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EXPECT OMAN TO DELIVER TOP-CLASS EVENT: AHF CEO
GO TO PAGE 16 SPORTS

Oman crude price back to pre-pandemic level of \$70

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The price of Oman's crude oil has recovered to its pre-pandemic levels having hit the highest mark in the past 18 months.

Oman crude crossed the important psychological mark of US\$70 per barrel on Thursday and extended gains to reach US\$70.38 per barrel on Friday at Dubai Mercantile Exchange (DME).

Oman crude, a major benchmark for Middle Eastern oils, has seen strong

growth recently. The last time the price of Oman crude was this high, the sultanate was about to confirm its first COVID-19 case.

The rising trend in oil prices comes amid optimism over a vaccine-led global economic recovery and effective coordination and commitment by major OPEC and non-OPEC producers (OPEC+) to restrain supply of crude.

The global benchmark Brent crude rose 0.8 per cent on Friday to settle at US\$71.89 per barrel, after touching US\$72.17, its highest since May 2019.

The US benchmark West Texas Intermediate crude on Friday rose 1.2 per cent to US\$69.62 per barrel, its highest since October 2018.

The rally in oil prices comes after OPEC+ confirmed its production plan last week amid optimism of increased consumption in a reopening global economy. On Tuesday, OPEC+ agreed to continue lifting output in July, having started slowly doing so in early May.

According to a statement issued by DME, the monthly trading volumes for Oman crude futures contract during

May (for July delivery) reached 92.65mn barrels, an average daily volume of 4.63mn barrels.

DME stated that the official average price of Oman crude in May (for July delivery) reached US\$66.40 per barrel, which confirms a recovery of Oman crude price to its pre-pandemic levels.

Higher oil prices, if sustained at around US\$70 per barrel levels, are expected to provide much needed room for the government to improve its fiscal position

and reduce budget deficits this year.

The average price at which Oman sold its crude oil during the first four months of 2021 was US\$52.4 per barrel compared with US\$62 in the same period last year.



► NEWS BRIEFS

HM GREETES KING OF SWEDEN

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of congratulations to King Carl XVI Gustaf of Sweden, on his country's National Day. In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan wished the king good health and happiness and the friendly Swedish people further progress and prosperity.

HM GREETES QUEEN OF DENMARK

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik sent a cable of congratulations to Queen Margrethe II of Denmark on Friday, on her country's National Day. In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan wished the queen good health and happiness and the friendly Danish people further progress and prosperity.

MERCURY CLOSE TO 50°C

Muscat - The mercury almost touched 50°C in a few places in Oman on Friday, while there was no letting up in the heat on Saturday with temperatures again rising to a high of 49°C. According to the Directorate General of Meteorology, this year's highest temperature so far was experienced in Sunaynah (49.8°C) on Friday.



Commercial Bank plans majority stake in NBO



Facebook revises rules; imposes ban on Trump



Lockdowns ease as daily case count falls in India

CALL FOR MEDICAL ADVANCES TO FIGHT FUTURE PANDEMICS

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that health security is no less important than food or water security. It is one of the most vital sectors that needs to be consolidated with new projects that can help Oman protect its people.

The pandemic has revealed the urgent need to delve into medical advancements and innovation to make Oman self-reliant and fight any future pandemic.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, Hilal bin Hamad al Sarimi, chairman of the Health and Environmental Committee of Majlis A'Shura, said that health security is a 'national issue' that needs the attention and efforts of everyone. "We need to establish factories to produce medicines and medical supplies because Oman has a severe shortage of such material."

For any country to achieve health security, it must meet between 50 and 70 per cent of its medical supply needs, Sarimi noted. The sultanate currently produces about ten per cent of its medical needs. "We also need advanced medical research laboratories to provide vaccines to confront any pandemic or disease. We have a shortage of hospital beds and emergency

health services."

He observed that there is urgent need of qualified staff to deal with crises like pandemics.

"We also need financial stability in order to procure medicines and medical supplies, especially in times of pandemics. Pharmaceutical and vaccine research centres can eventually evolve to support the national economy. It is also necessary to learn from international experiences in the field of pharmaceutical research while utilising the Omani competencies," said Sarimi.

He informed that His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik recently issued Royal Orders to establish an integrated centre for examination of infectious diseases, which he said was a timely decision considering the ongoing pandemic.

Elaborating on the concept of global public health security, Dr Hamad al Senawi, senior consultant in the Department of Behavioural Medicine at Sultan Qaboos University Hospital, said it is defined as the activities required, both proactive and reactive, to minimise the danger and impact of acute public health events that endanger people's health across geographical regions and international boundaries.

"Health security is an important issue, especially in light of the spread of epidemics from one country to another with the movement of individuals and goods across borders, which poses a threat to populations in various countries.

"Therefore, states and governments seek to create a mechanism for joint cooperation in detecting and reporting the presence of infectious diseases and creating accurate examination techniques. Health security includes enacting quarantine laws based on standardised scientific studies," Dr Senawi said.

Continued on Page 03



We need to establish factories to produce medicines and medical supplies because Oman has a severe shortage of such material

HILAL AL SARIMI

Sayyid Badr, Blinken discuss regional peace



H E Sayyid Badr al Busaidi



Antony J Blinken

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman's commitment to the Palestinian cause was at the forefront last week with Dr Mohammad Shtayyeh, Prime Minister of the State of Palestine, and his accompanying delegation visiting Oman for three days.

Dr Shtayyeh and Riyad Najeeb al Maliki, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates of Palestine, left the sultanate on Thursday. However, the Palestinian issue was the main topic of discussion when Antony J Blinken, US Secretary of State, called H E Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidi, Foreign Minister, on Friday.

"Spoke today with (H E) Sayyid Badr al Busaidi, Omani Foreign Minister, on the importance of building regional peace, stability and prosperity, and ensuring that both Palestinians and Israelis can live in safety and security," Blinken tweeted.

In a tweet H E Sayyid Badr said, "We appreciate the efforts and active engagement of Secretary Blinken for peace and security in the Middle East. We share a common commitment to resolving all regional issues for the benefit and prosperity of all."

According to the US Department of State, the Secretary and

Foreign Minister discussed efforts to reduce risks of further conflict between Israel, Hamas and other parties in Gaza. Secretary Blinken also affirmed the US' commitment to a two-state solution and underscored that Palestinians and Israelis equally deserve to live in safety and security and with dignity.

In addition, both the leaders noted the importance of an immediate, comprehensive ceasefire to help bring the war in Yemen and the humanitarian suffering of the Yemeni people to an end.

Political session

H E Sayyid Badr held a session of political talks with Maliki on Thursday. The session reviewed the bilateral relations between the two countries and means of promoting them. It also discussed the recent developments in Jerusalem and the occupied Palestinian territories.

H E Sayyid Badr underscored the solidarity of the sultanate's government and people with Palestine, reiterating Oman's stance of support to the Palestinian cause in establishing an independent country with East Jerusalem as its capital, as per the two-state solution and relevant international resolutions.

43% of Omani population under 18; 11,062 children own land

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The number of Omani children under 18 years in the sultanate was 1,185,059 or 43 per cent of the total Omani population, according to data of an electronic census conducted in 2020.

The governorates of Muscat and North Batinah account for 39 per cent of the total children population, according to the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

The data indicated that the total number of nurseries in the sultanate in

2020 was 326 with 933 boys and girls enrolled, which was a drop of 89 per cent compared to 2019 when 8,301 were enrolled.

The number of children enrolled in pre-school education (kindergarten) was 37,939 in 2020, of which 71 per cent were in private schools and 29 per cent in public schools.

The data for the academic year 2020/2021 also indicated that the number of students enrolled in school education in public and private institutions was 695,771 male and female students. This number did not include



(For illustrative purpose)

kindergartens, international schools and schools of foreign communities.

The number of children with disabili-

ties in Oman was 10,880 (one per cent of the total students), of which 58 per cent were male. Hearing impairment

was the most common disability among children - 2,601 - followed by physical disabilities (2,436).

Fourteen per cent of children under 13 years used at least one social media platform, with YouTube used by 76 per cent of the total, followed by WhatsApp (28 per cent), Instagram (14 per cent), and Snapchat (eight per cent).

According to the data, 11,062 children under the age of 18 owned land, of which 55 per cent were male. The governorates of Muscat and North Batinah accounted for the maximum number of children who owned land - 42 per cent.

WORLD ENVIRONMENT DAY

Work on to update environment law

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Environment Authority (EA) is working on updating the Law for the Protection of Environment and Prevention of Pollution, according to H E Dr Abdullah bin Ali al Omari, EA's chairman.

H E Omari informed that a working group of officials from EA and legal experts and specialists in various fields are currently working on putting the final touches to the draft law.

"It will take into account all environmental variables locally and regionally, including the preservation of ecosystems as well as the assessment of environmental assets. It will also take note of the comprehensive economic development in the sultanate which is witnessing an accelerated growth," he said.

H E Omari's comments came in an interview to ONA on the occasion of the World Environment Day, which is celebrated annually on June 5. It is the



(Supplied photos)

United Nations' principal vehicle for encouraging awareness and action for the protection of the environment.

The theme for World Environment Day 2021 is 'Ecosystem Restoration' and will see the launch of the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration. Ecosystem restoration can take many forms: Growing trees, greening cities, rewilding gardens, changing diets or cleaning up rivers and coasts.

H E Omari stressed that the law will set general determinants. "There are teams working to update specialised regulations in various environmental fields, whether in investment, protection or procedural, and it will take into account every detail, including some sanctions or penalties, which instead of including monetary sums, may include some environmental action that enhances habitats and ecosystems."



It will also take note of the comprehensive economic development in the sultanate which is witnessing an accelerated growth

H E DR ABDULLAH
AL OMARI

He added that "the authority is trying, as much as possible, for the law to include reward and punishment," noting that "there are some institutions that have

made clear progress in environmental obligations and therefore they must be rewarded".

This year, the World Environment Day celebrations call for urgent measures to revive and restore damaged ecosystems so that people can obtain food, clean water and livelihoods.

"Oman is one of the countries which has come a very long way in the environmental field. The sultanate drew early attention to its environment, the natural habitats and the preservation of its ecosystems, and has remained one of the pioneers in the environmental field," H E Omari said.

According to the UN, the world loses enough forest to cover a football pitch every three seconds and over the last century human beings have destroyed half of the wetlands.

"As much as 50 per cent of our coral reefs have already been lost and up to 90 per cent of coral reefs could be lost by 2050, even if global warming is limited to an increase of 1.5°C."



(Muscat Daily)

Over 18,000 land plots allotted in April

Our Correspondent
Muscat

More than 18,000 plots of land were allotted to citizen by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning in April this year.

A statement said, 'The ministry allotted 18,329 properties during the month of April 2021, at a rate of more than

916 title deeds per day.'

According to the ministry, the highest number of land allotments were in Muscat governorate (4,204), followed by North Batinah (3,628), South Batinah (3,215), North Sharqiyah (1,214), Dhahirah (1,247), South Sharqiyah (948), Dhofar (828), Buraimi (367), Al Wusta (195) and Musandam (166).

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Areej Mohsin Haider Darwish
Chairperson, MHD ACERE

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Vaccination drive for second dose begins today

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Health (MoH) will start a nation-wide immunisation campaign on June 6 for those due for the second dose of COVID-19 vaccine.

MoH has stated that it plans to cover the entire target group who are 12 years and older, which is equivalent to 70 per cent of the population. 'This will be carried out in stages in accordance with the national strategy for immunisation against COVID-19 developed by the ministry.'

For June, MoH has prioritised students of General Education Diploma and supervisory staff, health workers in the private sector who have not received the vaccine, employees in vital sectors such as oil and gas, airports and ports, as well government employees, Royal Oman Police and Sultan's Armed Forces.

The target group will be expanded to include adults aged 45 years and older during the third week of June.

MoH confirmed that the immunisation campaign for civil and defence sector employees and workers in private sector health institutions will begin on June 6 in North Sharqiyah governorate.

52,892 students, teachers vaccinated

As many as 52,892 General Education Diploma students, teachers and allied staff were vaccinated against COVID-19 vaccine between May 26 to June 3.

With this, MoH and the Ministry of Education have completed 70 per cent of the target group of 75,730 people.

Muscat governorate recorded the highest number of vaccinated individuals (13,588) - coverage rate of 80 per cent - followed by North Batinah (9,933 people or

72 per cent of the target group) and Dakhliyah (8,101 people or 77 per cent of the target group).

1,173 new cases of COVID-19

MoH reported 1,173 new cases of COVID-19 and 15 related deaths on Thursday. With these latest figures, the total number of cases registered in the sultanate has reached 220,702, and deaths - 2,385.

The total number of recoveries is 202,021, accounting for a recovery rate is 91.5 per cent.

There were a total of 871 inpatients on Thursday, including 140 admitted during a 24-hour period on the day. Of the total hospitalisations, 264 were in intensive care.

In the meanwhile, MoH has confirmed that a person who has been vaccinated against COVID-19 can donate blood soon after being immunised.

YEMEN FOREIGN MINISTER IN OMAN



Ahmed Awad bin Mubarak, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates Affairs of the Republic of Yemen, arrived in Oman on Saturday for an official visit that will last several days. The minister and his accompanying delegation were received by Dr Khalid bin Said al Jaradi, head of the Protocol Department in Foreign Ministry (ONA)

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OCEC set to resume its services following Supreme Committee nod

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre (OCEC) is preparing to resume services by hosting a series of events following the approval from the Supreme Committee on COVID-19 to restart the conferences and exhibitions sector.

Hailing the decision, Saeed al Shanfari, CEO of the OCEC, said, "The centre will offer an appropriate venue to hold events in partnership with local, regional and international event organisers, who are looking forward to hosting these exceptional events through a new set of services and facilities."

He stressed that the OCEC will be committed to ensuring the safety of attendees and guests by adopting strict health and safety standards in all operations, and preventive measures will include



temperature checks before entering, and social distancing in waiting and meeting places.

He pointed out that the re-opening of the centre will be accompanied by the introduction of a wide range of new services and facilities for customers, including a set of new and improved audiovisual equipment and processes.

"Arrangements will be made to host events where public can attend in limited numbers, while live broadcasting facilities will be

offered for larger events."

The Oman Chamber of Commerce & Industry (OCCI), too, has welcomed the decision. Its Exhibitions and Conferences Committee held several meetings with stakeholders in the last

few months. The meetings discussed the issue of financial compensation, and committee members urged Oman Development Bank (ODB) to provide companies with reasonable guarantees to mitigate the effects that exhibition and conference organisers faced due to the pandemic.

The committee demanded exemptions in government fees, rents and tax, in addition to discounts from the OCEC when activities resume.

The committee suggested the exhibitions sector be included in ODB and Raffd Fund for loans to SMEs to help these companies get financial compensation.

Redha bin Jumrah al Saleh, chairman of the Board of Directors of the OCCI, had tweeted, "The exhibitions and conferences sector is a significant element of economic diversification, and plays an important role in the development and enhancement of the national income. It achieves the goals of sustainable economic development. We'll support the sector according to the available investment opportunities."

Call for medical advances to fight future pandemics

Continued from Page 01

Dr Senawi stressed on the need for Oman to participate in activating international agreements that include precautionary measures to limit the spread of pandemics. He included the provision of vaccines with proven efficacy to all citizens and residents according to scientific guidelines to achieve herd immunity under health security.

"Health and media agencies contribute to reminding individuals to follow physical distancing, sanitising hands frequently and wearing masks to reduce the spread of disease and refuting rumors about the negative effects of vaccines," Senawi said.

For Dr Suleiman Zahir al Shuraiqi, senior specialist at the National Diabetes and Endocrine Centre, health security depends on the provision of medicines and establishing medical stores for this, and access to medical equipment of all kinds to medical cadres. "Pandemics create medical needs of all kinds. Oman has health services, but it needs a centre to combat pandemics and for the continuous education and training of its health workers," Dr Shuraiqi said.

The sultanate has five facilities for the production of medicines and medical equipment. Plans for the establishment of five more are being worked on. According to a strategic plan of the Ministry of Health, efforts are on to raise local production of medical supplies and equipment to meet 20 per cent of the sultanate's needs by the end of 2025 and up to 50 per cent by 2050.

