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OMAN OBSERVER

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RAISING THE TRAIL BAR IN STYLE



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SUSPECTED RUSSIAN HACKERS SPIED ON US TREASURY



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OMO FILM AWARDS ANNOUNCED



OMAN

HM THANKED BY SAUDI, KUWAIT

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has received a cable of thanks from King Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud of Saudi Arabia, in reply to His Majesty's condolences cable to him on the death of Princess Hessa Faisal Abdulaziz al Saud. In his cable, King Salman expressed his thanks for His Majesty the Sultan's good feelings and sincere prayers. His Majesty also received a cable of thanks from Shaikh Nawaf Al Ahmed Al Jaber al Sabah, Emir of Kuwait, in reply to His Majesty's condolences cable to him on the death of Shaikh Nasser Fahd Sabah Al Nasser al Sabah. Shaikh Nawaf expressed his thanks and appreciation for His Majesty the Sultan's sincere condolences.

WORLD

US STATES VOTE TO CONFIRM BIDEN WIN

WASHINGTON: Joe Biden's march to the White House — overshadowed by President Donald Trump's frantic attempts to overturn the US election — is to be formalised when the Electoral College meets to confirm the Democrat's win. Electors in all 50 states were meeting to cast their votes in a tradition that has long been considered mostly a formality for confirming the will of the people. But this year the somewhat arcane procedure is at the centre of an unprecedented challenge to the credibility of US democracy led by Trump. **DETAILS ON P8**



INSIDE



His Majesty approves Census 2020 results



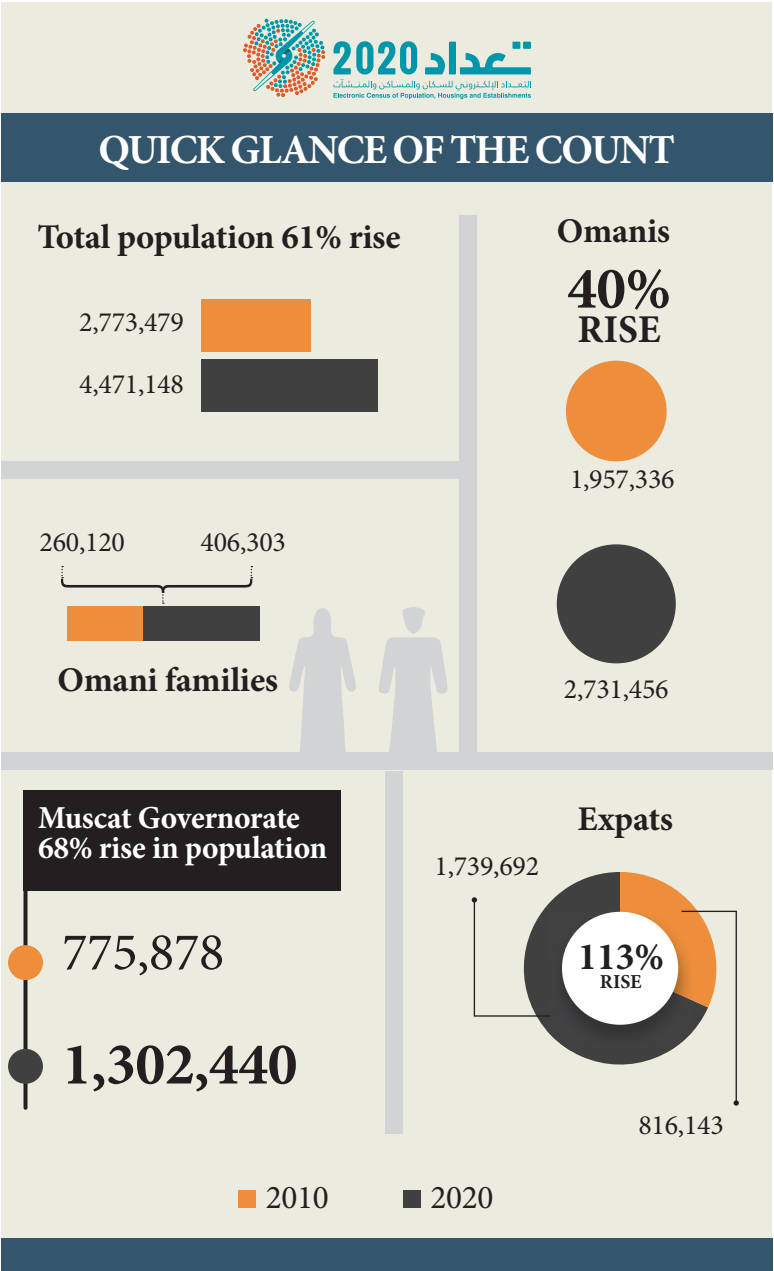
MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on Monday endorsed results of Census 2020 of Population, Residences and Establishments, which shows that the population of the Sultanate stood at 4,471,148 as of December 12, 2020.

