

OMAN  DAILY

Observer



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VERSTAPPEN
ENDS SEASON
WITH A CLINICAL
TRIUMPH

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FRANCE FINES
GOOGLE, AMAZON
135 MILLION
EUROS



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ALL SHADES OF
BLUE: POETRY BOOK
SURROUNDING
MENTAL HEALTH



Editor-in-chief: Abdullah bin Salim al Shueili

OMAN OBSERVER

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OMAN

12.9 PER CENT RISE IN
NUMBER OF SMES

MUSCAT: The total number of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) registered with the Public Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises Development (Riyada) at the end of October 2020 stood at 47,220 which is an increase by 12.9 per cent compared to the same period of 2019, according to the data released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI). Among the governorates, Muscat topped the list with 33.48 per cent SMEs registered till the end of October, followed by North Al Batinah with 15.79 per cent, Al Dakhiliyah with 12.63 per cent, Dhofar with 8.35 per cent, and the rest of governorates with 29.75 per cent.

DETAILS ON P2

41,425 EXPAT WORKERS
APPLY FOR EXIT PLAN

MUSCAT: As many as 41,425 expat workers have applied for leaving the Sultanate since the beginning of a grace period on November 15, according to data published by the Ministry of Labour. Of those who applied to exit the country there were 18,800 active workers, 19,400 workers who abandoned their jobs, 2,100 who have no work permits, and 945 cancelled workers. The statistics showed that more than 39,400 of those who applied for exit came on work visa, 929 on visit visa, 308 on relative joining visa, 222 on family visa, 4 on student visa and 393 undocumented workers.



INSIDE



INDIA FARMERS INTENSIFY PROTESTS OVER NEW LAWS

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FROM AFRICA TO EUROPE... VIA THE CANARY ISLANDS

P9

New rules to organise
electronic journalism

MUSCAT: Dr Abdullah bin Nassir al Harrasi, Minister of Information, has issued two ministerial decisions regulating electronic journalism and electronic radio and television establishments in the Sultanate.

The first decision, which amends some provisions of the Executive Regulation of the Law on Publications and

Publishing, seeks to organise electronic journalism in the Sultanate. The amendments are introduced to Articles 10bis, 16bis, 2, 35bis, 39bis and 45bis, like practising the profession of importing, selling and publishing electronic publications, as well as applying for an electronic media agency and working as an electronic media reporter.

Article (2) grants a three-month grace period for the adjustment of status for press establishments, publications, those operating in the profession of import, sale and publishing of electronic publishing, electronic news agencies, electronic journalism and reporters of electronic news agencies as of the date of enforcement of this decision.

TURN TO P2

US set for COVID-19
vaccinations

WASHINGTON: The Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine was to begin leaving the company's Michigan factory on Sunday, ready to be injected into the arms of millions of the most vulnerable Americans as the global death toll topped 1.6 million.

Doses will be shipped out in boxes containing dry ice that are capable of staying at -70 degrees Celsius, the frigid temperature needed to preserve the drug.

General Gus Perna, who is overseeing the massive



logistical operation as part of the government's Operation Warp Speed, likened the moment to D-Day, a turning point of World War II.

SEE ALSO P8

No free treatment for 11 diseases
for expatriates in public sector

VINOD NAIR
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The government on Sunday announced some changes to the free treatment policy provided to expatriate employees in the government sector.

Dr Mahad bin Said Baowain, Minister of Labour, issued a decision No 327/2020 amending some provisions of the executive regulations of the Civil Service Law.

Article 1 of the decision, which was published in the official gazette, said the amendments include expatriates working in the

government sector on permanent or temporary contracts. These include an expanded list of diseases and operations excluded from free treatment for non-Omanis from 11 diseases and operations to 19.

Article 1 replaces the list of diseases and surgeries excluded from free treatment attached to each of the appendices (10) of the employment contract for non-Omanis in permanent jobs and Appendix 11 for contracts related to temporary employment.

The list includes organ transplantation, open-heart

surgery, cancer tumours, hepatitis of all kinds, infertility, hereditary and cancerous blood diseases, reconstructive surgery, hemodialysis, artificial replacement (orthopaedic and non-bone), addiction, diagnostic and therapeutic cardiac catheters of all kinds, and heart surgeries, pulmonary fibrosis, multiple sclerosis, acne, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), schizophrenia, Alzheimer's, metabolic disorders, all dental services, and treatments.

TURN TO P2

A BREATH OF FRESH AIR

People relax at Yiti beach on Sunday. Cinemas, parks, beaches and tourist areas such as forts and museums have all been allowed to resume operations as part of the latest package of the reopening of economic activities following a fall in COVID-19 cases.

PHOTO BY KHALFAN AL RUZAIKI

Al Saleel Park has 7 per cent of global Arabian Gazelle

ZAINAB AL NASSRI
[@zainabalnasseri](#)

Al Saleel Natural Park, which is one of the largest wildlife reserves in the Middle East, is a natural habitat for the Arabian Gazelle. According to the latest studies, 7 per cent of the global herd of Arabian Gazelle exists in this reserve.

The reserve covers areas of the wilayats of Al Kamil W'al Wafi in the Governorate of South Al Sharqiyah, 57 km away from Sur,

the Environment Authority said.

The park got its current status through the Royal Decree No 50/97 and is spread over an area of 220 square km. It borders in the north by a mountain chain which extends up to the Sea of Oman (eastern Hajar mountains).

The main objective of establishing the reserve is to protect the plant cover and wildlife. However, other uses of the reserve are compatible with protecting the



natural components like providing the opportunity for visitors to get to know the reserve closely without negatively affecting the site. Activities based on natural tourism that increases the economic benefits to the local community, directly or indirectly, along with reducing consumption of natural resources are also encouraged.

The Sultanate has been keen to preserve natural habitats and their ecosystems. It works to

protect wildlife and biodiversity through the declaration of nature reserves, establishment of special protection areas, implementation of environmental regulations and prevention of damage and pollution.

Accordingly, the 18th nature reserves have been declared, the most recent being Jabal Qahwan Nature Reserve and Bar al Hikman Wetland Reserve in Al Wusta Governorate.

TURN TO P2

OIA holds third Rawabet Programme workshop

MUSCAT: Oman Investment Authority (OIA) on Sunday held the third Rawabet Programme workshop in the presence of chairmen of board of directors of state-owned companies, executive chairmen, businessmen and representatives of Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI). The workshop seeks to come up with a standardised framework for corporate governance of state-owned companies as well as attain the principle of empowerment and integration with the private sector.

The workshop discussed integration between the state-owned firms and private sector companies and the means for achieving the desired goals of integration and identifying the targeted sectors as the OIA seeks to enable the private sector to set up strategic partnerships with firms and investments overseen by OIA.

OIA also seeks to study opportunities for the allocation of percentages in some of the state-owned companies with a view of reinforcing the private sector's role in the economy and boosting in-country value.

By establishing a real



partnership between the state-owned companies and the private sector, OIA targets to create investment opportunities, generate lucrative revenues from liquidation, attain the economic diversification principle by investing in emerging and promising sectors, promote local products and enrich the capital markets.

The Rawabet Programme working team reviewed the governance frameworks and policies and the guiding principles that were accomplished as part of the programme which include the scopes of the business charter of the boards of directors, the decisions entrusted to the shareholders, dividend, risk management, information security, legal affairs, internal auditing, media and communication and tenders and purchases, which take effect by the end of this year.

— ONA

SMEs see an increase of 13 per cent

MUSCAT: The total number of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) registered with the Public Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises Development (Riyada) at the end of October 2020 stood at 47,220 which is an increase by 12.9 per cent compared to the same period of 2019, according to the data released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

Among the governorates, Muscat topped the list with 33.48 per cent SMEs registered till the end of October 2020, followed by North Al Batinah with 15.79 per cent, Al Dakhiliyah with 12.63 per cent, Dhofar with 8.35 per cent, and the rest of governorates with 29.75 per cent.

The Governorate of Muscat had 15,810 SMEs registered at the end of October 2020, followed by North Al Batinah with 7,456, Al Dakhiliyah with 5,965, Dhofar with 3,941, South Al Batinah with 3,524, and North Al Sharqiyah with 3,180 SMEs registered.

This was followed by South Al Sharqiyah with 2,776, Al Dhahirah with 2,760 SMEs and Al Buraimi with 1,015 SMEs registered.

Al Wusta had 611 SMEs registered and Musandam had 182 SMEs registered, which was the lowest among governorates registered at the end of October 2020. The total number of SMEs registered in September 2020 stood at 46,577 while the number of SMEs in August 2020 was 45,706. — ONA

Digital innovation platform, national innovation award discussed

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research and Innovation (MHESRI) organised a meeting on Sunday to discuss proposals to establish a national digital innovation platform, as well as establishing and naming a national award for innovation.

The meeting was chaired by Dr Rahma bint Ibrahim al Mahrouqiyah, Minister of Higher Education, Scientific Research and Innovation, in the presence of Dr Khamis bin Saif al Jabri, Head of the Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Unit, a number of officials and specialists in the innovation sector in the Sultanate.

The meeting discussed the challenges facing innovators and solutions proposed by the participating parties to overcome them

Dr Omar bin Said al Abri, Director of Programmes Department at the Office of the MHESRI Under-Secretary for Research and Innovation, gave a presentation on the proposal to establish a national digital innovation platform and its desired goals.

The meeting discussed the challenges facing innovators and solutions proposed by the participating parties to overcome them, whether in terms of financial, technical and marketing support, as well as intellectual property rights. The meeting also discussed experiences and models of the existing local digital platforms in order to reach an integrated national platform that would help the Omani innovators transfer their ideas into creative projects that add to the national economy and raise the Sultanate's position in international innovation indicators. — ONA

رؤية عمان 2040

بنك التنمية العماني
Oman Development Bank

TENDER NOTICE

Oman Development Bank (ODB) is the leading player in financing projects that add value to national development. The Bank provides facilities for micro, SMEs and corporate.

Oman Development Bank seeks tenders for the following services :

Tender No.	Description of service	Tender Fee (RO)	Last Date for Purchasing Tender	Last Date of Submission of Tender
1/2020	Cleaning service for head office & branches	100 RO Non-Refundable	17/12/2020	24/12/2020
2/2020	Postal services for head office & branches	50 RO Non-Refundable	17/12/2020	24/12/2020
3/2020	Air refreshment & perfume for head office	25 RO Non-Refundable	17/12/2020	24/12/2020
6/2020	Pure Drinking water for head office	25 RO Non-Refundable	17/12/2020	24/12/2020
7/2020	Security ,CCTV,Fire Alarm ,Time Attendance Systems & Fire Extinguisher	50 RO Non-Refundable	17/12/2020	24/12/2020

Interested vendors may obtain tender documents from the Head Office of the bank (Administrative services) located in MBD Area near the Ministry of Commerce & Industry on any working day (Sunday to Thursday) between 8 AM and 2 PM on payment of non-refundable tender fee.

The Tender enclosed in a sealed envelope addressed to Administrative services, should be submitted to the Administrative services at Ground Floor by 2.00 PM on or before 24/12/2020.

Oman Development Bank SAOC reserves the right to accept or reject any or all of the offers, extend the tender closing date, modify tender document(s) or cancel the tender without assigning any reason. Tender Committee's decision shall be final and binding.

OMAN DEVELOPMENT BANK SAOC

3077, PC 122, Ruwi, Sultanate of Oman 24726891 - 24726876 S.sauti@odb.om www.odb.om

FROM PAGE 1

New rules to organise electronic journalism

The second decision amends some provision of the Executive Regulation of the Law on Private Radio and Television Establishments. The decision replaces the text of Article 11 with the following: "Without prejudice to the Commercial Companies Law promulgated under Royal Decree No 18/2019, the provisions of this clause apply to applicants of a (new) establishment or existing radio, television or other establishment to adjust their status with this decision within three months from its date of enforcement."

As per the new amendments of the law journalists working for digital publications will be able to obtain a permit for practicing the media profession.

Applications for e-publication licenses and applications for establishing a digital news agency or electronic media outlet, will be overseen by the Ministry of Information in tandem with the mainstream media.

As per the new amendments, all the conditions and rules that apply to the mainstream media and regulate the publications of print newspapers, will also be applicable to e-publications.

— ONA

No free treatment for expats in govt sector

The list of medicines excluded from free treatment include biological medicines for the treatment of rheumatism and psoriasis, biological medicines for the treatment of asthma, biological medicines for the treatment of retinopathy, diabetes drugs from insulin-like groups, medicines before dialysis in cases of kidney failure and the Botulinum for the treatment of motor nerve spasm and sweating.

Al Saleel Park has 7% of global Arabian Gazelle

The reserves in the Sultanate are diversified. There are desert reserves like the Wildlife Reserve and Al Saleel Natural Park. Marine reserves like Daymaniyat Islands Nature Reserve, mountainous reserve of Jabal Samhan Nature Reserve, while some reserves are marine and mountainous like the Turtles Reserve.

Furthermore, studies are being conducted currently for more than 50 natural sites, three of them are about to be declared nature reserves, while wetlands have been paid special attention.

Consequently, nine sites on Dhofar's coast were declared nature reserves; some of them contain archaeological sites such as Khor Rori and Khor Al Baleed.

In addition, the Sultanate has also been keen on making nature reserves tourism attractions on the one hand, and there is a trend to encourage scientists and researchers on the other, as these reserves are essential support for national and international heritage.

Omanisation of leadership positions to gain pace

SAMUEL KUTTY

@samkuttv

Along with hiring ban on expatriates in different occupations in the private sector, Omanisation of leadership positions is also on course. Although the slowdown in economic activities led to accelerated decline of 3.1 per cent in aggregate employment in the private sector in 2019, employment to Omanis still expanded by 4 per cent during the year.

Pointing out that the private sector employment largely followed the evolving macroeconomic developments, the Annual Report 2019 by the Central Bank of Oman, said the focus largely been on In-Country Value strategies and efforts that could provide higher employment opportunities to Omanis and also develop local vendors and contractors.

"While the hiring ban for expatriates was stepped up for occupations across numerous fields and include both junior and sen-

We are working on a legislation that will ensure expatriates do not stay in leadership positions for long

SHAIKH NASR AL HOSNI

Under-Secretary of Labour

ior positions, the government is aiming at Omanisation of more leadership positions in the private sector", the said.