PRAYER TIMINGS	
Fajr	3.50am
Sunrise	5.19am
Duhr	12.05pm
Asr	3.24pm
Maghrib	6.51pm
Isha	8.21pm

RAFO CONDUCTS MEDICAL EVACUATION



A Royal Air Force of Oman (RAFO) aircraft conducted a medical evacuation at sea for a crew member of a transiting merchant ship off the coast of Salalah on Saturday. The patient, who was in critical health condition, was transferred from the ship belonging to the People's Republic of China 40 nautical miles south of Salalah in Dhofar governorate, to Salalah for treatment (Supplied photo)

CPA warns against PCR test price hike in private institutes

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Consumer Protection Authority (CPA) has cautioned the private health sector to adhere to the costs set by the Ministry of Health (MoH) for various laboratory tests related to COVID-19. The authority will follow up on the costs and inspect health institutions for strict adherence, the CPA stated in a circular.

"In view of the measures taken by the sultanate's government to limit the spread of the COVID-19, and the establishment of a mechanism for regulating the costs of COVID-19 examinations in private health institutions by the MoH, and out of the belief

The cost for RTPCR test for which report is issued in one to two days is RO15. For (Point of Care) POC-PCR test, with report due within a day, the cost is RO25 and for RDT antigen test it is RO7

that the authority has complementary role for joint action between government agencies, we would like to draw everyone's attention to the fact that the au-

thority will follow up on the prices in health institutions for COVID-19 examinations that the ministry has set.

The authority called on private health institutions to adhere to the prices set by the MoH according to its circular No 16/2021, which guarantees the right of the recipient of health services and protects them from exploitation.

According to the Directorate General of Private Health Establishments, the MoH, the cost for RTPCR test for which report is issued in one to two days is RO15. For (Point of Care) POC-PCR test, with report due within a day, the cost is RO25 and for RDT antigen test it is RO7.

UK to allow flights from Oman starting June 8; Oman Air to fly to Phuket

Our Correspondent
Muscat

United Kingdom will allow direct flights from Oman starting June 8, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) of the UK government has announced.

"From June 8, direct flights can arrive in England from Oman, but they must arrive at dedicated terminals at Heathrow and Birmingham airports. Different requirements may apply for arrivals into Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland," stated FCDO.

It also said that Oman is still on the UK's Red List, which means that anyone who has been in the sultanate in the last ten days will only be allowed to enter the UK if he/she is a British or Irish national, or has residence



rights in the UK.

People travelling back to the UK from Red List countries must take a pre-departure COVID-19 test, book a quarantine hotel package, including two COVID-19 tests, and complete a passenger locator form.

On June 3, Oman announced an extension of the travel ban

from a host of countries including the UK.

Oman Air to fly to Phuket

Oman Air is planning direct flights to Phuket, Thailand, from July 1, subject to government approvals.

The Supreme Committee on

June 3 announced inclusion of Thailand in the travel ban list, in addition to Malaysia and Vietnam. The ban came into effect on Saturday, June 5.

According to informed sources in Oman Air, the national carrier will fly to Phuket from July 1. The sources were hopeful of the travel ban being lifted.

Carrefour raises over RO12,700 to support needy

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Carrefour donated over RO12,700 to the Dar al Atta'a to support needy families.

During the holy month of Ramadan, Carrefour partnered with Dar al Atta'a, to continue the brand's mission towards

supporting the growth and prosperity of the communities it operates in.

Carrefour donated all the money raised from the sale of its '50bz sustainable reusable bags' to help local families in need. Over 240,000 sustainable bags were purchased during the campaign.

Alain Enjalbert, country manager of Carrefour Oman, Majid al Futaim, said, "In the spirit of giving and compassion, the 'Together we share' Ramadan initiative brought Carrefour and the local community together to support those in need. These acts of giving are especially important during

these challenging times."

Dr Shamsa al Harthi, director general at Dar al Atta'a said, "Our combined efforts have generated an incredible RO12,744, which will not only be used to support families in need but also allowed us to raise even more awareness about our sustainability efforts."

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Life begins anew

GRAND HYATT BEACH

Muscat Daily photographer **Syed Fasiuddin** was around to capture images of families when they came out in droves to enjoy the outdoors as COVID-19 restrictions eased



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MUSCAT DAILY

Manafa'a 2021 programme opens for registration

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Starting Sunday, for two months, the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, is welcoming applications for the Manafa'a programme 2021.

Being organised for the fourth time, this year's programme will be jointly conducted by Mawarid (Oman Animal and Plant Genetic Resources Centre) and the Environment Authority. It is being implemented within a strategic partnership with the Centre for Innovation and Technology Transfer at Sultan Qaboos University and Falha Investment Company with the sponsorship of Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) and Oman India Fertilizer Company.

This year's programme comes under the theme 'The National Initiative to Plant Ten Million Trees'.

Manafa'a programme this

year aims to support the national environmental initiative, encourage innovative ideas that will contribute towards the embodiment of the initiative on the ground, and maximise its environmental, educational and economic benefits, through attracting biodiversity and genetic resources-based innovative ideas and transforming them into real creative economic projects.

The ministry is seeking such ideas from Omanis and residents of Oman including entrepreneurs, researchers, environmentalists, programmers, creators, marketers, and others. Those interested to participate can submit their applications through www.oapgrc.gov.om latest by August 8.

An applicant must be an Omani or a resident in Oman above 18 years of age, while a team must consist of between two to four members.

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WM/NO 927870201 CR/NO 1365452

Commercial Bank plans to take majority stake in NBO



Our Correspondent
Muscat

Qatar's Commercial Bank has announced an offer to increase its stake in National Bank of Oman (NBO) to just over 50 per cent by acquiring an additional 15.2 per cent share capital from NBO shareholders.

The Qatari bank on Thursday issued a public announcement to all NBO shareholders to acquire additional 15.2 per cent of issued share capital which would increase Commercial Bank's shareholding in NBO to 50.1 per cent.

Commercial Bank is already the biggest shareholder of NBO, currently holding 34.9 per cent of

The Qatari bank on Thursday issued a public announcement to all NBO shareholders to acquire additional 15.2 per cent issued share capital which would increase Commercial Bank's shareholding in NBO to 50.1 per cent

the issued share capital in the Omani lender.

NBO, in a disclosure submitted to the Muscat Stock Exchange, confirmed that it received a written notice from Commercial Bank containing information relating to an acquisition offer to acquire 15.2 per cent of the issued share capital of NBO.

According to the bank's disclosure, the board of directors of NBO confirmed that it is not seeking another person to make a competing offer for the shares in NBO.

After the announcement NBO shares at the Muscat Stock Exchange surged by 9.5 per cent to close at 185bz on Thursday.

As per the Commercial Bank's

announcement, the share acquisition offer will open on June 10 and will close on July 11.

The record date for the purpose of the offer is June 9.

Commercial Bank has offered an offer price of 200bz per NBO share which represents an 18 per cent premium to NBO's closing share price on June 2.

The Qatari bank said that the offer completion will result in the formation of a stronger banking institution that the management of Commercial Bank envisages should become more competitive, both locally and regionally.

Through the acquisition of additional stake, Commercial Bank aims to enhance shareholder value and promote the development of NBO, it said.

Ubhar Capital has been appointed as the offer manager by Commercial Bank.

Expressing its intention with regards to growth and development of NBO, the Qatari lender said, 'Commercial Bank will support NBO from a capital perspective when needed so that NBO may meet its regulatory requirements and support growth of its business.'

The bank added, 'Commercial Bank will also support NBO with business process enhancements and use of agile frameworks to execute plans which will result in improved operational performance, optimised efficiencies and improved productivity'.



Madayn unveils incentives to boost investment in Sur

Muscat - The board of directors of the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn) has announced new projects in Sur Industrial City to be in line with the incentives that were announced earlier this year by Madayn.

These incentives include exemption from rental value for a period of two years, followed by a reduction in the rental value for a period of three years by 50 per cent for contracts concluded during the period from 2021 to 2024. In addition, Madayn also announced the reduction of all other fees listed in Annex (1) of the Investment Regulations by 50 per cent during the same period.

Madayn's board of directors has agreed to implement an array of investment opportunities in Sur Industrial City. This was announced during its fourth meeting this year chaired by H E Dr Saleh bin Said Masan, Undersecretary of the Ministry of

Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion for Commerce and Industry, and chairman of Madayn's board of directors.

The board of directors has approved the project of establishing an integrated workforce township by the private sector to enhance the offered services and boost business environment in Sur Industrial City.

Madayn's board has also approved the shipyard project in Sur Industrial City, which includes the establishment of a factory for modern fishing vessels, and ship maintenance and repair centre, among other related services. These efforts shall play a key role in enhancing an attractive environment for promising projects in the sultanate's fisheries sector.

Total volume of investments in Sur Industrial City has touched RO1.5bn by the end of 2020.

The announced incentives come within the efforts made by Madayn to mitigate the eco-

nomical consequences resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and global drop of oil prices. The incentives also support Madayn's vision to enhance Oman's position as a leading regional centre of manufacturing, ICT, innovation, and entrepreneurship excellence.

Following the meeting, H E Masan and members of the board of directors of Madayn, visited the project of Access Management System to Madayn's industrial cities, which is based at KOM4 building at the Knowledge Oasis Muscat.

This project represents a key pillar of the infrastructure development strategy of the industrial cities to keep pace with the technology trends, provide value-adding services, and facilitate procedures for the investors and their clients. The project features an integrated system that manages and facilitates the entry and exit of vehicles to/from the industrial cities of Madayn.

G7 nations reach 'historic' deal over global corporate tax

London, UK - Finance ministers from wealthy G7 nations on Saturday pledged to commit to a global minimum corporate tax of at least 15 per cent, rallying behind a US-backed plan.

'We... commit to a global minimum tax of at least 15 per cent on a country by country basis,' said a statement at the conclusion of their London meeting.

The G7 hopes to reach a final agreement at the July gathering of the expanded G20 finance ministers group, it added.

'I'm delighted to announce that G7 finance ministers... have reached a historic agreement to reform the global tax system,' said British Finance Minister Rishi Sunak, who chaired the two days of talks held in person after an easing of COVID-19 restrictions.

It was attended by counterparts from Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and the United States.



Rishi Sunak (left) and Olaf Scholz pose for a photograph on the second day of the G7 Finance Ministers Meeting in London on Saturday (AFP)

Sunak said the G7 had agreed to make the global tax system 'fit for the global digital age and crucially to make sure that it's fair so that the right companies pay the right tax in the right places'.

He thanked his counterparts for striking 'a deal of historic significance that finally brings our global tax system into the 21st century'.

The landmark move is aimed at getting multinationals - especially tech giants - to pay more into government coffers, which have been severely hit during the pandemic.

The talks have prepared the ground for a broader summit of G7 leaders in Cornwall, southwest England, starting Friday. US President Joe Biden is set

to attend next week's summit on his first foreign tour since taking office in January, while later Saturday US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen will hold a press conference following the G7 meeting.

Momentum has grown behind the US-led plans to limit the ability of multinationals like tech giants to game the tax system to boost profits, especially at a time when economies around the world are reeling from the impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

German Finance Minister Olaf Scholz on Friday told reporters it was the 'right time' for a global tax deal given the vast sums spent by governments 'to protect citizens, stabilise the economy and save jobs' since last year.

Biden had called for a unified minimum corporate tax rate of 15 per cent in negotiations with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

(OECD) and G20.

French Economy Minister Bruno Le Maire had told journalists in London that 15 per cent is 'a minimum. For us, it's a starting point'. Along with its G7 and G20 partners, France wants 'a more ambitious level of taxation', the minister said, with the current pandemic crisis showing that 'tax evasion, the race towards the lowest possible level of taxation, is a dead end'.

At the same time, Ireland has expressed 'significant reservations' about Biden's plan.

Its 12.5-per cent tax rate is one of the lowest in the world, prompting tech giants such as Facebook and Google to make Ireland the home of their European operations.

Proponents argue that a minimum tax is necessary to stem competition between countries over who can offer multinationals the lowest rate.

AFP



NCSI and IMF review economic indicators

Muscat - National Center for Statistics and Information (NCSI) conducted an online meeting with the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The meeting aimed at reviewing and discussing many economic data and indicators related to NCSI's specializations, especially inflation rates, GDP and the impacts of COVID-19 on the performance of these indicators.

The meeting also reviewed

the efforts exerted by the center to improve the performance of the economic indicators in Oman.

The meeting comes within the framework of the annual virtual visit that the IMF conducts during the period from May 24 to June 7. During these meetings the IMF conducts bilateral discussions with the member countries to assess economic and financial developments.

ONA

World food prices jump to highest level in decade: UN

Paris, France - Global food prices jumped to their highest level in nearly a decade in May, soaring by 40 per cent from a year ago, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization said.

The FAO's food price index has now risen for 12 consecutive months to reach its highest value since September 2011, driven by the higher costs of vegetable oils, sugar and cereals.

Prices rose by 4.8 per cent from April - the fastest month-on-month gain since October 2010 - and by nearly 40 per cent compared to May 2020.

The index stood at 127.1 points in May, only 7.6 per cent from its peak value in February

2011, the FAO said.

The sharp rise in food prices also comes as the COVID-19 pandemic has thrown millions out of work, adding to food security fears that are already high due to conflicts and climate change. The FAO noted that cereals prices rose 'even as world cereal production is on course to reach a new record high.'

In a separate report, the FAO said it expects a 1.9 per cent increase in cereals production this year to a record 2.82mn tonnes.

Despite the increase, it said the global ratio of food stocks to use is expected to decline to 28.1 per cent.

AFP

VACANCY MEDICAL REPRESENTATIVES

A leading healthcare supplier in the Sultanate of Oman invite applications for the position of Medical Representatives to promote pharmaceutical products to doctors and pharmacists.

All eligible candidates - Male / Female Pharmacy graduates with 2-3 years' experience and holding valid Oman Driving license may apply

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Send your comments to muscatdaily@apexmedia.co.om

Disclosure on the Public Announcement from The Commercial Bank (P.S.Q.C).

National Bank of Oman SAOG wishes to announce that it has received a written notice from The Commercial Bank (P.S.Q.C) containing information relating to an acquisition offer to acquire 15.2% of the issued share capital in accordance with the Takeover and Acquisition Regulations (Decision No. 2/2019).

The Board of Directors of National Bank of Oman SAOG hereby confirms that it is not seeking another person to make a competing offer for the shares in National Bank of Oman.

Further information in respect of the above will be duly disclosed on the MSX website in accordance with the requirements of applicable laws and regulations.



MARKET ANALYSIS - OMAN

MSX posts 2.6% weekly gains as oil prices rally

MSX30, the benchmark index of the Muscat Stock Exchange, reported weekly gains of 2.63 amid the rise in oil prices and expectations of a faster global economic recovery.

The gains in the main index were supported by all the sub-indices of MSX led by Financial Index which surged 3.40 per cent. Services Index and Industrial Index closed up by 2.29 per cent and 1.87 per cent for the week, respectively. MSX Shariah Index increased by 2.72 per cent.

Local news

►Al Anwar Investment signed a non-binding MoU along with Al Maha Ceramics and Al Hael Ceramics to explore the possibility of acquiring majority of existing shares of Al Hael. Al Hael Ceramics has a production capacity of 15mn sqm for porcelain and ceramic tiles. The deal will be complete but subject to financial and legal due diligence along with approval from all parties and regulators. If the due diligence is successful, the acquisition will result in Al Maha Ceramics with a combined capacity of 21mn. It will be biggest ceramic manufacturer in Oman until all expansion phases of Al Anwar Ceramic materialize. Al Anwar Ceramic currently has a production capacity of 16mn sqm. They recently approved capacity expansion plan which will raise the capacity of the

company to 23mn sqm. This addition of 7mn sqm will be in two phases.

►Salalah Mills Company disclosed the new project for a food industries center in Khazaen Economic City, on an area of 20,000 sqm. The project will include an industrial bakery and production lines for frozen and semi-cooked pastries in the first phase. Production lines for frozen cakes, snacks, noodles and biscuits will be added during the second phase. The initial cost of the project is estimated at RO10-12mn. Salalah Mills will sign with Khazaen Economic City in the coming weeks for the allotment of land. It is expected that production will start at the end of next year.

►Dhofar International Development & Investment Holding announced that its board of directors approved on May 29, 2021 a draft prospectus for the company's capital increase by right issue at a total amount of RO28.6mn. ►Total number of vehicles registered in the sultanate totalled 1.539mn in April 2021, representing a small increase over the December 2020 registered vehicles at 1.557mn, according to the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI). Private vehicles topped the list of vehicles registered at 1.217mn, followed by 0.232mn commercial vehicles and 29,268 taxis. The number of ve-



(Muscat Daily)

hicles with temporary registration reached 11,649 compared to 15,351 vehicles in December 2020.

