of local, regional and international developments.

Article 9 states that this decree will be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from January 1, 2021.

Royal Decree No 2/2021 ratifies the State's General Budget for Fiscal Year 2021.

Article 1 ratifies the State's General Budget for Fiscal Year 2021 according to the tables/schedules attached to the decree.

Article 2 instructs all units of the State's Administrative Apparatus and other public legal entities to implement the provisions of this decree, each within the scope of its prerogatives.

Article 3 states that this decree will be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from January 1, 2021.

ONA

See also Pages 02 and 13

Interest on govt loans for 2021, licence fees for 3 years waived

Our Correspondent
Muscat

On the orders of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, the Ministry of Finance has approved a package of facilities and incentives for citizens and the private sector for the year 2021.

The incentives include loans from Oman Housing Bank, with the annual sum earmarked for annual borrowing during 2021 to be increased from RO60mn to RO100mn.

'This will help increase the number of loan applications from 1,350 to about 2,250 for the year 2021 and will help reduce the waiting period for citizens to obtain housing loans,' a statement from the Ministry of Finance said.

Also, as part of the incentives, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning will help prepare for the distribution of 23,000 land plots in different governorates and wilayats of the sultanate.

In another major incentive,

borrowers from Oman Development Bank and the Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises will be exempted from loan interests for one year (2021).

As many as 32,104 establishments and firms will get a total sum waiver worth RO10,930,432. It is a measure aimed to alleviate the financial burden of small and medium enterprises and firms that take loans from Oman Development Bank and the Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises (loans of Al Raffd Fund and Sanad), particularly following the implementation of the electricity and water subsidy.

Also, starting January 1, 2021, small and medium enterprises owned by Omanis will be exempted from all licence fees for the first three years of incorporation.

The Ministry of Finance also reduced the rental contract fee from five to three per cent and lease contract fees, too, from five to three per cent.

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HALF YEARLY DRAW OMR 100,000	- 1 winner
HALF YEARLY DRAW FOR THARWA CUSTOMERS	
OMR 10,000 Each	- 3 winners
ANNUAL GRAND PRIZE OMR 150,000	- 1 WINNER

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Monthly Draw For Women OMR 500 Each	- 17 Winners (1 from each branch)
Monthly Draw For Accounts opened through Alizz Islamic Bank	
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TENTH FIVE-YEAR PLAN LAUNCHES

OMAN VISION 2040

Four key areas include society, economy, environment and state

KEY MACROECONOMIC TARGETS					
ACHIEVING GDP GROWTH OF NO LESS THAN 3.5%	ACHIEVING GDP GROWTH RATE AT CURRENT PRICES BY 5.5%	INCREASING INVESTMENT AMOUNTING TO 27% OF GDP	INCREASING PRIVATE SECTOR INVESTMENT TO 60%	ACHIEVING 3.2% GROWTH RATE IN NON-OIL ACTIVITIES	ATTRACTING FDI IN OIL & GAS TO 10% OF GDP BY END OF PLAN

Muscat - The Tenth Five-Year Development Plan (2021-2025) kicked off on January 1 in accordance with Royal Decree No 1/2021.

It is the first plan within the strategic Oman Vision 2040 under the patronage of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik. With this, a new era commences for a qualitative shift in the sultanate's development march, the Ministry of Economy stated following approval of the Tenth Five-Year Development Plan.

The ministry added that the plan reflects His Majesty the Sultan's approach as stated in his speech to the country on February 23, 2020, in which he outlined the salient features of national action in the next phase. These include restructuring the State's Administrative Apparatus, facilitating youth engagement in development efforts, empowering women in different spheres, and developing laws and legislations in a manner that accommodates present and future requirements, which will in turn accelerate the pace of comprehensive and sustainable development.

Oman Vision 2040 and Five-Year Plans

The Tenth Five-Year Development Plan launches Oman Vision 2040, which focuses on four main axes ramifying into 14 national priorities, 88 strategic goals and 68 performance indicators.

The First Axis is themed 'Society manned by creative individuals'. It focuses on education, learning, research, national talent, health, citizenship, identity, heritage, national culture, welfare, social security and youth development.

The Second Axis, themed 'Economy imbedded in a competitive environment', deals with issues of leadership, economic management, economic diversification, fiscal sustainability, labour market and employment, the private sector, investment, international cooperation, development of governorates, sustainable cities and information technology.

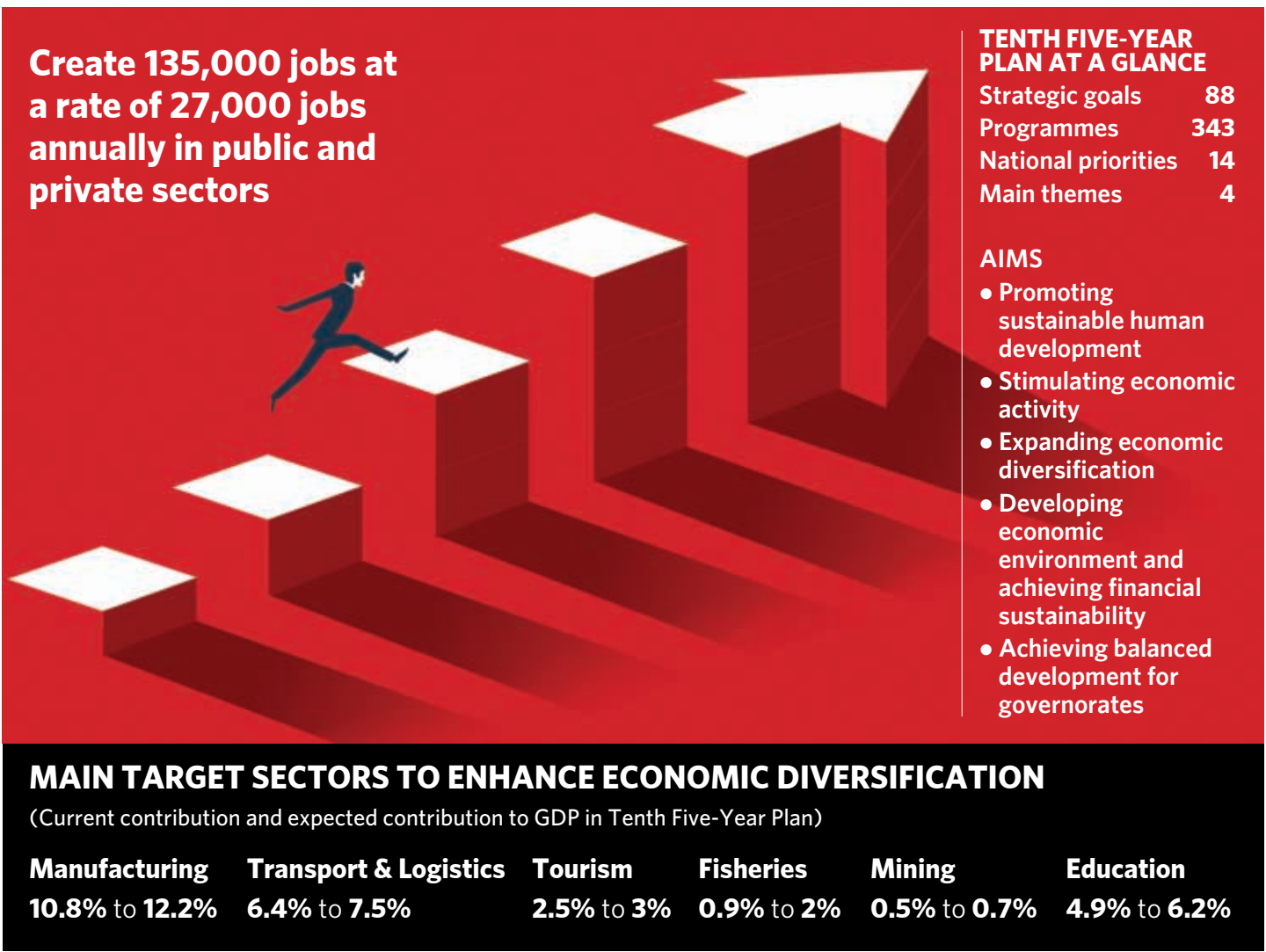
The Third Axis, themed 'Environment whose resources are sustainable', covers aspects of the environment and natural resources.

The Fourth Axis, themed 'A state with responsible institutions', deals with issues of legislation, the judiciary, auditing/monitoring, governance of the State's Administrative Apparatus, resources and projects.

Exceptional conditions and challenges

Preparations for the Tenth Five-Year Development Plan were done during exceptional adverse conditions, including the slump in international oil prices and the COVID-19 pandemic, the ministry stated.

The collapse of oil prices brought about a negative impact on human development, a global recession, surge in the general debt vis-à-vis the



GDP that pulled down the country's credit rating and increased the rate of borrowing. All this contributed to a decline in the contribution of the private sector to economic activities.

Despite shortcomings, the plan managed to restructure goals and reformulate clear-cut national approaches linked to timed executive programmes. It also restored economic growth, accelerated the rate of economic activities and achieved a balanced ratio of economic and social development through the execution of programmes, initiatives and proposed projects within a comprehensively regulated timeframe.

Tenth Five-Year Development Plan - Drafting methodology

The first stage of preparation of the plan focused on evaluating what was achieved earlier and tapping the outcome of strategies, plans and research made by the state's sectors. This stage included expanding the base of participation and the formation of committees and specialised working teams. Drafting of the plan took into consideration the current economic circumstances and the actual fiscal performance of the

previous five-year plan.

Since December 2019, 195 workshops and technical meetings have been held with the participation of more than 1,900 officials. During this period, the current situation and existing challenges were reviewed.

Goals of Tenth Five-Year Development Plan

The plan seeks to achieve a number of economic and social priority goals with the prime objective of activating the economy, developing macro-economy environment, upgrading the performance of general finance, rationalisation of public spending (particularly recurrent ones) and espousing an expandable, well-disciplined financial policy that achieves sustainable growth rates.

The plan also targets setting up necessary infrastructure for the acceleration of private investment, and the execution of major strategic projects and public-private sector partnership projects, besides attracting direct foreign investment, while at the same time considering prospects for oil prices based on an average price of US\$48 per barrel during the years of the plan.

This is in addition to backing the participation of governorates in the achievement of the Oman Vision 2040 goals.

Sectors of Tenth Five-Year Development Plan

The plan focuses on economic diversification mechanisms and programmes, and raising the contribution of non-oil activities. It sets a 3.2 per cent annual average growth rate of non-oil activities in the GDP by focusing on promising economic sectors like high-tech conversion industries, agriculture, fisheries, food processing, transporting, storing and logistics.

It also targets increasing the contribution of the private sector to economic activities of high in-country value, motivating small and medium enterprises by encouraging innovation, expanding the knowledge-based economy and use of Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) applications such as artificial intelligence, exploring specialised markets, and generating employment opportunities for Omani youth, notably entrepreneurship.

The plan lays great emphasis on protecting human capital and diminishing the repercussions

of the COVID-19 pandemic, pressing ahead with the development of a health scheme and the sector of medical industries, encouraging the contribution of the private sector to the health sector by providing high-quality services, developing pre-university and graduate education, and laying the foundations of administrative, economic and financial decentralisation.

In addition, the plan covers the protection of the environment, achievement of environmental sustainability, development of green and blue economy, increasing the contribution of clean and renewable energy to economic activity, and achieving the most ideal utilisation of marine resources.

Employment challenge

Employment of national manpower figures among the most formidable socio-economic challenges. Despite the fact that performance rates of the national economy do provide enough employment opportunities, the labour market could not cope with the steadily increasing number of job seekers.

To address this challenge and to regulate labour market discrepancies, the Tenth Five-Year Development Plan endorses policies that contribute to modifying the structure of employment (which currently relies on a wide base of non-skilled manpower) and introduces a new structure based on a wide base of skilled manpower through recruitment of skilled labour and offering incentives. The plan also encourages new investments based on the knowledge economy, developing the education system and increasing the participation of women in the labour market.

Dr Said al Saqri, Minister of Economy, said the plan will create 135,000 jobs at a rate of 27,000 jobs annually in the public and private sectors.

Executing plan and following up on performance

The achievement of goals, objectives and programmes of the plan is closely associated with the cooperation and collaboration of all government and private establishments, civil society institutions, the media and individuals. The Ministry of Economy will conduct regular assessment of the Tenth Five-Year Development Plan, prepare periodic reports and submit these to the departments concerned. The assessment will apply smart performance indicators, follow up programmes and evaluate their effects over the five years of the plan within the framework of a regulated institutional system entrusted to the vision's follow-up committee. An electronic platform established for this purpose will unify the performance indicators in cooperation with the departments concerned.

50% reduction in allowances for government staff: Ministry of Finance

Muscat - The Ministry of Finance on December 31, 2020, issued a circular on allowances, increments and other remunerations disbursed to some employees of the State's Administrative Apparatus.

'In efforts to follow up and revise some areas of spending in ministries and government units in a manner that rationalises public expenditure and optimises financial resources and, in revision of occupational systems and regulations to upgrade the efficiency of perform-

ance and regulate and unify job privilege payments with the purpose of achieving justice and equality, the Ministry of Finance informs all ministries, government units and public establishments that the following has been decided:

Allowances, increments beyond the deserved salary

A 50 per cent reduction of allowances disbursed to employees in all government units beyond the Unified Payroll sys-

tem cited under Royal Decree No 78/2013, from April 1, 2021.

These include management allowance, allowance for restructuring tasks, administrative work allowance, technical work allowance, risk allowance, complementary allowance, allowance for working in Duqm, 'rare practice' allowance, 'user allowance', personnel services allowance, majlis allowance, clinic allowance, system allowance, audit allowance and any other allowances or bonuses granted to employees as per in-

ternal regulations and decisions.

In case an employee gets more than one of such allowance, the 50 per cent reduction will apply to the highest-paid allowance.

The ranks of employees listed below will be exempted from Item (1) above: the judiciary (judges and employees of similar ranking), occupants of medical jobs and paramedical jobs in government medical (civil and military) establishments, holders of jobs of the diplomatic corps at the Foreign Ministry, academi-

cians, teachers and air navigation jobs.

Privilege payments beyond the deserved salary

With effect from April 1, 2021, all types of privilege payments made to employees beyond the framework of the deserved salary and its standard allowances will be stopped.

Senior officials

Provisions of Items (1) and (2) will apply to senior officials,

holders of special grade and higher.

In serving public interest, the Ministry of Finance exhorts all ministries, government units, public authorities, establishments and legal entities to fully abide by the provisions stated in this circular with effect from April 1, 2021.

All are required to provide the Ministry of Finance a detailed statement of accounts of allowances, increments and privilege payments disbursed to

employees beyond the Unified Schedule of Grades and Salaries issued under Royal Decree No 78/2013. The statement, to reach the Ministry of Finance by January 31 at the latest, should include the type and value of payments, the number of beneficiaries per financial grade and the total annual cost of payments. Internal audit units in every department are required to fully undertake their role of following up the implementation of this edict.

ONA

LAST SUNSET OF 2020



Qurum beach drew residents of the city across age groups to behold the last sunset of 2020, and in hopes of the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. Khalfan Manji came with his father, wife and children. "I hope the new year will be better, not like 2020. My father is here on the beach after almost eight months. The children are obviously happy, too," he said, as his seven-year old son Ahmed chipped in, "Last year was not good. We were not allowed in malls and beaches" (Muscat Daily/Syed Fasiuddin)

Ministry decision on incentives to private sector

Muscat - Implementing the decision of the Supreme Committee on extending a package of incentives offered by the government to establishments of the private sector and manpower till March 31, 2021, the Ministry of Labour has decided the following:

- Non-termination of the services of national manpower.
- It is permissible for hard-hit private sector firms, under the current circumstances, to negotiate cutting down salaries of their respective employees for a period of three months in return for cutting down the number of working hours (after an employee has exhausted his/her paid holidays). This procedure will take effect, if necessary, till March 31, 2021.
- Exemption from fees and fines against licences of non-Omani manpower provided the expat workers leave the country permanently.
- Exemption from first-time fines of renewal and services transfer during the period from March 15, 2020 to March 31, 2021.
- Allowing stricken private sector firms and establishments to terminate the services of expatriate manpower provided all past dues are paid to them and on condition they leave the country.
- Cutting down the fees for renewal of labour cards of non-Omani manpower till March 2021, from RO301 to RO201. It is permissible to renew the expired cards of establishments and firms which have Omani employees. The incentive also applies to owners of small and medium enterprises who are registered at the Public Authority for Social Insurance.
- Allowing business owners to renew the expired cards of expat employees who were outside the sultanate during the lockdown period. Resulting fines will also be cancelled.
- Extending the duration of licence for recruitment that expires during the current period.
- Approving temporary work licences for non-Omani manpower. Expat manpower's work licences that are usable partly or fully will be endorsed. Fees will be charged only against new labour recruitments.
- When necessary, multiple establishments owned by the same partners may second their workers to any other establishment among partner firms.

ONA



OIA dissolves OAG, Transom

Muscat - Oman Investment Authority (OIA) announced the dissolution of Oman Aviation Group and its subsidiary, Transom on Saturday.

H E Sultan bin Salim bin Said al Habsi, Minister of Finance, and Chairman of the Board of Directors of OIA, during his speech on the state budget for 2021, declared that the authority has decided to dissolve the Oman Aviation Group (OAG).