Data from the National Centre for Statistics and Information show that there have been 255,546 Omanis working in the private sector at the end of October this year. This is a 2.4 per cent fall against 262,333 nationals working in the sector during the corresponding period last year. The NCSI data also show that there has been a substantial rise in the number of nationals



receiving higher salaries compared to the previous years.

While the nationals drawing a monthly salary of RO 2,000 and above increased by 7 per cent during the period, those in the bracket between RO 500 and RO 600 registered a rise of 6.7 per cent.

Similarly, those earning above RO 800 and below RO 2,000 increased between 4 and five per cent, while those in the minimum wage scale fell by 9.9 per cent during the period.

Recruitment ban on expatriates in select professions was introduced a few years ago to regulate the Omani labour market and encourage more job opportunities for citizens. The share of Omanis in total employment in the private sector inched up to 13.7 per cent in 2019 from 12.7 per cent a year ago.

According to the report, "the private sector has been targeting training and upskilling of the Omani youth for potential direct employment as well as the development of SMEs".

In a recent decision, the government retained several high-ranking job positions for nationals including assistant general managers, administration managers, director or manager of Human Resources, manager for employee affairs, training managers, follow-up managers, public relations managers and assistant director or managers.

The Ministry of Labour is further working on legislation that will set term for expats in leadership roles and to give top positions to Omani citizens working in the private sector.

In a recent statement, Shaikh Nasr al Hosni, Under-Secretary of Labour said, "We are working on a legislation that will ensure expatriates do not stay in leadership positions for long." Majlis Ashshura had called upon the minister of manpower to replace all the expatriates occupying top positions in the private sector, including the post of chief executive officers, with nationals.

Upgrade selects 3 winning projects

MUSCAT: Upgrade programme, a programme that transforms the best graduation projects in the 4th Industrial Revolution (4IR) technologies into successful ICT startups, announced via video-conferencing the three winning projects for its fourth edition.

Out of the 75 applications from 19 academic institutions, the winning projects included 'Tracking Endangered Animals in the Wild using Unmanned Aerial Vehicles', 'Water Loss Preservation (Smart Water Loss Control Device)' and 'Navigation-eye'.

'Tracking Endangered Animals in the Wild using Unmanned Aerial Vehicles' was prepared by Younis al Jadeedi, Mohammed al Sarhani and Muhannad al Rumaidhi from Sultan Qaboos University (SQU).



Dr Saif al Haddabi

The primary objective of the project is to develop a system to recognise the endangered animals in the reserves. The system utilises Unmanned Aerial Vehicles and Artificial Intelligence.

'Water Loss Preservation (Smart Water Loss Control Device)' by Ahmed al Azri, Mohammed al Senani and Shabib al Busaidy from Middle East College involves manufacturing a technical

and smart device to save water from pipelines.

'Navigation-eye' by Taif al Badi, Moza al Jabri and Athari al Ajmi from Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) helps a driver to focus on both the GPS systems and the roads while driving.

The Navigation Eye device is able to merge the Augmented-Reality technology with Heads-Up-Display technology so that all the instructions that are provided by the normal GPS application will be displayed in front of the driver's line of sight so that the driving experience becomes safer and more focused.

During the event, Dr Saif al Haddabi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, said, "We are happy to see that the fourth edition of Up-

grade has also attracted a large number of these young people who were able to compete with their graduation projects and be incubated in this programme, with the hopes of providing the winning teams with job opportunities and achieving the objectives of Oman Vision 2040".

Talal Said al Maamari, CEO of Omantel, added, "The programme seeks to benefit from the graduation projects and research presented by students of majors related to information and communication technology, which seek to find innovative solutions to the challenges and problems we face in our daily lives and to transform these research into innovative projects by providing the winning projects with the necessary funding, guidance and other empowerment tools. — ONA

Municipality to auction abandoned vehicles

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Hundreds of abandoned vehicles will be put on auction allowing the general public to inspect, identify and choose the vehicle of their choice at the 'Baladiya Yard' in Amerat, according to Muscat Municipality.

These cars were either confiscated or towed away by the civic authority for various offences but the owners failed to claim the same despite many reminders.

"The vehicles on auction are either confiscated or towed away by the authorities but none claimed their ownership," a senior official at the said.

Accordingly, any citizen or resident can visit the yard in Amerat on December 15 or 16 from 9 am to 2 pm and select the pre-owned vehicle of their choice



and make an offer.

The official further said all the cars will be sold in the condition they are kept in the yard and no claim for damages will be entertained later.

Terms and conditions of the auction suggest that individuals and company representatives are allowed to enter the facility and participate in the auction after providing their ID proof or commercial registration at the entry point.

A fee of RO 4 (non-refundable)

will be charged for entering the auction area. An insurance of RO 500 (refundable) need to be paid for entering and participating in the auction.

After successful bidding for the vehicle, one can pay the total price in addition to a 3 per cent promotional charges for the vehicle.

The ownership title should be transferred in 10 days after winning the auction. There will be RO 50 per day fine for delay in the ownership transfer/registration.

OBITUARY

We, the Management and Staff of Shanfari Group of Companies, wish to inform the sudden demise of



Mr. N K Muraleedharan,
Operation Manager of SFO Muscat
on 12th December, 2020.

We wish to extend our heartfelt condolences to the bereaved family members and pray to the Almighty to give them strength and courage to overcome this loss.

OMAN OBSERVER

Now get news on the go



To receive news updates from OMAN OBSERVER,

WhatsApp
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96473232



Springs, mountains and seashore

Taqah



Wilayat of Taqah is the second-largest city in Dhofar Governorate and is located on southwestern part of the Sultanate.

The place offers varied tourist attractions, either on its outspread plains, grasslands or wide wadis.

Wadi Dabat in the wilayat embraces one of the spectacular scenes in the governorate. The wadi is distinguished by its unspoilt nature and thick botanical cover, besides natural springs and number of caves, especially Teeq Cave. Wadi Dabat is another scenic spot in Salalah, especially for the mountain and spring lovers.

Taqah has witnessed many development projects in education, health, electricity, water, telecommunications and

roads. Its fisheries harbour offers much economic significance.

The wilayat includes many attractions that connect between the past legacy and the present prosperity. Among the historic landmarks that exist in the wilayat is the Taqah Castle.

Located about 33 kilometres east of Salalah, the castle is regarded as the most popular castle to visit in the governorate. The castle became the property of the government during the time of Sultan Said bin Taimour, the father of late His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said. During the 1960s the castle was expanded by adding the outer wall and its four towers. The castle was renovated and reopened as a museum in 1994.



Minister receives health economics expert



MUSCAT: As part of the agreement signed by the Ministry of Health (MoH) and the British Embassy in Muscat, Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Saeedi, Minister of Health, on Sunday received Dr Aaron Blackman, Health Econom-

ics Expert. The meeting touched on a range of related topics including the health economy for the sustainability of healthcare financing through the optimal utilisation of the available resources.

In addition, the meeting high-

lighted the building capacity, develop competencies, and assistance in conducting studies in health economics and health funding, which will contribute to enhancing the efficiency of the health system.

The meeting was attended

by Hamish Cowell, British Ambassador to the Sultanate, Dr John Jabbour, Representative of the World Health Organization (WHO) to the Sultanate, along with a number of the MoH senior officials. — ONA

IATA developing health pass to boost air travel

VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

The International Air Transport Association (IATA) is developing a digital health pass that will support the safe reopening of borders to travellers without quarantine measures.

IATA Travel Pass will manage and verify the secure flow of necessary testing or vaccine information among governments, airlines, laboratories, and travellers.

The travel pass is key to ensure confidence in air travel as the Middle East airlines saw an 86.7 per cent traffic drop for October, improved from an 89.3 per cent demand drop in September.

UN has called on Countries to act urgently to sustain their air transport sectors in the face of these challenges.

"Today borders are double locked. Testing is the first key to enable international travel without quarantine measures. The second key is the global information infrastructure needed to securely manage, share, and verify test data matched with traveller identities in compliance with border control requirements. That's the job

of the IATA Travel Pass. We are bringing this to market in the coming months to also meet the needs of the various travel bubbles and public health corridors that are starting operation," said Alexandre de Juniac, IATA's Director General and CEO.

IATA Travel Pass enables passengers to find accurate information on travel, testing and eventually, vaccine requirements for their journey enables passengers to find testing centres and labs at their departure location which meet the standards for testing and vaccination requirements of their destination, enables authorised labs and test centres to securely share test and vaccination certificates with passengers.

The contact travel app will enable passengers to create a 'digital passport', receive test and vaccination certificates and verify that they are sufficient for their itinerary, and share testing or vaccination certificates with airlines and authorities to facilitate travel. This app can also be used by travellers to manage travel documentation digitally and seamlessly throughout their journey, improving the travel experience.

Oman Air gets five star rating from APEX

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 13

Oman Air, the national carrier of the Sultanate, has earned a Five Star rating in the Major Airline category from the Airline Passenger Experience Association (APEX). The prestigious award from APEX, a globally recognised organisation, was given to less than 10 per cent of the world's airlines.

This recognition makes it clear that everyone who works for Oman Air is focused on delivering world-class service, said Oman Air CEO Abdulaziz al Raeesi.

"From our cabin crew to our pilots and everyone on the ground, there is a commitment to set



industry-leading standards," he said. "We're proud to accept this award on behalf of everyone who works for Oman Air; our people created this success".

To determine the award winners, flights were rated by passengers across nearly 600 airlines from around the world.

Airlines are ranked in Global, Major and Regional categories, based on their size. The ratings were independently certified by a professional external auditing company.

Reaching the ratings pinnacle is a major milestone, said Dr Joe Leader, CEO, APEX.

"Oman Air's product advancements have clearly resonated with their customers to make them an APEX Official Airline Ratings 2021 Five-Star Major Airline," he said. "Thousands of APEX independently verified passenger votes via TripIt have advanced Oman Air in the top single-digit percentage of over 600 airlines rated worldwide.

"We extend our warmest congratulations to the entire Oman Air team for advancing their Economy, Business Class and First Class products to the APEX Five-Star level as independently rated by the most important critic of all: their customers across thousands of flights".

To whomsoever It May Concern



The Consumer Products division of **W.J.TOWELL & CO LLC** bearing C.R. No. 1003739 brings to your attention that **Mr. Basheer Ahmed Tipabab Syed Madar** who holds Civil Card no 95147775 is not representing the company w.e.f. 10th December 2020. The company shall bear no responsibility arising from others dealing with the aforesaid in its name. Those who have claims against the aforesaid person shall intimate the company on 79361718 within 20 days of this advertisement after which the company shall not entertain any claim arising.

WEAR A MASK
STAY SAFE

Dar Al Mubadara to release 'Qabas and Giving' book

MUSCAT: Dar Al Mubadara for Press, Publishing, Advertisement and Distribution will hold a virtual celebration to release a book entitled ('Qabas and Giving') under the patronage of HH Sayyid Fatik bin Fahr al Said. The book documents the march of fifty Omani personalities who lived through the modern Renaissance and accomplished successes and achievements at the personal or institutional level.

— ONA

Muscat Municipality Advertisement No. 58/2020

Companies specialized in the field and registered with **Tender Board**, may obtain tender documents for the website through the following link:
(<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>)
against non-refundable fees as mentioned below starting from the date of this announcement and until the end of deadline stipulated below.

Tender No.	E- Tender No.	Description of Tender	Tender Fee	Last date to collect the tender	Tender return date	Grade
PRE/19/047	2020/MM/QS-53	Construction of Drainage Structures and Remedial Measures as Sultan Qaboos Street, Al Khuwair Phase 1A2 (E- Tender)	Rial 290	27/12/2020	03/01/2021	Excellent
PRE/20/023	2020/MM/QS-54	Design & Construction of Boshier & Muttrah Internal Roads (E- Tender)	Rial 270	31/01/2021	11/02/2021	First

Tender Conditions :-

- Bidders shall submit their offers electronically accompanied with an electronic copy of bond issued by any local bank in Oman addressed to Muscat municipality. The bond shall be (1%) of the tender value valid for ninety (90) days starting from the date of bids submission. Any tenders which do not meet the required bond shall not be accepted.
- Original Tender Bonds are to be placed in the Tender Box at Muscat Municipality HQ, Third Floor.
- For any inquiries regarding tenders, please visit e-tendering website: (<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>).
- For technical support of e-tendering system please send an email to (etenderhd@ita.gov.om) or call (+96824166670).

Sultanate of Oman MINISTRY OF HEALTH ROYAL HOSPITAL

TENDER ANNOUNCEMENT

THE DIRECTORATE GENERAL OF ROYAL HOSPITAL INVITES SPECIALIZED COMPANIES TO SUBMIT TENDER

TENDER NO	DESCRIPTION	LAST DATE FOR COLLECTION OF TENDER DOCUMENT	CLOSING TIME/ DAY/DATE	ELIGIBILITY	TENDER FEE (NON-REFUNDABLE)
281/2020	SUPPLY OF SURGICAL (RESPIRATORY) ITEMS	24/12/2020	Before 10 AM on Tuesday 19/01/2020	SPECIALIZED COMPANIES REGISTERED WITH TENDER BOARD	25 RIALS
280/2020	SUPPLY OF PHARMACEUTICALS	24/12/2020	Before 10 AM on Tuesday 19/01/2020	SPECIALIZED COMPANIES REGISTERED WITH TENDER BOARD	25 RIALS
282/2020	SUPPLY OF LINEN & UNIFORMS	24/12/2020	Before 10 AM on Tuesday 19/01/2020	SPECIALIZED COMPANIES REGISTERED WITH TENDER BOARD	25 RIALS

- All specialized and interested companies registered with tender board on the above mentioned grade may obtain tender documents from etendering website: <http://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om> against non refundable payment as mentioned above for each set of document.
- Tender should be submitted on line on the given website signed and sealed. The tenderer should enclose scan copy of bank guarantee or a certified cheque issued by a local bank for not less than one (1%) for the tender value validity for ninety (90) days from the tender submission date, addressed to The Chairman of the Tender Committee before one day of date of submission.
- The Original bank Guarantee should be submitted to the office of Director of Finance one day before the submission date for all tenders.
- The Directorate General of Royal Hospital is not bound to accept the lowest or any other offer.

Sudan’s PM visits Ethiopia amid refugee crisis

ADDIS ABABA: Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed on Sunday discussed the conflict in Ethiopia with his Sudanese counterpart Abdalla Hamdok, whose country borders the fighting and hosts 50,000 refugees who escaped the violence.