GCC markets

Standard & Poor's (S&P) is expecting Kuwait to record the highest deficit to GDP ratio among Gulf countries in the current year by 20 per cent, followed by Bahrain and UAE with 6 per cent, Saudi Arabia with 5 per cent, Oman with 4 per cent, and Qatar with 1 per cent. The agency estimated that the cumulative deficit of Gulf governments would reach about US\$355bn during the period between 2021 and 2024.

According to the report issued by S&P, Saudi Arabia acquired about 60 per cent of this deficit (equivalent to US\$213bn), and then Kuwait by 25 per cent (equivalent to US\$88.7bn), the UAE by 7 per cent (equivalent to US\$24.8bn), and Oman by 4 per cent (equivalent to US\$14.2bn).

Kuwait, Abu Dhabi and Qatar may rely more on liquidating part of their assets to meet the deficit.

It is likely that Kuwait will issue a public debt law in 2021, but the size of the fiscal deficit that the agency expects until

2024 implies that it is likely to be exhausted, and the borrowing will be licensed under the law, which was previously proposed to have a limit of KD20bn, within three years.

The GCC stock markets recorded net foreign inflows of US\$930mn in May, down 17 per cent on month-on-month basis but up 107 per cent year-on-year.

In the month of May, the flows were led by Abu Dhabi at US\$521mn followed by Saudi Arabia at US\$474mn. Dubai, Kuwait and Oman witnessed net foreign outflows in May. Overall, in the first five months

of 2021, the GCC markets recorded net foreign inflows of US\$4.26bn compared to US\$330mn in same period of last year.

Saudi Arabia witnessed the major foreign inflows in the first five months of 2021 at US\$3bn followed by US\$802mn in Abu Dhabi.

Experts of the oil producers' alliance earlier expected a rise in global oil demand by about 6mn barrels per day in 2021, upon the world's recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recommendations

Globally, we saw investor movement more towards small-cap and mid-cap stocks which were hammered previously. We also witnessed sizable interest in speculative stocks during the week.

Within the region, oil remained the star performer which pulled the markets higher.

OPEC led agreement which targets the gradual easing of curbs on supplies until the end of July made way for oil price to go above US\$70 per barrel after a considerable period. We expect oil prices to stay above over US\$70 per barrel for sometime.

Locally, the market remained news driven with stocks which announced favorable announcement remained most sought by investors such as Al Maha Ceramics on acquisition news and National Bank of Oman because of offer from Commercial Bank of Qatar.

With oil prices looking to stay comfortably above US\$70 per barrel, we advise investors to look for stocks which will benefit from higher oil prices such as petrochemicals.

By special arrangement with U Capital

Huawei launches operating system in fight for survival

Shenzhen, China – Chinese tech giant Huawei launched its highly-anticipated homegrown mobile operating system on Wednesday, opening a new front in its fight for survival in the smartphone arena after the US blocked it from using Android.

The company said its new HarmonyOS system is packed with special features and capitalizes on growing demand to seamlessly link devices – known as 'Internet of things'.

But analysts say Huawei faces an uphill climb getting enough app developers to devise software and content for the OS to keep consumers buying the company's phones in a world dominated by Google's Android and Apple's iOS.

Experts who have analysed HarmonyOS said it is based on elements of the Android Open Source Project, the source code that makes up Android and which Huawei and other companies remain free to use.

The company unveiled the first mobile devices pre-loaded with the system in an online launch.

Lead developer Wang Chenglu said the OS will see Huawei get ahead of the curve as IoT development accelerates, spurred by new technologies like intelligent vehicles and the coming advent of super-fast 5G connections.

"With HarmonyOS, we weren't going to just produce another Android or iOS. It would be the same and have no consumer value," Wang told reporters ahead of the launch. "Our special features are what Android and iOS lack."

HarmonyOS smartphone users will, for example, be able to



People try Huawei products with the HarmonyOS operating system at a Huawei store in Shanghai (AFP)

access files, documents and other content on everything from computers to wearables and other linked devices, Wang said.

He said the system will also be able to accept a wide range of apps even if they weren't specifically coded for HarmonyOS – an effort to quell concerns that users' options will be limited.

The mobile landscape is littered with failed challenges to the Android-iOS duopoly like BlackBerry, Microsoft's Windows Phone and the Amazon Fire phone.

The administration of former US President Donald Trump in 2018 began an aggressive campaign to short-circuit the global ambitions of Huawei, which Washington considers a potential Chinese espionage and cyber-security threat.

The new US administration of Joe Biden has signaled no let-up.

The world's largest supplier of telecom networking gear, Huawei entered the handset business in 2003. It became one of the world's top three smartphone manufacturers along with Samsung and Apple – briefly occupying the number one spot last year – on Chinese demand and growing overseas sales.

But being cut off from Android effectively prevents Huawei from offering phone users popular features like Google's browser, its maps function and a range of other top apps available through Android.

Analysts say this is not a problem in China, where it has a healthy slice of the domestic market and its own menu of apps largely designed for domestic consumers. But HarmonyOS's global prospects may dim.

"When you're talking about the international market, you

can't live without Google, you can't live without Amazon or YouTube.

That will be challenging," said Elinor Leung, head of Asia internet and telecom research at CLSA.

She said, however, that including IoT linkage capability in HarmonyOS was foresighted, calling it "the way for the future." "All smart devices are going to be connected in the future."

Huawei, however, is still under US sanctions that bar access to the chips required to even make a smartphone, and its shipments have plummeted lately.

The tech giant may increasingly have to retreat to lower-volume sales of premium phones to conserve its chip stockpiles – abandoning the cheaper mass-produced segment that made it a top manufacturer.

AFP

UK strikes post-Brexit trade deal with three countries

London, UK – Britain announced Friday a free-trade agreement with three European countries – major fishing neighbour Norway as well as Iceland and Liechtenstein – in its latest move to boost trade ties post-Brexit.

"The deal, agreed in principle and which builds on an economic relationship already worth 21.6bn pounds (US\$30bn), will slash tariffs on British food products," UK's International Trade Secretary Liz Truss said.

Britain formally left the European Union in January 2020 after nearly five decades of membership, and quit its single market and customs union at the start of this year.

Since then, Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government has replicated or rolled over existing trade agreements with the bloc



Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg (right) and Norwegian Minister of Trade and Industry Iselin Nybø (AFP)

and several countries, vowing that they will be more advantageous than those negotiated by the EU. London is currently in advanced trade deal discussions with Australia and has held early talks with India, New Zealand and the United States. Talks are also due to begin soon with

Canada and Mexico.

"Reduced import tariffs on shrimps, prawns and haddock will reduce costs for UK fish processing, helping support some 18,000 jobs in that industry in Scotland and northern England," said Friday's statement. AFP

Biden said to mull dropping tax hike to fund his jobs plan

Washington, US – In an effort to win Republican support for President Joe Biden's infrastructure and jobs plan, the White House has signaled it was willing to negotiate over his pledge to increase the corporate tax rate.

The Washington Post reported Biden offered to drop his proposal to return the top corporate tax rate to 28 per cent – where it had been before a Republican-backed tax cut in 2017 – from its current 21 per cent level, something the opposition party strenuously opposes.

Citing sources familiar with the discussions, the newspaper said the offer was made in a private White House meeting on Wednesday with Republican Senator Shelley Moore Capito, as



US President Joe Biden

the president looks for opposition support for his spending plans. White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki however said Biden has not entirely give up on the corporate tax increase which he sees as "a viable pay-for."

But she said "those pay-fors can be moved around," signaling there could be some flexibility in

the current negotiations.

"We have a range of means for moving the president's ideas and proposals forward," she said, noting that Biden is scheduled to talk to Capito again Friday.

"The President remains committed to his goal of signing a bill into law... by the summer."

The Washington Post, however, said Biden would instead focus on a 15 per cent minimum tax that would target corporations which are profitable but pay little in taxes to the federal government. Biden has long stressed that corporations need to "pay their fair share" and vowed not to raise taxes on Americans making less than US\$400,000 a year. AFP

Bank Muscat awards customers in monthly Al Mazyona draws

Bank Muscat's landmark Al Mazyona savings scheme continues to successfully promote the concept of savings amongst all members of the community in Oman. Al Mazyona is the longest-running savings scheme and offers the highest prize money in the country for its different draws. In 2021, the scheme is offering over RO11mn to 7,470 winners, with the number of winners going up by 12 per cent compared to the previous year. The bank recently held Al Mazyona prize draws for its different customer segments as part of its important role in strengthening the savings habit amongst people in Oman.

Ten lucky Zeinah account holders won cash prizes of RO1,000 each for the month of April in the recently held draws. All Zeinah customers having a minimum balance of RO100 were automatically entered in the draw. A prize draw was also held for the bank's Shababi customers wherein 100 lucky winners won RO100 each.

They were chosen from among all Shababi customers with a minimum balance of RO10. Prize draws were also held in the Children's Account category with 100 winners winning RO100 each.

All children with a minimum balance of RO50 were automat-



ically entered into the draw.

Recently Bank Muscat announced the countdown to the special Al Mazyona Mid-Year draw with over RO1.5mn in high value prizes to be given away to 92 lucky winners from different governorates, Asalah Priority Banking and Al Jawhar Privilege Banking customers.

The unique Mid-year draw will reward Asalah and Al Jawhar customers as well as those from all the governorates of the Sultanate. Bank Muscat has

launched a special campaign across the media and social media channels to make customers aware that they can get more chances to win by saving more. Details regarding the draw will be posted on the bank's social media channels in the coming days and the draw will also be livestreamed on its social media accounts.

All customers maintaining a minimum balance of RO30,000 in their Al Mazyona accounts will be automatically entered into the

draws to select the winners of the two RO250,000 special mega prizes during the draw. High savings Asalah Priority Banking customers maintaining a minimum balance of RO30,000 will be entered into the draws for 10 Mid-year prizes of RO50,000 each for a total of RO500,000 in prizes for Asalah customers.

Al Jawhar customers maintaining a minimum balance of RO10,000 will be eligible to win one of the 10 Mid-year prizes of

RO20,000 each adding to a total of RO200,000. Also, 70 winners will be chosen from amongst customers across all governorates in the sultanate having a minimum balance of RO1,000, with each winner getting RO5,000 in the prize draw for a total of RO350,000 in prizes.

With over RO1.5mn to be given away during the Mid-year draw, the country's biggest savings scheme is all set to create further excitement in the coming weeks.



Experience 5G speeds for free with Ooredoo

Now available on Samsung 5G-enabled handsets, customers can take their digital experience to the next level, with Ooredoo 5G for mobile. And for a limited time only, the company is offering the chance to enjoy 5G for free.

Customers in 5G coverage areas can take advantage of the free opt-in option and enjoy amazing stability, almost zero delay, and lightning-fast download speeds. The telecoms company has already announced the promotion on Huawei handsets and is expected to add Apple in the near future. Having launched 5G for home internet and businesses last year, 5G for mobile is the next step in Ooredoo's journey to transform the sultanate's digital landscape.

Raed Mohammed Dawood, director of Branding, Communications and Corporate Affairs at Ooredoo, said, "With 5G technology being rolled out across Oman, users can now take their internet experience to exciting

new heights. At Ooredoo, we are always on the hunt for ways to enhance our customers' digital lives, while also being fully committed to supporting Oman's Vision 2040 to be a future-ready and digitally-focused economy."

"Promoting innovation and encouraging the adoption of next-generation technologies to elevate brand operations and broaden customer services is a vision that Samsung has shared with Ooredoo for a long time," said Osman Albora, senior director - Mobile Division, Samsung Gulf Electronics. "The 5G rollout in Oman represents a new era in communication and connectivity for the country. We aim to ensure the potential of mobile experiences are fulfilled through the power of 5G."

Ooredoo plans to construct and install around 2,000 5G stations over the next five years. Customers can opt in for a free 5G trial through the Ooredoo App or by sending an SMS to 80082.

Al Hayat Hospital announces COVID-19 vaccine roll-out

As part of the nationwide immunisation programme, Al Hayat International Hospital is gearing up for the COVID-19 vaccine roll-out.

Dr K P Raman, founder and chairman, Al Hayat International Hospital emphasised, "We wholeheartedly welcome the decision of the Ministry of Health for selecting Al Hayat as one of the COVID-19 private sector vaccination centres in Oman. The determination of Omani leadership will place the nation on the world's healthcare map. Today, vaccination of population is top priority, the world over, and the vaccination is safe and effective in preventing severe infection and ICU admission."

He added, "We are inviting the private sector to actively participate in the vaccination campaign, and save lives. In order to ensure, personalised patient care, Al Hayat has conceptualised a wide range of custom-made changes in its routine



services ever since the pandemic struck the county. Prior to COVID-19, our principal focus was on selective surgical, orthopaedic surgeries and cardiac cases.

"At the moment, the key focus is on sick COVID-19 patients, and we have reserved nearly 80 per cent of the bed capacity for effectively handling the prevailing situation."

"Though we have increased the number of beds, increasing the medical human capital at a short notice had been a huge challenge. However, the move to

make qualifying examinations online by the authorities for selected medical personnel will simplify the long procedures of recruitment during the pandemic."

"Treatment and care of critical Covid patients are costly, and it is welcome that MOH bears the entire cost of treatment for all."

To participate in the campaign, companies must register the names of their employees with the Ministry of Health to get the job from approved private hospitals. For corporates, the cost of Pfizer vaccine per dose is RO20.

At the time of registering and booking, companies should transfer RO40 (for 2 doses) to the Ministry of Health COVID-19 Pandemic Vaccine Fund (National Bank of Oman Account Number 10161251050001).

Al Hayat will be charging RO3 as administrative charges for each dose.

Oman Oasis Immuno celebrates more winners from its Scratch and Win draws

At the forefront of innovation, customer-centricity and unfaltering commitment to quality, Oman Oasis has been known to place its consumers' health as a priority.

Fortified with Zinc and Copper to boost immunity, Oman Oasis's Immuno has been a popular choice in the sultanate. Produced and distributed by Oasis Water Company, it also has ongoing promotions, draws and schemes that offer a rewarding experience for its consumers. Recently, it announced the second and third round of winners of the Immuno Scratch and Win draws.

The first draw which was held on March 25 had a total of thirty-six winners.

The second draw conducted on April 26 witnessed another round of excitement as twenty-one more winners were announced.

Same number of winners were again picked up at the third



cum final draw held on May 25.

The draws had an assortment of prizes that included three Huawei P 40 Pro phones, twelve 22 carat 4g gold coin, sixty Omantel Hayyak recharge worth RO10, and three Acer laptops.

Winners of key prizes from the third cum final draw: Hassan was the proud winner of one Huawei P40 Pro phone, whereas Rashid

Mubarak al Badri, Javed Khan, Hatim Salim and Mohamad Hashim each walked away with a 4g gold coin.

The lucky winner Hilal was exhilarated on winning an Acer laptop.

Winners of key prizes from the third cum final draw: Shameer Kodakkadan was thrilled to win one Huawei P40

Pro phone and Nithish Radhakrishnan turned lucky with the Acer laptop.

Zehra, Ahmed Shabeer, Khalid Khaleel al Balushi and Basma each won a 4g gold coin.

This exclusive Scratch and Win promotion concluded on May 24.

It saw an overwhelming response from the consumers.

Through ongoing campaigns like these, Oman Oasis has managed to engage with its consumers on a personal level and has created a strong bond with them.

By being able to anticipate future demands and prioritizing its consumers' needs, it has grown to be the preferred choice and a household name in the sultanate.

With over two decades of experience in the industry, it also holds several international product quality certifications like the IBWA membership, NSF, ABWA, and WQA.

OPPO at forefront of partnership with mobile phone eco rating initiative

Global smartphone brand OPPO is solidifying its role as an active participant in sustainability initiatives across all of its verticals by being among the first companies to join a new pan-industry Eco Rating scheme. Launched by Europe's top five operators, the new consumer labelling score aims to identify sustainable mobile phones and encourage suppliers to reduce the environmental impact of their devices.

Taking another step towards its "Technology for Mankind. Kindness for the World" mission - and in celebration of World Environment Day - OPPO aims to raise awareness over some of the most pressing environmental issues and best practices in sustainability by joining the scheme, which will be rolled out across Europe starting June 2021 to help

consumers identify and compare the most sustainable smartphones.

"Our unique devices are designed, built and delivered with the highest standards of quality and environmental management. Whether we are finding solutions to reduce our carbon footprint, operate responsibly or serve our communities - we ensure that sustainability is built in," said Ethan Xue, president of OPPO Middle East and Africa.