"Oman Investment Authority is taking corrective steps to dissolve both the OAG and the Transom, so that two companies, Oman Air and Oman Airports Management Company, will continue to operate and perform their duties," H E Habsi said.

H E Habsi stated that OAG and Transom's employees will join Oman Air, Oman Airports, and other state-owned enterprises under OIA or other government entities based on need and vacancies.

In response to a question from Oman News Agency on OIA's role in the restructuring of the state-owned enterprises and spending rationalisation, H E Habsi stated that OIA is continuing its efforts to review and evaluate the organisational and operational restructuring of the holding companies, as well as considering the restructuring of its affiliated companies. OIA is also reviewing the human resources policies, and evaluating the current structure of compensation and benefits, which will undergo adjustments to be announced soon.

He added that this will not affect any of the shareholders' commitments and obligations towards stakeholders as the change is aimed at restructuring the companies in the sector.

OIA will issue further details pertaining to different aspects of the restructuring soon.

REGIONAL WEATHER			PRAYER TIMINGS	
	Max	Min		
Abu Dhabi	24	14	Fajr	5.29am
Doha	24	15	Sunrise	6.50am
Kuwait City	23	13	Duhr	12.16pm
Manama	22	16	Asr	3.18pm
Riyadh	23	10	Maghrib	5.38pm
			Isha	6.53pm



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CAUGHT UNPREPARED

SHOPPERS AS WELL AS BUSINESSES SCRAMBLE FOR ALTERNATIVES FOLLOWING BAN ON SINGLE-USE PLASTIC BAGS ENFORCED STARTING JANUARY 1

Muscat - The first phase of the ban on single-use plastic bags in shopping centres in the sultanate came into effect on Friday.

Across communities, shoppers and shopping centres, most welcomed the decision to ban single-use plastic bags. But despite the advance notice, many - both shoppers and business establishments - were unprepared.

Among several available options to get by without single-use plastic bags, Bausher resident Manoj Kumar Behera suggests shoppers carry their reusable bags.

"The government has also introduced bio-degradable plastic bags to tackle the issue of indiscriminate use of single-use plastics."

He added, "Initially, it may be a bit of a hassle but with time, carrying our own bags will become a habit. The long-term result of this action will be of immense value to the whole of mankind. While travelling to the US and Europe, I have seen the effects of the polythene ban and how their citizens obey it happily and appreciate the benefits that come with it. A little sacrifice today will set the right tone for the future and ensure Planet Earth is in a habitable state for the next generation."

For expat Mark Dean, the shift away from single-use plastics bags is a welcome one. "Reusable bags are readily available and will be the option we use going forward. We have already started this. Shops and establishments now need to embrace

this and offer the stock for patrons to be able to purchase these products."

Doing the right thing to help the environment makes it 'comfortable', Dean noted. He looks forward to continued focus on this area with a ban on single-sip water cups and small water bottles next.

In an interview with Oman TV on Friday, Dr Abdullah bin Ali al Omari, chairman of Environment Authority, said the ban on the use of plastic shopping bags came after a thorough study involving the participation of all stakeholders. "Most of the waste in Oman comprises single-use plastic bags."

Talking about the alternatives available to single-use plastics, Dr Mohammad Majid al Kasbi, director of Department of Chemical Materials in the Environment Authority, was recently quoted saying, "Eco-friendly bags are made of cloth, paper or other organic materials and can be re-used multiple times."

David C, business head of Spar Oman Operations, said, "As a responsible retailer, Spar Oman has been proactive to live up to the cause. We have been selling 100 per cent cotton reusable shopping bags since July 2020 to prepare our shoppers for the new norms."

According to David, Spar Oman recently introduced more options of reusable shopping bags at different price points to suit all pocket sizes.

David added that the ban calls for a major behavioural shift among shoppers but "it is all for a greater good.



The ban on the use of plastic shopping bags came after a thorough study involving the participation of all stakeholders

We are definite that our shoppers are aware of it and will cooperate".

On occasion of the Arab Environment Day observed on October 14, in 2020 Spar Oman conducted a campaign distributing reusable shopping bags for free among shoppers on every purchase of RO10.

"We will continue to run such awareness campaigns in the future," David said.

Despite the government's announcement of the ban several

months prior to the enforcement on January 1, many businesses and shoppers were caught unprepared.

Al Khuwayr resident Saada al Naamani was disappointment to find few or no alternatives.

"I started using reuseable bags months before the ban but was shocked to find out no replacements have been made available for outlets like hardware stores where paper bags can't be used. Small foodstuff shops should have found where they can buy cheaper reuseable bags made of cassava starch and such bags which are available in South East Asia. Dealers should look for suppliers. Before something is implemented, options have to be available otherwise this affects outcome."

A branch manager at one of the supermarkets in Ruwi said, "Not every customer is understanding. Some even don't know about the ban. Besides, we are still confused as there is no clarification. The authorities did not mention what micron plastic bags are banned. Our suppliers are not sure what micron bags are allowed; that is why we did not procure re-usable bags in big quantity."

The branch manager informed that as a result of not being prepared for the situation, his branch ran out of reusable bags which it was selling for 200bzs a piece. "We will wait and see and try our best to provide affordable and strong reusable bags to our customers soon."

(Text and photos by Syed Fasiuddin)



I started using reuseable bags months before the ban but was shocked to find out no replacements have been made available for outlets

SAADA AL NAAMANI



Initially, it may be a bit of a hassle but with time, carrying our own bags will become a habit. The long-term result of this action will be of immense value to the whole of mankind

MANOJ KUMAR BEHERA



Reusable bags are readily available and will be the option we use going forward. We have already started this

MARK DEAN



Ministry of Education, Omantel conclude Olympics for Coding

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Omantel, in cooperation with the Ministry of Education, recently concluded the second version of Omantel Olympics for Coding, which was held online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It was held on December 28-29 for the students selected from previous stages of the competition.

Omantel Olympics for Coding aims at building a generation of talented students by enabling them to understand the general foundations of software and information technology. The Olympics also aims to enable students to keep pace with rapidly developing IT systems, enhancing the educational process in the sultanate, and creating an environment conducive to innovation and creativity.

The Omantel Olympics for Coding is based on the procedural coding which serves as an introduction to the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) technologies such as artificial intelligence, robotics, cloud computing, Internet of Things (IoT), big data among others.

A number of students have already qualified to participate in international competitions.

Laila Mohammad al Wahaibi,



(Supplied photo)

The objective of the Olympics is to raise the technical capabilities of youth and enable them to contribute to the digital transformation process

LAILA AL WAHAIBI

manager of Corporate Social Responsibility at Omantel, indicated that Omantel Olympics for Coding is one of the most important CSR initiatives of Omantel.

She said, "The objective of the Olympics is to raise the technical capabilities of Omani youth and enable them to participate and contribute to the digital transfor-

mation process in the sultanate during the next stage. It also aims to increase awareness of the importance of technology in the development and innovation journey in Oman, as well as encourage students to benefit from the digital world."

"Moreover, the competition is one of the means to discover tal-

ented students who will together form a national team that can participate in international coding competitions," she added.

Maya Said al Azaria, director of the Innovation and Scientific Olympics Directorate in the Ministry of Education, emphasised the role Omantel played in the success of this edition of the Olympics, in which a group of students representing various schools of the sultanate took part.

"Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this year's edition was implemented virtually, which had a great impact on emphasising the importance of employing tech-

nology and programming in all aspects of life," she said.

"Omantel is a major partner with the Ministry of Education in several programmes, especially those related to technology. Omantel serves as a role model for other companies in the field of CSR programmes as it invests heavily in youth development."

Award winners: Yasin Ahsan Uganeh from Hafs bin Rashid School in Muscat governorate; Said bin Saud bin Sulaiman al Qasabi from Balarab bin Sultan School, Dakhliyah governorate; Mohamed bin Abdulhamid bin Hamed al Hinai from Saleh bin al Mutawkel School in Dakhliyah governorate; Ghaith Mohamed Abdulwahab from Sheikh Nasser bin Rashid al Kharusi School in Muscat governorate; Abdulmalik bin Sulaiman bin Salim al Lamki from Moosa bin Nasir School for Basic Education in Muscat governorate; Moanis bin Hilal al Khusaibi from Shujaa bin Wahab School in Muscat governorate; Ghaida bint Salim bin Sulaiman al Kindi from Hail al Awamer School for Basic Education in Muscat governorate; Mohamed bin Hasan bin Abdullah al Ajmi from Ibn al Nafis School in Muscat governorate; Ahmed bin Ibrahim bin Yahya al Abri from Abu Said al Kudmi School in Dakhliyah governorate; Elaph bint Ahmed bin Khalfan al Shidi from Saham School for Girls in North Batinah governorate.

A fresh start to the new year

Shaddad al Musalmay
Muscat

As we start the new year 2021, I have no idea what the big events of this year will be. I won't recount the last year here, because you know it all too well.

Just like any other person, I feel we can begin this new year with active hope that rides on the lessons learnt from the past year as well as leveraging on the best leadership that Oman enjoys even in difficult times.

When I say active hope, I mean we should all wake up to the beauty of life that our country offers us and we should all play our part to rebuild what we lost in 2020.

We should all be thankful to what our government has done to contain the 2020 situation. We shared a lot together last year, and together we can do a lot more as we move forward.

Even as the year was marred by the pandemic, new approaches through innovations have emerged presenting greater opportunities to bring us back on track.

With several vaccines on the horizon, we are hopeful of a new beginning in 2021, with stability in health and economy.

To kick-start the new year, His Majesty Sultan Haitham issued the first Royal Decree of the year approving the Tenth Five-year Development Plan which is the first executive plan for the Oman Vision 2040, guided by his generous care.

The plan seeks to stimulate economic activity, develop the macroeconomic environment, raise the efficiency of public financial management, achieve a balance between measures to control and rationalise public spending, and adopt broad, disciplined financial policies that achieve sustainable growth rates.

The plan focuses on mechanisms for economic diversification and increasing the contribution of non-oil sectors

and activities.

This is not all. At the behest of His Majesty Sultan Haitham, the Ministry of Finance last week announced a set of incentives to be offered to citizens and the private sector during 2021.

The incentives include loans from Oman Housing Bank, with the annual sum designated for borrowing during 2021 to be increased to RO100mn, from RO60mn in the bank's budget in the same year. The step will shorten citizens' wait for their turn in obtaining housing loans.

Also, as part of the incentives, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning will help prepare for the distribution of 23,000 land plots in different governorates and wilayats of the sultanate.

So my fellow citizens, this is another active hope.

As far as boosting business in this new year is concerned, there are incentives that will exempt borrowers of Oman Development Bank and the Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises from loan interests for one year (2021). This means as many as 32,104 establishments and firms will get a lump sum waiver worth over RO10.9mn.

It is a measure aimed to alleviate the financial burdens of small and medium enterprises and firms that take loans.

This is in addition to exempting citizen-owned SMEs, who register from January 1, 2021, from all licence fees, provided the said SMEs are run by their owners.

Further more, the incentives include reduction of lease contract fees from five per cent to three per to encourage the registration of tenancy contracts and safeguard the rights of both tenants and landlords.

With all of these, we should all be so hopeful that we are leaving the worst behind and be assured that the best is the way.

Happy New Year to all our readers!

@shadadm

SQU Council meet stresses on Vision 2040

Muscat - The Council of Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) on December 31 held its first meeting for the academic year 2020/21.

The meeting was chaired by H E Dr Rahma bint Ibrahim bin Said al Mahrouqiyah, Minister of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, and chairperson of SQU Council. The meeting emphasised the necessity to achieve the council's goals in accordance with the university's strategic plan of 2021-25, and in line with Oman Vision 2040.

The meeting also approved the lists of graduates of spring and summer semesters 2020 for doctoral and master degrees, doctor of medicine, bachelor's degrees, and diplomas.

The council suggested organising a graduation ceremony for the 31st batch in four days according to a mechanism that will be announced later. The meeting approved the number of students expected to be admitted to the university for the academic year 2021/22.

The council also approved several academic programmes aimed at enabling outputs with the latest knowledge, skills, and best practical and research practices, including the approval of the

doctoral programme in management at the College of Economics and Political Science, the Master of Science programme in data science and machine learning from the Department of Computer at the College of Science, two Master of Science programmes in the fields of crop production and crop protection with two postgraduate diploma programmes in the same two specialisations, two Master

of Science programmes and a postgraduate diploma in marine and fishery sciences at the College of Agricultural and Marine Sciences.

The meeting was attended by H H Sayyid Dr Fahd bin al Julanda al Said, SQU vice chancellor and deputy chairperson of the SQU Council, and members of the council.

ONA

HOTLINES

24-hour pharmacies

Scientific Pharmacy: Qurm 24566601, Ruwi 24702850
Muscat Pharmacy: Ruwi 24702542, Salalah 23291635
Al Hashar Pharmacy: Ruwi 24783334

Hospitals and Clinics

Al Hayat International Hospital, Al Ghubra- 22004000, 94267068 / 97049520
94442000 (Emergency)
Al Raffah Hospital: Muscat - 24618900/1/2/3
Sohar - 26704639/49/50
Apollo Hospital Muscat, Hamriya: 24787766, 24782666, 24787780
Abeer Hospital, Ruwi, Muscat 24770800, 90999335, 90999334 (Emergency)
Starcare Hospital: 24557200
Emergency number: 24558333
Dr Harub's Clinic: 24563217, 2456381, 99254940 (Emergency)
Emirates Medical Center: 24604540
KIMS Oman Hospital: 24760105
Lama Polyclinic: CBD 24799077, 24788881, 24788577, 24707566, 24799655, Al Khuwayr 24478817, 24478818, Sohar 26751128
Muscat Eye Laser Centre: 24691414
Muscat Private Hospital: 24583600
Health4All Medical Centre: 24486005, 24483009
Dr Maurice al Asfour Specialised medical centre - 24560673/74
Lifeline Hospital, Sohar - 26651111
Lifeline Hospital, Salalah- 23212340
Muscat Municipality: 80077222

NONE OF MY BUSINESS

Just not superheroes and villains, everyone has – or would like to have – an alter ego to give vent to their wild dreams. If nothing, it helps take the mind off endless deadlines, commitments, cut-throat competition or just everyday banality.



UP CLOSE & PERSONAL

'NONE OF MY BUSINESS' unveils people who make news as they're prodded to reveal little known facets of themselves – everything not related to their work and profession. Here is Tariq Hilal al Barwani, IT expert and ethical hacker, up close and personal.

Friends or food - what would you opt for in a lazy evening?

None. In lazy moments, I tend to sleep and rest for all the hard work that I do.

What are the full forms of ATM and CDM?

It depends on the industry you are asking. If it is banking then it is Automated Teller Machine and for the construction sector it is Construction Design Management.

Mohamed Salah or Roger Federer? Why?

I love soccer, so I will go for Salah.

What were you doing 10 years from now?

I was busy building the Iron Man that you see today. There were failures but I never ever let them affect me.

Name the song on love, an ocean, a huge ship, a poor boy and a rich girl.

I am not so much into music but if you say it is a big ship then all I right now think is of course it is *My heart will go on* from the film *Titanic*.

Why does black coffee taste better without sugar and milk?

It really depends on who is going to drink it. But if you are on a diet, better avoid sugar. Generally it tastes good either ways.

Who said veni, vidi, vici?

Definitely not me! ['I came; I saw; I conquered' is a Latin phrase popularly attributed to Julius Caesar]

Say any dialogue from a film in your

mother tongue?

Hakuna matata and it means 'no worries' from the film *The Lion King*.

Name an Indian dish in Oman you love to have when happy.

There are many Indian dishes that I love but right now all I can think of is Hyderabad biryani. It tastes good and delicious, and takes me to the days when I was in Hyderabad representing Oman at an international event.

Why does a fan have three blades?

I think it has to do with circulation, efficiency and cooling of air.

Why is the moon in different shapes?

The moon is not in different shapes. It changes shape because of the rotation of the earth and how the sun lights the moon.



Scan the QR Code to view this 'NONE OF MY BUSINESS' video in full on Muscat Daily social media handles

MUNICIPALITY RAIDS BUILDING FOR VIOLATING LAW



Muscat Municipality in Amerat, in cooperation with ROP, raided an apartment building in the wilayat which was being used for storing carpets for commercial use, in violation of local laws (Supplied photo)

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Only 4 days are left to close Green Sports registration



While Bank Muscat, the leading financial services provider in the sultanate, continues to inaugurate more new fields as part of the Green Sports programme to teams across the various governorates, only four days remain until the deadline for receiving new registration applications for the year 2021 as the opportunity is still available to all eligible teams to submit their requests no later than January 6.

Applications are being accepted online at <https://www.bankmuscat.com/greensports>.

The new registration process is user-friendly and can be easily

done using a computer, a tablet or even a mobile phone.

It is noteworthy that 15 Sports Teams will benefit from the support in 2021, thus the Green Sports programme will continue to achieve successes and achievements in the field of social responsibility and sustainability.

The criteria for availing the Green Sports support include that sports teams should have been in existence for at least three years and have a minimum of 300 members. Teams should be able to provide documents including the mulkiya of the land on which the sports field is

situated, the team's latest income statement and a letter from their wali.