It was the first visit by a foreign leader since fighting broke out in Ethiopia’s Tigray region on November 4, creating a humanitarian crisis.

Thousands have been killed, according to the International Crisis Group, and just over 50,000 people have fled to Sudan since Abiy ordered troops into Tigray to to confront the region’s dissident ruling party.

Abiy, winner of last year’s Nobel Peace Prize, said Hamdok expressed support for the offensive against the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) during face-to-face talks.

“The Sudanese side reiterated their solidarity with the government of Ethiopia in the law enforcement operations it has been undertaking,” said a statement from Abiy’s office.

Hamdok, who is in Addis Ababa for two days, also recalled the support Abiy had extended to Sudan, it added.

Accompanied by a large security delegation, Hamdok said he looked forward to “productive discussions on political, humani-



Ethiopian refugee children who fled the Ethiopia’s Tigray conflict wait in a line for a food distribution by Muslim Aid at the Um Raquba refugee camp in Sudan’s eastern Gedaref state on Saturday. — AFP

itarian and security matters”.
REFUGEE CRISIS
The Sudanese premier had urged Abiy to engage in negotiations with the TPLF when

fighting broke out six weeks ago, and encouraged African mediation to resolve the conflict as it threatened to drag in the wider region.

Abiy has resisted international pressure to end fighting and accept mediation, saying TPLF leaders needed to be disarmed and apprehended.

On November 28 he declared the conflict over, saying the army had captured the regional capital Mekele, and has dismissed reports of ongoing clashes as “sporadic

It was the first visit by a foreign leader since fighting broke out in Ethiopia’s Tigray region on November 4, creating a humanitarian crisis

gunfire” not indicative of major combat.

Over the weekend AFP journalists saw trucks of soldiers heading north and ambulances remain a common sight in southern Tigray and northern Amhara regions.

Tens of thousands of refugees have crossed the border westward into one of the most impoverished regions of Sudan, itself one of the world’s poorest countries.

The influx comes with Sudan undergoing a fragile political transition since last year’s ouster of president Omar al Bashir and facing an economic crisis which has been especially felt in the eastern states of Gedaref and Kassala — the main arrival points for refugees escaping Tigray.

Around 170 refugees crossed into Sudan from Tigray on Saturday, according to the UN refugee agency UNHCR, compared to 1,100 on December 3. — AFP

Israel shortens mandatory COVID quarantine

TEL AVIV: Israel further shortened its mandatory quarantine period from 12 to 10 days, a Health Ministry statement said on Sunday. The ministry had already shortened the period for which anyone who has been in contact with a coronavirus patient must self-isolate from 14 to 12 days on November 1. The new regulation will take effect on Tuesday at 0600 GMT.

Israelis who have had contact with people who tested positive will themselves have to take a coronavirus test on the first day of their 10-day quarantine, as well as on the ninth day, and both tests must be negative in order for them to leave isolation. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu earlier on Sunday said Israel would likely start inoculating its first citizens — health workers as well the premier himself — within days, sooner than the earlier announced start date of December 27.

The first shipments of



A nurse is seen at the Maccabi Healthcare Services COVID-19 vaccine complex in Tel Aviv, on Sunday. — Reuters

some 8 million doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine bought by Israel arrived in the country on Wednesday.

Israel, a country of 9.2 million inhabitants, has been gradually lifting a second nationwide lockdown imposed in late September. But infections have since been rising again, prompting Netanyahu to warn of an imminent third lockdown. Its total COVID-19 death toll now nears 3,000. — dpa

Bahrain approves registration for Sinopharm vaccine

DUBAI: Bahrain’s National Health Regulatory Authority said on Sunday it had approved the registration of a coronavirus vaccine developed by China National Pharmaceutical Group (Sinopharm). The statement did not specify which vaccine among the two being developed by Sinopharm, but cited data from Phase III clinical trials that showed an 86 per cent efficacy rate and said Bahrain had participated in those trials.

The data cited was the same as what was announced earlier this month by the United Arab Emirates from interim analysis of late-stage clinical trials for an inactivated vaccine developed by Beijing Institute of Biological Product, a unit of Sinopharm’s China National Biotec Group (CNBG).

In July the UAE started Phase III clinical trials for the vaccine and the trial was expanded to Bahrain, Jordan and Egypt. — Reuters

■ CURFEW TO CHECK VIRUS SPREAD



The deserted Kizilay Square during a general curfew put in place to limit a second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, in Ankara, on Sunday. Under the new restrictions beginning from December 1, a curfew will be imposed on weekdays from 9 pm to 5 am. Over the weekend the lockdown will last from 9 pm on Friday until 5 am on Monday. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

GAZA CITY

Gaza Strip under full lockdown for two days

A two-day lockdown, imposed on the Gaza Strip on Friday to curb the spread of the coronavirus, ended on Sunday, according to the Interior Ministry in the Palestinian territory. Until Sunday at 7 am (0500 GMT), all shops except pharmacies were closed and people barred from leaving their homes except for health reasons.

Police and security forces were deployed in the streets in the Hamas-run strip to implement the curfew in all districts, which



were separated from each other and divided into blocks to facilitate control.

The ministry said the measures aim to reduce contact and overcrowding in light of the recent high rate of coronavirus cases in the enclave. — dpa

TEHRAN

Iran summons German, France envoys

Iran on Sunday summoned the envoys of Germany, current holder of the European Union’s rotating presidency, and of France over criticism of the execution of an Iranian journalist, Iranian media reported.

The Foreign Ministry voiced Iran’s protest to the two ambassadors over French and EU criticism of the execution on Saturday of dissident journalist Ruhollah Zam, who had been based in Paris before he was captured in Iraq and taken to Iran.

Zam was convicted of fomenting violence during anti-government protests in 2017. His Amadnews feed had more than 1 million followers. Iranian officials have accused some countries including the United States and government opponents living in exile, of stoking the unrest that began in late 2017 as regional protests over economic hardship spread nationwide.

Officials said 21 people were killed during the unrest and thousands were arrested. — Reuters

TEHRAN

Military medal awarded to slain nuclear scientist

Iran’s supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on Sunday posthumously awarded a prestigious military decoration to top nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, who was assassinated last month, state television reported. Fakhrizadeh was killed on a major road outside Tehran in late November in a bomb and gun attack.

The broadcaster said the first



class Order of Nasr (“Victory” in Persian), bearing Khamenei’s signature, was handed to the scientist’s family by the armed forces chief of staff Major General Mohammad Bagheri.

“This is a decoration meant for dear ones who defend the Islamic revolution and Iran’s territorial integrity and independence,” Bagheri said. — AFP

In brief

■ JAKARTA



INDONESIA ARRESTS JI LEADER LINKED TO BALI BOMBINGS

Indonesia has arrested a senior leader of the Al Qaeda-linked Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) network for an alleged role in the deadly 2002 Bali bombings, a police spokesman said.

National Police spokesman Argo Yuwono said Zulkarnaen, 57, was arrested in Lampung on Sumatra island on Thursday after spending nearly 18 years at large. Zulkarnaen "is now being interrogated" and anti-terror investigators were searching his residence, Argo said.

Zulkarnaen has been on Indonesia's most-wanted list since the bombings that killed 202 people on the Indonesian resort island of Bali. — AFP

■ KUALA LUMPUR



MALAYSIA SEIZES RECORD HAUL OF CRYSTAL METH

Malaysia's maritime agency said on Sunday it had seized more than two tonnes of crystal methamphetamine worth 105.9 million ringgit (\$26.2 million) from a boat off the country's west coast, its largest-ever haul of the drug. Malaysia has made several record busts of crystal meth in recent years.

Authorities have said the intercepted shipments were part of a multibillion-dollar illicit drug trade. The latest discovery came on Wednesday when a Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA) patrol encountered a recreational boat moving suspiciously off Penang island.

— Reuters

■ KATHMANDU



TIGER RECORDED AT THE HIGHEST-EVER ELEVATION IN NEPAL

A Royal Bengal tiger has been caught on camera wandering at an altitude of 3,165 meters which is by far the highest altitude at which big cats have been found in Nepal, according to forest authorities. The tiger was captured twice in November by a camera trap set to monitor ten wild red pandas equipped with GPS-satellite collars in a forest in eastern Nepal, the Department of Forests and Social Conservation said in a statement.

Sonam Tashi Lama, Programme Coordinator of Red Panda Network (RPN) said that the finding was surprising as the tiger has never been found at that altitude in Nepal. — dpa



A worker uses a brush to clear snow at Gyeongbokgung palace in central Seoul on Sunday. — AFP

S Korea's Moon warns of toughest COVID-19 curbs

SEOUL: South Korea's President Moon Jae-in warned on Sunday that COVID-19 restrictions may be raised to the highest level after a second day of record increases in cases as the country battles a harsh third wave of infection.

Presiding over an emergency meeting at the Central Disaster and Safety Countermeasures Headquarters for the first time since February, Moon urged vigilance and called for an all-out efforts to contain the virus.

"Unless the outbreak can be contained now, it has come to the critical point of considering escalating social-distancing measures to the third level," he said, referring to the tightest curbs under the country's five-tier system. Greater Seoul, home to about half of South Korea's 52 million people, is under level 2.5 restrictions. Gatherings of more than 50 people are banned and restaurants are prohibited from serving customers after 9 pm. A country that had initial success controlling

COVID-19, South Korea reported 1,030 new coronavirus infections on Sunday after 950 the previous day, bringing total infections to 42,766 with 580 deaths. Of the new cases, 1,002 were locally transmitted, the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency said. "Our back is against the wall," Moon said. "This is a crucial moment to devote all our virus control capabilities and administrative power to stopping the coronavirus spread." Level 3 curbs would essentially mean a lockdown for the first time in Asia's fourth-largest economy. Schools would switch to remote learning, companies could allow only essential workers in offices and gatherings of more than 10 people would be banned. The government will add about 10,000 hospital beds within the next few weeks and temporarily pay some nurses involved in the care of COVID-19 patients an extra 3 million won (\$2,748) a month to help overstressed hospitals across the country.

— Reuters

Over 50 Taliban killed as fighting rocks Kandahar

KANDAHAR: Dozens of Taliban fighters were killed in fierce overnight fighting between Afghan forces and militants who attacked multiple checkpoints in the insurgent bastion of Kandahar, officials said on Sunday.

Taliban militants attacked checkpoints in five districts surrounding the city of Kandahar, which Afghan forces countered with heavy air and ground assaults, the ministry of defence said in a statement.

"The security forces repulsed the attack, killing 51 terrorists and wounding nine," the ministry said, without offering details of any casualties among government forces.

Seven members of a family were also killed in an Afghan air strike in one of the districts, a local official said on condition of anonymity.

"The Afghan air force wanted to target a car filled with explosives... when they hit the car it detonated and caused civilian fatalities," he said.

The ministry of defence said it was investigating the incident.

The fighting lasted for several hours through the night, marked with continuous gun battles and heavy bombardments, a correspondent reported from Kandahar. When contacted the Taliban did not offer an immediate comment.



Afghan policemen search people at a checkpoint at the Chawk-e-Shahidan in Kandahar on Sunday. — AFP

The security forces repulsed the attack, killing 51 terrorists and wounding nine

MINISTRY OF DEFENCE

The southern province of Kandahar is the birthplace of the hardline movement, and over the past few weeks militants have launched attacks in districts on the outskirts of the

city of Kandahar, the provincial capital.

The Taliban launched a similar offensive in the neighbouring province of Helmand in September that sent tens of thousands of residents fleeing.

That attack, which also targeted the provincial capital of Lashkar Gah, prompted the US to call in air strikes to defend Afghan forces.

Since a US-Taliban deal in February, the insurgents have not carried out major attacks on key cities but have launched near-daily assaults against Afghan forces in rural areas. — AFP

China reports 24 new virus cases

BEIJING: China reported 24 new coronavirus cases in the mainland on Sunday, up from 13 cases a day earlier, while the authorities were monitoring possible contacts in the domestic tourism hotspot of Hainan.

There were five local cases and 19 imported infections on Saturday, according to a statement by the National Health Commission.

The number of new asymptomatic cases, which China does not classify as confirmed cases, fell to 14 from 17 a day earlier.

As of Saturday, mainland China had 86,725 confirmed coronavirus cases, the health authority said.

The COVID-19 death toll remained at 4,634. Two tourists visiting Sanya in Hainan, China's southernmost island province, were found to be in close

contact with an asymptomatic case in Xian in northwest China, after they had lunch with this person on Wednesday. Hainan, known as the "Hawaii of China", has been free of coronavirus for six months, drawing eager shoppers to duty-free malls, couples seeking a subtropical backdrop for wedding pictures, and surfers just looking to "breathe freely".

— Reuters

India farmers intensify protests as deadlock continues

MUMBAI/NEW DELHI: Tens of thousands of Indian farmers on Sunday intensified their protests against three new agricultural laws aimed at overhauling food grain procurement and pricing rules by allowing private companies direct access to the vast agrarian sector.

Angry farmers staged demonstrations near New Delhi after rejecting Prime Minister Narendra Modi's assurances that the laws would double farmers' income. Six rounds of talks between government officials and farmer union leaders have failed to resolve the challenge faced by Modi's government.

"Hundreds of farmers will launch a tractor trolley march to New Delhi to voice our grievances against the new laws," said Kamal Preet Singh Pannu, a leader of Sanyukta Kisan Andolan (United Farmers' Protest), one of 30 groups against the laws.

"Government wants to discredit and crush our movement,



Protesters hold placards and shout slogans while riding on motorbikes during a protest rally in support of farmers against the recent agricultural reforms, in Amritsar on Sunday. — AFP

but we will continue to protest peacefully," Pannu said. Local authorities increased security measures, deploying police and putting up barricades to prevent farmers from entering New Delhi in large numbers. Opposition parties and some senior economists have lent support to the protests.

"I've now studied India's new farm bills & realise they are flawed and will be detrimental to farmers," Kaushik Basu, a former chief economic adviser to the federal government, wrote on Twitter.

"Our agriculture regulation needs change, but the new laws will end up serving corporate interests more than farmers. Hats off to the sensibility & moral strength of India's farmers," Basu said.

The farmers are protesting the three laws that the government says are meant to overhaul procurement procedures and grant them more options to sell their produce. — Reuters

Four stabbed and one shot after pro-Trump rallies



Supporters of President Donald Trump demonstrate in Washington, DC, on Saturday to protest the 2020 election. — AFP

WASHINGTON: Four people were stabbed and one-shot as rallies backing President Donald Trump's baseless claims of election fraud led to clashes in major US cities on Saturday.