"As we develop and deliver innovative, environmentally friendly smartphones based on OPPO's core values, we maintain our responsibility towards the environment. At OPPO, we monitor the impact that we have on society and contribute to addressing global issues. Through this new initiative/programme,



we aim to support demand for more sustainable devices. We are committed to continually improving our environmental performance and moving towards best practices in corporate sustainability by joining initiatives such as the revolutionary Eco Rating," he added.

Europe's leading mobile operators Deutsche Telekom, Orange, Telefónica (operating under the O2 and Movistar brands), Telia Company and Vodafone have joined forces to launch the new pan-industry Eco Rating labelling scheme, which builds on industry knowledge

gathered through previous environmental labelling initiatives.

As a launch partner, OPPO has provided data and insights to help the Eco Rating apply a balanced, objective and consistent evaluation methodology comprising 19 different criteria which culminate in a single final score

for each device. Following the detailed assessment, each smartphone handset is given an overall Eco Rating score out of a maximum of 100 to demonstrate its environmental performance across its entire life cycle. The Eco Rating label for mobile devices emphasizes five aspects: durability, reparability, recyclability, and climate and resource efficiency.

In addition to its win-win collaborations with industry partners, OPPO recognises that its environmental responsibilities are an integral part of its brand ethos and engages in sustainable practices which seek to minimise environmental dips. The company currently adopts a more planet-friendly approach to production - which spans design, packaging, processing and more.

OPPO has recycled 13 times as much products by weight in 2020 in comparison with 2019. In addition, the global smartphone leader has demonstrated its commitment towards environmentally friendly practices, with 45 per cent of its packaging being made of renewable fibers. OPPO has also reduced its general waste by 42.7 per cent and cut indirect greenhouse gas emissions by 20 per cent in 2020.

Through its commitment to the goal of protecting the environment, OPPO integrates its business values and operations to meet the expectations of stakeholders, receiving recognition and positive reinforcement.

OPPO will continue to partner with environmental and developmental organisations all over the world.

Bank Nizwa forms IT & Cybersecurity Committee, first in local banking industry

In line with its strategic approach to embed digitalisation across its operations, Bank Nizwa has formed an IT & Cybersecurity Committee, a first-of-its-kind initiative in Oman's banking industry. The formation of the new committee comes as part of the bank's vision to become the 'Digital Bank of Choice' for people of Oman.

Sheikh Khalid Abdullah Ali al Khalili, chairman, Bank Nizwa, said, "Bank Nizwa aspires to be the 'Digital Bank of Choice' for the community and lead the Islamic banking industry in Oman on this journey. In a rapidly evolving digital environment, this commitment is anchored on preserving robust customer relationships by cultivating trust, relevance and convenience through every banking channel.

"The board gives special attention when it comes to taking the Islamic banking services to the next level by acquiring the latest FinTech solutions available



in the market that suit the customer's needs. And while we have always been at the forefront of innovation, the proliferation of digital technologies provides us with opportunities to redefine how our customers see Bank Nizwa and the role we play in their lives."

He added, "As part of the bank's digital transformation strategy, we have made heavy investments in order to adopt the top and up-to-date digital solutions. Our objective in this regard is to provide our customers with



innovative banking services marked by a high level of protection, security and digital intelli-

gence. Through this, we aspire to grant our customers convenient and seamless banking experi-

ence. Seeking to accomplish the aims of our digital transformation strategy, we have beefed up

our team by acquiring local talents qualified in the digitalisation of Islamic banking sector."

Bank Nizwa has been continuously investing in systems and procedures to adhere to best security standards. It was recently awarded the ISO 27001:2013 certification in recognition of its commitment to provide best-in-class banking services through adopting best security practices and deploying latest technology in the financial sector. The certification showcases that the bank has met all levels of confidence in information security management, becoming the first and only Islamic bank in the sultanate to achieve this international recognised standard.

Elaborating further, Khalid al Kayed, CEO, Bank Nizwa, said, "At Bank Nizwa, we have fast-tracked our digitalisation journey with investments in the right technology and people. We are here to support the growing needs of Sharia'a-compliant

banking in Oman. While on this path, we recognise the importance of cybersecurity and data protection, which underpins Bank Nizwa's commitment to being at the forefront of progressive change that safeguards the interest of its customers. The formation of a committee for this purpose underpins the bank's brand promise of being the most trusted Islamic bank in Oman."

In 2020, the bank continued to upgrade its digital channels to improve financial inclusion and accelerate the move to a digital economy. Various innovative products and services were introduced across all electronic platforms including, advance salary, instant issuance of ATM card - the first bank in Oman to do so, and enabling various banking transactions on the mobile app such as utility payment, aiming at putting innovative financial services at the fingertips of its growing customer base and enhance customer convenience.



You can conserve water

"It's no secret that the survival of our planet is intrinsically linked to the health of our ecosystems. However, in recent years, our natural world has faced challenges of epic proportions including the adverse effects brought on by climate change, and we're seeing our ecosystems and natural resources suffering as a result.

"We can sometimes feel powerless in this struggle, but World Environment Day serves as a timely reminder of just how impactful we can be when we come together to make a difference. Imagine the possibilities, if we each committed to making just a few simple changes in our everyday lives.

"Water plays perhaps one of the most integral and multifaceted roles in sustaining every aspect of our ecosystems, environment and our very existence. One of the key steps we as individuals, and as businesses can each take to help protect our precious ecosystems is to be more conscious in our consumption of water.

"At Sensus, a Xylem brand, we place water at the heart of everything we do, and we are committed to supporting our partners, and the communities we serve, in safeguarding this precious resource too. Here are four simple switches you can make in your everyday life:

- Turn the tap off in between rinsing when brushing your teeth and you could save up to 200 gallons of water per month
- Switch the tap off during those 20 seconds when you're scrubbing your hands with soap to help save up to 6 gallons per day
- Lather up your hair with shampoo with the tap off and you could save up to 150 gallons of water in a month
- Wash your vegetables and dishes in a sink of water instead of under a running faucet."

Francois Frigaux, regional director, Sensus, a Xylem brand

Vaishali looks forward to her role in ICC 100% Future Leaders programme

Having been picked by International Cricket Council (ICC) for its 100% Future Leaders Programme, Oman's Vaishali Jesrani, captain of women's team, feels the sultanate will do well to increase fan engagement as it looks to host international sports events in future.

To facilitate this aspect of women's cricket development, ICC has appointed Anthony Everard, Cricket Australia's executive general manager, Fan Engagement, to work as Vaishali's mentor as the six months programme starts next week.

"I look forward to serve women's cricket on a major platform in a much bigger way. The new role is extremely motivating after all the years of playing and establishing women's cricket in Oman. Getting into the ICC Future Leaders Programme is a great honour. I believe I have many more levels to reach in cricket and develop myself. I am working with Anthony which is going to be a great learning experience as Cricket Australia is one of the best organisations to work with as it takes women's cricket equally serious to any interna-



tional sport around the world," said Vaishali, who is also Oman Cricket's lady coordinator for Women's Cricket Development.

Wishing her success, Duleep Mendis, chief development officer, Oman Cricket (OC), said Vaishali's selection was an honour for OC and a rare opportunity for her.

Talking about the top-class cricket infrastructure in Oman and the wonderful support Oman Cricket Board provided to develop women's cricket over the years, Vaishali said ICC and Oman Cricket were looking to see how they can have more fans engaged when it comes to international events in future.

"ICC is not only looking to expand its TV audience but is also trying to see the game growing internationally. Looking back, things did not look good for women's cricket in Oman initially. A lot of girls were even questioning themselves whether they had any real prospects to grow as international sports-women but things started changing. It's quite clear now that women can definitely meet their ambitions and have a career in sport. There is a big platform open to them now and many opportunities are going to come their way. It's all about how their family or society looks at each and every daughter or girl who picks up her cricket kit and goes out there to perform," she added.

She was all praise for the parents, schools and Oman's media for helping women's cricket develop and grow.

The six-month programme will include a kick-off workshop with Belinda Clark, followed by monthly check-ins and a three-month review with the mentees and mentors agreeing the frequency and method of communication.

Gulf Air operates inaugural flight to Mykonos, Greece

Gulf Air, the national carrier of the Kingdom of Bahrain, celebrated the beginning of its seasonal destinations for the summer with the inaugural flight to Mykonos in Greece as flight GF036 was welcomed into Mykonos International Airport with a water cannon salute and, upon arrival, a number of airport officials joined the airline's flying crew for commemorative photographs.

Before departing from Bahrain International Airport, passengers were handed special boarding passes and commemorative certificates in celebration of the airline's very first flight from the Kingdom of Bahrain to the Greek island of Mykonos. The flight was operated by Gulf Air's new aircraft the Airbus A320neo which features 16 Falcon Gold seats and 120 economy class seats.

On June 16, Gulf Air will operate its inaugural flight to Santorini which will boost the airline's network with popular boutique seaside destinations that are favourite to many tourists and families in the Kingdom of Bahrain and the region.



These strategic additions come in place as the demand for travel grows gradually towards the summer holiday with travel restrictions easing off in Europe. Both Mykonos and Santorini will be served until end of September with two weekly frequencies. Flights can be booked online at gulfair.com, by calling the Gulf Air Contact Centre, or through any Gulf Air sales offices and approved travel agencies.

Last month, the airline announced that all its flights would be operated by 100 per cent vaccinated crew including pilots and flight attendants. The airline has started its internal vaccination campaign for its operating crew

and front line staff since December 2020 and is proud to be one of the first airlines in the world to be able to provide peace of mind to all passengers flying to any destination of its growing network.

Moreover, recently Gulf Air announced offering complimentary COVID-19 travel insurance coverage to all ticket holders including health and quarantine expenses in the unexpected circumstances of being diagnosed with or contracting COVID-19 during passengers' journeys.

All tickets booked on Gulf Air flights for travel until November 10 are automatically covered with COVID-19 insurance at no extra cost.

Learn more about Earth with Starzplay's library of nature documentaries

From the deserts and mountains of the Middle East, to the fast-flowing rivers of Africa and the icy terrain of Canada, Starzplay, MENA region's leading subscription video on demand (SVOD) service, offers the perfect chance to discover more about our fascinating planet on World Environment Day.

Celebrated every year on June 5, World Environment Day calls for action to revive our ecosystems which play a crucial role in sustaining life. To mark the occasion, why not immerse yourself in nature and discover the world's most awe-inspiring habitats. Here's Starzplay's top picks for subscribers to watch anytime, anywhere and from any device:

Wildest Middle East

A documentary featuring the diverse forests, deserts, mountains, rivers, seas, flora and fauna from around the Middle East. Expand your knowledge and discover the spectacular nature and



habitats of Turkey, Egypt, Arabia and Jordan.

Dodo Heroes

Animal lovers from around the world go to great lengths to ensure the well-being of creatures that are in dire need of help.

Tigerland

Tigers are one of the most endangered animals on Earth. Project Cat is trying to change that, with an ambitious effort to dou-

ble the tiger population in the wild by 2022.

Crikey! It's the Irwins

The members of the world-famous Irwin family deal with various challenges and struggles at the Australia Zoo as they follow their patriarch's footsteps in taking care of animals.

Wild Africa: Rivers of Life

A poignant series which exam-

ines the rivers of Africa and their various forms of life. The seven mighty rivers shape the lives of everything they touch, all year round. The dry seasons are a test of strength and when the rain pours, the rivers go through a cycle of new life and renewal. Where there is water, it seems there is life.

The Dark Side of the Sun

Scientists have only recently

begun to understand the true nature of our 'local star', the Sun. This programme discusses its past and future, and its effect on our planet.

How the Universe Works

The documentary explores how the universe came into existence and how it grew into the vast cosmos we see today. Learn all about black holes, the most powerful destroyers in the universe

and the most mysterious phenomena.

Amazing Planet: Lava Driven World

A mesmerising and eyebrow-singeing adventure through Earth's past, present and future to understand what the lava-driven world has in store for us.

Deadly after Dark: Polar Bear invasion

Welcome to Churchill, Canada, the world's polar bear capital. Each fall, this remote subarctic outpost is invaded by a thousand hungry bears and many tourists.

With thousands of hours of premium content including blockbuster movies, exclusive TV shows, kids content and Arabic series, Starzplay is today the number one player in the MENA region. The service is available in 20 countries across the Middle East, North Africa and Pakistan for fans to enjoy quality content anytime, anywhere and from any device.

Crunch trust vote for Israel's 'change' coalition draws nearer



Head of the Arab Israeli Islamic conservative party Raam Mansour Abbas (right) signs a coalition agreement with Israel's opposition leader Yair Lapid (left) and rightwing nationalist tech millionaire Naftali Bennett, in Ramat Gan near the coastal city of Tel Aviv on Wednesday (AFP)

Jerusalem - The speaker of the Israeli parliament will formally notify lawmakers on Monday of the opposition's announcement of a coalition to unseat veteran Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, his office said.

The notification will set in motion preparations for a confidence vote in the new government, which will now

likely be held on Wednesday or the following Monday, Israeli media said.

The late Friday announcement by speaker Yariv Levin, a close Netanyahu ally, allays fears their rightwing Likud party could find procedural ways to block the formation of the motley coalition that would end Netanyahu's 12 consecutive years in office.

On paper, the coalition announced by opposition leader Yair Lapid just minutes before a midnight Wednesday deadline, should command a slender majority in the confidence vote.

But all eyes will be on potential defections from the disparate alliance which is united only by shared hostility to Netanyahu.

Under the agreement, Naftali

Bennett of the religious nationalist Yamina party would be the Prime Minister for two years, to be replaced by the centrist Lapid in 2023.

With possible jail time hanging over him in his ongoing trial on corruption charges, Netanyahu is not expected to give up without a fight.

His supporters have been

Under the agreement, Naftali Bennett of the religious nationalist Yamina party would be the Prime Minister for two years, to be replaced by the centrist leader Yair Lapid in 2023

working hard to win defections from lawmakers from Bennett's own Yamina party uncomfortable with their leader's alliance with Jewish leftists and Arab conservatives.

Demonstrations orchestrated by Netanyahu supporters have been held outside the home of Yamina lawmaker Nir Orbach, who has warned Bennett he may not support him in the confidence vote. Were Orbach to vote against the deal without resigning from the party, the coalition would not have a majority.

A Friday post on Netanyahu's Facebook page said that 'those who were elected on rightwing votes have to do the right thing - to form a good, strong right-wing government'.

Should last-minute defections scupper the alliance, Israel would likely have to return to the polls for its fifth election in just over two years.

AFP



This file photo shows Kurdistan Workers Party's women fighters patrolling on the front line in the Makhmur area, near Mosul (AFP)

Iraqi Kurd troops killed in clash with PKK rebels

Arbil, Iraq - Five Iraqi Kurdish peshmerga troops were killed Saturday in a clash with fighters of Turkey's outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a senior Iraqi Kurdish official said.

The PKK maintains rear-bases in northern Iraq which have come under renewed assault by Turkish forces since April. Two peshmerga troops were also wounded in Saturday's clash in the Mount Matin district of Dohuk province, said Serbast Lazkin, deputy minister for peshmerga affairs in Iraqi Kurdistan's autonomous regional government.

The People's Defence Forces (HPG), the armed wing of the PKK, accused the peshmerga of entering 'a conflict zone in Matin' between it and Turkey 'which wants to occupy Iraqi Kurdistan'.

'These peshmerga movements are a stab in the back for the PKK and we refuse their entry into an area under our control,' it said in a statement.

The PKK's pan-Kurdish agenda has often put it at odds with Iraq's autonomous Kurdish government, which has sought to maintain good relations with Ankara. The peshmerga affairs ministry has called on 'everyone to respect the borders of Kurdistan and to refrain from endangering its security and stability'.

The federal government in Baghdad has taken a stronger line, condemning repeated air and ground incursions into Iraq by Turkish forces. Turkey has carried out a string of air raids and the occasional ground incursion since it announced its latest offensive in April. Most of them have targeted PKK bases in the Mount Qandil area further east.

But President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has warned he may widen the offensive to include the Makhmur district further south, which is directly ruled by the federal government in Baghdad.

The district hosts a UN-supported camp housing thousands of Kurdish refugees from Turkey that Ankara sees as a recruiting ground for PKK fighters.

"If the United Nations does not clean up this district, we will take care of it in our capacity as a UN member state," Erdogan warned earlier this week.

Turkish troops have maintained a network of bases in northern Iraq since the mid-1990s on the basis of security agreements struck with Saddam Hussein's regime.