Also, the dimensions of the sports field should be as per FIFA approved standards to be considered. Teams should also showcase their positive impact and contributions to the local community along with the application. Please email GreenSports@bankmuscat.com for any further queries regarding Green Sports applications.

The Green Sports initiative launched by Bank Muscat in 2012 continues to gain momentum with a total of 100 fields inaugurated so far, and the number

of sports teams benefiting from the programme until this year reached 123 teams across different governorates.

The scope of Green Sports support for sports teams include greening of football fields with natural or synthetic turf, floodlights or water desalination equipment in areas facing problems of water salinity. Ensuring wider representation, the Green Sports programme extends to develop sustainable sports infrastructure in all parts of the sultanate.

The bank's flagship CSR programme aims to provide avenues to Omani youth to excel in

all arenas and thereby contribute to the overall development and progress of the sultanate. The facilities developed as part of the programme can also be used as a venue for other social activities, leading to stronger community bonding and greater positive behaviour among young people.

It must be noted that the bank's CSR and sustainability programmes have been well appreciated and received a number of accolades. The bank was recently honoured for its CSR, Sustainability and Community Service programmes at the Fourth Oman Forum for Partnership and Social Responsibility.



JAC M4: Value that provides flexibility

After joining hands with JAC Motors in 2008 to bring the legendary reliability of JAC commercial vehicles to Oman, Towell Auto Centre has recently added an exciting range of JAC passenger and light commercial vehicles to their line-up.

Among JAC's exciting new range of vehicles is the flexible M4 bus and van. The JAC M4 Van 2.0lt provides you with unmatched flexibility for your business. Available in two variants, a 9 seater bus and a Panel Van, it is a vehicle that provides excellent business transport solutions for those living and working in the sultanate's cities and rural areas.

Known for its affordability, the JAC M4 comes with features such as ABS-Anti-lock Braking System+EBD, ESC-Electronic Stability Control, Rear parking sensor, Over-speed alarm and Driver seat belt alarm system. In the M4, owners get the legendary reliability of JAC's com-

mercial range, wrapped up in flexibility and modern styling as well as spacious interiors.

Younis al Ansari and Yousuf al Wadhahi, proud owners who recently purchased a brand new JAC M4 from our Barka showroom spoke of their personal experience driving the spacious minivan, saying, "The M4 comes with modern good looks on the exterior and stylish spacious interiors. We found the handling to be smooth and the drive to be a comfortable one. Apart from its good looks, the M4's engine packs a strong performance. We use the M4 to transport water bottles to companies and residential areas on a daily basis. The technology the M4 employs is impressive as well with an amazing display screen and USB interface. Overall, the smooth drive we've experienced with the M4 is second to none."

To find out more visit www.jacomman.com.

HAPPY NEW YEAR FROM A NEW AIRLINE



The UAE's new national airline, Wizz Air Abu Dhabi, welcomed the New Year with the arrival of new crew members and two new aircraft. This takes its Abu Dhabi aircraft fleet to four, ready for the first ultra low fare flights between Abu Dhabi and Athens, starting January 15



Aston Martin makes a return to Formula 1 grid

The Aston Martin name is back in Grand Prix racing for the first time in six decades. The Aston Martin Formula One Team will make its race debut in Melbourne, Australia, on March 21, marking a return to top-flight single-seater competition for the luxury carmaker.

The British marque has enjoyed great success in sportscar racing in recent years, highlighted by multiple class victories at the 24 Hours of Le Mans and now the time has come for Aston Martin to commit to the most famous of all motorsport arenas: Formula 1.

Aston Martin understands the power of Formula 1 when it comes to brand awareness. Much work has already been done via the company's title sponsorship of Red Bull Racing but Aston Martin will now take this to new heights as it joins the F1 elite as a manufacturer.

Lawrence Stroll, Aston Martin Lagonda executive chairman said, "Formula 1 is a hugely powerful platform that will play a key part in the overall Aston Martin strategy as we seek to take the company forward. It is a truly global sport with a huge audi-

ence that we believe can help reignite the brand and further increase its desirability all over the world. This is a brand that has already had huge success in top-level international motorsport such as the 24 Hours of Le Mans - and now we have an opportunity to write a new page in the history books. That's a hugely exciting prospect for anyone who is a lover of the Aston Martin brand, for fans of Formula 1 and the sport itself."

The Aston Martin Formula One Team will take the great British brand to new audiences across the globe. By bringing fans right into the heart of the team, it will become a team for everyone, reaching out to new audiences in this rapidly changing world but always remembering the loyalty of the hardcore racing fans. The team's journey to the grid will feature on all of the Aston Martin Formula One Team's social media channels and on a brand new website.

In February, the team will reveal its 2021 F1 car and livery, which includes four-time Formula 1 World Champion, Sebastian Vettel and multiple Grand Prix podium finisher, Lance Stroll.

Otmar Szafnauer, CEO & team principal, said, "We've had almost a year of preparation to reach this point and we're really looking forward to seeing the reaction when we finally unveil our new identity as the Aston Martin Formula One Team. Representing such an iconic brand is a huge privilege for every member of the team. We've earned a well-deserved reputation for punching above our weight, so we're confident we can do the Aston Martin name proud right from the get-go. It's the start of a new journey and I can sense an extra energy in the team, with a determination to push performance further than ever before. Combined with some of the most creative minds in the business, a true racers' mentality and the can-do spirit that has served us so well through the years, we have every reason to be excited about the future"

It will be an historic and poignant moment when two Aston Martin Formula 1 cars line up on the grid in Melbourne, returning the luxury marque to Grand Prix racing for the first time in 60 years and starting a new era for a truly great British brand.

BBC Earth announces 'A Perfect Planet'



BBC Earth has announced a brand-new series narrated by legendary English broadcaster and natural historian, Sir David Attenborough. *A Perfect Planet* explores the great forces of nature that support, drive and enable life on earth, and features breath-taking scenery set against an original score by award-winning composer Ilan Eshkeri and Attenborough's distinctive voice.

Set to air in the MENA region beginning January 4, the five-part series takes in awe-inspiring views, from lands drenched by the Indian Monsoon to the slopes of fiery Hawaiian volca-



noes, from the tidal islands of the Bahamas to the frozen wastes of Ellesmere Island. Four years in the making, the series was filmed in 31 countries on six continents.

The first four episodes explore the power of volcanoes, sunlight, weather and oceans. The final episode in the series looks at the dramatic impact of the world's newest force of nature: humans - and what can be done to restore our planet's perfect balance.

Sir Attenborough said, "This year perhaps more than ever,

people are finding comfort and solace in the natural world. Whilst we may not be able to travel, we can take a few moments to enjoy our wonderful and diverse planet in this incredible footage."

Series Producer Huw Cordey revealed that as the UK went into lockdown earlier this year, his team had to rethink their post-production on the series.

"Sir David embraced new ways of recording his voiceover and the music for the series had

to be finished in Iceland, one of the few places we could gather a string orchestra and record them playing live. Covid restrictions prevented us doing the same with brass and woodwind instruments so they had to be recorded separately in each of the musicians' living rooms."

Award-winning composer Ilan Eshkeri created the music for *A Perfect Planet*, joining the ranks of Hans Zimmer and Steven Price who have previously created scores for other BBC natural history landmarks. Eshkeri's body of work includes collaborations with Annie Lennox, David Gilmour, Sinead O'Connor and KT Tunstall.

Eshkeri said, "Creating the music for *A Perfect Planet* has been a hugely rewarding experience. The series celebrates the extraordinary world we are a part of as well as showing the delicate balance of the systems that support life, and what we need to do to ensure its future stability. It's a message that's very important."



Renault Megane RS offers driving pleasure

Renault Megane RS has been impressing car aficionados with its unparalleled driving performance and motorsport cutting-edge technology. Suitable for all enthusiasts and driven by its powerful design and focused on performance, Renault Megane RS makes no attempt to hide its motorsport pedigree, offering outstanding driving pleasure on the road and on the track. The Megane RS features a new generation of 1.8lt turbo engine, delivering 280hp and 390Nm, thanks to the development work jointly carried out by engineers from Renault Sport Cars and Renault Sport Racing. The car comes with 6AT Electronic Dual Clutch transmission.

4Control System
Renault Megane RS takes Renault Sport's unmistakable hallmarks of agility, efficiency and driving enjoyment a step further. Merging competence, dexterity, and constancy, new Megane RS chassis is jam-packed with motorsports cutting-edge technology: 4Control System, independent pivot front-axle and suspension with hydraulic compression stops. With its finely-



tuned chassis and 4Control technology, complete with four-wheel steering, the car is aiming to become – like its predecessors – a benchmark in the C-segment hot hatch market.

RS Vision
The impressive Renault Megane RS is a car built to awaken the driving instincts with four-wheel steering and dynamic styling. Sitting squarely on its 19-inch black diamond alloy wheels, the front features LED lights with RS Vi-

sion. With its many driving aids, Megane RS allies sporting performance with safety. It also features parking sensors, adaptive cruise control and emergency braking assistance.

The Megane RS benefits from the know-how of Renault Sport in adapting motorsports technologies to production sports vehicles.

4Control technology contributes to incisive steering and optimised road holding for a precise, surefooted drive.

Safety first
Among its appreciated features are launch control, multi change down and braking performance. Megane RS's safety features include front side airbags; Front and rear curtain airbags; Antilock Braking System; Emergency brake assist; Driver and passenger front airbags; Disconnectable passenger airbag; Seatbelt reminder for Driver + front passenger + 3 rear passengers; Engine electronic immobiliser; Adjustable L-shape rear head-

rests; Height adjustable front seatbelts; Three 3-point rear seatbelts; Blind Spot Warning; Tyre pressure monitoring; ESP with Hill Start Assist; ISOFIX child seat mounting points; Hands Free parking; Rear camera plus front and rear parking sensors; Electric parking brake.

A spokesperson for Renault Oman said, "Megane RS takes styling and technology even further to deliver truly exceptional driving enjoyment. The car has been designed by people who are passionate about cars, for people who love to drive. Its versatility also makes it perfectly suited for everyday use. The 4Control system is a dream come true for every driver looking for efficiency, since it improves both the agility and the stability of the car."

Support enhancements
It is supported by visibility and lighting enhancements such as C-shape LED DRLs and 1-touch triple turn signal on door mirrors; Rear high mounted LED brake light; Full LED headlights; RS Vision: long range light beams with integrated signature; Power

heated door mirrors with temperature sensor, power foldable, with puddle lamps; Manual day/night dimming room mirror.

Performance aiders
Comfort attributes encompass 4Control four wheel-steering technology; Automatic headlamps and rain sensing wipers; Smoker accessories and rear 12V power outlet; Eco advice with gear shift indicator; Dual zone auto air conditioning + rear air ducts (under front seats) + rear air-vents (back of centre console); Black paddles shift behind steering wheel; Central door locking; High central console (with sliding armrest / storage / double cup holder); Rear glass with demister; Rear one-touch power windows; Front one-touch power windows; Multi-sense with variable engine performance, sound, steering, throttle and variable damping; Welcome/goodbye sequence (approach detection, exterior lights & door mirrors activation and interior ambient lighting); Driver & Passenger sunvisors with mirrors + illumination; R-Link 2 - 8.7" touchscreen with navigation, 3D Sound by BOSE,

8 speakers, 2 USBs, AUX, streaming via Bluetooth+CD player; Cruise control with speed limiter; Renault Smart Card with walk away closing with specific Renault Sport design + Push button start 7" colour TFT combimeter with ambient lighting and customisable skins/colours; RS nappa leather steering wheel; Light tinted anti-glare windows; Sunroof; Auto dimming rear view mirror; Electric parking brake.

Seats
Its seats have RS dark and Red Alcantara trim and interior harmony; 1/3 - 2/3 folding rear seats + central armrest and two cupholders; Manual front seats adjustment with Driver height & lumbar adjust; Heated Driver and Passenger seats.

It has 19" RS Black diamond alloy wheels + temporary spare wheel; Sport rear spoiler; Sport front bumper with F1 blade, specific fender & rear spoiler; RS design grid, rear diffuser; specific all-new RS logo.

For more information, visit <https://www.renault.com.om/> or call our Toll Free number on 80050011.

12 Nissan cars that showed the way to an electric future

A car is more than just a way to get around. Getting behind the wheel should be inspiring, exciting and just plain fun – and the shift to electric vehicles doesn't change that one bit. In fact, thanks to smarter onboard technology, today's electric vehicles open up richer lifestyle possibilities than ever.

Nissan was a pioneer in creating electric cars for modern living. From our first EV in 1947 to the new Nissan Ariya, from ice cream vans to robot co-pilots, our electric-powered lineup has changed with the times and drivers' needs.

Earlier last month, the first Nissan Futures discussion was held to mark the 10th anniversary of the Nissan LEAF where guest speaker, Dr Akira Yoshino, awarded the Nobel Prize in Chemistry 2019 for his work on the lithium-ion battery, described the path he took to develop the lithium-ion battery, the challenges he faced, and weighs in on a possible future society ahead with advanced batteries and EVs.

Tama (1947)
Electric vehicles aren't a new idea. In postwar Japan, where oil was scarce but hydroelectric power was relatively plentiful, the government promoted research and development in this area. Nissan's engineers rose to the challenge with the Tama Electric Vehicle. Released in 1947, the Tama was Nissan's very first



electric car. Used mainly by taxi companies, it had replaceable lead-acid batteries that gave it a top speed of 35.2 kph and a range of 96.3 kilometers.

Prairie Joy EV (1996)
Lithium-ion batteries first appeared in devices like laptops and cellphones. Some doubted they could ever be scaled up to power a whole car, but the Prairie Joy EV, the world's first electric vehicle equipped with cylindrical-type lithium-ion battery power, proved itself in one of the most challeng-

ing environments on earth: the Arctic. Japan's National Institute of Polar Research used the Prairie Joy EV for six years under harsh polar conditions, without a single breakdown.

Hypermini (2000)
The Hypermini was a new take on the electric car: an urban commuter vehicle built for two. Stylish and distinctive, it appeared in Hollywood movies like *Sleepover* and *The Princess Diaries 2*. A neodymium magnet synchronous traction motor delivered a zippy

100 kph at top speed and up to 115 km of range on a single charge.

Pivo (2005)
The Pivo was a next-generation concept EV displayed at the 2005 Tokyo Motor Show. Its bubble-like cabin attracted attention, and it was also notable as the first vehicle to be powered by light, compact laminate lithium-ion batteries.

Pivo 2 (2007)
Research shows that drivers in a happy, positive mood have fewer

accidents. The Pivo 2 was an experiment in applying this insight, with an onboard Robotic Agent system that monitored driving conditions and used speech and motion to help the driver stay cheerful.

Nissan LEAF (2010)
As Nissan's first mass-produced electric vehicle, the Nissan LEAF was a milestone for electric mobility. More than 500,000 LEAF cars have been built to date.

The key to the LEAF's success was combining decades of re-

search and development with consumer insight. The first-generation LEAF had a range of 200km per charge.

New Mobility (2010)
As the developed world's population ages and one-person households grow in number, mobility needs will shift toward shorter trips for fewer passengers. To show how those needs might be met, Nissan developed the New Mobility Concept: a user-friendly, ultra-compact, emissions-free 100 per cent elec-

tric vehicle with the maneuverability of a motorcycle and the stability of a car.

e-NV200 (2014)
Ever bought ice cream from an electric van? If you're in the U.K., you might have encountered Mackie's all-electric ice cream van, based on the e-NV200 — Nissan's first zero-emission light commercial vehicle.

New LEAF (2017)
The new LEAF featured updates across the board: more powerful acceleration, lighter handling and a vastly increased range of up to 400 km per charge.

Sylphy (2018)
The Sylphy Zero Emission was the first Nissan-branded EV specifically for the Chinese consumers, manufactured in China.

IMk (2019)
The IMk concept EV was unveiled at the 2019 Tokyo Motor Show. With a "kei car" body size and all-new EV platform, the IMk offered a powerful, smooth and quiet drive augmented by driver support systems.

Ariya (2020)
Revealed in Nissan's first ever virtual launch, the 100 per cent electric crossover was first hinted at with the Ariya Concept, displayed at the 2019 Tokyo Motor Show.

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'Getting fitter and stronger'

Man United title challenge a year in the making, says Solskjaer after his side move level with Liverpool at top

ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE

London, UK - Ole Gunnar Solskjaer hailed Manchester United's progress over the past year after a 2-1 win over Aston Villa on Friday took them level on points with Liverpool at the top of the English Premier League (EPL).

A year ago to the day, United lost 0-2 at Arsenal to fall 24 points behind the English champions, having played two games more. Another season contending just for a top-four finish looked in store for Solskjaer's men after winning only two of their opening six league games.

But as all the other contenders have stumbled in recent weeks, the Red Devils have now taken 26 from a possible 30 points to mount an unexpected title challenge. "Of course we are happy with what we are doing. We have shown we have improved a lot in a year," said Solskjaer.

"We are getting fitter and fitter and stronger and stronger."

Bruno Fernandes has been the key figure in transforming United's fortunes over the past 12 months and the Portuguese again provided the winner to edge out a rapidly improving Villa side.

Solskjaer's side needed a 93rd minute winner to beat Wolves on Tuesday, but were far faster out the blocks this time round.