Scuffles broke out in many places between rally-goers and counter-protesters who turned up to criticise the president, who lost the November 3 election to Democrat Joe Biden but is yet to concede.

Washington State Police said in a tweet late on Saturday that a shooting had taken place after clashes near the capitol building in Olympia, and that a suspect had been detained.

In the US capital, DC Fire and EMS Department com-

munications chief Doug Buchanan said that four people had been stabbed and were now hospitalised "with serious injuries."

The New York Times reported that 23 had been arrested throughout the day. There was no indication of whether any of the victims had been involved in the protests, on either side of the divide. The day had begun with a festive atmosphere as thousands of red-hatted protesters filled Washington's streets to support the president, undeterred by the US Supreme Court's rejection on Friday of what may have been his last chance to overturn the results. — AFP

Historic US vaccine campaign launches with convoy of trucks

WASHINGTON: The first shipments of Pfizer Inc's COVID-19 vaccine left a factory in Michigan early on Sunday on a convoy of semi-trucks, kicking off a historic effort to stop a surging pandemic that is claiming more than 2,400 lives a day in the United States. Mask-wearing workers at a Pfizer factory in Michigan began packing the first shipments of its vaccine in dry ice shortly after 6:30 am ET (1130 GMT) on Sunday.

Three trucks carrying pallets of boxed, refrigerated vaccines rolled away from the Kalamazoo facility at 8:29 am, escorted by body armour-clad security officers in a pickup truck and an SUV. The United States expects to immunize 100 million people, or about 30 per cent of its population, by the end of March, US Operation Warp Speed chief adviser Dr Moncef Slaoui said in an interview with Fox News on Sunday.

In a novel process that will need to become a daily routine, workers removed pizza-boxed sized cartons containing vaccine vials from a freezer. They placed them in large, blue coolers before these were boxed and labelled, as shown on a network television video feed. The massive logistical



A FedEx truck leaves the Pfizer Global Supply manufacturing plant with a small convoy, amid the COVID-19 outbreak, in Portage, Michigan, on Sunday. — Reuters

Pfizer workers begin shipping vaccine from Michigan factory
Healthcare workers and elderly will be first to get vaccine
UPS and FedEx leading complex distribution project

effort is complicated by the need to transport and store the vaccine developed with German partner BioNTech SE at minus 70 Celsius (minus 94 Fahrenheit), requiring

enormous quantities of dry ice or specialised ultra-cold freezers.

Workers clapped and whistled as the first boxes headed to the trucks. The long-awaited mo-

ment comes as the US death toll was approaching 300,000 and infections and hospitalizations set daily records. It will take months before most US residents can get a COVID-19 vaccine. The federal government plans to release the nation's first 2.9 million doses to 64 states, US territories and major cities, as well as five federal agencies. — Reuters

Germany orders partial lockdown to curb 'out of control' virus

BERLIN: Germany will go into a partial lockdown from Wednesday with non-essential shops and schools to close, as Europe's biggest economy battles to halt an "exponential growth" in coronavirus infections.

The new curbs will apply until January 10, with companies also urged to allow employees to work from home or offer extended company holidays, under the new measures agreed by Chancellor Angela Merkel with regional leaders of Germany's 16 states on Sunday.

"That would help to implement the principle 'we're staying at home,'" according to the policy paper agreed by Merkel and state premiers.

Germans are urged to limit their social contacts to another household, with a maximum of five people excluding children under 14 meeting at each time.



A person wearing protective mask lights a candle on a vigil organised by an activist-group to commemorate the people who died due to COVID-19 in Berlin. — Reuters

From Christmas Eve to Boxing Day, the contacts would be eased to allow gatherings with another four people excluding children, but who should be limited to close relatives or partners.

Germany in November closed leisure and cultural facilities and

banned indoor dining in restaurants. The measures had helped to halt the rapid growth of infections after the autumn school holidays, but numbers had plateaued at a high rate.

Merkel had repeatedly pushed for tougher curbs to break the

chain of contagion, but the implementation of the rules is in the hands of individual states and some were reluctant to impose more curbs.

The mood, however, has changed in the last week after Germany recorded new daily death tolls reaching close to 600 and as the country's disease control agency RKI reported that the infections trend had taken a worrying turn.

"Today is not the day to look back or to see what could have been, rather, today is the day to do what is necessary," said Merkel, pointing to "very high numbers of deaths" and stressing the urgent need for action.

"The corona situation is out of control," said Bavarian state premier Markus Soeder, pledging to implement the tougher restrictions in his state. — AFP

UK firms appeal for deal as PM warns of likely failure

LONDON: UK businesses clamoured for compromise on Sunday as Prime Minister Boris Johnson said failure remains the "most likely" outcome to marathon post-Brexit trade talks with the European Union. "I'm afraid we're still very far apart on some key things, but where there's life there's hope," Johnson told reporters, after agreeing with EU commission chief Ursula von der Leyen push on with negotiations.

The pair had said they would decide whether or not a deal was possible by the end of the weekend, but agreed in a phone call to "go the extra mile" before the UK leaves the EU's single market on December 31.

"The UK certainly won't be walking away from the talks. I still think there's a deal to be done if our partners want to do it," Johnson said at 10 Downing Street after briefing his cabinet about the call.

But Britain could not compromise on the "fundamental



nature" of Brexit, controlling UK laws and fisheries, he said.

"The most likely thing now is, of course, we have to get ready for WTO terms," Johnson added, referring to tariffs and quotas on the basic rules of trade set by the World Trade Organization. "There is a clarity and a simplicity in that approach that has its own advantages. It's not where we wanted to get to... but the UK is prepared," he said.

"Either way, whatever happens, the UK will do very, very well." — AFP

SHORT TAKES

NEW YORK

Biden's fractured foot is 'healing as expected'

Joe Biden shouldn't be limping for too much longer. Doctors said one of the small fractures Biden sustained while playing with his dog weeks ago was barely detectable. The other is "healing as expected" after the examination at Pennsylvania Hospital in Philadelphia, the Biden transition team said in a statement. "Results were very encouraging," said Dr Kevin O'Connor of GWMedical Faculty Associates. "No more extensive injury was identified."



Biden, 78, suffered the injury two weeks ago at his home in Delaware. He wore a protective boot for several days and is now walking with a limp. — dpa

ZURICH

Swiss hospitals urge minister to tighten measures

The directors of five of Switzerland's largest hospitals have written to the health minister asking for urgent measures to reduce coronavirus infections, the *SonntagsZeitung* newspaper reported on Sunday. In their letter to Health Minister Alain Berset, the directors of the university hospitals of Zurich, Bern, Basel, Lausanne and Geneva said the pandemic was forcing them to postpone operations for patients with other life-threatening conditions while intensive care beds



were becoming scarce. More than 4,000 operations have been postponed at the five hospitals since October, the newspaper reported. — Reuters

TELAVIV

Israel establishes diplomatic relations with Bhutan

Israel established diplomatic relations with the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan on Saturday, the Israeli foreign ministry said, the latest in a string of normalisation deals agreed by the Jewish state. "The circle of recognition of Israel is widening," Israeli Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi said in a statement. "The establishment of relations with the Kingdom of Bhutan will constitute a new stage in the deepening of Israel's relations in Asia." Israeli Prime Minister



Benjamin Netanyahu hailed the agreement, saying in a statement that Israel was "in contact with other countries that want to establish relations with" the Jewish state. — AFP

Warriors unlikely serving a noble cause

From owning fancy cars and expensive clothes to having fine dining and happy vacations, there are many ways we can spend our hard-earned money.

There is absolutely nothing wrong with rewarding ourselves, but what would happen if we reward someone else instead? We could share the joy of rewarding by donating to people who are in need. Always making a living comes by what we get, but we make a life by what we give to others.

Charity marks a religious and social obligation to give back to the society. It is true that charity begins at home, but does not end there. Charitable deeds should extend beyond family and relatives. Many people all over the world are in need of charitable donations, including those who are closer in our reach within the society. Probably, getting food twice a day would be more than enough for many of these people! Therefore, one should never hesitate to lend a hand of support to those needy people, so that everyone could have a fair and decent living.

Today, with the remarkable emergence of charitable associations spreading all over the country, life of the needy families is getting much better compared to olden days. These charities are sparing no effort to provide all possible support to these families. Their help goes beyond



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providing daily rations and funding children's school fee, but extends to building new houses and refurbishing others in some cases.

There are hundreds of voluntary warriors working in charitable associations to serve the noble mission of giving. Finding time is never an issue for them; they sacrifice their time during holidays, Eids and special occasions just to be with the people in need, children at homes or patients in hospitals. All what they are after is just to make others happy and share great moments!

Helping others by sacrificing time, money or property always creates an improved sense of purpose in life or work and inner satisfaction. If a person performs a deed that continues to benefit others in a good way, s/he will keep collecting rewards for this single charitable act as long as it benefits others. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said: "When a person dies his works end, except for three: ongoing charity, knowledge that is benefited from and a righteous child who prays for him."

On the other hand, with all efforts made, there are associations that run unhealthy competition with their charitable counterparts, by aiming to serve personal interests or social status. It is really sad to see people managing charities for the sake of serving their self-reputation and desires. They

just do their activities based on their moods and self-interests, paying no attention to the needs of families in need within the society.

We all agree with Mahatma Gandhi's saying, "The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others." But things should always be under a proper management in this regard.

Practically, forces of charities within the same geographical boundaries or of similar target audience should be joined so that they can achieve their missions and objectives. Charity always intends to serve bringing justice, balance and kindness to society.

In this regards, the government bodies concerned should closely monitor and supervise the work process and performance of all charitable associations in the Sultanate. This will help in ensuring that they are professionally managed and sufficiently serving the society. Individual volunteers and charities shall be more responsible and honest when serving society.

Dear volunteers, just remember that what you do for yourself dies with you, but what you do for others and the world remains and is everlasting. May the Almighty Allah bless you for all the joyous moments you share with the needy and the suffering; for whatever you give the poor and needy families!

TOXIC EXPOSURE

Defence bill measure a critical first step

RESHMA KIRPALANI AND TARA COPP

A massive defence bill passed by Congress on Friday includes provisions that would require government studies of military toxic exposure among fighter pilots and some of the first forces that deployed after the September 11, 2001, (9/11) terrorist attacks.

Veterans see the approval of those provisions as a significant step that they hope will lead to a recognition by the US government that their illnesses were tied to that service. The broader legislation faces a veto threat from President Donald Trump due to other provisions. But veterans' advocates hope Congress will override any veto as they also begin working with the incoming Biden administration to keep this year's momentum on addressing toxic exposure going.

The final version of the \$740-billion fiscal year 2021 National Defence Authorisation Act covers military pay and benefits and also funds warships, submarines, missiles and military aircraft. One provision would require government studies to determine whether veterans who served at a base in Karshi-Khanabad, Uzbekistan, or K2, after 9/11 developed illnesses from exposure to radiation, chemical weapons

and other toxins that were in the ground.

Another would require the Defence Department, working alongside the National Cancer Institute and National Institutes of Health, to conduct a study on whether military pilots face higher levels of cancer.

“It’s a victory for sure, because we now have legislation that codifies K2

SGT MARK JACKSON
Retired Army Staff

“It’s a victory for sure, because we now have legislation that codifies K2. It’s official recognition by the US government for the first time for K2 and Uzbekistan veterans,” said retired Army Staff Sgt Mark Jackson, a K2 veteran and cancer survivor.

“It is a great start, having gone from nothing, and having no recognition whatsoever.” But both provisions fall short of what the veterans wanted, which is for the Department of Veterans Affairs to add their illnesses as presumptive conditions tied to their military service, so when those veterans go in for medical care it won’t be an uphill battle to get cancer screenings or treatment at VA facilities, and have the cost covered by the VA.

Jackson was informed by his oncologist last week that new lab tests showed he was facing a new cancer diagnosis, but more tests were needed to identify what type of cancer had returned.

“Every time they tell us they need another study or ‘good science’ I am going to look at this picture,” Jackson said in a text to McClatchy of a photo of him receiving an IV infusion of iron serum last Wednesday, a first step to address recurring anaemia before he can begin treatment.

The legislation also includes an expansion of the number of illnesses covered at the Department of Veterans Affairs for Agent Orange exposure. Two other provisions on burn pit exposure would help veterans who inhaled toxic particles from the military’s open-air trash fires and another would increase access to a new electronic record of toxic exposure the VA is now keeping for veterans.

Several veterans who led the effort to make toxic exposure a priority during this Congress were again battling illness as the bill made its way to final passage. — Reuters

A MAJOR GATEWAY

From Africa to Europe...

PABLO MELIAN & DIEGO URDANETA

After a three-day boat trip from Western Sahara, Mohceine Ait Lamadane reached the Canaries and from there travelled to Italy, taking advantage of a system swamped by arrivals and slowed by the coronavirus.

“I paid 2,000 euros (\$2,430) for the crossing,” 23-year-old Lamdane said in late November after disembarking at Arguineguin port in Gran Canaria where Spain's coastguard drops off migrants picked up at sea.

And barely 10 days later, he was in Italy “with his two brothers”, confirmed his cousin Moulay Omar Semlali, 40, who lives in Gran Canaria, the archipelago's largest island. It was Semlali who picked him up from Arguineguin, a small fishing port that has in recent months taken centre stage in the crisis, with its temporary camp — that was only set up to process migrants and run virus tests — completely swamped.

At one point, more than 2,100 people were staying there, mostly sleeping rough on the ground in conditions deplored by international rights groups, politicians and legal officials.

Following the criticism, the government dismantled the encampment on November 30, after announcing plans to build emergency encampments to house 7,000 people.

In normal times, when someone enters Spain illegally, the police identify him or her and issue them a deportation order, except in cases where they qualify for international protection as a refugee.

The process must be carried out within the first 72 hours as after that “detention is illegal,” explains Daniel Arencibia, a lawyer who works with



Migrants run across the A 16 motorway in an attempt to climb into the back of lorries bound for Britain while traffic is stopped upon waiting to board shuttles at the entrance to the Channel Tunnel site in Calais, northern France. — AFP

IN NORMAL TIMES, WHEN SOMEONE ENTERS SPAIN ILLEGALLY, THE POLICE IDENTIFY HIM OR HER AND ISSUE THEM A DEPORTATION ORDER

migrants in Gran Canaria.