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AFP

Facebook revises rules for politicians, imposes ban on Trump for Capitol incident



This photo illustration made on Saturday shows a phone screen displaying the statement of former US president Donald Trump on his Facebook page background in Arlington, Virginia (AFP)

San Francisco, US - Facebook on Friday banned former US president Donald Trump for two years, saying he deserved the maximum punishment for violating platform rules over a deadly attack by his supporters on the US Capitol.

The punishment will be effective from January 7, when Trump was booted off the social media giant, and comes after Facebook's independent oversight board said the indefinite ban imposed initially should be reviewed. 'Given the gravity of the circumstances that led to Mr. Trump's suspension, we believe his actions constituted a severe violation of our rules which merit the highest penalty available under the new enforcement protocols,' Facebook vice president of global affairs Nick Clegg said in a post.

In updating its policies, Facebook also said it will no longer give politicians blanket immunity for deceptive or abusive content based on their comments being newsworthy.

At the end of Trump's two-

year ban, Facebook will enlist experts to assess whether his activity on the platform still threatens public safety, according to Clegg. 'If we determine that there is still a serious risk to public safety, we will extend the restriction for a set period of time and continue to re-evaluate until that risk has receded,' Clegg said.

When Trump's suspension is lifted, he will face strict sanctions that could rapidly escalate to permanent removal for rule-breaking, according to Clegg.

Last month, the independent oversight board said Facebook was justified in ousting Trump for his comments regarding the deadly January 6 rampage at the US Capitol but that the platform should not have applied an 'indeterminate and standardless penalty of indefinite suspension'.

'Insult to voters'

Trump said in a statement the ban was an 'insult' to voters, renewing his false claims that the 2020 presidential election was stolen from him. 'They shouldn't be allowed to get away with this

censoring and silencing,' he said.

Trump also took a jab at Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, who attended a White House dinner with the former president in 2019.

'Next time I'm in the White House there will be no more dinners, at his request, with Mark Zuckerberg and his wife,' Trump said. 'It will be all business!'

Zuckerberg has long maintained private companies should not be the arbiters of truth.

'American democracy doesn't belong to Silicon Valley; it belongs to the American people,' Clegg said in a podcast with Richard Reeves of the Brookings Institution. 'And it's the legislators and politicians of this country who in the end have to govern the rules that prevail.'

Some activists criticised Facebook for even opening the door to reinstating Trump.

Angelo Carusone of left-leaning watchdog Media Matters for America called Facebook's move dangerous, saying if Trump is reinstated, 'the platform will remain a simmering cauldron of

extremism, disinformation and violence'.

Activists in a group that calls itself The Real Facebook Oversight Board said, 'Facebook shouldn't have needed a US\$130mn Oversight Board and a team of law professors to tell them dictators and authoritarians were running wild on their platform'.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki, when asked about the Facebook decision, said a social media platform which is disseminating information to millions of Americans, 'has a responsibility to crack down on disinformation... whether it's about the election or even about the vaccine'.

Trump was suspended from Facebook and Instagram after posting a video during the attack by his fired-up supporters challenging his election loss, in which he told them: "We love you, you're very special."

The oversight panel had called on Facebook to justify why his ban should be permanent.

'The steps Facebook has committed to today will contribute to greater clarity, consistency and transparency in the way the company moderates content, and promote public safety, defend human rights and respect freedom of expression,' the board said in a release.

As part of its new policy, Facebook will step back from its 'newsworthiness' exception which allowed false information from Trump and others to circulate. Facebook will begin publishing the 'rare instances' in which offending posts are tolerated, and will not treat content posted by politicians differently from content posted by anyone else, according to Clegg.

AFP



This file photo released by UK veterinary charity PDSA shows Magawa, an African giant pouched rat, wearing his gold medal for his work in detecting landmines, in Siem Reap, a resort town in Cambodia (AFP)

Bomb-sniffing rat from Tanzania retires after Cambodian career

Phnom Penh, Cambodia - A giant African pouched rat called Magawa who spent years sniffing out landmines in the Cambodian countryside has stopped working and will enjoy a well-earned retirement eating bananas and peanuts, his employers told AFP.

Magawa, originally from Tanzania, was trained by the Belgian charity APOPO which says the rodent helped clear mines from 225,000 square metres of land in his five-year career, the equivalent of 42 football pitches.

But after detecting 71 landmines and 38 items of unexploded ordnance 'he is getting a bit tired', Michael Heiman, the charity's programme manager in Cambodia, said on Saturday. "The best thing to do is to retire him."

Millions of landmines were

laid in Cambodia between 1975 and 1998, causing tens of thousands of casualties.

APOPO trained Magawa in his native Tanzania to detect the chemical compound within explosives by rewarding him with tasty treats - his favourites being bananas and peanuts.

He alerts de-miners by scratching the earth.

Magawa can scurry across an area the size of a tennis court in just 30 minutes, something that would take four days using a conventional metal detector. He is big enough to be attached to a leash as he goes about his business but light enough not to set off mines.

In his autumn years, Magawa will spend more time doing what he loves, says Heiman - eating bananas and peanuts.

In September last year the

rodent won the animal equivalent of Britain's highest civilian honour for bravery because of his uncanny knack for uncovering landmines and unexploded ordnance.

Magawa was the first rat to receive a PDSA medal in the 77 years of the awards, joining an illustrious band of brave canines and felines - and even a pigeon.

The group says 20 newly trained rats that recently arrived in Cambodia have just received their accreditation from the authorities to start landmine detection work.

But it will be a tough challenge following in Magawa's footsteps.

Magawa is a 'very exceptional rat', Heiman said.

"Obviously we are going to miss him in operations."

AFP

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Delhi, Mumbai ease lockdown as daily infection numbers fall in India

New Delhi, India - Markets and shopping malls in New Delhi will be allowed to reopen from Monday in a further easing of the COVID-19 lockdown, the Chief Minister said, as infections fall in major Indian cities after weeks of restrictions.

Delhi Metro will also resume services at 50 per cent capacity, the city's Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal said on Saturday.

Markets and malls will operate on alternate days, with half of them open on any given day.

Offices can reopen at half capacity but Kejriwal urged people to still try to work from home.

The easing comes after Delhi allowed construction sites and factories to reopen last week.

"They have been open for a week but the COVID-19 situation is still under control, and we have less than 500 fresh cases in the last 24 hours," Kejriwal said. "It is important to bring the economy back on track now that the COVID-19 situation improving. We pray that the situation remains the same."

The government of Maharashtra state, which includes India's economic powerhouse Mumbai, announced a five-level



People make their way through a wholesale food grain market in India's capital New Delhi on Saturday (AFP)

plan to ease restrictions depending on infection rates and hospital bed occupancy.

In level-one areas - with infection rates below five per cent

and hospital bed occupancy below 25 per cent - all shops, restaurants and malls will be allowed to reopen.

But level-five districts - with

infection rates over 20 per cent - will remain under severe movement restrictions.

Daily infections reported across India have dropped to

about 120,000 from more than 400,000 in May, according to official statistics.

Deaths have also fallen, with 3,380 reported in the previous

24 hours, although this is widely seen as a major underestimate.

At least 344,082 people in the country have lost their lives to the coronavirus, which is now surging in parts of rural India.

Delhi reported about 400 new infections Saturday, down from about 25,000 daily cases when the lockdown was announced seven weeks earlier.

The devastating surge was blamed on new virus variants and the government having allowed most activity to return to normal including mass religious and political gatherings.

India's vaccination programme meanwhile is making progress with so far about 180mn people receiving the first dose of the vaccine, while another 45mn people completed taking both the shots.

So far India has allowed three vaccines - the Oxford-AstraZeneca, Covaxin by Bharat Biotech and Russia's Sputnik V, which was added to the list in April. Sputnik V has been deemed to be safe, and works in a way similar to the Oxford-AstraZeneca jab which is being made in India as Covishield. Agencies

Vast majority recovered from virus

Paris, France - The novel coronavirus has killed at least 3,714,923 people since the outbreak emerged in China in December 2019, according to a tally from official sources compiled by AFP at 1000 GMT on Saturday.

At least 172,499,930 cases of coronavirus have been registered. The vast majority have recovered, though some have continued to experience symptoms weeks or even months later. The figures are based on daily reports provided by health authorities in each country.

They exclude revisions made by other statistical organisations, which show that the number of deaths is much higher.

The World Health Organization estimates that the pandemic's overall toll could be two to three times higher than official records, due to the excess mortality that is directly and indirectly linked to COVID-19.

A large number of the less severe or asymptomatic cases also remain undetected, despite intensified testing in many countries.

On Friday, 9,916 new deaths and 427,592 new cases were recorded worldwide. Based on latest reports, the countries with the most new deaths were India with 3,380, followed by Brazil with 1,454 and the United States with 605.

The United States is the worst-affected country with 597,001 deaths from 33,346,365 cases. After the US, the hardest-hit countries are Brazil with 470,842 deaths from 16,841,408 cases, India with 344,082 deaths from 28,694,879 cases, Mexico with 228,568 deaths from 2,429,631 cases, and Peru with 185,813 deaths from 1,976,166 cases. AFP

US sending \$266.5mn in aid to Afghanistan for COVID response

Washington, US - The United States announced on Friday more than US\$266mn in additional humanitarian aid for Afghanistan, intended mainly for its COVID-19 response, as foreign troops continue their withdrawal from the country.

"As the United States withdraws military forces from Afghanistan, our enduring commitment is clear," top US diplomat Antony Blinken said.

"We remain engaged through our full diplomatic, economic and assistance toolkit to support the peaceful, stable future the Afghan people want and deserve."



Afghan children sit on a wall along a roadside in the old part of Ghazni on Wednesday (AFP)

The aid is intended for areas such as protective equipment, shelter, food and health and hygiene services related to the COVID pandemic. It also provides for 'protection needs for the most vulnerable Afghans', including at-risk women and girls.

The US\$266.5mn, made up of US\$157.5mn from American aid agency USAID and US\$109mn from the State Department, brings total US humanitarian aid to Afghanistan in fiscal years 2020 and 2021 to US\$543mn.

Washington has still not made a decision on whether to evacuate Afghan interpreters who worked with the US mili-

tary, now fearing for their lives as foreign troops pull out.

Twenty members of Congress on Friday appealed to President Joe Biden in an open letter on Friday to 'immediately' evacuate the more than 18,000 interpreters and their families, who have filed for visas to come to the United States.

No American entity 'has the ability or authority to protect them in Afghanistan after our withdrawal. It would be a moral failure to transfer the responsibility to protect our Afghan partners onto the shoulders of the Afghan Government' they said. AFP

With homemade rifles, groups take fight to Myanmar's junta



This file photo shows military training by the Karenni National Progressive Party ethnic rebel group underway in Kayah State on May 10 (AFP)

Yangon, Myanmar - At makeshift factories hidden in Myanmar's jungle, locals who have formed self-defence groups make rifles to take the fight to the military junta, but their homemade weapons don't always hit the mark.

Myanmar has been in chaos and its economy paralysed since the generals ousted Aung San Suu Kyi's government in February, accusing it of fraud during 2020 elections.

Several communities across Myanmar - especially in townships that have seen a high death toll at the hands of police - have formed local 'defence forces'.

At one workshop in Kayah

state near the Thai border, an amateur gunsmith - pieces of wood strewn around him, the sounds of saws and hammering in the background - prepares to fit a trigger guard.

Another applies the final touches to the stock with a sander, before examining the finished product: A bolt-action rifle that would not look out of place in a WWI film.

The performance of the homemade weapons is not always up to the exacting standards required in combat.

"One night, the military... shot at us with heavy artillery," Ko John, a self-defence force member, told AFP.

Junta soldiers then closed to within 60-90 metres of the group. "When we decided to shoot back at them, our guns did not fire as expected since they were homemade," he said.

"We called for support from our two snipers and we shot eight rounds at them but only six rounds were fired properly."

As well as the rise of local self-defence forces, analysts believe hundreds of anti-coup protesters from Myanmar's towns and cities have trekked into insurgent-held areas to receive military training.

But part-time fighters know the odds are stacked against them in any confrontation with Myanmar's military - one of Southeast Asia's most battle-hardened and brutal.

Ko John described being overwhelmed by superior numbers and weaponry during one recent encounter.

"When we tried to capture the military camp, their helicopter arrived and the reinforcements from the helicopter shot down at us."

Fighting has escalated in Kayah state in recent days, with locals accusing the military of using artillery shells that have landed in villages.

AFP



Members of the Chinese and Hong Kong community in New York attend a vigil on the 32nd anniversary of the Tiananmen Square crackdown, on Friday (AFP)

China fumes at US and EU consulates in Hong Kong for lighting Tiananmen candles

Hong Kong, China - China on Saturday berated the US and EU consulates in Hong Kong for displaying candles to commemorate the June 4 Tiananmen crackdown, slamming it as a 'clumsy political show' to destabilise the city.

Candles were seen lit in the windows of the US consulate building, which is next to the residence of Hong Kong's Beijing-appointed leader Carrie Lam, and the European Union's office on Friday night.

The missions also posted photographs of their candlelit

Tiananmen memorials on social media.

"Any attempt to exploit Hong Kong to carry out infiltration or sabotage activities against the mainland crosses the red line... is absolutely intolerable," a spokesperson for the Hong Kong office of China's Foreign Ministry said. "We again urge the organs of relevant countries in Hong Kong to immediately... stop meddling with Hong Kong affairs and China's internal affairs at large, and avoid playing with fire."

For three decades in Hong Kong, huge crowds, often tens of

thousands strong, have held candlelit vigils on June 4 for those killed in 1989 when tanks and troops crushed pro-democracy protests in Beijing.

Crowds have swelled in recent years as Hong Kongers chafe under Beijing's increasingly assertive rule.

However this year's vigil was banned at a time when Hong Kong authorities are carrying out a sweeping clampdown on dissent following huge and often violent democracy protests two years ago.

Flashes of defiance still flick-

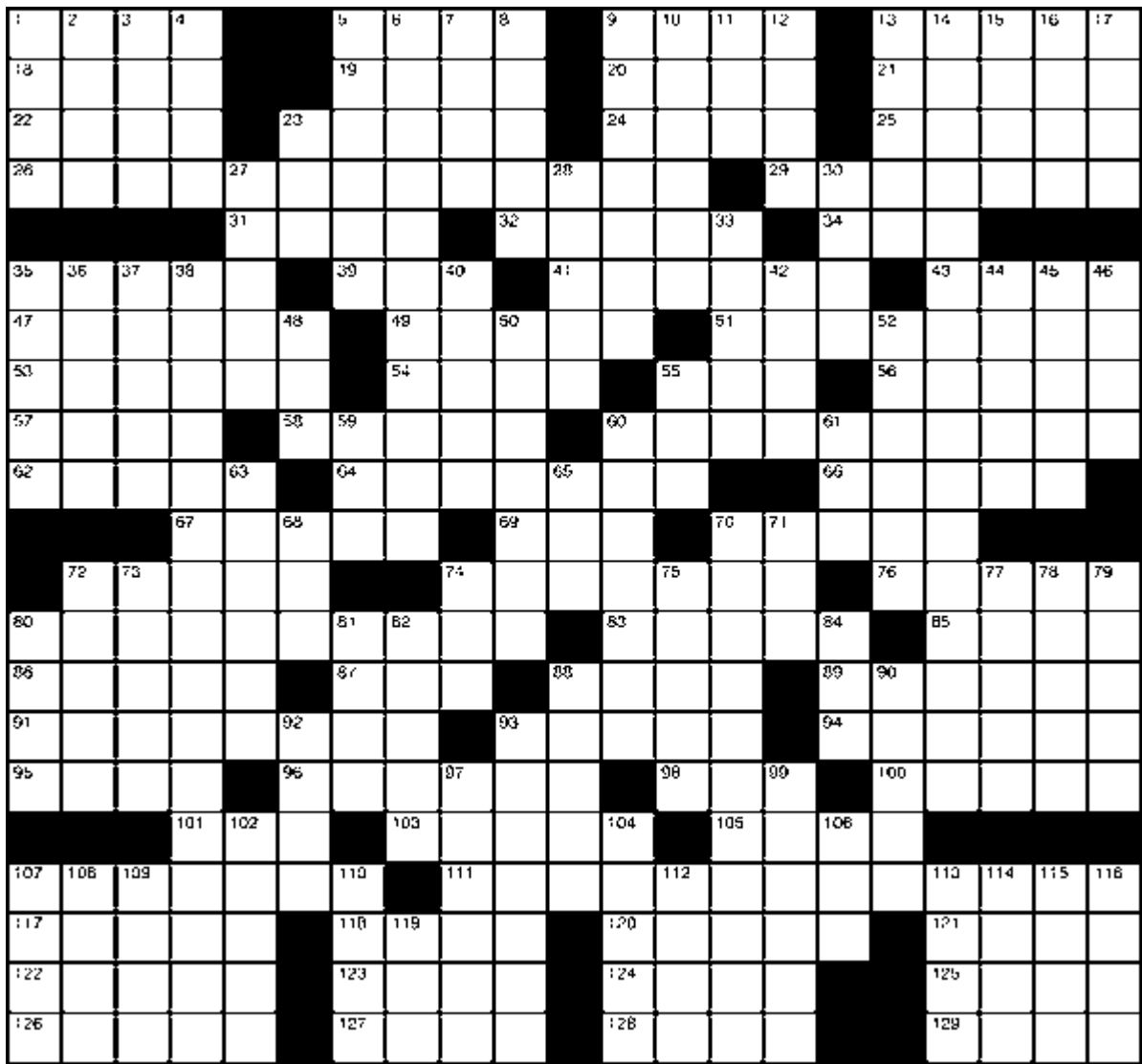
ered across the city on Friday night as residents simultaneously turned their mobile phone lights or lit candles in multiple districts across the city to mark the date.