This happened when His Majesty the Sultan gave an audience to the Chairman and members of the Supreme National Census Committee at

Al Barakah Palace on Monday. His Majesty the Sultan expressed his satisfaction with the outcome of this major project which was implemented as scheduled.

His Majesty the Sultan underscored the significance of data and indicators provided by the census in enhancing Oman Vision 2040, as well as the census's important implications to developmental planning in all sectors of the state.

His Majesty the Sultan also voiced his great appreciation for the Supreme National Census Committee and its sub-committees which, he noted, exerted efforts to make the project a success. His Majesty the Sultan extended his appreciation to all government and private establishments, citizens and residents for their cooperation and positive response to census requirements. — ONA



Vaccine awareness survey from today

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 14

A national survey on knowledge, attitude and practice regarding the COVID-19 vaccine, carried out by the Ministry of Health, represented by the Directorate-General for Disease Surveillance and Control, in cooperation with other stakeholders will be launched today.

According to a statement released by the ministry, the survey is aimed at getting closer and understanding the society more, in addition to promoting

scientifically-based information and refuting misinformation and rumours by identifying the extent to which the members of the community know about the cadre and their attitudes regarding the vaccine and the practices.

Around 3,000 participants, including Omanis and non-Omanis from all the governorates, will be randomly picked for the survey.

The survey will be done in the form of a five-minute phone call from the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI). **TURN TO P3**

AHLI SIDAB WIN HM YOUTH CUP



Last edition winners Ahli Sidab Club were crowned champions of His Majesty the Sultan's Cup for Youth 2019 on Monday. Assigned by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, HH Sayyid Taimour bin Asaad al Said, Chairman of the Board of Governors of the Central Bank of Oman, presided over the award ceremony for the HM Cup for Youth 2019 and Youth Excellence Award 2020. HH Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth was present. **DETAILS ON PAGE 10**

US takes Sudan off terror blacklist

KHARTOUM: The United States on Monday removed Sudan from its state sponsors of terrorism blacklist and declared a "fundamental change" in relations.

The move opens the way for aid, debt relief and investment to a country going through a rocky political transition and struggling under a severe economic crisis exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

US President Donald Trump had announced in October that he was delisting Sudan, 27 years after Washington first put the country on its blacklist for harbouring militants.

The US embassy in Khartoum on Monday said the step had been formalised, and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo later confirmed that "Sudan's designation as a state sponsor of terrorism is officially rescinded".

"This represents a fundamental change in our bilateral relationship toward greater collaboration and support for Sudan's historic democratic transition," Pompeo said in a statement. **DETAILS ON P6**

Geminid meteors dazzle Sultanate's skies

ZAINAB AL NASSRI
@zainabalnasseri

For two consecutive nights (December 13 and 14) the skies over the Sultanate witnessed the peak of the 2020 Geminid meteor shower which saw the largest

number of meteors at the rate of 120 per hour. The phenomenon is being witnessed globally with interest among the astronomers.

Ibrahim al Mahrouqi, Member of the Board of Directors of the Oman

Astronomical Society, said: "We can monitor this phenomenon with naked eye without the need of using special devices. Just go to an open place, away from the lights, and enjoy watching."



On Sunday night, Al Mahrouqi along with Astronomy Friends Group were able to detect 1,100 meteors between 11 pm and 5 am. "It was really an extraordinary night," he said. **TURN TO P3**

HM approves Census 2020 results



In brief

■ SOUTH AL BATINAH

18 INFILTRATORS
NABBED IN S. AL
BATINAH

Coast Guard vessels of South Al Batinah Police Command rounded up 18 infiltrators on board a smuggling boat off the governorate's coast, Royal Oman Police (ROP) said on Twitter. Legal procedures against the arrestees are ongoing. ROP expressed thanks to citizens and residents for their cooperation with the police by reporting any suspicious activities, urging the public for more cooperation with ROP to confront smuggling and infiltration attempts.