They are then sent to a temporary camp where they wait until they are sent back home.

But the three-day deadline hasn't always been respected by the authorities, who have been completely swamped by the arrival of nearly 20,000 people this year, 10 times the number in 2019.

In November, a local judge spoke out to remind the authorities that migrants can no longer be held “against their will” beyond the initial 72 hours.

Nor can those awaiting deportation be sent to temporary detention centres, most of which have either been closed or forced to radically limit their capacity due to the pandemic, which has also put repatriations on hold.

Although the government has dismissed the idea of transferring migrants to mainland Spain — as demanded by the authorities in the Canary Islands — officials admit that some managed to make the journey themselves and from there, travel to other parts of Europe. — AFP

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VERSTAPPEN ENDS SEASON WITH A CLINICAL TRIUMPH

Bottas takes second, Hamilton finishes third



YAS MARINA, United Arab Emirates: Max Verstappen claimed his second win of the season and the 10th of his career on Sunday when he drove to a clinical victory for Red Bull in a pedestrian season-ending Abu Dhabi Grand Prix.

The 23-year-old Dutchman dominated from start to finish as he turned his third pole position into a demonstration of speed, talent and flawless strategy to leave both Mercedes men well beaten behind him.

It was the first time he had claimed a lights-to-flag victory in Formula One.

“What a way to close a season - fantastic mate,” said his Red Bull engineer at the end on team radio. “After such a busy year, I think everyone was a bit tired at the end, but it is amazing,” he replied.

Verstappen eased home 15.976 seconds clear of Valtteri Bottas, who at least recovered some pride by taking second after his forlorn showing at the Sakhir Grand Prix, and 18.415 ahead of seven-time champion Lewis Hamilton.

On his return to action after recovering from a bout of COVID-19, Hamilton struggled to make any impact as he battled through ahead of Alex Albon, who finished fourth in the second Red Bull, just 1.5 seconds adrift of the out-of-sorts champion.

“You can’t win them all,” said Hamilton. “And, considering the last couple of weeks that I’ve had I am genuinely happy with the weekend, even I am have not been 100 per cent.

“But, congratulations to Max. It was a hard race for me and I am glad it’s all over. It’s a fantastic

result anyway to get two podium finishes.”

Mercedes team-mate Bottas said: “The Red Bull was too quick today. We could not get near them and could not keep up with them, but it was a solid race from my side.”

Lando Norris came home fifth ahead of his Ferrari-bound McLaren team-mate Carlos Sainz, a solid showing by the precocious pairing that secured third place in the constructors’ championship on a day when they announced an American consortium is buying a major stake in the team.

Daniel Ricciardo, in his last race for Renault before replacing Sainz at McLaren, was seventh ahead of Alpha Tauri’s Pierre Gasly, Esteban Ocon in the second Renault and Lance Stroll of Racing Point.

— AFP

In brief

MUSCAT



OMAN CRICKET'S ANNUAL AWARDS CEREMONY SPLIT INTO THREE DAYS

Oman Cricket's annual prize distribution ceremony has been split into three days due to COVID-19 protocols as team and players will be honoured by the chief guest Janab al Sayyid Qais Khalid al Said, OC Vice-Chairman, on December 15, 16 and 17 at 5 pm on Oman Cricket Academy ground in Al Amerat.

The first ceremony for the season 2019-20 will take place on Tuesday, December 15 which will see Premier, A and B League and Knockout tournament teams being honoured by the chief guest along with senior OC officials.

Teams from B to H Divisions will receive their awards on Wednesday while Thursday's ceremony will honour Junior League U-13, U-16 and U-19 teams along with participants of Women's League tournament.

In order to avoid a big gathering, Oman Cricket has taken steps to ensure adherence to COVID-19 health protocols and precautions, dividing the ceremony into three parts on three days.

LOS ANGELES



SHIBUNO CLINGS TO US WOMEN'S OPEN LEAD

Japan's Hinako Shibuno, the 2019 Women's British Open champion, clung to a one-stroke lead over American Amy Olson after Saturday's third round of the 75th US Women's Open. The 22-year-old nicknamed 'Smiling Cinderella', trying to win her US Women's Open debut, fired a three-over par 74 to stand on four-under 209 after 54 holes at Champions Golf Club in Houston, Texas. Shibuno, who led by three strokes when the day began, managed only one birdie against four bogeys, starting and finishing her round with bogeys. — AFP

MILAN



INTER FIGHT BACK TO RECLAIM SECOND SPOT

Inter Milan hit back after their Champions League elimination to reclaim second spot in Serie A on Sunday with 3-1 comeback win over Cagliari. Antonio Conte's side had trailed a goal down with a quarter of an hour to go in Sardinia, after Riccardo Sottil put the hosts ahead before the break and a series of fine saves from home goalkeeper Alessio Cragnò. Inter Milan hit back after their Champions League elimination to reclaim second spot in Serie A on Sunday with 3-1 comeback win over Cagliari. — AFP

Skipper Holder's rearguard action keeps West Indies alive in second Test

WELLINGTON: West Indies captain Jason Holder held off a venomous New Zealand attack as the tourists survived to be 244 for six at stumps on Sunday on day three of the second Test in Wellington.

They require a further 85 runs with four wickets remaining to make New Zealand bat again and avoid a second innings defeat.

Against a four-pronged pace attack, rated by the West Indies as "one of the best" in the world and who continued to get bounce and movement off the pitch, the tourists lost seven wickets in the first two sessions but only one after tea as Holder launched into the bowling.

He was not out 60, with eight fours and two sixes, when bad light ended play an hour early.

Joshua da Silva, in his debut Test, was not out 25 with the pair adding an unbeaten 74 for the seventh wicket.

New Zealand quick Trent Boult said they were targeting an early finish on day four with the new ball 14 overs away.

"It's all set up nicely for us tomorrow," he said.

"Hopefully we can scratch out a couple before the new ball and set it up nicely."

"We don't need to go looking to do too much. Keep it nice and simple like we have done throughout the innings and draw the error and I'm pretty confident we can do it."

West Indies opener John Campbell eked out 68 runs in the second innings but said it was hard going in New Zealand conditions where the ball does a lot.

TREMENDOUS PRESSURE

"It's difficult. It's one of the best bowling attacks in the world



West Indies captain Jason Holder plays a shot on day three of the second Test match against New Zealand at the Basin Reserve in Wellington. — AFP

right now in Test cricket and in their own conditions," he said.

"When they bowl they put us under tremendous pressure."

New Zealand needed less than five overs at the start of the day to take the remaining two wickets and end the West Indies first innings at 131.

Tim Southee mopped up the tail to finish with five for 32 to go with the five for 34 by Kyle Jamieson, who was not required to bowl on the third morning.

Faced with a 329-run deficit, the West Indies second innings was already wavering at 73 for two by lunch with Boult accounting for Kraigg Brathwaite (24) and Darren Bravo (4).

Campbell and Shamarh

SCOREBOARD

New Zealand first innings: 460

West Indies first innings (O/n: 124-8):

K Brathwaite c Taylor b Southee	0
J Campbell c Latham b Jamieson	14
D Bravo c and b Southee	7
S Brooks b Jamieson	14
R Chase b Jamieson	0
J Blackwood c Latham b Southee	69
J Holder c Boult b Jamieson	9
J da Silva c Watling b Southee	3
A Joseph c Watling b Jamieson	0
C Holder (not out)	8
S Gabriel b Southee	2
Extras (LB-3, W-1, NB-1)	5
Total (all out, 56.4 overs)	131
Fall of wickets: 1-0, 2-22, 3-29, 4-29, 5-97, 6-111, 7-117, 8-117, 9-127	
Bowling: Southee 17.4-6-32-5, Boult 14-5-	

34-0, Wagner 12-5-28-0, Jamieson 13-4-34-5

West Indies second innings (f/o)

K Brathwaite c Young b Boult	24
J Campbell b Jamieson	68
D Bravo c Nicholls b Boult	4
S Brooks c Watling b Wagner	36
R Chase c Latham b Jamieson	0
J Blackwood b Boult	20
J Holder (not out)	60
J da Silva (not out)	25
Extras (B-1, LB-5, W-1)	7
Total (for 6 wks, 65.4 overs)	244
Fall of wickets: 1-37, 2-41, 3-130, 4-131, 5-134, 6-170	
Bowling: Southee 17-4-63-0, Boult 15-4-1-75-3, Jamieson 15-4-43-2, Wagner 16-4-53-1, Mitchell 2-0-4-0	

Brooks put on 89 for the third wicket but just as they looked comfortable the West Indies lost their way losing three wickets

for three runs.

Neil Wagner accounted for Brooks (36) and Kyle Jamieson removed Roston Chase for this

second duck of the match and bowled Campbell for 68 and the West Indies went to tea at 158 for five.

Despite a chilly breeze, more than 4,700 spectators filled the grass banks at the Basin Reserve waiting for New Zealand to mop up the tail.

But the only wicket to fall in the final session was that of Jermaine Blackwood, bowled by Boult for 20 before the stubborn resistance of Holder and da Silva ensured the Test went into a fourth day.

Boult, unsuccessful in the first innings, has three for 75 while Jamieson's two second innings wickets have given him seven for the match. — AFP

Westwood wins Race to Dubai

DUBAI: Veteran Englishman Lee Westwood secured his second Race to Dubai title and finished top European golfer for the third time, as Matt Fitzpatrick secured the DP World Tour Championship on Sunday.

Fitzpatrick entered the final day on the Earth Course in Dubai sharing the lead with Patrick Reed, who was vying to become the first American to win the Race to Dubai.

After starting his round with four birdies, Fitzpatrick held a commanding lead and was on course to win the Race to Dubai. Westwood, however, birdied two of his last three holes to finish with a final round 68 which was good enough to snatch solo second and be crowned European Number One.

"It's been a bizarre season for so many reasons, the European Tour have done an incredible job to pick the season up again from July and have tournaments on every week," said the 47-year-old Westwood. "The culmination of it all here, it was a great finish. Thrills and spills, the Race to Dubai up for grabs and the tournament up for grabs."

Fitzpatrick matched his 68 to finish at 15 under, one shot



clear of his fellow Englishman at the top of the leaderboard, and win his first Rolex Series title but not good enough to win the Race to Dubai.

Westwood won the European Tour Order of Merit in 2000 but within three years he was outside the top 250 in the official rankings before mounting one of the game's great comebacks.

His victory at the 2009 World Tour Championship,

Dubai saw him crowned the inaugural winner of the Race to Dubai and the following year he emerged as world number one.

European Tour's Race to Dubai standings (GBR/IRL unless stated):

1. Lee Westwood 3,128.Opts, 2. Matthew Fitzpatrick 3,110.2, 3. Patrick Reed (USA) 3,103.7, 4. Tommy Fleetwood 2,182.6, 5. Collin Morikawa (USA) 2,096.6, 6. Victor Perez (FRA) 2,702.9, 7. Christiaan Bezuidenhout (RSA) 1,874.8, 8. Aaron Rai 1,741.0, 9. Tyrrell Hatton 1,736.5, 10. Louis Oosthuizen (RSA) 1,646.2

Real win Madrid derby to prove point to leaders Atletico

MADRID: Real Madrid showed why they are Liga champions with a convincing 2-0 home win over Atletico Madrid in the derby on Saturday to end the pacesetters’ unbeaten start to the league season.

Real deservedly took the lead in the 15th minute when Casemiro headed home from a corner, leaving Atletico behind for the first time in their 11th league game of the season.

Dani Carvajal put Zinedine Zidane’s Real side further at ease with a stunning strike in the 63rd minute which came off the post and into the net off keeper Jan Oblak for an own goal.

Atletico still lead the standings on 26 points, while Real climbed to third and closed the gap on their city rivals to three points, although Diego Simeone’s side have a game in hand.

The result also means second-placed Real Sociedad can reclaim top spot if they beat Eibar on Sunday.

Atletico were utterly outplayed by champions Real and did not have any attempts on goal in the first half, while they failed to even manage a shot on target until the 80th minute, when Saul Niguez’s header was saved by Thibaut Courtois.

“We went all out to win the game from the start, we drowned them in their own half,” said Carvajal.

Atletico captain Koke added: “They played much better than us, they were more intense and we were not ourselves in the first half. “We took a step forward in the second half and

Atletico still lead the standings on 26 points, while Real climbed to third and closed the gap on their city rivals to three points, although Diego Simeone’s side have a game in hand

had a great chance to score but football is all about the little details.

“Now we need to move on, it’s a long season and we need to stay near the top of the season.”

REMARKABLE WEEK
The win completed a remarkable week for Real after beating Sevilla in La Liga and Borussia Moenchengladbach to reach the Champions League last 16 and will further ease the

pressure on Zidane after his side’s relatively poor start to the campaign. “We were facing a very difficult week but have picked up nine points from nine,” added Carvajal.

“It’s difficult to explain why we seem to really come into our own in the biggest matches, but it’s been a strange season. “We’ve had lots of injuries but the more games we play the better we’ll get.”

The home side were boosted by the return of first-choice right-back Carvajal but Zidane also rewarded Lucas Vazquez for his outstanding efforts in deputising for the defender and deployed him as a right-winger.

The move gave Real extra intensity and work rate and Atletico could barely cope with their whirlwind start, as Karim Benzema forced Oblak to tip a stinging shot onto the post and moments later narrowly failed to connect with a cross.

The hosts continued to dominate the first half and Simeone sprung a triple change at the interval in a bid to give his side some control of a match that was slipping from their grasp.

The move almost bore fruit as substitute Thomas Lemar ghosted in unmarked at the far post from close range to meet a cross but somehow hit the side-netting, Simeone howling in disbelief on the sidelines at a glorious chance gone to waste.

Carvajal then delivered an emphatic counter punch to put the game out of Atletico’s reach and although the visitors reacted well they never looked like staging a comeback.

— Reuters



Real Madrid's Dani Carvajal celebrates with Sergio Ramos after Atletico Madrid's Jan Oblak scored an own goal. – Reuters

Everton end Chelsea’s long unbeaten run with vital win

LIVERPOOL: Chelsea spurned the chance to go top of the Premier League as Gylfi Sigurdsson’s penalty earned Everton a vital 1-0 win in front of 2,000 fans at Goodison Park.

A first defeat in 18 games, excluding penalty shootouts, leaves Frank Lampard’s men still two points adrift of Tottenham and Liverpool at the top of the table.