There were online calls for people to turn off the lights at home and place candles in their windows in commemoration.

Public commemorations of June 4 are forbidden in mainland China and, until recently, semi-autonomous Hong Kong was the one place in China where large scale remembrance was still tolerated.

AFP

DAILY CROSSWORD



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97 Wearisome
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102 ___ nous
104 Cut
106 Reverence
107 Abrade
108 A type of genius?
109 ___ good
example
110 Resorts
112 Traditional
learning
113 Watercourse in
Syria
114 Privy to
115 Expedition
116 Rodentlike
mammal
119 French king

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE



ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

Real problems involving your nearest and dearest need most of your attention, so try to ignore frivolous situations as much as possible. You have enough projects to keep you busy for now. Avoid taking on any new business or personal tasks unless it's absolutely necessary. The key word right now is "prioritise." Your selflessness will be rewarded in extremely beneficial ways.



LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

You might be bored, but it's in your best interests to ignore the urge to stir up trouble just for the fun of it. If you insist on acting silly, you'll have to do it alone. Your co-workers are too busy being adults to share your current mood. Besides, you have your professional reputation to think about. How would it look if the boss walked in and saw you behaving this way?



SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

Looking at your dilemma from a different perspective can have a favourable outcome as long as you don't get too far off track. The challenges you face aren't insurmountable, but they might seem that way in the beginning. Break your biggest problems down into smaller, more workable components so you don't feel too overwhelmed as you begin to solve them.



TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

You have a much better time viewing the world through someone else's eyes. If you have something exciting planned, be sure to invite along a friend so you can share opinions. Group events are much more your style, so say yes to a party at a friend's house or the reopening of your favourite store. Keeping an open mind is the key to having successful conversations with strangers.



VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Why are you so determined that your way is the right way? The first thing on your to-do list should be to stop being critical of other people's ideas and opinions. There is a definite grey area here, so don't make your decision based strictly on your observations. Stop what you're doing, let go of some of your control issues, and open your mind to other possibilities.



CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

If you don't have any creative or artistic friends, it's time to get acquainted with some. Look online, join a creative group, or sign up for an art class. At the moment, you do your best work when you have a collaborative partner, and it would be a shame to let your talents go to waste. Ask your friends and relatives about their hobbies and artistic skills.



GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

You should know by now that what you say and how you say it can directly affect what other people think of you. Yes, you have a lot on your mind, but talking without thinking first can be quite detrimental to your personal and professional reputation. Keep jokes and sarcasm to a minimum, and if you absolutely have to say what's on your mind, be sure to remember your audience.



LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

If you attempt to start too many new projects, you might just fall behind with both the old and the new. If delegating some of your workload to other people isn't a possibility, then it's time to prioritise. Admitting to yourself that you won't be able to get it all done is a difficult but necessary task. If everything doesn't get finished on time, it isn't the end of the world.



AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

Money is your main concern, so it's a good idea to put off spending any more of it than you absolutely have to. Feel free to tend to your basic needs, such as food, shelter, and clothing, but put off making major purchases for now. You can't really afford to be around people who want to spend your cash frivolously either, so try not to lend money to your friends.



CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

You have a superior sense of intuition, which makes it pretty easy to guess what your friends, co-workers, and relatives are thinking about just by looking at the expressions on their faces. This is a good time to tap into your own subconscious as well, especially if you've been trying to work through a personal problem. Listen to what that little voice is telling you.



SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

The longer you play the game, the harder it might be to maintain your grip on reality. Of course, maybe an escape is exactly what you need right now. In that case, go for it. Games are a fun way to pass the time, especially if you can get someone else to play along with you. Your dreams may be particularly vivid and exciting tonight, but don't try to remember them.



PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

No matter which road you choose to go down, there's something at the end of it that is well worth the trip. Luck is on your side, and it feels great to have such positive energy surrounding you. People with negative attitudes aren't welcome in your presence, and if they insist on telling you that what you want to do isn't possible, you're likely to show them the door.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

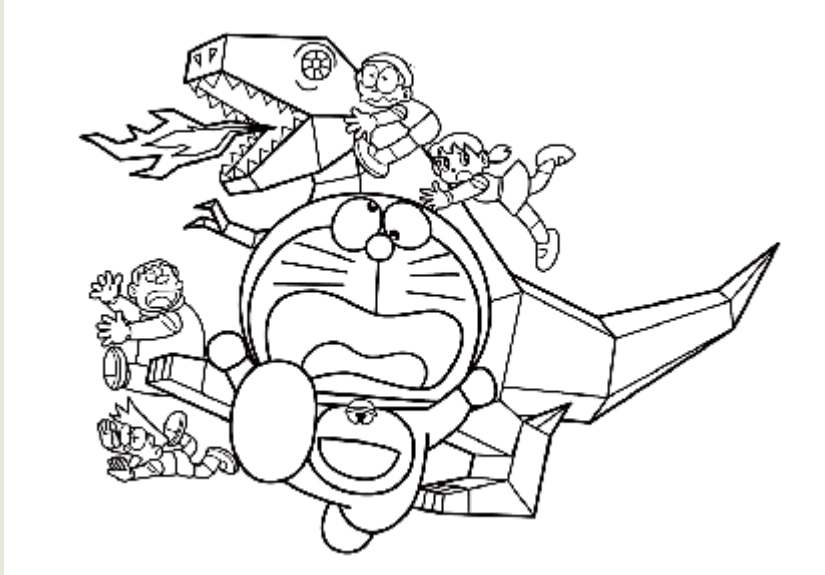
1. In which decade was the American Institute of Electrical Engineers (AIEE) founded?
a. 1850s
b. 1880s
c. 1930s
d. 1950s

2. What is part of a database that holds only one type of information?
a. Report
b. Field
c. Record
d. File

3. 'OS' computer abbreviation usually means
a. Order of Significance
b. Open Software
c. Operating System
d. Optical Sensor

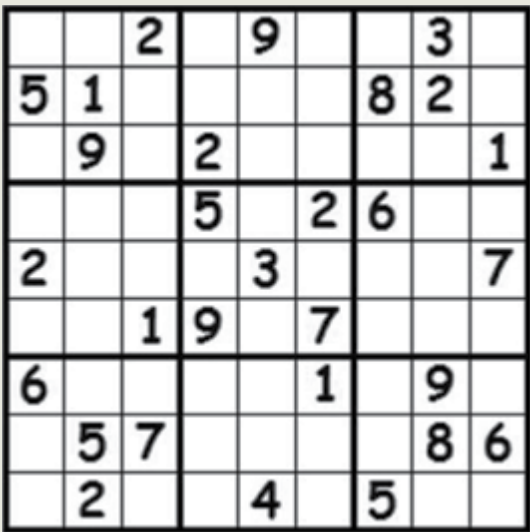
Answers: 1. b 2. c 3. c

KIDS COLOURING



DO YOU SUDOKU?

LEVEL EASY: Fill in the grid so that every row, every column and every 3x3 box contains the digits 1 to 9 and only one instance of each number



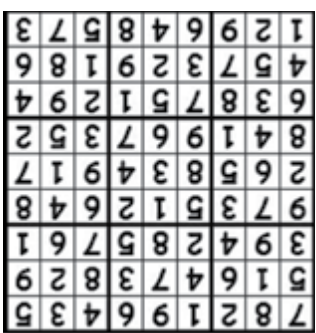
BOGGLER



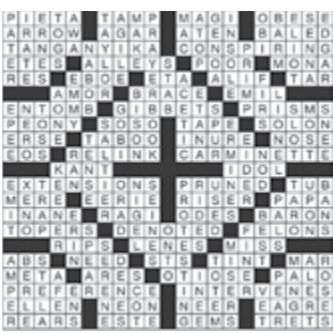
Each game will present you with a matrix filled with letters. The objective is to form words by linking adjacent letters - to the left, right, on top, bottom, or diagonal to each other. The Boggles Classic game uses a 4 x 4 matrix. Words are valued at one point for each letter in excess of two letters. A three letter word is worth one point, a four letter word is worth two points, and so on. Valid words must be at least three letters long.

Solution 20-25 words: Excellent, 15-20 words: Very good, 10-15 words: Good, 5-10 words: Average

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER



DAILY CROSSWORD ANSWERS (JUNE 03)



WORD BUILDER

You have three minutes to find all the words contained in this word.

Rules: Words should be at least four letters long, proper nouns and duplicates don't count





Adam Driver and Marion Cotillard in a scene from the musical *Annette*

BACKLOG OF CINEMATIC GOLD

'ANNETTE' TO OPEN 74TH CANNES

Annette, an upcoming musical film directed by French director Leos Carax (his English debut), which releases in France on July 6, will be the opening film at the 74th annual Cannes Film Festival, slated to be held between July 6-17 (after having been originally scheduled for May 11-22).

The film tells the story of a provocative stand-up comedian (Adam Driver) and his wife, a world-famous soprano (Marion Cotillard) whose life take an unexpected turn with the birth of their gifted daughter - Annette.

A rich crop of past Palme d'Or winners and arthouse favourites are set to return to the 2021 Cannes Film Festival as organisers announced a bumper selection for its competition on Thursday.

Among the 24 directors whose films are heading to the Cote d'Azur for July 6-17 are Sean Penn for his new film *Flag Day*, Italy's Nanni Moretti (winner in 2001) with *Tre Piani* and France's Jacques Audiard (winner in 2015) with *Les Olympiades*. They join three big auteurs that had already been announced - Wes Anderson (*The French Dispatch*), Paul Verhoeven (*Benedetta*) and Leos Carax (*Annette*).

One silver lining from all the disruption of the past year has been a backlog of cinematic gold that gave organisers some 2,000 films to wade through as they made their selection for the 74th edition of the world's leading film shindig.

TOP DIRECTORS

Jacques Audiard

Leos Carax

Paul Verhoeven

Nanni Moretti

Sean Penn

Wes Anderson

Another past Palme winner returning to the Croisette is Thailand's Apichatpong Weerasethakul with his first English-language film *Memoria*, starring Tilda Swinton. Iran's two-time Oscar winner Asghar Farhadi will also return with *A Hero*, while Russia's renowned director Kirill Serebrennikov - who has lately faced significant pressure from authorities - will be in competition with *Petrov's Flu*.

They will face a jury headed by US director Spike Lee, who was set to preside in 2020 before the festival was cancelled by the pandemic. The opening film was already known - *Annette* is the first in a decade from French arthouse darling Carax, and his first in English, starring Adam Driver and Marion Cotillard as a celebrity couple awaiting a mysterious child.

Verhoeven, meanwhile, promises a touch of scandal on the Croisette with his entry, *Benedetta*, about a lesbian nun in a 17th century Italian convent - solid ground for the Dutch filmmaker who has often married art and salaciousness with movies like *Basic Instinct*, *Showgirls* and *Elle*.

It has been a particularly long wait for Anderson, who was due to present his latest quirky bauble, *The French Dispatch*, at last year's festival.

Filmed in Angouleme in southwest France, it was clearly worth waiting for a proper Gallic launch, and could bring a multitude of stars to the red carpet, with Anderson regulars such as Bill Murray and Adrian Brody joined by new additions including Timothee Chalamet, Benicio Del Toro and France's own Lea Seydoux.

Hopefuls

Also appearing during the fortnight are some special screenings, appearing outside the main competition.

They include a documentary about the troubled US filmstar Val Kilmer (*Val*) and a new film about 1960s rock stars *The Velvet Underground* by Todd Haynes.

Oliver Stone will present an update to his 1990s classic film about the Kennedy assassination, having reportedly got hold of some new documents, titled *JFK Revisited: Through the Looking Glass*. Charlotte Gainsbourg will present a film about her mother Jane Birkin, while Oscar winner Tom McCarthy (*Spotlight*) will premiere his new action film with Matt Damon, *Stillwater*.

The organisers have also teased the possibility of a major blockbuster appearing during the fortnight, though confirmed that it will not be the much-delayed new James Bond film, *No Time To Die*.

The press conference also spoke about the health measures that organisers promise will make the festival safe for the mass of film professionals and press - some 18,000 have already applied for accreditation, they say.

That is far below the usual attendance, because the normally packed movie marketplace is being held separately and online this year.

France's COVID-19 statistics are also currently headed in a reassuring direction and it is due to lift remaining restrictions in time for the event. Organisers say visitors will need proof of vaccination or negative tests.

AFF

Competitors for Cannes Palme d'Or

Here are some of the films competing for the prize awarded by a jury headed by US director Spike Lee:

- Annette** by Leos Carax, France

Adam Driver and Marion Cotillard star as a glamorous celebrity couple whose lives are upended by the arrival of their first child.
- The French Dispatch** by Wes Anderson, US

Film fans can never get enough of Wes Anderson, and his latest quirky bauble can be counted on for more obsessively curated sets and shots.
- Benedetta** by Paul Verhoeven, Netherlands

Dutch director Paul Verhoeven's latest tale recounts a lesbian affair in a 17th-century convent, starring Virginie Efira and Charlotte Rampling.
- A Hero** by Asghar Farhadi, Iran

This film was shot in Iran and in the Farsi language by Oscar winning Iranian director Asghar Farhadi,
- Tout s'est Bien Passe (Everything Went Well)** by Francois Ozon, France

Featuring French stars Sophie Marceau and Charlotte Rampling, the film by Francois Ozon tells the story of a woman asked by her father to help him die.
- Tre Piani (Three Floors)** by Nanni Moretti, Italy

Exactly 20 years after winning the Palme d'Or with 'The Son's Room' Moretti is back with his first-ever adaptation of a novel.
- Titane** by Julia Ducournau, France

Starring French veteran actor Vincent Lindon, Titane is the second feature film after 'Grave' by horror film specialist Ducournau.
- Red Rocket** by Sean Baker, US

The comedy-drama by indie filmmaker Baker features Simon Rex as an over-the-hill porn star who returns to his hometown in Texas, where he is not very welcome.
- Petrov's Flu** by Kirill Serebrennikov, Russia

An alcohol-fuelled stroll by a cartoonist and his friend in post-Soviet Russia brings back childhood memories that get mixed with the present.
- Par un Demi Clair Matin (France)** by Bruno Dumont, France

Adapted from a work by French writer Charles Peguy, the film charts the fall from grace of a star TV reporter whose life crisis is shown in contemporary France.
- Nitram** by Justin Kurzel, Australia

The Australian director looks at events leading up to the Port Arthur
- mass shooting in Tasmania, in which 35 died and led to reforms of Australian gun control laws.
- Memoria** by Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Thailand

Memoria explores the relationship of Swinton's character with a French archaeologist and a musician as she tries to understand strange sounds in the night.
- Lingui** by Mahamat Saleh Haroun, Chad

Lingui tells the story of an adolescent whose unwanted pregnancy puts her in conflict with her country's traditions and the law.
- Les Olympiades (Paris 13th District)** by Jacques Audiard, France

Based on three graphic novels by US author Adrian Tomine, this film is about three young women and a young man who are friends as well as lovers.
- Les Intranquilles (The Restless)** by Joachim Lafosse, Belgium

The film tells the story of a couple under stress due to Bonnard's character suffering from bipolar disorder.
- La Fracture** by Catherine Corsini, France

Corsini returns with a drama about a couple stuck in a hospital that comes under siege during a violent Paris demonstration.
- The Worst Person in the World** by Joachim Trier, Norway

A film about love and its complications - the third of Trier's Oslo trilogy - looks at Julie, who turns 30 and is looking for answers in a relationship.
- Compartment No 6** by Juho Kuosmanen, Finland

Two strangers - a Finnish woman and a gloomy Russian - share a compartment of a train winding its way up to the Arctic circle.
- 'Casablanca Beats'** by Nabil Ayouch, France-Morocco

Ayouch rocks the suburbs of Casablanca with a film about young people seeking an outlet through hip hop.
- 'Ahed's Knee'** by Nadav Lapid, Israel

Lapid explores two battles waged by an Israeli director against the death of freedom and of a mother.
- 'Drive My Car'** by Ryusuke Hamaguchi, Japan

An aging, widowed actor looking for a chauffeur ends up hiring a 20-year-old woman. First, things go awry, then unite them.