Anthony Martial forced Emiliano Martinez into an excellent save high to his left inside ten minutes before Fred, Paul Pogba and Fernandes fired efforts just off target.

The breakthrough came five minutes before the break and owed much to Pogba's ingenuity with the Frenchman finally start-



Manchester United's Bruno Fernandes (centre) celebrates with teammates after scoring against Aston Villa at Old Trafford in Manchester, UK, on Friday (AFP)

ing to find form despite the speculation over his future. Pogba and Marcus Rashford combined to send Aaron Wan-Bissaka free down the right and his cross was headed home by Martial at the near post.

Villa were on a five-game unbeaten run themselves to earn a place in the top six and showed why with their start to the second-half as United were forced back. Jack Grealish was again at the heart of all the visitors' best work going forward and it was from his cross that Bertrand Traore equalised.

However, Dean Smith's men quickly undid their good work as

It's early on in the season and we shouldn't be carried away. The league this season is going to be so tight. There are going to be difficult games, strange results

OLE GUNNAR SOLSKJAER

a soft challenge from Douglas Luiz on Pogba was deemed enough for a penalty by referee Michael Oliver.

Fernandes's near-perfect penalty record continued as he slotted the spot-kick just out of the reach of Martinez for his 15th goal of the season.

United needed a big save

from David De Gea to deny Matty Cash and a brave block from Eric Bailly in stoppage time to hang on and Solskjaer is not getting carried away with talk of challenging for the title ahead of a trip to Liverpool in two weeks' time.

"It's early on in the season and we shouldn't be carried away,"



Man United manager Ole Gunnar Solskjaer (right) talks with Aston Villa's Jack Grealish after the match at Old Trafford on Friday

added the Norwegian. "The league this season is going to be so tight. There are going to be difficult games, strange results, but since 'Project Restart' I think we've been very consistent."

Everton lack 'quality'

Earlier, Everton missed the chance to close to within a point of the top two as they were beaten 0-1 at home by West Ham.

The Toffees failed to impose themselves on a West Ham side playing their third game in six days and were punished when Tomas Soucek slotted home the winner four minutes from time.

"It was not a good game," said Everton boss Carlo Ancelotti.

"We didn't have opportunities and we didn't concede opportunities, they had a lucky deflection and we lost the game. We could play with more intensity and more quality up front."

David Moyes's men had the toughest festive fixture schedule in the Premier League in terms of rest and he said there has been a change in mindset with the Hammers this season to battle through adversity.

"The players have played three games in six games, they are amazing," said Moyes, who won for the first time as a visiting manager at Goodison Park, where he made his name in 11 years in charge of Everton.

"I don't think there was any difference in the fitness levels so great credit to the players, there has been a big change in the mentality here at West Ham."

Victory took West Ham to within three points of third, although they remain in tenth in a tight EPL table.

AFP

Kail's ton in Al Turki's big victory

Ansari and Prajapati shine in Muscat CT's ten-wicket win over AER



Khalid Kail



Karan Sonavala



Munis Ansari



Kashyap Kumar Prajapati



Nishad K S

LOCAL CRICKET

Al Turki NMC's Khalid Kail and Muscat CT's Munis Ansari were the standout performers in their respective team's convincing victories in Oman Cricket Premier Division (50-over-a-side) matches played at Al Amerat on Friday.

Al Turki NMC trounced Renaissance CT by a huge 156 runs and Muscat CT romped to a ten-wicket win over AER to begin the new year on a winning note.

Khalid Kail has been in terrific form this season and the Al Turki

batsman continued with his run-scoring spree as he smashed a solid 157 to help his side amass 337 for nine.

Kail's 157 came off 122 balls and was studded with 24 boundaries and two sixes. Kail was well supported by Karan Sonavala, who hit a half-century (64) off 60 deliveries. Sonavala's knock comprised six hits to the ropes and three sixes.

Syed Muzamil and Arjun Rajesh claimed three wickets each.

In reply, Renaissance inched to 86 for five in 31 overs but failed to put up any late fightback

as they were restricted to only 186 for seven. Asif Khan top-scored with 75 while Abdul Rauf and Sufyan Mahmood chipped in with 29 and 28 runs respectively. Hemalkumar Tandel bagged three for 29.

In the other match, Ansari celebrated his pick by Pune Devils in the Abu Dhabi T10 draft with a four-wicket haul for only 19 in Muscat CT's triumph. AER were bowled out for 85 in 26.4 overs. Ganesh Chandrashekar, Wasim Ali and Sandeep Goud bagged two wickets each. Sachin Kumar made a fighting 38.

Muscat CT raced to the target in only 43 balls, scoring 86 without loss as Kashyap Kumar Prajapati smashed a half-century (57), which included eight boundaries and three sixes. Giving him company was Jatinder Singh, who made 28.

BRIEF SCORES

Al Turki NMC 337-9 (Kail 157, Sonavala 64; Muzamil 3-41, Suresh 3-56, Bilal Mohammad 2-66) beat Renaissance 181-7 (Asif 75; Tandel 3-29).

AER 85 all out in 26.4 overs

(Kumar 38; Ansari 4-19, Goud 2-16, Chandrashekar 2-24, Ali 2-26) lost to Muscat CT 86 for no loss in 7.1 overs (Prajapati 57 n.o., Jatinder 28 n.o.).

A Division (50-over-a-side):

Zawawi Powertech 219 all out in 49.3 overs (Sajeev Thamarath 61, Nishad K S 51; Mohammed Irfan 3-60, Parameswaran Shankar 2-46, Arun Pushpan 2-23) beat Awtad International 165 all out in 46 overs (Mohammad Waqas 63, Nishad 3-38, Suhil Kanagaraj 2-22, Prabhakaran Kannan 2-35).

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Rohit, Pant, Gill, Shaw, Saini placed in isolation as precaution

INDIA'S TOUR OF AUSTRALIA

Melbourne, Australia - Rohit Sharma, Rishabh Pant, Shubman Gill, Prithvi Shaw and Navdeep Saini have been placed in isolation as a precaution pending investigation into a video posted on Twitter that purportedly showed the group eating in an indoor restaurant in Melbourne. The players will be allowed to continue training but not with the rest of the group.

The statement released by

Cricket Australia said the action was taken in consultation with both the boards' medical units but didn't expressly state if it was a breach of biosecurity protocols to eat at an indoor venue outside the team hotel.

Nor did it say what the course of action will be if it is indeed a breach of protocols.

A Twitter post by a fan of Indian origin claimed he had spotted the five India players eating at the same restaurant as him. He said he had paid for the

cricketers' food unbeknownst to them.

An initial tweet claimed that Pant hugged the fan when he found out that the food had been paid for, but that tweet was retracted later, with the fan stating that Pant never hugged him, and that he had gotten carried away in excitement when tweeting previously.

"In the interim, on the advice of the Australian and Indian medical teams, the aforementioned players have been placed

in isolation as a precaution," the release said.

"This will include separating the group of players from the broader Indian and Australian squads when traveling and at the training venue.

"Players will be permitted to train in accordance with the strict protocols that have been put in place to ensure the ongoing safety of all members of the Indian and Australian squads. Similar measures were taken during the BBL this season after it was

determined two Brisbane Heat players failed to comply with tournament biosecurity protocols."

Rohit had joined the Indian team in Melbourne the day after India finished their series-leveling victory at the MCG. He was named the team's vice-captain upon joining the squad, which might have been indication he is in line to make his Test comeback after last playing more than a year ago.

Cricinfo



A file photo of Rohit Sharma



A file photo of BCCI president Sourav Ganguly

Sourav hospitalised after suspected mild cardiac arrest

Kolkata, India - BCCI president Sourav Ganguly has been hospitalised in Kolkata after complaining of chest pain, suspected to be a mild cardiac arrest. Ganguly's elder brother Snehasish Ganguly told ESPN-cricinfo the former India captain was undergoing angiogram.

Snehasish confirmed that Ganguly, 48, felt some 'uneasiness' immediately after doing exercise on Saturday morning around 11am and was admitted to the nearby Woodlands Hospital. "After finishing his gym he felt some uneasiness," Snehasish said.

Dr Rupali Basu, MD & CEO of Woodlands Hospital later issued a statement saying Ganguly 'suffered from chest discomfort while doing tread mill at his home gym' and he 'had family history of IHD (Ischemic heart disease)'.

BCCI secretary Jay Shah tweeted Ganguly was 'stable and responding well to treatment'.

After attending the BCCI

AGM recently in Ahmedabad, Ganguly had returned to Kolkata and visited Eden Gardens earlier this week to discuss the preparations for the upcoming Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy - India's domestic T20 competition - with Cricket Association of Bengal (CAB) president Avishek Dalmiya and secretary Snehashish. Kolkata is among the six cities that will host the league stage of the SMA Trophy starting January 10.

Ganguly, who captained India from 1999 to 2005, took over as the BCCI president in October 2019 after the Supreme Court-appointed Committee of Administrators (CoA) left the board following a period of 33 months. Ganguly has since then been credited for making India play their inaugural day-night Tests, against Bangladesh at his home ground Eden Gardens, and announcing the introduction of a contacts system for first-class cricketers in India.

Cricinfo

New Zealand eye No 1 spot in Test rankings

NEW ZEALAND VS PAKISTAN SECOND TEST

Christchurch, New Zealand - New Zealand has to be one of the toughest countries to tour in recent times. Last time a visiting team won a Test in New Zealand was in March 2017. That was also the last time New Zealand failed to win a Test series at home. With that as the backdrop, combined with the fact they just trounced West Indies by an innings in successive Tests, New Zealand were always the favourites against Pakistan.

That Pakistan almost eked out a draw in the first Test must have boosted their confidence. But they suffered a setback on Saturday when Babar Azam was ruled out of the second Test as well.

Mohammad Rizwan will once again lead the side under whom Pakistan had shown great fight in Mount Maunganui, but if the visitors want to draw the series, they will require their top order to step up.

New Zealand, on the other hand, will have an eye on the future. A win here will strengthen their chances of qualifying for the World Test Championship final at Lord's next year. More immediately, they can claim the top spot in the ICC Test rankings if they beat Pakistan 2-0, even if that changes after the Australia-India series concludes.

What works in New Zealand's favour is they know their home conditions too well. Against



New Zealand's Kane Williamson (centre) leads the team off after their victory on the fifth day of the first Test against Pakistan on Wednesday

West Indies, Tom Latham gave a masterclass in opening the batting in the country, and in the last Test, their bowlers showed how to hunt as a pack and bowl a side out on the fifth day in New Zealand. Having said that, the team that comes out on top in Christchurch will be the one that can stay in the present the most.

The buzz

New Zealand: The hosts are once again likely to go with a four-pronged pace attack, with Mitchell Santner as the lone spinner. That means Matt Henry should replace Neil Wagner, who

has been ruled out because of two fractured toes.

Pakistan: With Babar Azam still not fit, Pakistan may go with an unchanged XI.

In the spotlight

Kane Williamson: The Kiwi tries his best to avoid the limelight, but it will not be easy for him to stay invisible in the middle. Not only is he the fulcrum of New Zealand's batting but also the No 1-ranked batsman in Test cricket. Given his recent form - he has scores of 129, 21 and 251 in his last three innings - dismissing Williamson early will be half the

battle won, no matter how much one says New Zealand don't rely on one player.

Mohammed Abbas: After a Barnes-esque start to his career, his form has nosedived. In his last 12 Tests, he has picked up only 23 wickets at an average of 38.91 and a strike rate of 99.5. While pitches in New Zealand are generally conducive to seam bowling, particularly in the first innings, Abbas bagged just two wickets in 42 overs in the first Test. If Pakistan have to level the series, Abbas will need to deliver with the new ball.

Teams

New Zealand (likely): Tom Latham, Tom Blundell, Kane Williamson (captain), Ross Taylor, Henry Nicholls, BJ Watling (wicketkeeper), Mitchell Santner, Kyle Jamieson, Tim Southee, Matt Henry, Trent Boult.

Pakistan (likely): Shan Masood, Abid Ali, Azhar Ali, Haris Sohail, Fawad Alam, Mohammad Rizwan (captain & wicketkeeper), Faheem Ashraf, Yasir Shah, Mohammad Abbas, Shaheen Afridi, Naseem Shah. Cricinfo

SA aim for elusive series win against injury-hit Sri Lanka

SOUTH AFRICA VS SRI LANKA SECOND TEST

Johannesburg, South Africa - For two days, Sri Lanka were competitive at Centurion. But with half their resources sapped through injury, and even several batsmen struggling, it would have taken a cricketing miracle on par with Kusal Perera's Kingsmead 153 for the visitors to even remain in contention.

Now, no fewer than seven members of their 21-strong squad are under injury clouds. Kasun Rajitha, Lahiru Kumara, Suranga Lakmal, Dhananjaya de Silva, Oshada Fernando and Dinesh Chandimal have all been ruled out of the match, while leg-spinner Wanindu Hasaranga is also in doubt due to the thigh injury.

With Angelo Mathews not even having made the trip due to a busted hamstring, Sri Lanka will be without at least seven - possibly eight - first-choice players at the Wanderers. This is a venue at which they've only previously had disasters - two innings losses, both inside three days.

South Africa may be slightly wary of a beleaguered Sri Lanka team, following the 2019 tour in which a depleted Sri Lanka beat



Sri Lanka's Dinesh Chandimal (on ground) receives medical assistance during the first Test against South Africa

them 2-0, but so resounding was their victory at Centurion, that it is difficult not to think of this as a golden opportunity to turn around their poor recent series record. South Africa have lost each of their three most-recent Test series.

Not only are they almost at full strength, although Kagiso Rabada won't play as he continues his comeback from a groin strain, several of their players are also in excellent touch. With Sri Lanka top order missing some of

their best players of seam bowling, South Africa are well-placed to wreak havoc on one of the fastest tracks on the planet.

The buzz

Sri Lanka: The visitors don't really have a lot of options here. Minod Bhanuka and Asitha Fernando are likely to debut. Lahiru Thirimanne and Dushmantha Chameera are also expected to come into the XI. If Hasaranga can't play, Lasith Embuldeniya seems likeliest to replace him.

South Africa: South Africa will be without uncapped duo Raynard van Tonder, who fractured a finger on his left hand during a training session on match eve, and Glenton Stuurman, who was released from the squad the previous day with a thigh strain. Barring any other last-minute injuries, the batting line-up should be unchanged.

In the spotlight

Aiden Markram: In full flow, he is South Africa's most watchable

batsman. His drives are crisp, and when he is timing the ball well, even his pull shot is pretty. Although he only made 68 at Centurion, he seemed the most fluent and well-grooved of South Africa's batsmen.

Dimuth Karunaratne: His Test record in South Africa has been poor. In 12 innings, he has made just one half-century. There will be plenty of pressure on his captaincy with such a depleted and inexperienced side expected to take the field, but Karunaratne will also be desperate to get himself to a score.

Teams

Sri Lanka (likely): Dimuth Karunaratne (capt), Lahiru Thirimanne, Kusal Mendis, Kusal Perera, Minod Bhanuka, Dasun Shanaka, Niroshan Dickwella (wk), Wanindu Hasaranga, Dushmantha Chameera, Fernando, Asitha Fernando.

South Africa (likely): Dean Elgar, Aiden Markram, Rassie van der Dussen, Faf du Plessis, Quinton de Kock (capt, wk), Temba Bavuma, Wiaan Mulder, Keshav Maharaj, Anrich Nortje, Lungi Ngidi, Lutho Sipamla.

Cricinfo

Steyn makes himself unavailable for IPL 2021

Johannesburg, South Africa - South Africa fast bowler Dale Steyn has announced that he will not be playing in the 2021 edition of the IPL, through a tweet that said he was making himself 'unavailable' for his current franchise Royal Challengers Bangalore this year.

Steyn indicated that he was taking some time off during that period, and in a follow-up tweet said that he would continue to play in other leagues, 'nicely spaced out' to allow him to pursue other things. At the end of both tweets, the 37 year old said he was not retiring.

Steyn is currently in his second extended spell with the Royal Challengers, the franchise with whom he had begun his IPL career in 2008. Having come in as an injury replacement for Nathan Coulter-Nile midway through the 2019 edition, Steyn was then picked again in the auction ahead of the 2020 season. He played three matches for the Royal Challengers in the delayed IPL season, and took one wicket.

That auction happened a few months after Steyn had retired from Test cricket, in August 2019. In 2020, having missed out



on a central contract with South Africa, Steyn was picked in their T20I team and made it clear he would be looking to play in the T20 World Cup that year. This was shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic struck and the World Cup was called off. Steyn's insistence that he won't be retiring could suggest that he could now be targeting the 2021 edition of the same tournament.

"As long as that drive is there to still play at the highest level, and get batters out and fox them and outsmart them and all that kind of stuff, if I can do that, I am going to continue to do that. And then once I can't do that anymore, well once I decide that I don't want to do it anymore, then I'll be done," Steyn had said in February last year.

Cricinfo

FOOTBALL ROUND-UP

Son bags 100th Spurs goal as Leeds crumble

ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE
London, UK - South Korea forward Son Heung-min admitted he was 'proud' to have scored his 100th Tottenham goal in a 3-0 win over Leeds that hauled his team back into the English Premier League (EPL) title race on Saturday.

Son grabbed the second goal for Jose Mourinho's side after Harry Kane's penalty had opened the scoring at the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium.