They can extend that advantage to five points when they are in action on Sunday.

The victory lifts Everton up to seventh and within just one point of the top four.

Reece James and Mason Mount hit the post for the visitors, but they were made to pay for one rash moment from goalkeeper Edouard Mendy as he bundled over Dominic Calvert-Lewin and Sigurdsson coolly slotted home the resultant spot-kick.

A £220 million (\$291 million) spending spree had seemingly

transformed Chelsea into title contenders, but the Blues badly missed the creativity of the injured Hakim Ziyech and Christian Pulisic to break Everton down once the Toffees went in front.

Carlo Ancelotti’s men had slid down the table after a blistering start to the season and the need for Everton’s own big spending to finally pay off with European football was laid bare when the club announced losses of nearly £140 million for the 2019/20 season on Friday.

However, it is Calvert-Lewin, signed for just £1.5 million from Sheffield United four years ago, who is keeping Everton’s European ambitions afloat.

The Premier League’s top scorer failed to add to his 14 goals this season, but was too quick for both Thiago Silva and Mendy to a loose ball and was wiped out by the Senegalese ‘keeper.

Richarlison had to be convinced to allow Sigurdsson to



Everton's Gylfi Sigurdsson scores their first goal from the penalty spot. – Reuters

take the penalty and the Icelandic international made no mistake.

Chelsea were nearly level almost immediately as James’s shot from outside of the box was turned onto the inside of the post by Jordan Pickford.

Kurt Zouma then fired too close to the England number one, whilst Olivier Giroud was crowded out when the goal was gaping after Pickford crashed into his own defender Yerry Mina from a long ball forward.

Everton had won just one of their previous seven games after a blistering start had taken them top of the table in October.

However, the limited number of home fans, returning to Goodison for the first time since March, were given a huge win to cheer as the hosts held out with relative comfort after the break.

The closest Chelsea came to an equaliser was a Mount free-kick that came back off the post after wrong-footing Pickford 10 minutes from time. — AFP



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Islamic Banking Services

CMA issues guidelines regulating insurance investments

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 13

The Capital Market Authority (CMA) has issued new guidelines regulating investments of insurance companies and Takaful insurance in the Sultanate. This is in line with efforts by the Authority to support the development of the Omani insurance market and enable insurance firms to diversify their investments.

Shaikh Abdullah bin Salim al Salmi (pictured), Executive President, said the new regulations grant insurance firms greater flexibility in channelling their investments to support their corporate growth objectives, while at the same time maintaining adequate reserves and liquidity to handle claims from policyholders.

In drafting the new guidelines, the CMA took into account investment trends, market volatility issues, international developments in the sector, and other factors. The overall goal, the Executive President said, is to help the insurance companies enhance their investment performance and achieve the greatest economic returns, and thereby support economic growth.

Investments by the insurance sector climbed to RO 709.2 million as of end-September 2020, maintaining an average growth rate of six per cent over the last five years. The sector is a key investor in the governmental bond mar-



ket alongside banks and pension funds, besides investing in other instruments.

Takaful insurance now accounts for 12 per cent of the total insurance portfolio, he said. With this growth trend in mind, the new regulations seek to ensure that Takaful companies comply with legal provisions like deeds and Islamic investment funds according to the specified percentages and terms whether investing within or outside the Sultanate.

The regulations place limits on investments in schemes such as deposit, commercial and governmental bonds and the public joint stock companies' shares, investment funds and the companies that are not listed on stock exchange, as well as real estate.

The sector has developed remarkably in recent years and is approaching a total size of about half a billion Omani riyals. Investments by the sector have climbed from RO 503.3 million in 2015 to RO 709.2 million in Q3 2020, representing a jump of 41 per cent over this period.

Oman govt subsidy, funding support surpass RO 1 bn in 2019

ROLLBACKS: After being nearly halved from its 2015 high of RO 1.219 bn, subsidy payouts and other funding assistance by the government have been largely on the downtrend in subsequent years in line with strident efforts to curb public expenditure

CONRAD PRABHU
@conradprabhu

Subsidy and other forms of funding support extended by the Omani government towards a number of public services and economic sectors jumped 9.9 per cent to top RO 1.031 billion in 2019 up from RO 937.9 million a year earlier — bucking efforts by authorities to rein in expenditure as part of a concerted bid to reduce the widening annual budget deficit.

After being nearly halved from its 2015 high of RO 1.219 billion, subsidy payouts and other funding assistance by the government have been largely on the downtrend in subsequent years in line with strident efforts to curb public expenditure.

But a significant uptick in funding assistance to the power and water sector, among other economic activities, contributed to this latest spike, the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) noted in its 2019 Annual Report.

“The increase in spending under this head was mainly



attributed to considerable enhancement in government support to the electricity sector, operational support to government organisations, support on hydrocarbon products to the targeted segment, and subsidies on soft loans to the private sector and housing,” the apex bank stated.

Subsidies and other government funding assistance are broadly grouped under the head, ‘Government Participation and Other Expenses’. Citing provisional figures from the Ministry of Finance, the CBO report noted that subsidy earmarked for the electricity sector accounted for a hefty 58 per cent of the total expenditure under this head.

It surged to RO 600 million in 2019, up from RO 476.6 million a year earlier, entailing a jump of 25.9 per cent.

Additionally, government support to Omani individuals and fishermen benefiting from

subsidised petrol and diesel almost doubled to RO 39.9 million last year, up from RO 20 million in 2018.

Subsidised loans for housing, as well as the private sector, surged 42.5 per cent to RO 36.9 million last year, up from RO 25.9 million in 2018.

Also bracketed in the ‘Government Participation and Other Expenses’ category were funding support to government organisations (RO 190.1 million), investment expenditure support to public sector entities (RO 83.1 million), and government assistance in support of a number of domestic, regional and international causes (RO 78.1 million).

“Notwithstanding the pursuit of fiscal consolidation, the increase in expenditure under this head was necessitated by socioeconomic requirements and to support growth through support to government companies and organisations,” the Central

Bank remarked.

Significantly, a landmark Medium Term Fiscal Plan unveiled by the government last month enshrines a commitment to gradually phase out subsidy on a number of public services, notably power and water, while channelling savings captured as a result to economically weaker sections of the Omani populace.

The blueprint for fiscal consolidation, spanning the 2020 – 2024 timeframe, noted thus: “The government is pursuing a range of cost containment and expenditure optimisation initiatives. Redesigning subsidies and the social safety net are critical components to helping contain future expenditure growth and capture savings opportunities.

“This initiative intends to reallocate the subsidy to the vulnerable and people who deserve it by gradually increasing the electricity and water tariffs and ensuring that support is provided for vulnerable populations.”

19pc uptick in foreign direct investment

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 13

The total foreign investment stock in the Sultanate grew by 12.1 per cent at the end of 2019, the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) stated in its latest 2019 Annual Report, citing provisional figures released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

Foreign direct investment (FDI) increased by 19 per cent and constituted a major part of the total foreign investment (accounting for 63.6 per cent) at the end of 2018.

Foreign investment, other than FDI, increased by 2.0 per cent during 2018 and accounted for 36.4 per cent of total foreign investment stock.

During recent years, the main sectors that attracted the largest share of FDI remained the same. The oil and gas sector received the largest share of 67.3 per cent, followed by financial intermediation with a share of 11.4 per cent. The total return on FDI (dividends plus retained earnings) declined slightly from 9.1 per cent in 2018 to 8.5 per cent in 2019, it noted.



“The government and other stakeholders have been continuously striving to promote diversification in the economy through increased participation of the private sector and foreign investors.

Oman provides excellent transportation and logistics infrastructure and a conducive business environment,” the apex bank stated.

TARGET SECTORS: The oil and gas sector received the largest share of 67.3 per cent, followed by financial intermediation with a share of 11.4 per cent

“Furthermore, Oman is strategically located in terms of accessibility and hence, it offers immense potential to become a gateway to the Gulf and Asia region for multinational companies (MNCs) and global value chains (GVCs).

“The government has implemented various structural reforms, including promulgation of several important laws related to Foreign Capital Investment, Privatisation, Public-Private Partnership, and Bankruptcy, in the recent past to improve the business environment and the functioning of the labour market so that Oman could provide a competitive edge to foreign investors.

These reforms coupled with existing potential and strategic location would facilitate higher inflows of FDI in the Sultanate, especially in nonhydrocarbon sectors,” the report added.

Leaders to push Brexit trade talks beyond latest deadline

BRUSSELS/LONDON: London and Brussels agreed on Sunday to more talks on an elusive trade agreement, even though they still have a long way to go to avert a turbulent ‘no deal’ exit for Britain from the European Union’s orbit at the end of the month.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and the president of the EU’s executive Commission, Ursula von der Leyen gave negotiators a Sunday deadline to find a way to resolve an impasse on arrangements that would guarantee Britain zero-tariff and zero-quota access to the EU’s single market.

Both said on Friday that a ‘no-deal’ was now the most likely outcome, but on Sunday they pledged to go “the extra mile”, mandating nego-

tiators to continue. “Despite the exhaustion after almost a year of negotiations, despite the fact that deadlines have been missed over and over we think it is responsible at this point to go the extra mile,” Prime Minister Boris Johnson and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said in a joint statement.

British Foreign Minister Dominic Raab said earlier the British side needed the EU to shift position on two issues. “We want to be treated like any other independent self-respecting democracy.

If the EU can accept that at a political level, then there’s every reason to be confident but there is still, I think, a long way to go,” he told Sky News. — **Reuters**

Oil, industrial bet on strong recovery in 2021

VACCINE and stimulus optimism continue to propel stock markets and commodities higher, and the dollar lower. Since the first of a several encouraging vaccine announcements on November 9 from Pfizer/BioNTech, many markets, especially stocks related to technology and a certain car company, have all behaved as if they have been injected by steroids.

Thereby creating market conditions which most of all resembles the weeks leading up to the bursting of the tech bubble two decades ago. With this in mind, we see an increased risk of the 'party' sooner or later being disrupted by a reality check.

Commodities, especially industrial metals, crude oil and

fuel products, have responded strongly to the prospects that already strong demand from Asia, led by China, will increase further once Europe and the US emerge from underneath the COVID-19 cloud. In doing so, some markets, especially the energy sector, have managed to shrug off a renewed slowdown in fuel demand as the coronavirus case count and number of deaths continue to rise.

Crude oil continues higher and during the past month both WTI and Brent, the two global benchmarks, have rallied by close to one-quarter. This week, Brent crude oil returned to \$50/b for the first time since Saudi Arabia's ill-timed price war declaration in early March.

Happening during a week where US inventories of oil surged and demand for fuel slowed further amid an out-of-control pandemic



highlights to what extent the market is prepared to look beyond weak short-term fundamentals towards expectations of a brisk vaccine-led recovery, primarily towards the second half of 2021.

Given the way Brent has behaved since June around the key technical Fibonacci levels highlighted in the chart, it makes sense to expect that the market

may now try to consolidate around current levels.

While the stock price of energy companies can rally in the expectations of a future recovery in oil prices and earnings, the physical oil market needs to balance on a daily basis in order to avoid a price negative inventory build-up.

Given the current headwind

from lockdowns across the world, the price of oil currently risks running too far ahead of what can be justified by current fundamentals.

Gold continued to consolidate with the current lack of momentum into the low liquidity time of year raising the risk of increased volatility. Especially after its return to relative safety above \$1850/oz lasted less than a day.

Silver, meanwhile, also turned lower after being forcefully rejected at \$24.80/oz. As mentioned, we have entered the time of year where profits are being defended and where a lack of momentum can cause some major price swings.

Markets that currently lacking momentum are precious metals and more recently platinum, while copper has yet to break levels

that may cause a sweat among speculators holding elevated long positions.

Industrial metals prices continued to rally this past week with traders in Asia driving key commodities from copper to iron ore to fresh seven-year highs. Iron ore has jumped by more than 40 per cent and on Friday it reached \$160/tonnes in Singapore before some profit taking emerged.

This was driven higher by a cocktail of lower supply estimates from Vale, the world's biggest producer, after November shipments from Brazil dropped to a six-month low, robust Chinese demand from infrastructure stimulus which has run down inventories and not least speculation which is currently running wild.

[Ole S Hansen is Head of Strategy at Saxo Bank]

SPOTLIGHT

Weekly 'Made in Oman' series



Gulf Advanced Industries Company

What do you make?

We design, develop and produce our own high quality sanitary ware as well as environmentally friendly water and energy saving bathroom and kitchen fittings. We have also developed an overall plumbing system using the latest technology to deliver sustainable and high quality services within the Sultanate.



If local companies want to develop and thrive, they have to apply innovative ideas

ABDULLAH AL BALUSHI,
Founder & CEO,
Gulf Advanced Industries

Where are your markets?

We focus mainly on the market in Oman for our design and development services. However, we have received orders from GCC countries and have exported to UAE and Qatar. We very much hope to expand the export side of our business.

Tell us about yourself

I am an engineer who initially entered the retail business without any experience at all. I imported products from China and Turkey. Even though the products were selected carefully, the specifications were very high and I supervised everything directly during the manufacturing process, the market did not really accept our products because of where they were made.

Have you had challenges?

Financial losses started mounting but I was determined not to give up. I decided to stop importing and start manufacturing in Oman with the expectation that customers

would accept locally made products.

After an enormous amount of hard work we found prospective investors to establish an assembly line here in Oman and I found a few customers. We opened a small workshop and started our operation.

Unfortunately, luck was not on our side again. We found operation costs were higher than we anticipated and we just could not succeed in our attempt to start a new assembly line in Oman. This second failure was very hard for us to bear.

Did you get local support?

We went to the Industrial

Innovation Centre (IIC) to look at how we could develop our products before introducing them to the market and in that way make a difference. We first met them in 2017 and got support through their Company Innovation Program. But our concept did not meet their requirements as it did not have innovative value.

Happily, IIC, asked to speak to us again and encouraged us to keep going. They gave us invaluable advice and put us on the path to innovation, marketing our products and selling them.

They told us to focus on market pain-points and provide innovative solutions to problems customers faced. We took this on board and went back to them with new ideas.

Today, I am proud to say we locally produce items with features that no-one else in the market offers. The company is moving in the right direction and doing well.

Local Green Innovation

An eco-conscious, energy-saving bath and shower mixer is one of our innovations. By providing easy access to the cartridge of the faucet for future replacement if needed, we solved the problem of changing the whole body.