FOOTBALL ROUND-UP



Brazil's Neymar (R) celebrates with teammate Lucas Paqueta after scoring (AFP)

**2022 FIFA WORLD CUP
S AMERICAN QUALIFIERS**
Porto Alegre, Brazil - Star forward Neymar scored a retaken penalty as Brazil maintained their perfect start to South American World Cup qualifying with a 2-0 win over Ecuador on Friday.

Richarlison had given Brazil the lead on 64 minutes and Neymar sealed the win deep into injury time, but only after another VAR farce. Referee Alexis Herrera initially gave a free-kick against Gabriel Jesus after contact between him and Angelo Preciado in the Ecuador area five minutes from time.

But after an interminable four-minute VAR review, he changed his mind and awarded a penalty.

Neymar stuttered in his run-up but Ecuador goalkeeper Alexander Dominguez wasn't

fooled and easily saved his weak shot. Ecuador were then down the other end attacking when Herrera blew his whistle and brought the game back for encroachment by Dominguez.

Neymar retook the penalty and this time sent Dominguez the wrong way.

The slapstick ending could not mask a deserved victory for Brazil, who now top the qualification table by four points from unbeaten Argentina, with Ecuador third, two points further back.

Predictably, Brazil dominated the early possession with 75 per cent of the ball in the first quarter of an hour. But it wasn't until 20 minutes that they first threatened with Richarlison millimeters away from turning home a whipped inswinging Neymar free-kick.

Moments later Richarlison played Gabriel in on goal but Dominguez was out quickly to smother his poked effort.

Ecuador were their usual physical selves but showed little of the attacking verve that had seen them score 13 goals in their previous three matches.

Neymar in particular felt the full force of Ecuador's muscular approach. Ecuadoran chances were few and far between, with fullback Preciado blazing over from 20 yards on 58 minutes.

Brazil coach Tite had seen enough and brought on forward Gabriel Jesus for defensive midfielder Fred, who was making his first appearance for the Selecao since 2018.

The switch paid instant dividends. After Dominguez saved low to his right from

Neymar, he was poorly beaten on 64 minutes at his near post by a shot from Richarlison.

It was one-way traffic and Marquinhos headed over the bar before Dominguez made partial amends for his earlier clanger, saving low to his right to deny Gabriel Jesus and then blocking a shot from Gabriel with his foot.

Gabriel, whose nickname is Gabigol, then headed wide of an empty net from Richarlison's cross on a lightning counter-attack after Dominguez made a rash dart out of his area.

But the true drama came at the end of the match as VAR once again stole the headlines.

Brazil travel to Paraguay on Tuesday while Ecuador host Peru, before the Copa America begins in Brazil on June 13.

AFP

Spain and Portugal in lukewarm stalemate

EUROS FRIENDLIES

Madrid, Spain - Spain and Portugal both lacked firepower as they drew 0-0 in a friendly warm up for the European Championships at the Metropolitano in Madrid on Friday.

The match was both an occasion to officially launch the two nations launching a joint bid to host the 2030 World Cup and for the hosts to test out a new-look defence.

Cristiano Ronaldo had a frustrating night on his first game in Madrid since leaving Real in 2018 and came close to scoring twice and set up a good chance Diogo Jota failed to take advantage of. Backed by Joao Felix, Ronaldo was largely neutralised by Barcelona pair Sergio Busquets and Thiago Alcantara in a tight home midfield in front of a remodelled defence.

"It was a very good test for us and I think we will all be ready for the European Championship," said Spain coach Luis Enrique. "In the first 60 minutes we managed to almost completely cancel out the reigning European champions, they almost didn't make three passes in a row,"

Alvaro Morata came closest to scoring for Spain missing two clear chances and hitting the bar in stoppage time. Manchester City defender Aymeric Laporte made his debut after opting for Spain ahead of his native France.

Portugal coach Fernando Santos was less satisfied. "We can do better, I'll be talking with the lads and we have the quality to improve," he said. "They gave everything and it'll serve us well."

"We have the consistency to hope to win titles," he added.

Some 14,743 masked fans attended at Atletico Madrid's



Portugal's Cristiano Ronaldo (L) and Spain's Diego Llorente vie for the ball

68,000-seat Wanda Metropolitano stadium.

Italy rout Czechs

Bologna, Italy - A week before they kick off Euro 2020 in Rome, Italy crushed the Czech Republic 4-0 in Bologna on Friday, keeping an eighth straight clean sheet.

Ciro Immobile Nicolò Barella Lorenzo Insigne and Domenico Berardi all scored for the hosts who will open the Euro against Turkey next Friday. In the absence of PSG midfielder Marco Verratti, who is nursing an injured knee, Jorginho, a Champions League winner with Chelsea, and Barella quickly set the tempo for Italy.

Italy's strikers Lorenzo Insigne and Ciro Immobile wasted early chances, before Immobile of Lazio broke the deadlock in the 3rd minute. Barella, who injected energy from midfield, added a second before half time. Immobile set up Insigne to score the third with a deflected shot.

Berardi rounded off the party in style, much to the delight of the few thousand spectators in the venerable Dall'Ara Stadium.

They also warmly welcomed the debut of Sassuolo striker Giacomo Raspadori, the surprise pick on the 26-man squad, with 12 minutes left.

The only real scare for Italy manager Roberto Mancini came when Leonardo Bonucci limped off in the first half after twisting his right knee, but the Juventus defender returned and finished the game.

Italy are undefeated in 27 matches, since September 2018.

Hungary edge Cyprus
Budapest, Hungary - Euro 2020 Group F outsiders Hungary beat Cyprus 1-0 in Budapest on Friday in their first friendly match before the delayed tournament starting on June 11. A 36th minute strike by midfielder Andras Schafer, his first international goal, settled the tie.

AFP

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LECLERC ON POLE

Ferrari driver on top after eventful qualifying session in Baku

FORMULA ONE
AZERBAIJAN GP
Baku, Azerbaijan - Ferrari's Charles Leclerc claimed pole for the Azerbaijan Grand Prix after a crash-laden, red-flagged qualifying session in Baku on Saturday.

Mercedes' world champion Lewis Hamilton will start alongside Leclerc, who is looking for quick redemption after taking pole in Monaco last time out, and is on the second row of Sunday's race with the Alpha Tauri of Pierre Gasly for company.

Q3 was halted with a minute remaining when Gasly's teammate, Japanese rookie Yuki Tsunoda, crashed at turn three, with Carlos Sainz in the following Ferrari taking quick avoiding action, locking his wheels and smashing into a safety barrier

A fortnight ago Leclerc was on course to confirm Ferrari's return to form after their woeful 2020 when he qualified fastest in Monaco but crashed at the end of Q3 in his home race.

He then suffered the heartache of having to retire before taking his rightful place at the head of the grid. "I didn't expect us to be this competitive so I'm happy with how it went," Leclerc said. "The car felt OK but I feel Mercedes and Red Bull have a bit more from us so it will be difficult tomorrow."

'Stupid qualifying'
After a misfiring weekend and seventh-place finish at Monaco



Ferrari's Monegasque driver Charles Leclerc celebrates after claiming pole position in the qualifying session for the Formula One Azerbaijan Grand Prix at the Baku City Circuit in Baku on Saturday (AFP)

Hamilton was relieved at what he hailed as 'a monumental' qualifying result.

"The lap was OK and we definitely weren't expecting that.

We've been struggling like you wouldn't believe", said the Briton targeting his record-extending 99th career win on Sunday.

"Our race pace is a lot better

than our one-lap pace - we don't understand why - and hopefully we can take the fight to these guys tomorrow, he noted."

Verstappen, whose car

required flash repairs after a crash in third practice, cut a frustrated figure, the Dutch driver saying: "It was just a stupid qualifying to be honest. It is what it is though, we're still P3.

"Our car is still strong so let's see what we can do for the race.

"Let's hope for a clean start, three different cars at the front which is always good to have."

Sainz, who finished second to Verstappen in Monaco, starts from the third row in Baku

I didn't expect us to be this competitive so I'm happy with how it went. The car felt OK

CHARLES LECLERC

alongside Lando Norris in the McLaren, although the British driver could be hit with a grid penalty for failing to obey protocol in the second of four red flag appearances.

Q1 was suspended for ten minutes when Lance Stroll crashed his Aston Martin, with the red flags out again when Antonio Giovinazzi's Alfa Romeo struck a barrier. Q2 was halted with a minute and a half left to run after Daniel Ricciardo gave his McLaren an unscheduled crumpled makeover.

And the red flags came out for a fourth and final time towards the end of Q3 but by then Leclerc had sealed his pole to put Ferrari in sight of their first win since Singapore 2019.

AFP



Taha al Kishry Hussain al Musallam

Kishry re-elected to FINA Bureau; Musallam is new FINA chairman

Ashok Purohit
Muscat

Oman Swimming Association (OSA) chairman Taha al Kishry's stature as a top official in world swimming was once again underlined as the senior Asian Swimming Federation (AASF) administrator was re-elected to the FINA Bureau for a four-year term (2021-25) at the International Swimming Federation (FINA) Congress in Doha, Qatar on Saturday.

This is the second time in a row for Kishry as a FINA Bureau member, who is also the Oman Olympic Committee (OOC) secretary general and AASF director-general.

Also at the Congress, which was held in a hybrid format to allow members to attend either in person in Qatari capital Doha or connect virtually, Kuwait's Husain al Musallam was elected as the FINA president. The Kuwaiti had served as the FINA first vice-president under Julio Maglione, who stepped down as FINA president after 12 years in the role.

Besides Musallam for the presidency, the AASF had

nominated Kishry along with China's Zhou Jihong and Kazakhstan's Andrey Kryukov for the Bureau.

A total of 319 votes were cast by FINA members in the presidential election. Musallam, the only candidate for the post, received 302 votes in favour, with seven candidates voting against his election and ten abstentions.

The Congress elected 16 FINA Bureau members from continental organisations en bloc with Asia sending Jihong and Kryukov along with Kishry.

A total of 316 votes approved the candidates, with one no vote and two abstentions.

Kishry has put in more than three decades in sports management and administration and has played a key role in development of Oman sports, Oman's Olympic Movement and swimming in the sultanate and Asia.

Besides his roles in Oman, Kishry has been a executive member of the OCA, director general of Asian swimming and chairman of Arab Swimming Federation.

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Quartararo clinches fifth straight pole at Catalan MotoGP

MOTOGP
Montmeló, Spain - Championship leader Fabio Quartararo claimed his fifth successive pole of the season, narrowly clocking the fastest time in qualifying Saturday for the Catalan MotoGP. Yamaha's French rider is joined on the front row of Sunday's race in Montmeló by Australian Jack Miller's Ducati and Johann Zarco on Ducati's satellite Pramac bike.

Quartararo's fastest qualifying lap of 1min 38.853 sec was only 0.037 seconds quicker than Miller. It made him the first rider to record pole position in five straight races since Marc Marquez in 2014

Quartararo, 22, is aiming for a fourth win this season. He has a 24-point lead in the world championship over Zarco, another Ducati rider Francesco Bagnaia is two points further back but will start only ninth. Miller is fourth.

Both Quartararo and Miller recorded their times early in the



Yamaha French rider Fabio Quartararo celebrates after getting the pole position during the MotoGP qualifying session on Saturday (AFP)

session and had problems when they went for a final flying lap.

"I did a great first run. But actually my lap was not that perfect," Quartararo said in television interviews in English and French straight after finishing.

He began well in a second attempt but with other riders

crashing, the stewards waved caution flags.

"I was developing a pretty good one," Quartararo said. "Unfortunately there were a lot of yellow flags".

One of the riders who came off was Miller who went flying onto the track.

"I came out of it pretty good,

landed on my back and just slid off," said Miller, speaking in tattered leathers.

Zarco jumped onto the front row late in the session after following South African Brad Binder's wheel at the start of the lap and then muscling past the KTM on turn ten.

"Brad was going pretty fast and we almost fight a little bit."

Portuguese rider Miguel Oliveira (KTM) missed out on the front row by one hundredth of a second. He is joined on the second row by Italian Franco Morbidelli (Yamaha-SRT) and Spaniard Maverick Vinales (Yamaha).

Spaniard Marc Marquez will start 13th. The six-time MotoGP World Champion has yet to find his rhythm on his Honda after a long absence through injury.

The race marks the first this season with fans. The track is being allowed 20 per cent of total capacity, or 24,000 people, per day.

AFP

OC's Premier Division to begin on August 13

Muscat - Oman Cricket (OC) on Saturday confirmed that the Premier Division 2021-22 season will begin in August while A Division and lower-division season will start in September.

The first game of the 2021-22 Premier Division is scheduled on August 13 while other division games will begin from September 10. OC has invited senior division teams to register for the new season with the online registration for Premier and A Division teams open from June 15-30. The deadline for players' registration is July 10.

The last date for other teams' registration is August 10 while deadline for players' registration is August 15.

Dates for junior league and women's league teams' registration will be announced later.

Every day, all day!

Djokovic, Nadal march ahead; Swiatek wins

Paris, France - Novak Djokovic and Rafael Nadal recorded new French Open landmarks as they moved effortlessly into the fourth round on Saturday, setting up intriguing duels with a pair of Italian teenagers seen as heir apparents to the Grand Slam superstars.

Djokovic, the champion in Paris in 2016 and chasing a 19th Grand Slam title, brushed aside 93rd-ranked Ricardas Berankis of Lithuania 6-1, 6-4, 6-1.

The world No 1 is in the last-16 for the 12th successive year and will next face 19 year old Lorenzo Musetti who is making his debut at the Slams. Defending champion Nadal reached the fourth round for a record 16th time, claiming his 103rd victory in Paris to set a new record of match wins at a Grand Slam. Nadal's 6-3, 6-3, 6-3 victory over Britain's Cameron Norrie also put him into the last-16 of a major for the 50th time.

His 103 wins in the French capital puts him ahead of Roger Federer's mark of 102 victories at the Australian Open and 101 at Wimbledon.

Nadal, chasing a 14th Roland Garros title and record-setting 21st Grand Slam, goes on to face Italian teenager Jannik Sinner.

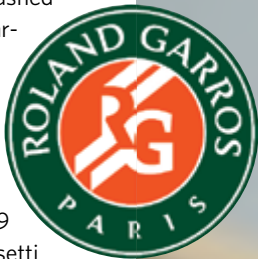
Musetti, ranked 76 in the world, fired 50 winners past compatriot Marco Cecchinato in a 3-6, 6-4, 6-3, 3-6, 6-3 victory. He becomes just the sixth man since 2000 to make the fourth round of a Slam on debut.

"I have practised with Novak so I know a little bit about his game. There will be more tension, but it's what I have been working for since childhood," said Musetti. "Now it's reality."

Lot of firepower

Djokovic said he was a fan of Musetti with whom he practised in Monte Carlo this year. "He's got a lot of firepower from both forehand and backhand," Djokovic said.

Nadal defeated Sinner in the quarterfinals in 2020 but



Serbia's Novak Djokovic in action during his third-round match against Lithuania's Ricardas Berankis in Paris on Saturday (AFP)



Poland's Iga Swiatek returns the ball to Estonia's Anett Kontaveit during their match in Paris on Saturday (AFP)

expects a much tougher assignment on Monday. "Jannik is not the best fourth round, without a doubt, he's a dangerous one," said Nadal. Sinner, seeded 18, eased past Sweden's Mikael Ymer 6-1, 7-5, 6-3.

Three top-ten women left

Defending champion and eighth

seed Iga Swiatek overcame an early break to defeat Estonia's Anett Kontaveit 7-6 (7/4), 6-0 to stretch her record of straight-sets wins at Roland Garros to ten matches.

Barbora Krejickova of the Czech Republic reached the last-16 for the second successive year with a 6-3, 6-2 victory over three-time quarterfinalist Elina

Svitolina as only three of the top-ten women's seeds made it to the second week.