Reaching his century of Tottenham goals was a landmark moment for Son, who is the 18th player to score 100 in all competitions for the north London club and the first from outside the United Kingdom and Ireland.

Since arriving from Bayer Leverkusen in 2015, the 28 year old has established himself as one of Tottenham's key players and maintaining his fine form will be key to their hopes of pushing for the title. "I'm very happy and grateful for my teammates. I'm not doing it alone. I need a lot of help for this big achievement," Son said.

"To score 100 goals with one team is a big thing. I'm very proud. It's a good way to start the new year."

It was the 13th time Kane and Son had combined for a goal this term, equalling the EPL record set by Alan Shearer and Chris Sutton for Blackburn in 1994-95.

"We're working hard and working on it for a long time. I am a bit sad I couldn't give an assist to 'H'," Son said. "He knew I was there. Sometimes it is telepathic, sometimes we talk about it."

Mourinho is reaping the



Tottenham Hotspur's Son Heung-Min (right) celebrates with teammate Toby Alderweireld after scoring against Leeds in London on Saturday (AFP)

rewards of that telepathic partnership and he said, "Of course, the understanding is good and against Leeds it was important to have that ability in attack. That movement of Harry Kane and Sonny in the finishing positions fit well.

"I think in the Premier League there are many good players everywhere even in clubs where you don't believe they can have great players. But I have to say that Sonny and Harry are doing special things this season."

Toby Alderweireld scored Tottenham's third goal as they climbed to third place.

The only frustration for Mour-

inho was a stoppage-time red card for Matt Doherty after the Republic of Ireland right-back received a second booking.

Spurs slam stars

Tottenham have meanwhile condemned Erik Lamela, Sergio Reguilon and Giovani Lo Celso for breaking coronavirus protocols after the trio were spotted at a large party.

Lamela, Lo Celso and Reguilon were pictured at the gathering over the Christmas period. West Ham's Manuel Lanzini was also in attendance, breaching strict guidelines that prohibit mixing with other people indoors due to

COVID-19. The photo was circulated on social media and Tottenham are set to take disciplinary action after issuing an angry rebuke about the players' behaviour.

Lamela was not named in the squad for Saturday's victory against Leeds, while Reguilon was on the bench and Lo Celso out injured. "We are extremely disappointed and strongly condemn this image showing some of our players with family and friends together at Christmas, particularly as we know the sacrifices everybody around the country made to stay safe over the festive period," the

Tottenham statement said.

Meanwhile, Premier League chiefs insist the season will go on despite Fulham's clash with Burnley on Sunday becoming the latest victim of the coronavirus.

Fulham announced on Saturday that their showdown with relegation rivals Burnley was off following further positive tests among Scott Parker's squad.

Also on Saturday, Crystal Palace registered a 2-0 win over Sheffield United. Sheffield set an unwanted record of 17 games without victory from the start of a season and remain anchored to the bottom.

AFP



Mauricio Pochettino

Pochettino named new coach of Paris Saint-Germain

Paris, France - Mauricio Pochettino was officially named the new coach of French champions Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) on Saturday following the sacking of Thomas Tuchel.

PSG announced on its website that former Tottenham manager Pochettino had signed a contract until June 30, 2022 with an option for an additional year.

The 48 year old Argentine was the only name in the frame to take over at the club where he played from 2001 to 2003 after PSG abruptly ended Tuchel's involvement on December 24, reportedly for comments viewed as critical of the Qatari owners.

"This club has always held a special place in my heart. I have wonderful memories, especially of the unique atmosphere of the Parc des Princes," Pochettino said in the PSG statement.

"I return to the club today with a lot of ambition and humility, and am eager to work with some of the world's most

talented players," Pochettino said, adding he would do his utmost "to give our team the combative and attacking playing identity that Parisian fans have always loved."

His priority will be to sate the Qatari-backed club's quest for Champions League glory.

Tuchel, who oversaw the club's first ever Champions League final appearance last season, guided Neymar and company into the knock-out stages this season before being axed.

Pochettino's first major test will be the Champions League last-16 away leg at Barcelona next month.

Pochettino will take charge of his first match next Saturday at Saint-Etienne as Ligue 1 resumes after the winter break with PSG one point off the leaders in third. Then, on February 16, he will be plotting the downfall of his compatriot Lionel Messi's Barcelona at the Camp Nou, with the return leg on March 6.

AFP

Former champions Arouba, Suwaiq advance to last-16; Muscat crash out

Ashok Purohit
Muscat

HIS MAJESTY'S CUP FOOTBALL CHAMPIONSHIP

Last season's runner-up and four-time champions Al Arouba and three-time winners Al Suwaiq recorded contrasting victories to advance to the last-16 stage of the 2020-21 His Majesty's Cup Football Championship over the weekend.

The 2020-21 HM's Cup round-of-32 began on Friday and Arouba began the new year on a winning note as they defeated hosts Salalah 2-0 at the Saada Sports Complex in Salalah.

However, a day later, Suwaiq survived a big scare against unfancied Al Bashayer at the Nizwa Sports Complex. Bashayer held Suwaiq to a 3-3 draw in regulation time and even extra-time failed to break the stalemate, forcing a penalty shootout. The former champions got the better of their gritty rivals in the shootout with a 2-1 win, thanks to the heroics of their goalkeeper Mazin al Kasbi.

Also on Saturday, Oman came up a 2-1 winner against Jalan to advance to last-16 along with Al Rustaq, who beat Masirah 3-1. Also making their way into the last-16 was Al Mussanah, who edged past Al Shabab 1-0 at the Rustaq Sports Complex.

Al Ittihad emerged as the biggest winner of the first round over two days, recording a 5-2

win over Al Ittifaq, at the Saada Sports Complex. Sohar was up against Al Khabourah in an all-Batinah clash later on Saturday.

Earlier on Friday, Ibri, Samail and Saham booked their spots in the last-16 stage.

While Ibri trounced Mirbat 4-0, Samail eked out a shock 2-1 win over former winners Muscat and Saham edged past Al Mudhaibi in a penalty shootout, winning 4-2 after both the teams were locked in a 1-1 stalemate.

The remaining fixtures of the round-of-32 will be completed on Sunday with Omantel League champions Seeb hosting Al Talee'a and Ahli-Sidab taking on Al Nahda. In other games on Sunday, Sohar meet Bahla in Sur, Majees take on Nizwa at Sohar Sports Complex and Al Nasr plays Bausher at home.

Defending champions and nine-time winners Dhofar received a bye into the last-16 stage following the pullout of Fanja from the tournament, leaving only 31 teams in fray. Fanja and Dhofar jointly hold the record of maximum nine HM's Cup titles each.

The round-of-16, which will also be played on a single-round format, will be held January 21-22. The first-leg of the double-leg quarterfinals will be played on February 5-6 while the return-leg will be held on February 15-16. The two-leg semifinals will be played on February 26-27 and March 8-9.

@ashokmuscat



Action from the HM's Cup round-of-32 match between Al Suwaiq and Al Bashayer at the Nizwa Sports Complex on Saturday



Action from the match between Al Mussanah and Al Shabab on Saturday



Al Arouba and Salalah players in action during their match on Friday

Rangers edge past ten-man Celtic in Old Firm derby

SCOTTISH PREMIERSHIP

Glasgow, UK - Rangers manager Steven Gerrard hailed his side's 1-0 win over ten-man Celtic as a 'statement' victory as they opened up a 19-point lead at the top of the Scottish Premiership.

Celtic have three games in hand to try and close that gap, but a rampant Rangers claimed a 14th consecutive league win. The game turned on a red card for Celtic defender Nir Bitton after he hauled down Alfredo Morelos just after the hour mark. Rangers goal came when the ball looped off Callum McGregor's shoulder into his own net in 70th minute.

AFP

Qatari driver Attiyah wins Dakar prologue

Jeddah, Saudi Arabia - Qatari driver Nasser al Attiyah sent out an early warning to his rivals in the Dakar Rally by winning the car prologue on Saturday while defending champion Ricky Brabec of the US took the early motorbike honours. The prologue, being run for the first time in the Dakar's history, took place on a mainly sandy 11km route near the Red Sea city of Jeddah.

Toyota driver Attiyah, a three-time winner of the most gruelling event in motorsport, earned the right to start first in Sunday's opening stage, a 622km run from Jeddah to Bisha in the southeast of the kingdom.

AFP



BRITISH AIRWAYS GETS LOAN
British Airways, facing slumping demand due to coronavirus pandemic, has secured a £2bn loan, parent group IAG said as it also unveiled a Brexit-propelled overhaul

BUSINESS

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BRIEFS

Maldives President pledges to revive economy in 2021

Maldives President Ibrahim Solih pledged to revive the economy and revitalise the nation in a statement delivered to mark the New Year 2021 on Friday.

According to Solih, new development projects, including the decentralisation of essential services, were top on the government agenda in the new year.

The government will reduce the island country's dependency on the ailing tourism sector by developing agriculture and fisheries, he said.

Protecting the environment and the vulnerable groups of society will remain a policy objective, he added.

Solih also urged citizens to work in harmony towards the collective prosperity of the nation.

Singapore to renew loan commitments to IMF

The Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS) announced that Singapore will renew its loan commitments to support multilateral efforts to strengthen the capacity of the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

MAS said that the renewals will help boost the IMF's resources to enable it to effectively play its role in safeguarding global economic and financial stability in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to a press release from MAS, the loan commitments will be made under the New Arrangements to Borrow with a US\$1.86bn loan for the period 2021-2025 and the Bilateral Borrowing Agreement with a US\$1.72bn loan for the period 2021-2024.

MAS said that the loan commitments take the form of contingent loans to the IMF and are not made directly to countries borrowing from the International Monetary Fund.

Oman aims to trim budget deficit to RO2.2bn in 2021

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman is targeting to further reduce government spending in 2021 as the sultanate's government seeks to trim its widening budget deficit amid the coronavirus pandemic and weak oil prices.

The sultanate's general budget for the year 2021 estimates total revenues of RO8.64bn, a decrease of 19 per cent from estimated revenues in 2020. This year's general budget is based on an average oil price assumption of US\$45 per barrel.

As per the Ministry of Finance's statement published by Oman News Agency, Oman's new state budget estimates the government spending to decline to RO10.88bn in 2021, a reduction of 18 per cent from the approved spending of RO13.2bn in the 2020 state budget.

This year's budget estimates a lower deficit of RO2.2bn, which is equivalent to 8 per cent of the sultanate's GDP. The government plans to fund RO1.6bn of the total estimated deficit by local and foreign borrowings,



Sultanate's 2021 budget projects public spending at RO10.88bn, nearly 18 per cent lower from the approved spending in 2020

while the remaining deficit (around RO600mn) will be funded through withdrawals from the reserves, the ministry's statement said.

As per the Ministry of Finance's statement, the sultanate's public debt will reach to about RO21.7bn by the end of 2021 and the external borrowings constitutes for 76 per cent

of the total public debt.

The ministry indicated that the general budget for 2021 was prepared according to the main objectives of the 10th five-year development plan (2021-2025) and Oman's Vision 2040. The general budget for 2021 aims to increase non-oil revenues and reduce spending to achieve financial sustainability and to enable

the national economy to continue in achieving targeted growth rates.

The Ministry of Finance noted that the sultanate's government has taken a number of financial and economic measures to mitigate the negative impacts of the coronavirus pandemic and the continuous decline in oil prices.

In its statement, the ministry confirmed that the government will continue to complete the supporting infrastructures to stimulate economic growth and give priority in implementing the necessary projects.

10th five-year plan targets 3.5% GDP growth

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman's 10th five-year development plan (2021-2025) aims to achieve an annual real gross domestic product (GDP) growth of minimum 3.5 per cent during the five years period of the plan.

The new five-year plan also targets to realise an average yearly GDP growth of 5.5 per cent at current prices during the years of the plan, according to a statement issued by the Ministry of Economy.

The plan seeks to achieve a number of economic and social priority goals with the prime aim of activating the economy, developing macro-economic environment, upgrading the performance of general finance, and realising the rationalisation of

public spending.

The 10th five-year development plan also targets increasing investment rate to 27 per cent of the gross domestic product during the years of the plan and working to raise the efficiency of investment. The plan aims to increase foreign direct investment in oil and non-oil sectors to 10 per cent of GDP by the end of the plan.

The plan focuses on economic diversification mechanisms and raising the contribution of non-oil activities to the sultanate's economy. It aims to achieve a 3.2 per cent annual average growth in non-oil GDP by focusing on promising economic sectors like high-tech converting industries, agriculture, fisheries, food processing, transporting, storage and logistics.

National Cable Industry to target foreign markets

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman's National Cable Industry, which is based at Raysut Industrial City, is planning to explore foreign markets in near future with its high efficiency and high quality cable products.

Despite the circumstances posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, National Cable Factory has continued its production and promotional campaign in the local market, and is manufacturing high quality electrical and flexible cables to meet the needs of the sultanate's market, the company said in a press statement.

"With high efficiency and excellent quality of products, the factory plans to explore foreign markets in the near future to promote these products overseas," Nayef bin Hamid Fadel, CEO of National Cable Factory said.

National Cable Factory was established in 2013 and began production in 2018.



Nayef bin Hamid Fadel

"The company's annual production volume has amounted to 10,000 tonnes of all types of electrical cables. Besides, the company has introduced new production lines in correspondence to the requirements of a fast-moving market," Fadel said.

He emphasised that the company pays great attention to providing job and training opportunities for the national cadres. "The National Cable Factory, in cooperation with the Technical and Administrative Training Institute, will train a number of diploma holders as part of training for employment."

OPEC+ meet to decide output levels

London, UK - Members of the OPEC group of oil producers and their partners will meet via videoconference on Monday to decide on production levels for February, hoping to turn the corner on a difficult year.

The OPEC+ ministerial meeting comes after oil consumption tanked in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and a price war between Saudi Arabia and Russia.

Despite a pick up in prices towards the end of last year, the market levels for black gold remain uncertain.

After their last summit, from November 30-December 3, the OPEC+ members agreed to increase production by half a mil-

lion barrels per day in January.

Also at that meeting the 13 members of the OPEC cartel, led by Saudi Arabia, and their six allies, led by Russia, agreed to meet at the beginning of each month in order to decide on any adjustments to production volumes for the following month.

Russia and Saudi Arabia are respectively the second and third biggest oil producers in the world after the United States. The decision illustrates OPEC's desire to maintain a strong influence on the oil market and the gravity of the situation for crude producers last year.

Before the pandemic, OPEC members were content with two summits per year at the organi-



sation's headquarters in Vienna.

"Finally, we saw a strong demonstration of OPEC+ will and capability to manage the market, laying the groundwork for Brent's recovery to over US\$50 per barrel despite remaining demand uncertainty in the market," JBC Energy analysts said in a statement.

US govt imposes additional tariffs in long-running Airbus-Boeing spat

Washington, US - The United States announced that it will impose additional tariffs on French and German products as part of a long-running dispute over subsidies for aircraft manufacturers Airbus and Boeing.

The tariffs are on 'aircraft manufacturing parts from France and Germany, certain non-sparkling wine from France and Germany, and certain cognac and other grape brandies from France and Germany', which will be added to the list of products taxed since 2019, according to a statement from the US Trade Representative (USTR).

It said the move was in retaliation to tariffs imposed by the European Union which it considers unfair.

The decision is the latest twist in the 16-year trade battle over aircraft subsidies that turned increasingly sour under the protectionist instincts of US President Donald Trump, and comes despite hopes for a trade truce following Joe Biden's election.



The EU was authorised last year by the World Trade Organization (WTO) to levy additional customs duties on American products.

But Washington believes it has been penalised by the method of calculation chosen, which, according to the Trump administration, has led to an excessive amount of customs duties levied on American products.

'In implementing its tariffs... the EU used trade data from a period in which trade volumes

had been drastically reduced due to the horrific effects on the global economy from the COVID-19 virus,' the USTR statement said.

'The result of this choice was that Europe imposed tariffs on substantially more products than would have been covered if it had utilised a normal period. Although the United States explained to the EU the distortive effect of its selected time period, the EU refused to change its approach,' the statement said.

As a result the US 'is forced to

change its reference period to the same period used by the European Union,' it continued.

The US also deplored an EU decision to exclude the UK from its calculations, which it argued unfairly increased the tariffs.

The feud over European aircraft manufacturer Airbus and its American competitor Boeing is the longest and most complicated ever handled by the WTO.

The aviation feud predates Trump, but Washington quickly embraced the opportunity to impose US\$7.5bn in tariffs against Europeans after also being cleared to do so by the WTO last year.

Washington imposed punitive tariffs of 25 per cent on iconic EU products such as wine, cheese and olive oil and put a 15 per cent tariff on Airbus planes in March.

In retaliation, the EU has been imposing customs duties on US\$4bn of American exports since the beginning of November.

AFP

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MARKET ANALYSIS - OMAN

MSM posts weekly gains as all indices rise

The benchmark index of the Muscat Securities Market (MSM) last week closed on a positive note supported by all the sectoral indices.

The MSM30 index ended the week up by 1.64 per cent as all sectors ended positively. The Industrial index ended the highest and up by 2.46 per cent. Services index closed higher by 1.72 per cent and Financial index was up by 1.56 per cent for the week. The MSM Shariah index rose by 1.89 per cent on weekly basis.