This means clients can easily maintain the mixer without the help of a plumber or a third party. This is great news for the environment as it reduces

demands on Earth's limited metal resources and reduces the amount of items put into landfills.

The mixer is also environmentally friendly in terms of the way it is produced and its low energy and water consumption.

The new aerator/nozzle has been developed with a minimal and stable flow rate to save both water and energy. This provides a high efficiency wash with maximum savings by limiting the water usage up to 30 per cent of normal taps.

What's been the local response?

The Omani market wants products like this. We get lots of positive reactions. But I do think people need to be made more aware about just how necessary resource, energy and water innovations like this are. They are kind to the planet and wallet.

Any advice?

Innovation is the future and innovation will make a difference. In the coming years lots of businesses will close and leave the market if they are not aware about the importance of innovation. If local companies want to develop and thrive, they have to apply innovative ideas. To entrepreneurs, I would say work hard and be innovative and never give up even if you find extreme challenges. To green entrepreneurs in particular, I would say keep going – our planet needs you.

Businesses expect post-pandemic life to be different: Survey

KEY FINDINGS:
Two-thirds say pandemic has made it harder to know what is going on in their business



BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 13

Most businesses around the world expect working life to be different in the future, a survey by chartered accountancy body ICAEW has found.

In a report published on Sunday, based on a survey with chartered accountants from more than 50 countries, the shift to remote and flexible working was mostly seen as positive experience, ICAEW said.

Nine in 10 businesses felt working life would look different in the future, compared to pre-pandemic times.

A far greater reliance on remote working during the pandemic, and the risks of staff feeling isolated, meant support for employee mental health and wellbeing was more important than before, the report said. Just under half respondents said the pandemic had had a negative impact on mental health, while two-fifths believed organisations found it difficult to keep up staff morale.

Flexibility around working hours and having a greater awareness of colleagues' personal obligations were key to supporting mental health, the report said. Nevertheless, most respondents said the shift to remote working was a positive experience, as was the acceleration in technology it brought with it.

Half of those surveyed said bringing on board new employees had been difficult because aspects of 'on-boarding' new hires was more challenging when done remotely. As a result, members said they wanted to see a return to in-person interviews and induction processes.

In a climate where new and young employees had missed

out on the benefit of face-to-face interactions, ICAEW said organisations must actively pursue mentoring, guidance and formal training to help build their practical experience.

The report also examined the value that face-to-face interactions can add to organisations. Half of survey respondents said that the pandemic posed challenges when engaging new clients and building relationships, while just under half thought it was easy to maintain corporate culture.

The pandemic had underlined that organisations were ultimately dependent on people interacting, ICAEW said, and suggested that remote working could bring new dynamics to employee interaction. Remote working could change the perception of hierarchy, break down cross-country barriers and facilitate recruitment, the report added.

Three-quarters of respondents said their top operational challenge was forecasting, while two in three said the pandemic made it difficult to understand what was going on in their business.

Successful organisations must be aware of what's going on in their business, irrespective of whether employees are remote or office-based, the report said.

Michael Armstrong, FCA and ICAEW Regional Director for the Middle East, Africa and South Asia (MEASA), added: "In markets like the UAE, where early intervention has led to marketplaces and trade reopening sooner, there is a sense that the country is getting ahead of economic recovery.

And this bodes well for people wanting to return to the workplace where there is, perhaps, a greater desire for face-to-face interaction with colleagues because of the country's large expatriate workforce.

PRESS RELEASES

BANK MUSCAT ANNOUNCES COMPLETION OF GREEN SPORTS FIELDS IN AL BATINAH

Bank Muscat recently inaugurated 3 football fields as part of its Green Sports programme to teams in the Governorate of South Al Batinah. The bank celebrated the official opening of the Al Ogdah Sports Team's Green Sports Field in the Wilayat of Barka. The event was held in the presence of Hamad bin

Salim al Malki, Team Manager, and Adnan bin Ahmed al Balushi, Assistant Regional Manager – South Al Batinah, Bank Muscat.

The bank also celebrated the opening of the Al Ahli Sports Team's stadium in the Wilayat of Al Rustaq in the presence of Khalifa bin Salim Al Muqbali,

Team Secretary, and bank officials. A third field was handed over recently to the Al Mazahith Sports Team in Al Rustaq.

The event in Al Rustaq was attended by Salim bin Sulaiman al Salmani, Team Manager and senior bank officials.

Project completion certificates

were handed over to the respective teams at all the three events, which were organised in full compliance with social distancing norms.

Bank Muscat continues to hand-over more Green Sports fields to teams across the country as part of its efforts to support Omani youth and local communities.



In brief

■ PRAGUE

**CZECH GOVT BANS COFFEE-TO-GO DUE TO PANDEMIC**

Caffeine lovers in the Czech Republic could be facing a dry spell after their government introduced a ban on coffee-to-go in a bid to curb the coronavirus pandemic. The move prompted Czechs to voice their displeasure in the online comment sections of news websites.

“This is pure mockery,” wrote one Internet user. “I don’t have time to sit in the cafe in the morning before work,” complained another. Others responded with sarcasm, with one comment reading, “This will definitely save us from the pandemic.”

The Czech government approved the new resolution on Thursday, but due to unclear wording, some thought the ban was just an error.

■ KABUL

**WORLD BANK SENDS \$85 M TO AFGHANISTAN IN COVID-19 FIGHT**

Two grants totalling nearly \$85 million are going to Afghanistan to help the country expand its public services and fight COVID-19, the World Bank said.

The aid is part of a package of \$393 million in grants from the bank as it fights the economic slump brought on by the pandemic, as well as ongoing conflict there, according to a statement. Of the \$85 million, 50 million would finance a clean water project for Herat, Kabul and Kandhar provinces.

Combined with funding from another programme, that would budget \$200 million for the project. — **dpa**

■ LONDON

**ROLLS-ROYCE STARTS SEARCH FOR NEXT CHAIRMAN**

British aero-engine maker Rolls-Royce Holdings Plc is beginning a search for its next chairman, Sky News reported on Saturday.

Rolls-Royce’s board has begun the process of identifying a successor to Ian Davis, the report said, adding an appointment was unlikely to be announced until well into next year. “The chairman will have served nine years in March 2022 and it is best practice that he will stand down by then,” Rolls-Royce said in an e-mailed statement.

“The Board will ensure an orderly transition.”

Davis was appointed as chairman in May 2013, according to the company’s website. — **Reuters**

AstraZeneca to buy Alexion for \$39 bn to expand in immunology

EXPECTS DEAL TO IMMEDIATELY BOOST CORE EARNINGS

FRANKFURT: Britain’s AstraZeneca has agreed to buy US drugmaker Alexion Pharmaceuticals for \$39 billion in its largest ever deal, diversifying away from its fast-growing cancer business in a bet on rare-disease and immunology drugs.

Pharmaceuticals for \$39 billion in its largest ever deal, diversifying away from its fast-growing cancer business in a bet on rare-disease and immunology drugs.

The deal comes in a week that AstraZeneca said it was conducting further research to confirm whether its COVID-19 vaccine could be 90 per cent effective, potentially slowing its rollout, and as a rival shot from Pfizer was launched in Britain and approved for use in the United States.

The British company said on Saturday that Alexion shareholders would receive \$60 in cash and about \$115 worth of equity per share — either in AstraZeneca’s UK-traded ordinary shares or in dollar-denominated American Depositary Shares.

Based on a reference average ADR price of \$54.14, that implies



a total price of \$175 per share. Alexion shares closed at around \$121 apiece on Friday.

“It is a tremendous opportunity for us to accelerate our development in immunology, getting into a new segment of disease, a new segment of physicians, and patients we haven’t been able to cover so far,” AstraZeneca Chief Executive Pascal Soriot told a media call. Alexion’s best-selling drug is Soliris, used against a range of rare immune-disorders including paroxysmal nocturnal haemoglobinuria (PNH), which causes anaemia and blood clots,

and whose revenue rose 3.6 per cent in the first nine months to \$3 billion. AstraZeneca hopes that an improved version of Soliris called Ultomiris has an even larger market potential.

It expects more growth from introducing the target’s rare-disease treatments to China and other emerging markets.

The British firm said the boards of both companies had approved the deal, which is expected to close in the third quarter of 2021. AstraZeneca was once seen as leading the race to develop a COVID-19 vaccine, but has fallen



Chief Executive of AstraZeneca Pascal Soriot

behind Pfizer and its partner BioNTech, as well as Moderna, whose shots have shown greater efficacy in late-stage clinical trials.

With a planned capital increase of about \$25 billion after the deal closure, Soriot is looking to harness a strong advance by AstraZeneca stock, driven by the stellar growth of new cancer drugs. The shares have climbed about 70 per cent through the past three years.

A precursor cash call, on a much smaller scale, was a \$3.5 billion issue last year to fund the purchase of rights to cancer drug Enhertu from Daiichi Sankyo. — **Reuters**

Fed may convey optimism on US economy

WASHINGTON: After a year in which the Federal Reserve pushed out unprecedented lending to support the economy while pleading for government stimulus that never came, central bankers could show early signs of optimism next week.

The policy-setting Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) will open its final meeting of 2020 on Tuesday, capping a year that saw the world’s largest economy contract massively due to COVID-19, and Joe Biden oust President Donald Trump in the November presidential election.

The Fed and its chair Jerome Powell likely will, as usual, steer clear of making any political statement, but experts say they likely will update their view on how the economy will fare in 2021 as vaccines against the virus are rolled out.

However, the outlook is not

entirely clear.

“This is actually a pretty difficult FOMC to analyse,” Steven Englander of Standard Chartered Bank said. “Picking up the pieces is going to be more complicated and will kind of look more complicated in six months than it does now.”

Looming over the meeting is continued failure of Congress to pass another spending package to help the economy recover from the COVID-19 downturn — something Powell and other central bankers have gently but persistently urged them to do for months.

Powell will hold a press conference after the meeting ends on Wednesday, but beyond more prodding, there is little he can do to close the thus far gaps between Democratic and Republican lawmakers, Rubeela Farooqi of High Frequency Economics said. — **AFP**

■ DULL BUSINESS DUE TO COVID



A vendor steering her boat while looking for customers at The Damnoen Saduak floating market, nearly deserted with few tourists due to ongoing COVID-19 coronavirus travel restrictions, some 100km southwest of Bangkok. — **AFP**

France fines Google, Amazon 135 million euros

PARIS: France’s CNIL data privacy watchdog slapped 135 million euros in fines on US tech titans Google and Amazon for placing advertising cookies on users’ computers without consent.

The 100-million-euro fine against Google is the largest sanction the regulator has ever imposed, which it justified by the fact 90 per cent of French Internet users use the firm’s search engine.

CNIL said the fines were “for having placed advertising cookies on the computers of users ... without obtaining prior consent and without providing adequate information.”

A cookie is a small piece of data stored on a user’s computer browser that allows websites to identify



users and remember their previous activity. They are important for providing targeted advertising as well as improving user experience on websites.

The CNIL said when a user vis-

ited the website google.fr, several cookies used for advertising purposes were automatically placed on his or her computer, without any action required on the user’s part.

It said a similar thing happened when visiting one page on the amazon.fr website.

The regulator said “no matter what path the users used to visit the website, they were either insufficiently informed or never informed of the fact that cookies were placed on their computer.”

CNIL said the type of cookie used “can only be placed after the user has expressed his or her consent” and thus violated regulations on receiving prior consent.

It faulted Google for providing insufficient privacy information for users as it did not let them know about the cookies which had been placed and that the procedure to block them still left one

operational.

CNIL said after redesigns implemented in September 2020 the websites of both firms stopped placing cookies on computers without consent.

However, it rapped both for still not providing clear or complete information about the use of the cookies and the possibility to refuse them, ordering both to make changes within three months or face additional fines.

- French rules ‘uncertain’ -

CNIL imposed fines of 60 million euros on Google LLC and 40 million euros on Google Ireland Limited.

The 35-million-euro (\$42-million) fine is on the Amazon Europe Core subsidiary. — **AFP**

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■ LOST

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■ ANNOUNCEMENT

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features



All Shades of Blue: poetry book surrounding mental health

Shahd al Balushi, a 20-year-old Omani, fell in love with poetry years ago in school, when analysing poems in English class. She then began writing poetry at the age of 15. In 2017, she came first place in Penned Thoughts, The Annual Ali Mehdi Young Writers Competition in Oman... **P18**

INSIDE STORIES

CULTURE



WHEN MOUNTAINS CONNECT CULTURES

The mountainous topography of the Sultanate, which has been featured in international travelogues and pulled orophile from across the planet is truly a strong connector of cultures of nations that share similar landscape... **Story on Page P20**

E-LEARNING



ASSESSING REMOTELY (E-ASSESSMENT)

After the educational system in the Sultanate of Oman was transformed into an e-learning framework, a review of the inputs, processes and outputs of this new system is required. All around the world, when educational... **Story on Page 19**

READ



WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE

A young boy named Max who, after dressing in his wolf costume, wreaks such havoc through his household that he is sent to bed without his supper. Max's bedroom undergoes a mysterious transformation into a jungle environment, and he winds up sailing to an island inhabited by malicious beasts known as the "Wild Things." After successfully intimidating the creatures, Max is hailed as the king of the Wild Things and enjoys a playful romp with his subjects.

POPULAR SPORT



ESTONIANS PLUNGE INTO ICY WATER TO WARD OFF CORONAVIRUS BLUES

Over 500 swimmers swam in the near-freezing waters of Tallinn port in Estonia on Friday, taking part in a giant winter swimming relay in a country where the sport has been a popular way to counter the tedium of coronavirus restrictions... **Story on Page 19**

MUSIC



CARTOONS AND LIVE PERFORMERS COMBINE IN ONLINE GORILLAZ GIGS

Innovation has always been a hallmark of musician Damon Albarn and illustrator Jamie Hewitt's cartoon band Gorillaz, and now they are aiming to pull off something new in a series of live concerts that audiences can pay to stream into their homes. After releasing a web series this year, the band are gearing up to showcase new album 'Song Machine, Season One: Strange Timez' with three online shows in which human performers interact with animated characters.



BY MOUJ HIJAZI

Shahd al Balushi, a 20-year-old Omani, fell in love with poetry years ago in school, when analysing poems in English class. She then began writing poetry at the age of 15. In 2017, she came first place in Penned Thoughts, The Annual Ali Mehdi Young Writers Competition in Oman. Today, she has her own poetry book available for purchase.