World No 33 Krejickova goes on to face former US Open champion Sloane Stephens. Stephens, the 2018 runner-up in Paris, defeated Czech 18th seed Karolina Muchova 6-3, 7-5 to reach the last-16 for the seventh time.

Fourth seed Sofia Kenin, came back to beat fellow American Jessica Pegula 4-6, 6-1, 6-4.

The top three seeds, Ashleigh Barty, Naomi Osaka and Aryna Sabalenka all failed to get beyond the third round. American Coco Gauff, 17, made the last-16 for the first time when compatriot Jennifer Brady retired.

AFP

Sri Lanka's players refuse to sign new pay contracts

Colombo, Sri Lanka - Sri Lanka's national cricket players on Saturday refused to sign new pay contracts by a weekend deadline, but said they will take part in the tour of England later this month.

A lawyer representing the cricketers said they did not agree with a new performance-based pay scheme designed by a cricket board panel that included former Australia star Tom Moody. "Players refuse to sign annual and tour contracts until the pay dispute is resolved," lawyer Nishan Premathirane said in a statement. The statement came as Sri Lanka Cricket (SLC) extended the June 3 deadline until Sunday.

The statement said players will take part in the upcoming tour of England where they are due to play three ODIs and three T20 matches without contracts. "Even when players are re-fused pay, they will play for the country because that is their main objective."

Under the proposed pay structure, former captain Angelo Mathews and current Test captain Dimuth Karunaratne

suffered the biggest cuts. Mathews' annual fee fell from US\$130,000 a year to US\$80,000 while Karunaratne was offered US\$70,000, a drop of \$30,000.

When the new pay plan was unveiled last month, players said it was 'non-transparent' and urged Sri Lanka Cricket to not hold them at gunpoint.

Players also accused the board of violating confidentiality by publicly disclosing their proposed salaries.

There was no immediate reaction from the board, but it has said that players could earn more under the new performance-based scheme formulated with the help of former skipper Aravinda de Silva and Moody.

The Australian was hired in March as the Sri Lankan board's director of cricket to prepare the team for the next World Cup.

The 24 players were offered annual contracts with allrounder Dhananajaya de Silva and wicket-keeper Niroshan Dickwella getting the highest remuneration of US\$100,000 each.

AFP



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NZ's Tim Southee (2L) celebrates after dismissing an England batsman

Southee and Burns share day's honours at Lord's

ENGLAND VS NEW ZEALAND

FIRST TEST: DAY FOUR

London, UK - Tim Southee took six wickets but a painstaking hundred from England's Rory Burns halted New Zealand's march towards victory in the first Test at Lord's on Saturday.

New Zealand were 62 for two in their second innings at stumps on the fourth day, a lead of 165 runs. Ollie Robinson, continuing an impressive on-field debut, dismissed both fellow newcomer Devon Conway, fresh from his first-innings 200, and New Zealand captain Kane Williamson for a return of two for eight in nine overs.

By then New Zealand, following Friday's total washout, had damaged their hopes of going 1-0 up in this two-match series by twice reprieving Burns before the Surrey left-handed opener completed his third Test century. Burns was finally last man out for 132 to give veteran paceman Southee figures of six for 43 in 25.1 overs as England, in danger of following-on at 140 for six, reached 275 - still 103 runs adrift of New Zealand's 378.

England captain Joe Root fell for 42 to the first ball of Saturday's play when he edged a fine delivery from the towering Kyle

SCOREBOARD

New Zealand 1 st Innings 378		
ENGLAND 1 st INNINGS		
R Burns	c Watling b Southee	132
D Sibley	lbw b Jamieson	0
Z Crawley	c Watling b Southee	2
J Root	c Taylor b Jamieson	42
O Pope	lbw b Southee	22
D Lawrence	c de Grandhomme	
	b Southee	0
J Bracey	b Southee	0
O Robinson	c Jamieson b Southee	42
M Wood	c Watling b Jamieson	0
S Broad	b Wagner	10
J Anderson	not out	8
Extras:	(b 4, lb 4, nb 8, w 1)	17
TOTAL:	275 in 101.1 overs	
Fall of wickets: 1-4, 2-18, 3-111, 4-140, 5-140, 6-140, 7-203, 8-207, 9-223, 10-275		
Bowling: T Southee 25.1-8-43-6, K Jamieson 26-8-85-3, C de Grandhomme 15-5-24-0, N Wagner 24-3-83-1, M Santner 10-4-30-0, K Williamson 1-0-2-0		
NEW ZEALAND 2 nd INNINGS		
Tom Latham	not out	30
D Conway	b Robinson	23
K Williamson	lbw b Robinson	1
N Wagner	not out	2
Extras:	(lb 6)	6
TOTAL:	62 for two in 30 overs	
Fall of wickets: 1-39, 2-57		
Bowling: J Anderson 11-3-22-0, S Broad 6-1-9-0, O Robinson 9-4-8-2, M Wood 4-0-17-0		

Jamieson to Ross Taylor at slip.

England then lost three wickets for no runs in 21 balls in a middle-order slump, as Southee removed Dan Lawrence and debutant James Bracey for two of the four ducks in the innings.

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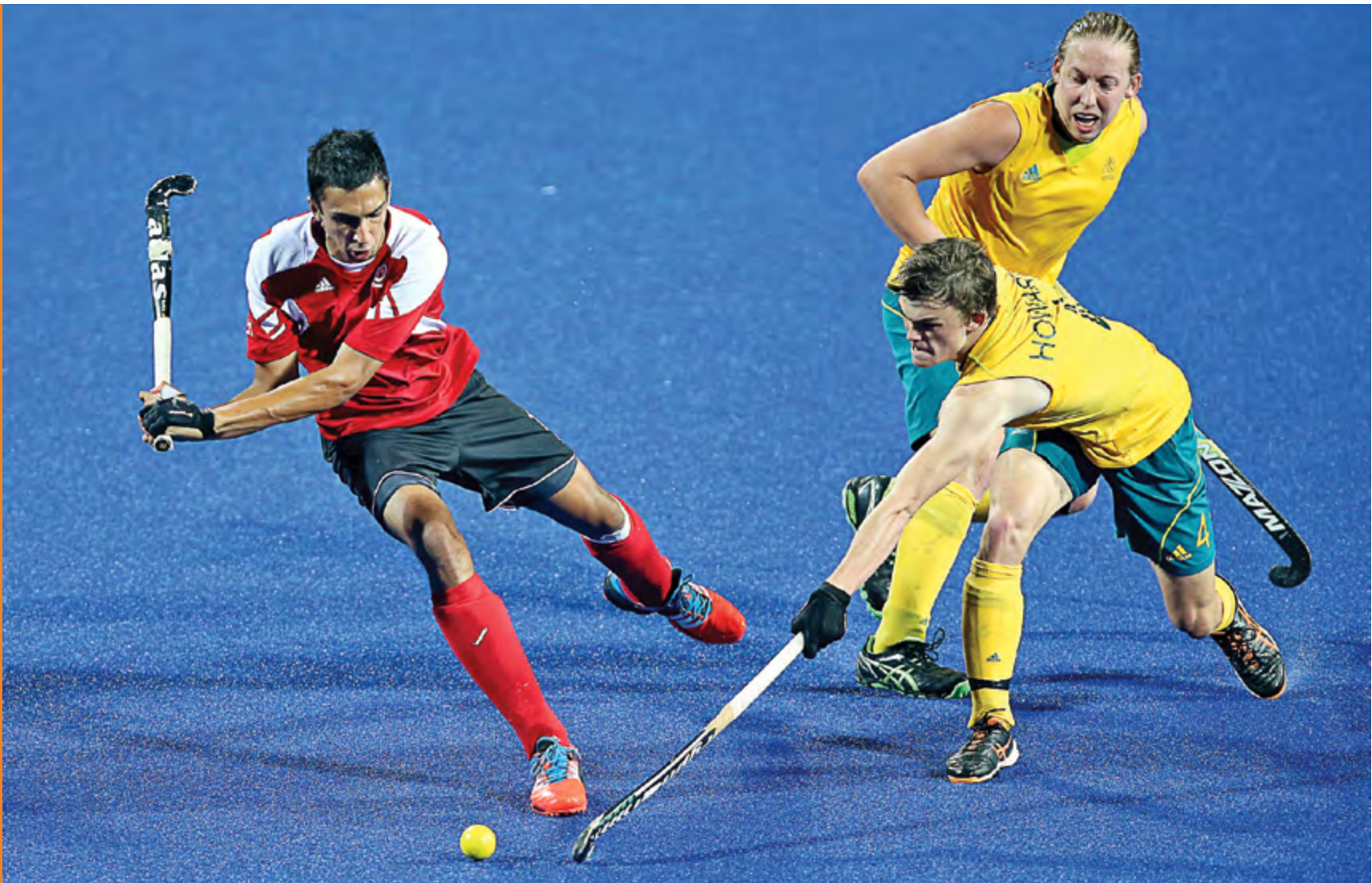
WE EXPECT OMAN TO DELIVER A TOP-CLASS EVENT: AHF CEO

Oman to host inaugural FIH Hockey5s World Cup (men and women) in January 2024

New 5,000-seater stadium to be built at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex

OHA to launch women's hockey team, to take part in the Hockey5s World Cup

Oman qualify as hosts in both men and women categories



Ashok Purohit
Muscat

It was a close fight with hockey heavyweights India and Pakistan also in the fray. But, Oman on Thursday, staged a coup of sorts, as they won the hosting rights for the inaugural FIH Hockey5s World Cup (men and women), to be played in Muscat in January 2024.

The decision to award Oman the bid was based upon a recommendation from the FIH Events Bidding Task Force (comprising of executive board members of all five continental federations) and the executive board (EB) of the International Hockey Federation (FIH).

Heading the task force was Asian Hockey Federation (AHF) general secretary and chief executive Dato Tayyab Ikram, who has been a votary of popularising the game across the continent and taking the sport to new regions.

In his exclusive remarks to *Muscat Daily* from Islamabad (Pakistan), Ikram, the AHF CEO said, "It is a special thing for Oman to win the inaugural edition of the FIH Hockey 5s World Cup. It is a moment of pride for Oman and Oman Hockey Association (OHA), who has been promoting the game for decades. I have closely followed the development of Oman's hockey and I am happy to see that Muscat has been awarded the rights to host the FIH flagship hockey5s event.

"This is the first time that the world governing body has

introduced the competition for both, men and women."

Ikram, who is also a member of the FIH executive board said, "I would like to congratulate His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq al Said for his support to sports in Oman and also greet H H Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth, for his support to the game of hockey. We, at the Asian hockey believe that they can deliver a world-class event. To have it in Oman also underlines our goal of taking the World Cup to new regions to boost the game.

"OHA, under the leadership of captain Talib al Wahaibi, has been very enthusiastic about the bid and has worked hard to prepare a top-class bid. I am confident that Oman will be ready for this milestone event.

"OHA and the government of Oman are capable of creating top-class facilities for athletes ahead of the World Cup. Asian hockey will provide all support to achieve this as the success of the inaugural hockey5s World Cup in Asia is paramount for all of us," said Ikram.

It may be mentioned that, besides India and Pakistan, Singapore was also in the fray to host the prestigious tournament. The new brand of hockey has become very popular and the continental qualifiers for the hockey5s World Cup will be held in 2022. The World Cup will feature 16 teams per gender, with three featuring per continent. Oman will qualify for the event as the host nation.



Tayyab Ikram (L) receives a memento from Talib al Wahaibi in Islamabad

Ikram lauded the efforts and persistence of Wahaibi along with his dedicated team of OHA and AHF board member Zuhair al Ajmi and OHA international relations manager Shakir Munir.

Matter of great pride, says OHA boss

OHA chief Talib al Wahaibi, who worked tirelessly to ensure that the Hockey5s World Cup comes to Oman, thanked HM the Sultan, H H Sayyid Theyazin, the sports ministry, Oman Olympic Committee, Asian hockey CEO Ikram, and Oman Sail for their key roles.

Wahaibi said, "I am very pleased and delighted. We will happily undertake this great responsibility to deliver the first-ever FIH Hockey5s World Cup at the highest possible standard.

"We will build state-of-the-art

facilities and provide best conditions for the athletes. It is a matter of great pride for me, Oman, and Oman hockey. Our sincere gratitude to FIH for giving us the responsibility of hosting the Hockey5s World Cup for men and women.

I am very pleased and delighted. We will happily undertake this great responsibility to deliver the first-ever FIH Hockey5s World Cup at the highest possible standard

TALIB AL WAHAIBI, OHA CHAIRMAN

"Winning the rights to host this innovative and attractive hockey tournament will open up great horizons and showcase Oman around the world."

Oman's strong bid was



Zuhair al Ajmi



Shakir Munir

prepared with the help of Oman Sail, which has the expertise in hosting world championships in the sultanate in the past. The teamwork that went into the preparations of Oman's bid was another example of how various stakeholders could join hands to

convince the FIH events bidding task force and the executive board to award the maiden Hockey5s World Cup to Oman.

New stadium, new women's team

As part of the Hockey5s World Cup bid, a new 5,000-seater stadium will come up next to the existing hockey stadium at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex.

Both the stadiums will have new blue turfs with the existing turf to be removed.

With the event to feature men and women, a top OHA official confirmed that they will start a full-fledged programme for women's hockey. "We will make it a top-priority and not only launch a team for young girls but also build a team that can take part in the World Cup in 2024. We are serious in promoting hockey among women in Oman," he said.

Zaman yet to sign a deal with OHA

Meanwhile, Tahir Zaman, former national team coach and Pakistan great, denied media reports that he has signed a new deal with OHA. Zaman, a World Cup winner, told *Muscat Daily* on Saturday from Pakistan, "I have yet to sign a deal with the OHA though they have approached me.

"I congratulate Oman on winning the bid to host the first-ever Hockey5s World Cup."

Zaman earlier coached Oman from January 2018 to May 2020. Since his departure there has been no national team coach.

'Boost to the game in the region'

In a press statement, FIH CEO Thierry Weil said, "We're looking forward to a wonderful inaugural FIH Hockey5s World Cup in Oman. This surely will be a great boost for the promotion of hockey both in the country and in the whole region. We're convinced that Hockey5s will play a key role in the growth of hockey worldwide. This is why this World Cup has been created, as well as a Hockey5s World Tour which we are currently working on."

In 2019, the FIH executive board decided to create an FIH Hockey5s World Cup, with a view to further boosting the development of hockey globally through the promotion of its five-a-side format.

Hockey5s is played with five players per team with two halves of ten minutes each on a smaller pitch. It is particularly known for its non-stop end to end action, since the ball is in play for about 90% of a match, thanks to rebound-boards placed against the outside of the side-lines and back-lines. Furthermore, there are usually more goals with Hockey5s than with the more traditional 11-a-side format of hockey, since players can score from anywhere after the attacking line.

Played in about 70 countries in the world, Hockey5s was the most attended sport at the 2018 Youth Olympic Games, in Buenos Aires, Argentina, with no less than 200,000 spectators.

@ashokmuscat

Oman welcomes all visitors

Ashok Purohit
Muscat

In an apparent response to statements from English and Scottish hockey federations on Friday for making the sport inclusive for everyone and reserving their rights to not participate if they were to qualify for the Hockey5s World Cup, the OHA released a statement on Saturday.

The OHA said that 'Oman welcomes every individual without any discrimination to join in Muscat in whatever role

or capacity – as a player, athlete, official, spectator, a fan and even as a tourist'.

"We believe in contributing to the sport of hockey no matter

We believe in contributing to the sport of hockey...by welcoming everyone from all the five continents

OMAN HOCKEY ASSOCIATION

their ethnic background, gender, sexual orientation, or religion by welcoming everyone from all the five continents and joining the Omani men's and women's teams for an amazing

celebration of our sports through the first-ever Hockey5s World Cup."

Earlier on Friday, the world hockey governing body, FIH,

said that 'hockey is an inclusive sport and FIH unequivocally promotes inclusion and diversity. This is a fundamental part of our values and principles, and applies to all FIH events,

wherever they might be staged'.

"Oman is aware of FIH stance on inclusion and diversity and has ensured FIH that everybody will be welcome at the FIH Hockey5s World Cup.

We will monitor this very closely with the Oman Hockey Association and the Omani authorities. "Sport is one of the universal languages which helps to build bridges and has proven on a number of occasions that it can be a catalyst for dialogue and positive change in society," said the FIH statement.

@ashokmuscat



A file photo of women Hockey5s event during the 2018 Youth Olympic Games in Buenos Aires, Argentina