Local news

►Oman announced the re-opening of its airports and borders to travellers from December 29 after closing them during the previous week amid concerns over a newly discovered strain of COVID-19.

►Takaful Oman announced on the bourse that it is in the process of issuing a perpetual sukuk worth RO6mn through private placement. The issue manager is Sohar International Bank's Islamic banking window Sohar Islamic. The sukuk issue is subject to approval from the Capital Market Authority (CMA).

►The proposed merger between Oman Investment and Finance Company (OIFC) and Gulf Investment Services Holding Company (GIS) under which GIS will merge into OIFC was approved by the shareholders of both the companies. The

proposed increase in OIFC's authorised capital from RO20mn to RO30mn was also approved by the company's shareholders. Further, the proposed increase in the paid-up capital of the company from RO20mn to RO23.7mn was also approved.

The increased paid-up capital shall be allocated to GIS's shareholders on pro-rata of their shareholding in GIS. The issuance of secondary unsecured bonds with a value of RO750,000 for a term of five years with 5 per cent interest was approved. The bonds shall be allocated to GIS's shareholders on pro-rata of shareholding in GIS.

►Omani authorities have announced that work is set to start early next year on a number of industrial, economic and infrastructure projects at Sur Industrial City. The private sector led investments include a boatyard complex, a residential township for the industrial park's labour force, and a new sewage treatment plant. As per news sources, the investments in Sur Industrial City have now hit RO2.045bn, up 0.67 per cent year-on-year basis.

►It was announced during the week that Oman's Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ), which regulates all four of the country's biggest free zone developments, is overseeing a string of mining-related invest-



(Muscat Daily)

ments. Oman has opened up around 33 projects and initiatives on a public-private partnership (PPP) basis, involving investments worth over US\$2.5bn, for local and international investment, newspapers reported.

►The sultanate's solid waste management flagship, be'ah, is promoting an array of projects for local and foreign investment as part of its drive to sustain a circular economy centring on the solid waste sector. (1) the biggest project is a waste-to-energy Independent Power Project (IPP) utilising municipal waste for power generation - a

venture estimated to cost US\$700mn, (2) a US\$23.5mn worth of bio-gas plant at the Barka landfill for the production of electricity, thermal energy and compost, (3) a soda ash production plant at a cost of US\$145.64mn, (4) a clinker manufacturing facility with US\$20.72mn cost, (5) quick lime production plant with US\$14.3mn investment, and (6) a ground calcium carbonate factory valued at US\$7.25mn.

►The Central Bank of Oman said it approved a recommendation that would provide more flexibility for banks in financing stock market investments. The

regulator's board reviewed the prospects and challenges facing the economy and approved a recommendation to amend some of the provisions in granting of loans against shares. 'The amendment is expected to provide greater flexibility and enhanced opportunities to banks in financing investments in shares or against the security of shares,' according to a statement posted on the CBO's website. It didn't provide further details. The regulator also said banking sector in Oman was 'comfortably placed' to ensure its continued support to the economy.

GCC markets

Within the GCC markets, investors added US\$1bn in eighth straight week of inflows, Bloomberg data showed. The current winning streak has added US\$15.4bn to the funds, bringing year-to-date inflows to US\$2.47bn. That's a reversal from earlier this year, when as much as US\$20bn was removed as the pandemic roiled the appetite for risk.

Saudi-listed banks reported a 10 per cent year-on-year rise in aggregate net profits before Zakat and tax to SAR4.12bn in November 2020, data from the Saudi central bank Saudi Arabian Monetary Authority (SAMA) showed. The sector's aggregate earnings fell by 21 per cent to SAR36.5bn year to date, compared to SAR46.41bn a year earlier. The data covers 11 listed banks and some foreign banks operating in Saudi Arabia.

Saudi banks' aggregate assets grew by 15 per cent year-on-year to SAR2.967tn in November. Combined deposits increased by 12 per cent year-on-year to SAR1.934tn in the same month. Loans to the private sector saw an increase of 15 per cent year-on-year to around SAR1.755tn by the end of November.

Gold is poised for the biggest annual gain in a decade. It is headed to highest close in seven weeks after US President

Donald Trump signed a US\$900bn coronavirus stimulus package, pumping more state funds into the world's top economy. The haven built on a run of four weekly gains following the breakthrough on the package, which Trump had initially declined to endorse amid a dispute on the size of checks to support households amid the pandemic.

Recommendation

Global stocks rose on Wednesday after announcement that US stimulus payments could begin arriving in people's bank accounts as early as Tuesday night. This payout is expected to provide a boost to the US economy, which has been slammed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Regionally, the markets have somewhat overcome the first-quarter shock triggered by a global recession fears on COVID-19 outbreak and the Saudi-Russia oil price war. However, key events like progress on the COVID-19 vaccinations and cases are expected to continue to play an important role in market performance.

We advise investors to watch any changes announced in the board of directors of companies, any dividend announcements as well as macro-economic news like the budget statement announcement due this week.

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Iran to open euro account in Baghdad

Tehran, Iran - Iran's Minister of Energy Reza Ardakanian said that a euro account is to be opened in Iraq in the coming days enabling Baghdad to secure its debts to Iran over electricity and natural gas purchases.

Speaking on the sidelines of the weekly Cabinet meeting, Ardakanian said that previous and the recent debts of Iraq to Iran

will be changed to euros and will be deposited in the account.

Thus, the problems caused by the oppressive sanctions of the US will be eased to some extent and the account can be used for providing medicine and basic goods for Iran, he said.

Noting that payment of US\$700mn of the debts is almost finalised, he added that the

same account can be used for Iraq's debts to Iranian private sector.

Iranian Energy Minister Ardakanian made a visit to Baghdad recently and was welcomed by Iraqi Electricity Minister Majid Mahdi Hantoush.

Ardakanian said in Baghdad that after a six-year halt Iran-Iraq Joint Economic Commission is to

be reactivated in Tehran in a few weeks.

He said Iraqi specialised delegations will participate in the Tehran meeting and Iranian private and public sectors will hold constructive consultations for developing bilateral relations, adding that the trip was made for expanding ties with Iraq.

IRNA

Russia's oil output drops by 8.6%

Moscow, Russia - Russia's production of oil and gas condensate dropped by 8.6 per cent to 512,680,000 tonnes in 2020, according to data from the Central Dispatching Department of the Fuel and Energy Sector.

Russia is a member of the OPEC+ agreement on oil output cut aimed at improving the situation on the global oil market.

Russia's oil exports fell by 12.7

per cent to 232,500,000 tonnes in 2020, while domestic oil supply was down by 5.2 per cent to 274,900,000 tonnes.

The country's petrol production dropped by 4.5 per cent to 38,412,000 in 2020 amid a decline in global energy demand due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The emergence of coronavirus vaccines on the global

market is helping to restore oil demand, and the market may return to pre-crisis parameters during 2021, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said recently in an interview with Rossiya 24 TV channel.

Novak added that global demand for oil in 2021, according to optimistic forecasts, may grow by 5-6mn barrels per day.

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Adnoc Distribution to acquire 15 service stations in Saudi Arabia

Abu Dhabi, UAE - Adnoc Distribution announced the execution of a definitive agreement to acquire 15 service stations in Saudi Arabia, reaffirming its commitment to grow its business in the Kingdom; the largest fuel retail market in the GCC.

The purchase consideration for this acquisition is AED36.7mn (US\$10mn). The acquisition is subject to certain conditions [including obtaining regulatory approvals].

Already the only fuel retailer operating in all seven emirates in the UAE, the addition of these new stations highlights the long term smart growth strategy to also become a leading fuel operator in Saudi Arabia.

The company sees value creation potential coming from uplift in fuel margins and the company's integrated approach to managing fuel and non-fuel retail offerings.

Located in the eastern region, with sites dedicated to both highway commuters as well as in-community convenience, the new stations will be refurbished in line with Adnoc Distribution brand standards and offer high



quality fuel and retail services to customers, including convenience stores. "Expanding our presence in Saudi Arabia is an important milestone for our company and part of our profitable growth strategy. We see this expansion as a natural progression since opening our first station in 2018 and look forward to significantly increasing our presence in the coming years. This is the first announcement of many we intend to make with Saudi being a key strategic market for us as we make Adnoc

service stations a destination for all in Saudi," Ahmed al Shamsi, acting CEO of Adnoc Distribution, said.

Adnoc Distribution opened its first service station in Saudi Arabia in December 2018, located on the Riyadh-Dammam highway around 40km from the capital. It was followed shortly after by the second in the city of Hofuf within Al Ahsa Governorate. Upon completion of this transaction, the new locations will bring the company's total network to 17 across the Kingdom.

"Saudi Arabia is the largest market in the GCC and there is huge potential for experienced fuel operators like us to consolidate the market and capture further growth," said Shamsi.

"And we are currently in discussions on a range of opportunities to further build on our network in the country. With such a vast and diverse landscape, we aim to bring our fuel and retail experience to benefit local communities and industrial areas across the Kingdom."

WAM

New Year, new rules: UK begins post-Brexit future

London, UK - Britain on Friday began a new year and life outside the European Union's single market, with the first trucks crossing the Channel by ferry and rail largely reporting few difficulties despite new customs rules.

Brexit, an all-consuming issue in Britain since it voted in 2016 to quit the bloc, became reality an hour before midnight after nearly five decades of integration with Europe.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson was bullishly optimistic, writing in the *Daily Telegraph* that Brexit presented 'opportunities unknown to modern memory', even as the country battles a new wave of coronavirus infections.

Johnson also tweeted his ambitions for a 'Global Britain', as the country took over the presidency of the G7 nations on Friday and prepares to host the COP 26 climate summit in November.

'I look forward to welcoming our friends and allies as we beat COVID and build back better from the pandemic,' he wrote.

In practical terms, free movement of over 500mn people between Britain and the 27 EU states ended with the New Year.

More rigorous customs checks returned for the first time in decades, despite the hard-fought brokering of a deal with the EU allowing for tariff- and quota-free trade.

Passengers stepping off the Eurostar train from London at the Gare du Nord found new customs checks awaiting them.

Ferry group Stena Line said six freight loads bound for EU-member Ireland were turned away at



A Stena Line ferry depart for the United Kingdom on Friday (AFP)

the port of Holyhead in Wales for not having the correct paperwork.

But the approach to Dover in southeast England, where ferries to and from northern France dock, was quiet.

"Everything was normal," said Romanian Alexandru Mareci, who was among the first truck drivers to enter Britain after the rule changes. "Of course, how many people do you know who work on the first day of the New Year? We don't know how it will be in the future."

Scores of heavy goods vehicles also passed through the Channel Tunnel connecting Britain and France by rail 'without any problem' early Friday, its operator said.

However, the British government, which is implementing a phased introduction of checks,

expects this week to be the true test, once the quiet holiday period is over.

New Year's Day newspapers reflected the historic but still deeply divisive change, which will have repercussions for generations to come.

The front-page photograph on the pro-Brexit *Daily Express* showed the White Cliffs of Dover with 'Freedom' written on a Union flag.

But whether the United Kingdom will even stay united is exercising minds as the pro-EU Scottish National Party steps up calls for a second referendum on independence.

"It's a very sad day. Brexit puts a barrier in between my ability to be Scottish and my ability to be British," retiree Bruce Borthwick told AFP in Edinburgh.

The end to EU rules was a triumph for veteran Brexiteers such as populist politician Nigel Farage, a prominent voice in the 2016 referendum campaign to leave. He tweeted, '25 years ago they all laughed at me. Well, they're not laughing now'.

In the city of Gateshead in northern England, where the majority voted for Brexit, Alessio Suave, a 37 year old retail manager, was equally upbeat.

"I think it's a great opportunity for the UK now to stand alone and to really build some business across the world," he said.

In any case, opinion polls indicate that most Britons want to move on and are far more worried about the worsening coronavirus pandemic, which has left more than 73,500 dead in Britain alone.

Practical changes include how long Britons can visit their holiday homes on the continent, how to travel with pets, and an end to British involvement in an EU student programme.

Holidaymakers and business travellers used to seamless EU travel could face delays, although fears Britons will have to get international permits to drive in Europe were averted by a separate accord.

British fishermen are disgruntled at a compromise in the free trade agreement to allow continued access for EU boats in British waters.

The key financial services sector also faces an anxious wait to learn on what basis it can keep dealing with Europe, after being largely omitted from the trade deal along with services in general, which account for 80 per cent of Britain's economy.

AFP



Wall Street stocks end tumultuous 2020 at records

New York, US - Wall Street indices finished 2020 at all-time highs on Thursday, a surprising conclusion to a year in which the United States endured a recession caused by the deadly COVID-19 pandemic that continues to plague the country.

The Dow and S&P 500 finished at fresh records, capping a year in which they, along with the Nasdaq, scored significant gains even amid elevated joblessness, rising hunger and acute pain in sectors such as hospitality, airlines, oil and gas and the performing arts.

"For Main Street, it was a terrible year," said Briefing.com analyst Patrick O'Hare. "For Wall Street, it was a fantastic year."

The broad-based S&P 500, which swooned below the 2,200-point level at its nadir in March, finished the year at 3,756.07, up 16.3 per cent for the year.

European equity markets had a mixed year, with Frankfurt higher, but Paris declined and London suffered its worst year since the global financial crisis.

The gains in US indices seemed impossible in March, when exchanges were forced to suspend trading as stocks went into free-fall as much of the US economy was shut down to combat the coronavirus.

Yet, markets pivoted quickly from the fear of a depression-like collapse after the Federal Reserve stepped in with extraordinary stimulus and Congress mobilized to enact its biggest-ever fiscal package, the \$2.2 trillion CARES Act.

Stocks began regaining ground in late March and rose for much of the summer. Volatility picked up again in the fall ahead of the November presidential election and as the infections spiked.

But Wall Street engineered a strong late-year rally as COVID-19 vaccines were approved and began to be rolled out, fueling hope for an economic recovery in the new year.

However, analysts see risks ahead in the first part of 2021.

"We've priced in a lot of the good news and not the bad news," said Art Hogan, chief market strategist at National Securities.

He expects the market in the upcoming period to fixate both on weakening economic data and on the virus's worrying spread.

"In large part, the market has done so well in 2020 because it is pricing in 2021," O'Hare said. AFP

LVMH and Tiffany finally seal merger at lower price

Washington, US - Shareholders of US jeweler Tiffany overwhelmingly approved a merger with France's LVMH, ending months of drama with a marriage of two luxury icons.

About 99 per cent of shareholders voted in favour of the union during a special meeting that was held virtually, a spokesperson told AFP.

The parent to luxury brands such as Louis Vuitton, Dior and Moet & Chandon, LVMH announced its plan to acquire Tiffany and its iconic robin's egg blue gift boxes at the end of 2019.

But the French company

walked away from its proposal in September after claiming a series of poor decisions by Tiffany's board.

The companies buried the hatchet in October after Tiffany agreed to a lower price to prevent the deal from collapsing.

The price was dropped by US\$3.50 a share to US\$131.50, lowering the value of the deal to US\$15.8bn from the original US\$16.2bn.

LVMH had already obtained authorisation from the authorities for the merger.

Tiffany will be removed from the New York Stock Exchange. AFP

China's factory activity slows, recovery on track

Beijing, China - Factory activity in China slowed slightly in December though it continued to grow as the world's second-largest economy stays on track to recover from the coronavirus crisis.

While the rest of the world has struggled to overcome the deadly virus, China has bounced back from a rare contraction in the first three months of the year and is expected to be the only major economy to avoid a recession this year.

The closely watched Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) - a key gauge of manufacturing activity in China - dipped to 51.9 from 52.1 in November, the National Bureau of Statistics said. It was also slightly lower than the forecast by analysts.

The dip came as demand for



Chinese exports was hit by fresh lockdowns and strict containment measures in key markets including Europe and the United States.

Still, NBS statistician Zhao

Qinghe said the country's economic recovery 'remained strong'.

"The overall manufacturing sector maintained a steady recovery, with the pace at a relatively high level for the year," Zhao said.

The manufacturing PMI collapsed to a record low of 35.7 in February after the virus brought much of China to a standstill but

economic recovery helped it bounce back to a three-year high in November.

The International Monetary Fund expects the Chinese economy to expand by 1.9 per cent in 2020.

China's non-manufacturing PMI - a gauge of sentiment in the services sector - fell to 55.7 in December from 56.4 in November.

China has largely curbed the spread of the virus but a series of local outbreaks in cities including Beijing have reduced the number visiting restaurants, cinemas and other public venues.

These mini-outbreaks have also raised fears of reduced economic activity during the Lunar new year holiday in February. AFP

Painful 2020 ends for US workers and layoffs could rise again

Washington, US - Despite a drop in weekly jobless claims, the US economy is far from healed after a year in which tens of millions of people lost their jobs due to the coronavirus pandemic, many of whom remain out of work.

New filings for unemployment benefits dropped below 800,000 for the first time in a month, the Labor Department reported on Thursday, but experts say that is more likely a statistical fluke related to the holidays and political maneuvers in Washington, rather than a sign the economy is finally on track for a sustained recovery.

As the United States continues to weather the world's largest coronavirus outbreak even as vaccines are finally being deployed, analysts see more layoffs on the horizon, at least in the early weeks of 2021.

"While prospects for the economy later in 2021 are upbeat, the economy and labour market will have to navigate some difficult terrain between now and then," Nancy Vanden Houten of Oxford Economics said.