Shahd, who also goes by the pen name Nectar B, is currently studying in Glasgow. When she heard that Speculative Books, a Scottish publishing company, were accepting poetry submissions, she wasted no time in sending hers in. Before she knew it, they asked her to send in a collection of her poems for publication.

The book, 'All Shades of Blue', acquired this name because to Shahd, the colour blue symbolises a range of things, from peace and healing to sadness and uncertainty. A fitting name for a poetry book encompassing themes of the ups and downs of mental health. It is comprised of Shahd's best work from 2016 up until now.

"I spent a month writing new poems to add to my old ones for the collection and sent it through. Then we worked together on refining it until we had the final draft ready in October and it was announced in November!", she said.

What attracted Shahd to poetry was the ability to express oneself while being vague, and its openness to interpretation.

"With poetry you can hide behind ambiguity, interpretations and symbolism, and still leave your reader pondering about the meaning. I loved that about poetry," Shahd explained.

"The poems tell a coming of age story that explores my mental health during the past few years, and also showcases my attempts at trying to live outside of my mother's shadow," shared Shahd.

She hopes that by sharing her poetry and mental health struggles, she is helping anybody dealing with similar issues, especially considering certain taboo topics.

"Because mental health is so stigmatised in our community, I wanted to let them know that they are not alone. I hope that this would encourage others to not be afraid of expressing themselves. It's important to have a healthy outlet like that."

Shahd also made sure to include warning for certain poems that are dark and potentially triggering to some.

She spoke of the poems striking a chord with readers. "I haven't heard much yet, but I do know of tears that have been shed."

"I really hope that my poems resonate with people because, ironically, I know what it's like to not know the words to express how you feel," she added.

But not all of Shahd's poetry is poignant. She writes about the things that she enjoys, too, and switches up her writing style. Some have been inspired by fictional characters, such as 'Dear Artist', or people she has observed, like 'The Laundry Room'.

"It's hard to pick a favourite when all of them mean so much to me. But if I had to pick one, it would be 'Grounded' because it reminds me of all the little things in life that bring me joy," said Shahd.

In terms of future plans, Shahd aspires to continue writing both poetry and prose, and expand into the world of fictional novels.

You can purchase 'All Shades of Blue' here: <https://www.speculativebooks.net/shop/shahd>

All Shades of Blue: poetry book surrounding mental health



The colour blue symbolises a range of things, from peace and healing to sadness and uncertainty



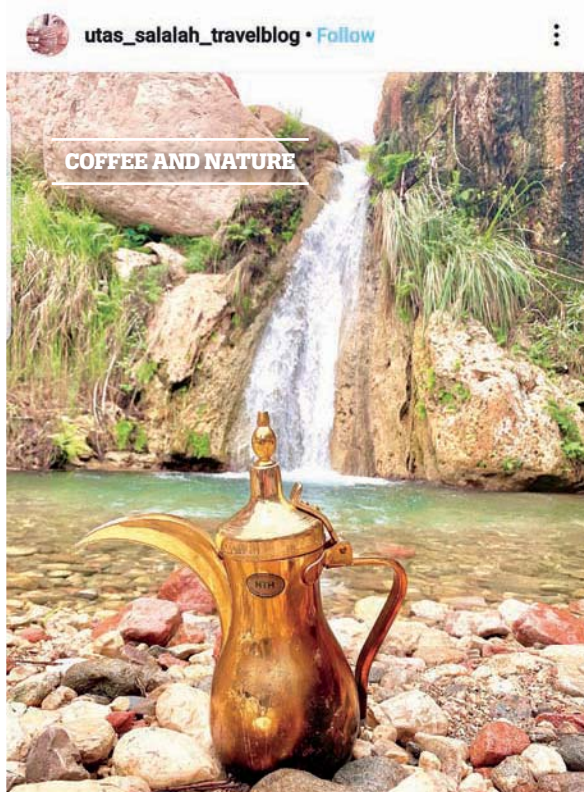


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INSTAGRAM TOP PICKS



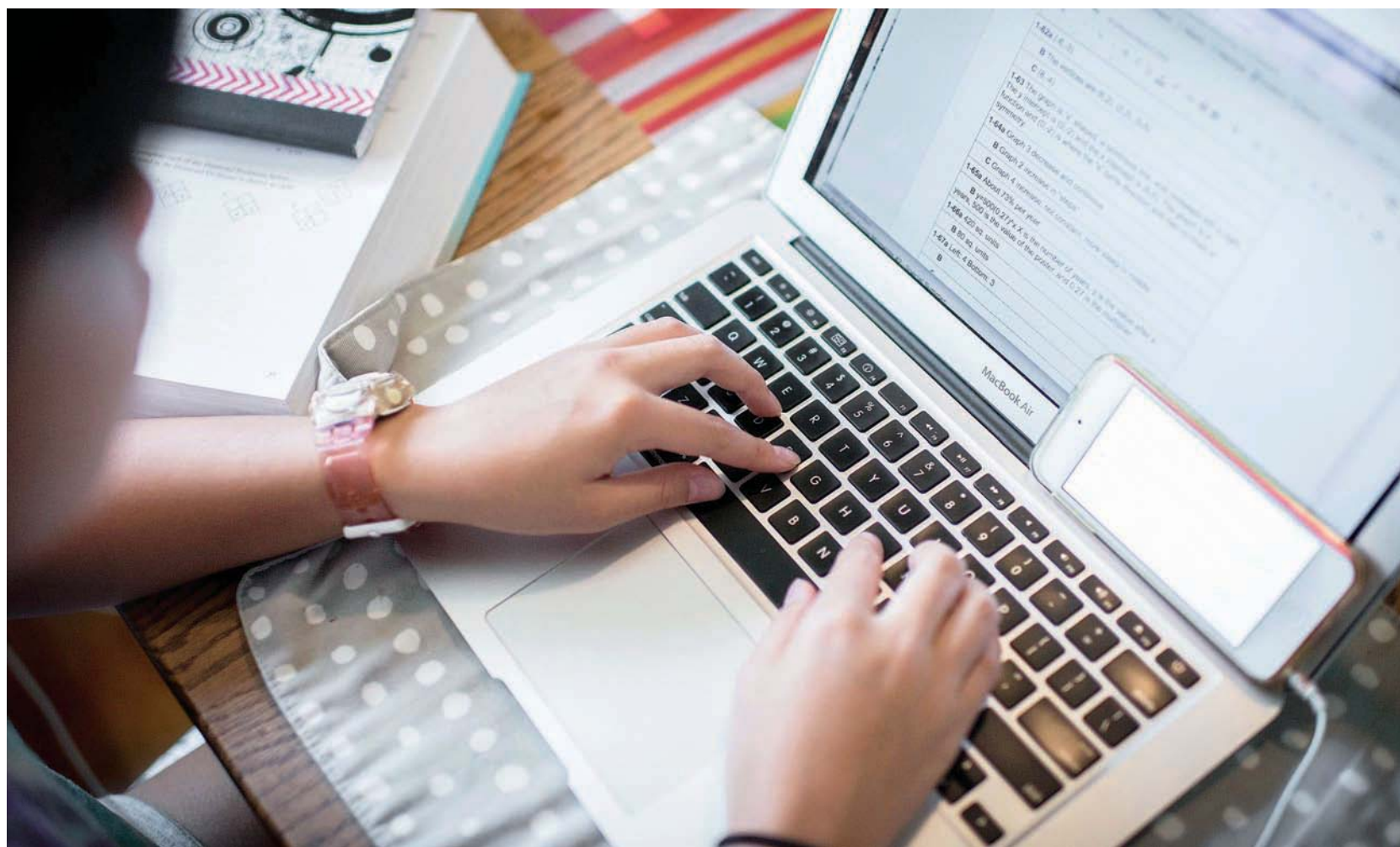
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E-LEARNING

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Assessing remotely (E-Assessment)

BY: DR ZAINAB AL-AJMI
ZEINBF@MOE.OM

After the educational system in the Sultanate of Oman was transformed into an e-learning framework, a review of the inputs, processes and outputs of this new system is required. All around the world, when educational institutions moved their classes online during the COVID-19 pandemic, activities, applications and programmes in teaching and distance learning have largely changed as a result. Consequently, the student assessment process needs to be fairly and obviously revised in this form of remote teaching.

E-learning has grown significantly, especially in educational institution by given the advent of distance learning, online teaching and virtual universities,

thus, the e-assessment has taken a prominent place in effective teaching and meeting the learners' educational needs, which extremely requires the regular processing programmes of the learning assessment has been change especially the self-evaluation of the learner. There are three classifications of assessment: assessment for learning, assessment as learning and assessment of learning. In assessment for learning, current situation is assessed.

This type of assessment actually provides teachers with the obvious progress of their students' learning in the light of their needs and their teaching pattern. Assessment as learning, in contrast, helps students to become active in the process of assessing their learning and to create associative relationships between what they are learning and their previous knowledge. As a result, the knowledge

they acquire becomes meaningful for the learner. In assessment of learning, the aim is to find out the academic achievement as indicated by the final product of the students' assessment process.

Hence, the assessment has been a paradigm shift, and unlike traditional assessments such as homework, essays and multiple-choice (MCQ), remote assessments include a realistic assessment of students' achievement through portfolios, self-assessment, peer-assessment and project-based assessment. According to Sattar (2020, 15, 17), projects and independent or jigsaw puzzles are trusted as the most effective assessment tools for distance learning. In addition, "the effective Online Assessment it takes one of two forms: Real-world assessment which requiring students to engage in actual situations in their field, and the realis-

tic assessment which relevant in nature, yet students engage in situations that mimic the real world".

To sum up, E-assessment in present decade has played a pivotal role in the schools and universities, since all studies enumerates the advantages of e-assessment such as: "Increased motivation for students through the use of media-rich elements in assessment, support for preferences in different learning styles and assessment approaches, and Immediate feedback to students". The educators should be changing their traditional learning style and assessment tools to suit the subjects' content and outcomes by designing an affective online tools.

This new framework of evaluation enhancing the wellbeing of students and should not stress students, to ensure that the learner becomes an interactive character in the self-assessment process.

Estonians plunge into icy water to ward off coronavirus blues



OVER 500 SWIMMERS

swam in the near-freezing waters of Tallinn port in Estonia on Friday, taking part in a giant winter swimming relay in a country where the sport has been a popular way to counter the tedium of coronavirus restrictions.

The 505 participants each swam the course of 25 metres (27 yards) marked out in a former

the below-freezing air.

He believed the sport provided good protection against COVID-19.

"When you're doing this, your body produces extra white blood cells. So, if a virus comes in, there are more white blood cells to attack it and kill it," he said.

Dozens of spectators cheered along the course, many from hot tubs and mobile saunas



submarine dockyard, taking 4 hours and 50 minutes to do so.

The swimmers, many attired with funny hats, ranged from a 9-year old boy to an 83-year old woman, and included a pregnant woman who joked her effort should be counted for two.

"It's actually a smart thing to do at this moment", Roy Viissers, one of the swimmers, said after emerging from the 4 Celsius (39.2 Fahrenheit) waters into

set up along the side.

Aivar Tugedam, a winter swimming enthusiast who organised the event, said he had seen the sport grow in popularity since Estonia first went into a coronavirus lockdown in spring.

"Let's say from spring until now, I would say the count of the winter swimmers have tripled in Estonia.

It's gone wild and really popular", he said.

— Reuters



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The mountainous topography of the Sultanate, which has been featured in international travelogues and pulled orophile from across the planet is truly a strong connector of cultures of nations that share similar landscape.

Be it snowy mammoths of the west or the rocky wilderness of the Middle East or the greeny heights of Asia, there are some common features and sharp resemblances of cultures of people living on the heights or at the foothills that bind them together.

Taking a classic example of Switzerland which has huge mountainous terrain vis-à-vis the Sultanate, not only the beauty of their mountains has been a main attraction for tourists, but the characteristic landmark shaping the topography of both countries has helped form the farming culture in a significant way.

"Mountains are not just a décor, their powerful presence shapes the minds and aspirations of the people living there. And their sometimes harsh environment requires, as nature in general, due respect," avers Ambassador Balz Abplanalp, the Swiss diplomatic representative to the Sultanate.

To celebrate and to pay due respects to the key role played by mountains in shaping the cultures and providing livelihood of a populace on the occasion of the International Mountain Day on December 11, the Embassy of Switzerland in Oman has prepared two projects.

"We have produced a short film, presenting a mountain farmer in Oman and a family farming in Switzerland. We asked them both the same questions."

The film shows Al Azhari Zaif Mohammed al Zakwani from Jebel Akhdhar as well as Ueli and Christine Erb from Switzerland, mountain farmers who have shared their experience on living and making a living in the mountains. While they have a different cultural background, their experiences and their views on farming in the mountains are surprisingly similar.

They were asked what the mountains do mean to them, how they did shape their identity, how

farming in the mountains is different from farming in the plains, and how they see the future of mountain farming.

"Their answers were surprisingly similar. They both have a strong attachment to the mountain environment that has been passed along through generations. Their surroundings pose additional challenges to their work," adds Balz Abplanalp.

According to Ueli, the Swiss who was interviewed, to farm successfully in the mountains, one needs to have a deep understanding of the environment.

"You need to listen to what the mountains tell you and can't just get going with your work without taking into consideration the constantly changing requirements of the setting."

Both farmers see it as an important task to cultivate and maintain an intact environment. With their work, they make an invaluable contribution to the biodiversity of the mountains. Biodiversity is the topic the United Nations have selected for this year's celebration of the International Mountain Day.

"The second project is a regional art installation of the artwork "Constructed Yearning" by Swiss Artist Aline Stalder. When she moved from the mountains to the plains in 2017, she painted a 16 metre long mountain panorama to bring the beloved mountains with her."

This panorama has now been cut into seven fragments and sent to different countries throughout the region besides Oman. They are Iran, Lebanon, Morocco, Switzerland where mountains are a characteristic feature. One of them has arrived in Oman and is thus creating a link between this country, Switzerland and the wider region.

The short film that the embassy has produced on the occasion of the International Mountain Day aims to show this common influence on the identity of people living in the mountains. Pomegranate and Cheese - Farming in the mountains of Oman and Switzerland.

Also, both Switzerland and Oman have a vast net of hiking trails that could connect in a way or another. "And we can try to learn from each other on how to encourage a sustainable use of the mountains that helps to protect their unique biodiversity and includes the people living in the mountains," Abplanalp hopes.