New initial jobless claims slipped to 787,000 for the week ended December 26, a drop of 19,000 from the prior week, the Labor Department said.

Another 308,262 people filed new claims for Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA), one of the programmes available to jobless workers who would not normally be eligible for benefits.

That means the total new applications remain above one million long after the business closures ordered in March to halt the spread of COVID-19 turned the economy upside down.



Events and entertainment workers gather in a protest to bring attention to their labor and unemployment in Las Vegas, Nevada on August 19, 2020 (AFP)

Those business closures sent the unemployment rate spiking to 14.7 per cent in April, but it has since declined, falling to 6.7 per cent in November as companies modified or restarted operations even as the virus remained rife.

Nonetheless, the weekly filings for unemployment aid have remained above the worst single week of the 2008-2010 global financial crisis, and 19.6mn people were receiving jobless benefits under all government programs as of the week ended December 12, according to the Labor Department.

COVID-19 cases also are hitting new record levels in parts of the country, prompting local governments to order renewed business restrictions, meaning another jump in claim filings could be waiting in the new year.

Industries like travel, hotels, restaurants and entertainment have been devastated.

Grant Thornton chief economist Diane Swonk tweeted that she is 'worried about a jump in claims post holiday as those who

delayed reup and containment measures by states intensify with post holiday surge'.

In addition to the holiday impact, applications also could have been held down by legislative confusion in Washington over the fate of PUA and other special pandemic aid due to expire before the end of the year.

Congress finally approved both, but President Donald Trump did not sign the new relief package into law until the day after some programmes expired on December 26.

"We think that holiday noise and uncertainty about extensions of benefits may have held down claims last week," Oxford's Vanden Houten said. AFP

Iran Guards vow response to any action amid tensions

Tehran, Iran - Iran's Revolutionary Guards chief Hossein Salami vowed on Saturday to respond to any 'action the enemy takes', in a visit to a strategic Gulf island, amid rising tensions with the US.

Salami was speaking on the eve of the first anniversary of the US killing of top Iranian military commander Rear Admiral Qasem Soleimani in a Baghdad drone strike on January 3, 2020.

"We are here today to evaluate and be assured of our powerful capabilities at sea and against enemies who sometimes boast... and threaten," Salami said according to the Guards' official website Sepahnews.

Salami inspected the troops stationed on Abu Musa island, accompanied by the Revolutionary Guard Corps navy commander Rear Admiral Alireza Tangsiri. "We would respond with a reciprocal, decisive and strong blow to whatever action the enemy would take against us," Salami warned.

Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunb islands are located in the Gulf near the entrance to the strategic Strait of Hormuz, through which a fifth of world oil output passes.

The islands are under Iranian control but are also claimed by the United Arab Emirates.

Tensions have been building up in the run-up to the anniversary of Soleimani's killing, with two American B-52 bombers recently flying over the region.

Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif on Thurs-



Members of the Lebanese Hezbollah take part in a parade under a poster of slain Iraqi commander Abu Mahdi al Muhandis (left) and Iran Revolutionary Guards commander Qasem Soleimani, ahead of the January 3 first anniversary of the US drone strike, in Baalbeck city on Saturday (AFP)

We are here today to evaluate and be assured of our powerful capabilities against enemies who sometimes threaten. We would respond with a reciprocal strong blow

HOSSEIN SALAMI

day accused outgoing US President Donald Trump of aiming to fabricate a 'pretext for war' after Trump blamed Tehran for a rocket strike on the US Embassy in Baghdad on December 20.

The US aircraft carrier *USS Nimitz* has been patrolling Gulf waters since late November, but American media said this week that the acting US defence secretary, Christopher C Miller, had or-

dered the *Nimitz* to return home. *The New York Times*, quoting US officials, said this move was part of a 'de-escalatory' signal to Tehran to avoid a conflict in Trump's last days in office.

Trump unilaterally withdrew the US from a landmark nuclear deal with Iran and world powers in 2018 and launched a 'maximum pressure' campaign against Tehran, reimposing and reinforcing crippling sanctions.

The two countries have twice come to the brink of war since

June 2019, especially following the killing of Soleimani.

Days after the Soleimani assassination, Iran launched a volley of missiles at Iraqi bases housing US and other coalition troops, with Trump refraining from any further military response.

Tangsiri had last visited the two Tunb islands on December 25 and emphasised the necessity of the troops' 'combat-readiness and awareness'.

AFP

Iran says will enrich uranium up to 20%: IAEA

Vienna, Austria - Iran has informed the International Atomic Energy Agency that it intends to produce uranium enriched to up to 20 percent purity, well beyond the threshold set by the 2015 Vienna accord, the UN nuclear watchdog said on Friday.

"Iran informed the agency of its intention to enrich uranium at a rate of up to 20 per cent in its Fordow underground plant, to comply with a law recently passed by the Iranian parliament," an IAEA spokesperson told AFP.

The letter dated December 31 'did not state exactly when this enrichment activity would begin', the spokesperson added.

Russian Ambassador to the IAEA Mikhail Ulyanov reported the information earlier on Twitter, citing a report submitted by IAEA chief Rafael Grossi to the board of governors.

"It is an additional blow," a diplomat based in Vienna said, as Tehran continues to retaliate to US sanctions by progressively abandoning limits on its nuclear activity laid down in the deal.

According to the latest report available from the UN agency, published in November, Tehran was enriching uranium to levels greater than the limit provided for in the Vienna agreement (3.67 per cent) but not exceeding the 4.5 per cent threshold, and still complied with the Agency's very strict inspection regime.

But there has been turmoil since the assassination in late November of Iranian nuclear physicist Mohsen Fakhrazadeh.

In the aftermath of the attack, blamed on Israel, hardliners in Tehran pledged a response and parliament passed a controversial law calling for the production and storage of 'at least 120 kilograms per year of 20 per cent enriched uranium' and to 'put an end' to the IAEA inspections intended to check that the country is not developing an atomic bomb.

The Iranian government opposed the initiative which was also condemned by the other signatories to the accord who called on Tehran not to 'compromise the future'.

The other signatories to the deal - China, France, Germany, Russia and Britain - have been playing for time, in advance of Joe Biden's inauguration as US president.

The Democrat has shown himself to be determined to save the pact.

Biden, who takes office on January 20, has signalled Washington would rejoin the so-called Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) aimed at limiting Iran's nuclear programme.

The deal has been unravelling ever since President Donald Trump dramatically withdrew from it in May 2018 and imposed crippling economic sanctions on Tehran.

German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas has said the change of administration in the US means that there is 'a last window' for progress that 'shouldn't be wasted'.

AFP

Man left paralysed by Israeli army fire

Jerusalem - A Palestinian man was paralysed from the neck down after being shot by the Israeli army during Friday clashes in the West Bank, the Palestinian Health Ministry said.

The man was shot through the neck, the ministry said in a statement.

Palestinian sources had earlier reported the wounding of 24 year old Haroun Rasmi Abu Aram in the village of Al-Tuwana, south of Hebron.

The man had been attempting to prevent the troops from 'stealing an electric generator' that belonged to him, according to the Palestinian news agency WAFA.

Israeli rights group B'Tselem said Abu Aram was helping a neighbour to build a house at the time of the shooting.

The Israel Defence Forces told AFP that a number of Palestinians had attacked its troops who were conducting a routine operation to evacuate an 'illegal building' and had fired into the air in response.

An investigation into the incident was under way, the IDF added.

Israel has occupied the West Bank since 1967 and its settlements in the area are regarded as illegal by much of the international community. But the settler population has grown in recent years.

AFP

Five women killed in Yemen wedding attack

Hodeida, Yemen - Five women were killed when a projectile exploded at a New Year's Day wedding party in Yemen's Red Sea city of Hodeida, the latest atrocity in the war-torn nation.

The government and Huthi rebels blamed each other for the Friday night attack near Hodeida's airport, a frontline between their forces on the edge of the key Huthi-held port.

It came just two days after at least 26 people were killed in blasts that rocked the airport of the southern city of Aden as government ministers got off a plane.

In Hodeida, 'the explosion struck at the entrance to a complex of several wedding halls', a witness told AFP, as a party was being held for a newly-married rebel supporter.

Local officials said five women were killed, and children were among seven others wounded, when what appeared to be an artillery shell hit the wedding venue.

General Sadek Douid, the government representative in a UN-sponsored joint commission



A damaged van at the site of an explosion at a nearby wedding hall during the night, in Yemen's Red Sea city of Hudeida on Saturday (AFP)

overseeing a truce, condemned it as 'an odious crime committed by the Huthis against civilians'.

Hodeida's Huthi-appointed governor, Mohammed Ayache, said on Al-Masirah television, which is run by the Shiite rebels, that 'the forces of aggression

never hesitate to blame others for their crimes'.

Saudi-backed government forces launched an offensive in June 2018 to retake Hodeida, the main entry point for humanitarian aid to the Arab world's poorest country.

Humanitarian catastrophe

A ceasefire has been partially observed since December of that year.

On December 4, however, at least eight people were killed in bomb attacks on an industrial

complex in Hodeida, a few days after the bombardment of residential areas that killed five children and three women.

Huthi military camps were targeted in air raids by the Saudi-led coalition backing the government, in retaliation for an attack

on a Saudi oil tanker that was blamed on the rebels.

In the face of the highly volatile situation, Yemen's new power-sharing government vowed on Thursday to restore stability, a day after the deadly blasts on the airport tarmac in Aden, the south's main city.

All Cabinet members were reported to be unharmed, in what some ministers charged was an attack by the Huthi rebels, who have controlled the capital Sanaa since 2014 September and are based in northern Yemen.

Foreign Minister Ahmed bin Mubarak said that the new government was up to tackling the challenges facing Yemen.

"The government is determined to fulfil its duty and work to restore stability," he said.

"This terrorist attack will not deter it."

The new government includes supporters of the secessionist Southern Transitional Council, as well as other parties.

While all in the new government oppose the Huthi rebels, they are deeply divided.

AFP

Iran's ultraconservative cleric passes away

Tehran, Iran - Influential Iranian cleric Ayatollah Mohammad Taghi Mesbah-Yazdi, an ultra-conservative figure close to supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, died in Tehran on Friday, state news agency IRNA reported.

The 85 year-old was under medical care and hospitalised days ago due to a 'digestive disease' at a Tehran hospital, IRNA said, citing a statement from his office.

A veteran revolutionary close

to Khamenei, Mesbah-Yazdi was also known as a staunch supporter of ultraconservative former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. However, he lifted his support for the firebrand president during his second term due to his 'deviation' after Ahmadinejad had a falling out with the Supreme Leader.

To his opponents, the fundamentalist spiritual head of the Paydari Front political faction was one of the most disliked and radical figures.

At the time of his death, Mesbah-Yazdi was the head of the of Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute and a long-time member of the Assembly of Experts, the body that oversees the works of the supreme leader and is tasked with choosing his successor.

He had failed to secure a seat in the assembly in the 2016 elections amid a surge by reformists and moderates, whom he fiercely opposed, but managed to regain the position in a by-election two

years later.

The cleric had said in 2014 that Iran's people 'do not deserve such a leader' as Khamenei and that his leadership was a 'blessing' for the Islamic republic, ISNA news agency reported.

Iran's President Hassan Rouhani and parliament speaker Mohammad-Bagher Ghalibaf in separate statements offered their condolences on Mesbah-Yazdi's death to the nation of Iran, his family and the supreme leader.

AFP/Agencies



A file photo of Ayatollah Mohammad Taghi Mesbah-Yazdi (AFP)

Turks among 4 killed in Somalia blast

Mogadishu, Somalia - Two Turkish nationals were among four people killed on Saturday in a suicide bombing outside the Somali capital Mogadishu claimed by the Al Shabaab militant group, officials said.

Turkish Health Minister Fahrettin Koca said 14 others wounded in the blast, including three Turks, were being treated at a Turkish-run hospital in Mogadishu.

The attack targeted employees of a Turkish company building a road between Mogadishu and Afgoye, a town about 25km west of the capital, officials from both countries said.

"The number of our nationals who lost their lives in the terror attack in Somalia has increased to two," Koca said, adding the lives of the wounded Turks were not in danger.

The two others killed in the assault were Somali special police, said Mohamed Ibrahim, a police officer in Afgoye.

He said security forces opened fire as the bomber tried to force his way into a construction site where work was underway.

"Unfortunately, he was already close to where people were gathered and detonated, inflicting casualties," he said.

Al Shabaab, the Al Qaeda-linked extremist group waging a deadly insurgency against the foreign-backed government in Mogadishu, claimed responsibility for the attack.

Turkey is one of Somalia's closest foreign partners and is among several nations training soldiers to take over from African peacekeeping force AMISOM,



The attack targeted employees of a Turkish company building a road between Mogadishu and Afgoye, a town about 25km west of the capital, officials from both countries said

whose troops are set to leave the country this year after 14 years.

In June, two people were killed when a suicide bomber targeted a Turkish military training base in Mogadishu.

The bomber tried to conceal himself among young recruits

who had gathered to enlist in the academy, which opened in 2017 and is among the largest foreign-run military centre in Somalia.

Somalia plunged into chaos after the 1991 overthrow of president Siad Barre's military regime, leading to years of clan

warfare followed by the rise of Al Shabaab which once controlled large parts of the country and capital.

After being pushed out of their main bastions by AMISOM in 2011, Al Shabaab has continued to wage war against the gov-

ernment, with regular attacks in Mogadishu and against neighbouring countries which have contributed to the force.

According to the Turkish foreign ministry website, the country's largest embassy complex abroad is in Mogadishu and in-

vestments in the country total US\$100mn. Turkish companies also run the Mogadishu international airport and seaport.

Ankara also offers Somalia humanitarian assistance and scholarships, and earlier this year sent plane loads of medical

equipment to help the country deal with the coronavirus pandemic.

During some of the worst attacks in Mogadishu, Turkey has often flown the wounded to its country for treatment. AFP

Rio's new mayor orders probe against predecessor

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil - The new mayor of Rio de Janeiro took office on Friday launching a raft of investigations into corruption allegations against his predecessor, a pastor allied to Brazil's far-right President Jair Bolsonaro.

Outgoing mayor Marcelo Crivella had already been arrested on December 22 and suspended from his job over the allegations. But the new mayor, Eduardo Paes, wasted no time piling more pressure on the man he defeated in municipal elections last November.

A veteran centrist who previously led Brazil's second city



Rio de Janeiro's new mayor Eduardo Paes (AFP)

from 2009 to 2016, Paes used his first day back in office to order four probes into alleged corruption and strongarming in

the Crivella administration.

"Never in the history of Rio de Janeiro has a mayor received such a perverse inheritance from

his predecessor," Paes said.

The probes he ordered will investigate allegations that the Crivella administration forced companies to pay bribes to win public contracts, committed irregularities in the construction of a COVID-19 field hospital, embezzled funds for protective gear and health equipment against the pandemic, and ran an operation called the 'Guardians of Crivella' whose mission was to stop journalists from covering the impact of the health crisis.

Crivella, a gospel singer and bishop in the powerful Universal Church of the Kingdom of God -

which was founded by his uncle - has denied the accusations. He says he is the victim of political persecution.

Bolsonaro, who hails from Rio, supported Crivella's election campaigns. But he has distanced himself from the former mayor since the latter lost his re-election bid in a landslide.

The President said after the elections that he would work well with Paes. Paes (51) presided over what many consider a golden period for Rio, when it hosted the 2014 World Cup final and 2016 Olympics. AFP



Burning candles are placed in the snow for the victims of the landslide that hit a residential area in Ask in Gjerdrum on Saturday (AFP)

One dead, nine missing in Norway landslide

Oslo, Norway - Rescuers on Friday found a dead body and continued searching for nine other people, including a toddler and a 13 year old, still missing days after a mudslide destroyed homes in a Norwegian village, the authorities said.

An entire hillside collapsed in Ask, 25km northeast of the capital Oslo overnight on Tuesday, burying homes or breaking them apart.

"A dead body was discovered in the landslide," police said without identifying the person.

The police statement said the discovery was made around 2.30pm on Friday as Norwegian crews supported by colleagues from Sweden continued search operations in the snow-covered terrain.

The police published the names of the ten people subject to the days-long search. Eight are adults, one is two years old and the last is 13 years old.

Norwegian media reported that a medical helicopter and ambulances were at the scene.

The authorities have banned all aircraft from the disaster area until 3.00pm on Monday as they conduct aerial searches.

"We still think we can find survivors in the landslide zone," a rescue worker told TV2.

"The fact that a discovery was made suggests to us that we are in an area where there may be people," the official said.

'We want to have hope'

Local mayor Anders Østensen told TV2 he was trying to keep his hopes up.

"I choose to listen to the police when they say that the current operation is a rescue operation," the mayor said.

"We want to have hope but we see very well what the site looks like."

Homes were buried under mud, others cut in two and some houses left teetering over a crater caused by the mudslide, with several falling over the edge.

The Norwegian Water Resources and Energy Directorate (NVE) said the disaster was a 'quick clay slide' of approximately 300m by 800m.

Quick clay is a sort of clay found in Norway and Sweden that can collapse and turn to fluid when overstressed. AFP

THE BLESSED SITE IN PALESTINE



A visitor looks at a replica of the Nabi Musa complex in the courtyard of the structure, where the tomb of Prophet Moses is believed to be located, in the Judean Desert near the West Bank town of Jericho, on Saturday (AFP)

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

India holds vaccine drills ahead of mass inoculation

New Delhi, India - India on Saturday staged nationwide drills to start one of the world's biggest coronavirus vaccination programmes as the drug regulator prepared to approve the first vaccine.

A government panel on Friday recommended emergency use of the AstraZeneca-Oxford University shot and the first injections could be given in the coming week after the Drugs Control Authority of India gives

The [nationwide] exercise would help build expertise so that the upcoming vaccination drive [to begin in the coming week] may proceed without any glitch.

HARSH VARDHAN

final approval.

India, which has the world's second highest number of pandemic cases - more than 10.2mn - has set an ambitious target of inoculating 300mn of its 1.3bn people by mid-2021.

Serum Institute of India, the world's biggest vaccine producer, has already stockpiled



An artists gives finishing touches to a mural depicting frontline workers carrying a COVID-19 vaccine, in Kolkata on Saturday (AFP)

tens of millions of doses of AstraZeneca's Covishield ready for the campaign and 96,000 health workers have been trained for the inoculation drive.

The drills saw 25 health workers receive dummy vaccines at each of the centres to be used across the country in a test run ahead of the launch.

Health minister Harsh Vardhan said the exercise would help build expertise 'so that the upcoming vaccination drive may proceed without any glitch'.

He has also called for a campaign to counter 'misleading rumours' that may scare people off getting the vaccine.

While India is only second to the United States for the number of cases, its rate of infection has come down significantly from a mid-September peak of 90,000 plus cases daily and its fatality rate is lower than other badly affected countries.

Britain and Argentina this week authorised the As-

traZeneca vaccine while the World Health Organization on Thursday granted emergency validation to the rival Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine.

Covishield is expected to get more use in India as it can be stored and transported under normal refrigeration.

AFP



People dance during a party near a disused hangar in Lieuron about 40km south of Rennes, on Friday (AFP)

Mass party in France breaks up amid fears

Rennes, France - Revellers on Saturday left an illegal New Year party in northwestern France that had drawn some 2,500 people, led to clashes with police and sparked concerns it could spread the coronavirus.

Police had failed to stop the underground event, set up on Thursday in two disused warehouses in Lieuron, south of the city of Rennes in Brittany.

The music had been switched off and sound systems dismantled after two nights, and the first revellers began leaving the site before dawn.

LOCAL PREFECTURE

Such mass gatherings are banned across France to prevent the spread of COVID-19, and a nationwide 8.00pm curfew - which was not lifted for New Year - applies across the country.

Techno music had blared out during the night from the warehouses, which had been transformed into illegal nightclubs for partygoers who had flocked to the site from across France and even abroad.

The local prefecture said on Saturday the music had been switched off and sound systems dismantled after two nights, and the first revellers began leaving the site before dawn.

AFP photographer said.

The officers were in particular on the lookout for narcotics, and were using torches to check the eyes of the ravers for signs of drug use.

Police reinforcements continued to arrive and close off the site in a calm atmosphere on Saturday morning, the photographer said.

About half of the car park at the site was empty early Saturday morning.

French authorities have been worried about mass rave parties throughout the pandemic, but New Year's Eve was a particular concern.

By 10.15am the site was under the control of police, who had booked more than 800 people for failing to respect the curfew restrictions or wear masks or for 'participating in an illegal assembly', it said in a statement.

Earlier on Saturday, the prefecture said only 'a few hundred' of the estimated 2,500 revellers remained, quoting an association that oversees the prevention and security risks of such events.

Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin tweeted that the large police presence at the site had led to the breakup of the rave 'without violence'.

'Fierce hostility'

Police on access roads were checking all those leaving the site, on foot or in vehicles, an

Police had on Thursday night tried to 'prevent the event but faced fierce hostility from many partygoers' who set one of their cars on fire and threw bottles and stones, the prefecture said on Friday.

First aid workers distributed hand gel and masks to the revellers to try and limit the spread of the virus.

The French government, facing the threat of a new wave of COVID-19 infections, announced on Friday it is bringing forward its nighttime curfew by two hours in 15 regions to help combat the virus.

The country recorded around 20,000 new cases and 133 deaths on Friday, bringing the total number of fatalities to almost 64,800.

AFP

Lebanon medics warn of calamity

Beirut, Lebanon - Lebanon's hospitals are being overwhelmed by coronavirus cases, medics warned on Saturday, as infection rates surge in the wake of end of year holidays.

The national COVID-19 task force was to meet later the same day and expected to advise a three-week lockdown, said Petra Khoury, its head.

Lebanon, with a population of around 6mn, has recorded 183,888 cases, including 1,466 deaths, since February.

On Thursday, it hit a daily record of more than 3,500 new cases.

In what he termed a 'catastrophic' situation, Sleiman Haroun, head of the Syndicate of Private Hospitals, said, "The 50 private hospitals in the country receiving patients with COVID-19 are now almost full." They have a total of 850 beds, including 300 in intensive care units, Haroun said.

"Patients are now waiting in line... waiting for a bed to be free," he said.

After imposing tight restrictions in November to combat the spread of the pandemic, the government relaxed rules. Ahead of the December holidays, the government pushed back a nighttime curfew to 3.00am and allowed nightclubs and bars to reopen.

AFP

Tokyo calls for state of emergency over coronavirus third wave

Tokyo, Japan - Tokyo's governor on Saturday asked Japan's central government to declare a new state of emergency as the country battles a third wave of the coronavirus, with record numbers of new cases.

Yuriko Koike, joined by the governors of three neighbouring regions, called for the measure to be imposed in their areas during a meeting with Yasutoshi Nishimura, the minister in charge of the coronavirus response.

Japanese officials have in recent weeks asked restaurants and businesses to close early and urged people to stay at home, measures that Koike said were having 'some effect'.

"But considering the number of cases and the situation of the medical system in Tokyo and the three neighbouring prefectures, we decided it was necessary to immediately and



Japan's Economy Minister Yasutoshi Nishimura (left) and Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike speak with media, in Tokyo on Saturday (AFP)

thoroughly curb the movement of people," she told reporters.

Nishimura, who earlier this week said a state of emergency could be necessary if cases continued to rise, said the government viewed the situation as 'serious' and would

discuss the request.

He said he had asked governors to request businesses further shorten their hours and that residents avoid non-essential outings after 8.00pm.

On Thursday, Tokyo reported more than 1,300 new

cases, far exceeding the previous high of 949 cases set late last month, with nationwide infections also breaking records.

Japan imposed a first state of emergency in spring.

The measure allows local governors to call on businesses to close and to request people stay at home.

It carries no penalties for non-compliance, but the requests were widely observed this spring.

There was no immediate word on whether the governors would seek school closures.

Japan was one of the first countries in the world to shutter schools, with then prime minister Shinzo Abe calling for closures in February.

Japan has had a milder pandemic than many other countries, with about 3,500 deaths since its first case in January.

AFP

Opera to return to Sydney after nine months of hiatus

Sydney, Australia - The finishing touches were being put on a glitzy show at the Sydney Opera House on Saturday, as the venue prepared to host an opera crowd for the first time since March.

The Merry Widow will open on Tuesday to masked audiences up to 75 per cent capacity, in a sign of hope for a performing arts industry crippled by the pandemic, artistic director Lyndon Terracini said.

"Walking back into the theatre was a very emotional time for everyone involved," he said.

"I think throughout this year, other opera houses will be opening very soon and people will be coming back to the theatre with a sense of hope."

Thanks to Australia's success in suppressing the virus, crowds inside venues - including the Sydney Opera House - have been permitted in the country's most populous city for months.

But even as the performers readied for their opening night, an outbreak in the city forced officials to tighten restrictions - including a new mandate on mask-wearing on public transport and in many indoor settings from midnight on Saturday.

The outbreak of over 180 cases first emerged in December in Sydney's northeast but has since sparked other clusters, including in Melbourne.



A sign in front of the Opera House reading the closure the complex for the New year celebrations around Circular Quay in central Sydney on Thursday (AFP)

Areas of Sydney remain under lockdown and officials have suggested further restrictions may be needed to curb the spread - which could include a change to audiences at indoor performances.

Julie Lea Goodwin, who leads the show along with Alexander Lewis, said she was thrilled to be back performing but after a nine-month hiatus the uncertainty of the pandemic still loomed. "I have no idea what's ahead," Goodwin said.

"I think that Australia is doing an unbelievable job... but it's just going to be a process for the next year, I'd say, or longer."

AFP



SOCIAL INNOVATION

A group of youngsters has come together to forge a new pathway that will help in bettering the plight of upcoming generations in Oman by what they call social innovation

Hubert Vaz

A unique initiative between TEDxMuscat and Innovation Factory, to enhance various aspects of society through innovation and progressive strides, is currently in the making. A group of youngsters has come together to forge a new pathway that will help in bettering the plight of upcoming generations in Oman by what they call 'social innovation'. Abeer al Mukhaini, the founder host of TEDxMuscatWomen, and Shaima al Gheilani - co-founder of Innovation Factory, who have been spearheading this new initiative named Carbon, throw light on its aim and scope.

What exactly is social innovation?

Before we go in the term social innovation, I would like to highlight the concept behind the initiative and why social innovation. In the Carbon exploration programme, we, as a team, are driven by investing in individuals, impacting a developing community and creating a resultant prosperous economy.

We aim at creating common social values and value-driven business ideas that result in a coherent social innovation ecosystem. Our initiative and parallel activities are designed to tackle different segments in society to pilot customised programmes that trigger a social innovator mindset across Oman.

As for what is 'social innovation', it is the process of developing and deploying effective solutions to challenging, often systemic, social, and environmental issues in support of social progress. The concept of social innovation sheds light on ideas and solutions that create social values, as well as the processes through which they are generated, regardless of where they come from.

Social innovators or 'superheroes', as we call them in our programme, question the premise on which existing social structures are built and then re-imagine systems and institutional relationships to bring about change.

What ideas have come forth so far?

The first cycle of the carbon exploration programme, that started in mid-November, targeted four sectors - Housing, Food, Agriculture and Clothing. We managed to shortlist ten social innovative ideas through these sectors presented by different nationals.

Have any ideas been implemented yet?

The Carbon exploration programme has been divided into two phases. The first phase mission is to create and find social innovation opportunities by introducing essential topics that will assist social innovators in creating a tangible and quantifiable impact to improve the community. This can be done by supporting the development and transfer of practical solutions, that is by introducing certain crash courses to validate and analyse their ideas, in addition to coaching and mentoring participants. In the second phase, the Carbon team will work hand-in-hand with the final two short-listed ideas to implement them, develop a prototype, and, hopefully, connect them to potential investors.

What hurdles and challenges do you expect?

Carbon is introducing a different method of analysing potentials in social business which requires rearranging priorities by looking at the impact that will be created and not the profit that will be gained. It puts the community at the core of the business and not the global market as a priority. The biggest challenge is to create a new mindset in looking into new norms in making impactful businesses, and coming forth with ideas that actually tackle a cause in the community.

Although we have participants from different regions, we as a team have managed to accommodate our programme to fit the physical and virtual needs by making our programme courses available and recorded online for all participants. Thankfully, we are almost

midway through and have managed to deliver the programme courses efficiently.

How would these initiatives help in changing/improving social life and outlooks?

Carbon opens a more collaborative and inclusive way to find solutions that meet people's real needs, a creative process with the aim to deliver new solutions to a challenge. These solutions (products, services, models, markets, processes, etc.) will simultaneously meet a social need (more effectively than existing solutions) and lead to new or improved capabilities and relationships and better use of assets and resources.

Carbon, is a short exploration programme that will introduce the principle, the idea validation, and social business model, assisting social entrepreneurs in sustaining their businesses by emphasising the purpose and social values, and facilitating in creating a social innovation based social business structure and network.

We believe, in Carbon, that the importance of individual responsibility towards the community and any action resulted can affect the community as whole.

Who is the core team and what are their roles?

Carbon is a collaborative initiative empowered by TedxMuscat and Innovation factory that is funded by the Netherlands embassy of Oman. We have got support from Framzeen - our creative consultant partner - and Mubashir as our lead digital media partner.

Carbon is driven by a dynamic team that works day and night. It includes Abeer al Mukhaini - the Host of TedxMuscatWomen, Firas al Musafir, CEO and founder of Innovation Factory, Shaima al Gheilani - co-founder of Innovation Factory, Marwa al Harthi - Carbon marketing specialist, and Fatma al Mukhaini - Carbon project coordinator, and last but not the least, our participants through which our programme is all about.



"Carbon is a programme designed from the community to the community, to highlight hidden opportunities for overall good. Caring about society is not at the expense of profit - it supports profit."

ABEER ALI



People think that design thinking is nothing more than a series of steps to follow. Yet it's more than that, it's a scientific philosophy and a method of thinking that will only be successful if adopted by conviction and practice.

FIRAS AL MUSAFIR

Participant ideas

Dima Said

Clothing: Commercial leather made up of completely natural materials.

Nusaiba al Kharusi

Agriculture: Recycling waste of palm trees to manufacture home accessories.

Lito Apelo

Agriculture: Integrated Multi-trophic Aquaculture System (IMTA).

Al Baraa al Badawi

Agriculture: Biofuels production units that convert wastewater and natural materials.

Abdulrahman al Jahdhami

Agriculture: Small scale solar water desalination system .

Judhaima al Jahdhami

Agriculture: The Good Tree - Permaculture Education and Research Academy.

Nahla Nasser

Agriculture: Recycling of plant materials and animal litter to produce organic fertilisers.

Mohammed al Riyami

Agriculture: Using drones for agriculture

Khalsa al Ma'amari

Housing: Smart Gas Cylinder (SGC) - designing circuits of gas cylinders for domestic/commercial use.

Hamid Ahmed

Housing: Eco-cabins for accommodation or commercial use



(Left to right) Al Baraa, Dima, Judhaima and Khalsa at an interactive session



Photos by Syed Fasiuddin

ART IS NOT AN ANSWER...

Hubert Vaz

There is a pin-drop silence as you enter her beautiful villa at Al Mawaleh, but within minutes, you notice numerous artworks screaming for attention from different sections of her parlour. Art seems to be in the DNA of this dwelling.

Farah Asqul, an Omani mixed media artist who says she was more inclined towards creative writing, however, believes that it is easier to tell a story through art. She actually went to university to study writing but subsequently changed her focus to fine art and it has now become a large part of her life.

Farah says her work is reminiscent of expressionism but ranges between painting and installation, and explores cultural narrative and symbolism in Arabia. From the Mashrabiya patterns in architecture to the electric towers that are in abundance in Omani mountains, she re-creates

daily recognisable elements that infuse her surroundings and her travels with an artist's imagination.

A graduate of Fine Art, specialising in painting, from Cardiff Metropolitan University, UK, Farah admits that she loves to experiment with different styles of art, rather than be stuck with one. And, over the years, she has exhibited her work and curated several exhibitions in the UK as well as in Oman.

She has previously worked on hosting seven successful exhibitions at Bait Muzna Gallery and curated and managed twenty five exhibitions between Gallery Sarah, Bait al Zubair Museum, and Shangri-La Barr Al Jis-sah Art Gallery between 2013 and 2016. In 2016, Farah had managed and curated Gallery Sarah's booth at Art Dubai fair and curated and managed the exhibition Loud Art Oman at Bait Al Zubair museum.

"I would say, I am an expressionist painter and I work from my own emo-

I like to take things and make them look the way I want to be- cause, I believe, art is not an answer, it is a question that should make the viewer want to come and see and wonder why an artwork is done in the way it is

FARAH ASQUL

tions and portray things through my own artistic view. I like to take things and make them look the way I want to because, I believe, art is not an answer, it is a question that should make the viewer want to come and see and

wonder why an artwork is done in the way it is," she said, adding, "It is very important for your work to spark up a language and conversation among people."

Considering art as everything in life, Farah says art can be found in every aspect of life these days, whether photography, graphic designing, furniture, interiors and is not restricted to just making a pretty painting for your living room. She also considers art as a therapy as it is way for one to express one's emotions and so it becomes part of ones personality, she asserts.

About the influence of her art on her family, Farah admits that her husband has himself become well-versed in understanding art, he has been to many esteemed museums all over the world, and they can communicate with each other very well about art. "He has learnt a lot about art and I have learnt lot about football through our conversations," she quips.



Portrait of her husband
This is an expressionist painting bringing out one of the moods of her husband. "It might look like a 'dark' painting but it comes from a happy expression of my husband," she says.



Children's hospital in Berlin
This painting was created from a photograph of a hospital for abandoned children in Berlin, which was decouped using a special technique to transfer the image onto canvas.



A treasured gift
When she worked as a curator, Farah had taken this artwork of Radhika Khimji to Art Dubai, which was later gifted to her. "She has been a great inspiration to me and this artwork has her signature style on it," she said.



Dystopia
This is a multimedia artwork, very dear to Farah. It has been created with a painting, a photograph, charcoal and water-colours all in one. The foreground also has a drawing of a construction site in Oman.



Octopus
This painting was created when Farah returned to Oman after graduation and was experiencing loneliness. She made it in four parts with images from National Geographic, using acrylic paint, charcoal, ink, and chalk pastels.

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