■ MUSCAT

MAN HELD FOR DRUG
TRAFFICKING

The Directorate-General for Combating Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, arrested an expat on charges of smuggling and trafficking drugs in Muscat Governorate.

The anti-drug unit recovered 22 kg of crystal meth and 8 kg of hash from the accused. Legal action against him is under way, police said.

■ MUSCAT

SOME HERITAGE SITES
REOPENED

The Royal Court Affairs (RCA) has announced the opening of some heritage and tourist sites that were closed to limit the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The sites are Muscat Gate Museum, Al Mansour Fort, Rustaq, Al Shomoukh Fort Library in the Wilayat of Manah, the recreation centre in the Wilayat of Manah.

The sites will operate and receive visitors by strictly following the precautionary measures to limit the spread of COVID-19.

■ FROM PAGE 1

Vaccine awareness
survey from today

During the call, the participant is given a set of questions to which he/she is asked to respond on his/her general information and other questions related to his/her knowledge, attitude, and practice regarding the vaccine. This survey will represent local data with regard to answering the most important questions in the minds of the people, raise public awareness about the vaccine, and highlight the most important challenges on awareness that will rise with the arrival of the vaccine.

It is affirmed that the success of this survey depends on the response of all, credibility and realism in answering the questions to achieve the ultimate goal in controlling the pandemic and its effects through scientific-based individual and community responsibility.

■ OMAN, IRAN HOLD TALKS



Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, received Dr Abbas Araghchi, Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister for Political Affairs, in Muscat on Tuesday. During the meeting, the ministers stressed the importance of promoting various fields of bilateral cooperation, particularly the economic, commercial, cultural and scientific areas to serve the joint interests. They also exchanged views on the regional and international developments, stressing keenness of the two neighbouring countries in supporting all endeavours and initiatives to consolidate pillars of regional security and stability, as well as achieving understanding, harmony and cooperation among all. The meeting was attended by Shaikh Khalifa bin Ali al Harthy, Foreign Ministry's Under-Secretary for Diplomatic Affairs, the Iranian Ambassador to the Sultanate and some officials from both sides. — ONA



The 7th session of the strategic consultation committee between the Sultanate's Foreign Ministry and the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was held in Muscat on Monday. The Omani side was led by Shaikh Khalifa bin Ali al Harthy, Foreign Ministry's Under-Secretary for Diplomatic Affairs while the Iranian side was led by Dr Abbas Araghchi, Deputy Foreign Minister for Political Affairs. The session discussed the bilateral relations between the two friendly countries and means of promoting them in various fields to the serve the joint interests. They exchanged views on different regional and international issues and efforts exerted to solve them through peaceful means. The session was attended by a number of officials from both sides. — ONA

Demise of pioneer television
sports journalist mourned

AL MUSANNAH: Veteran Media Personnel Yaqoub Yousef al Zedjali, one of the founders of sports programmes in the Sultanate of Oman Television, passed away today. Yaqoub al Zedjali joined the former Ministry of Information in 1974. He worked as a director, producer and news presenter for many shows, the most important of which were sport programmes. He was appointed as a media expert for news affairs.



Al Zedjali was awarded the Youth Shield in 1993. He was also chosen to represent the Sultanate in the torch relay of the Olympic Games that took place in China in 2008. He received the Arab Sports Media Medal in 2011. He was also hosted in many local and foreign forums. Yaqoub al Zedjali authored two books "Omani Sports from Roots to the World" and "Sultanate of Oman TV; a Journey and Achievement". — ONA

'Oman under a peaceful
sky' art expo opens

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 14

An exhibition of abstract painting opened at Art & Soul Gallery on Sunday. The art gallery located at the Waterfront Mall, hosted Sara Riaz Khan, who is an artist, author and educator. She lived, painted and taught in Muscat for many years.

Her art exhibition titled 'Oman under a peaceful sky' is a tribute to Oman and its people. Maryam al Zadjali, a prominent name in the art fraternity inaugurated the exhibition.

The exhibition, according to Kethki Ambekar, Art & Soul Director, will run till December 26.



Sara Riaz Khan is an abstract artist. Experience of living in a calm and peaceful space of Oman, close to the nature has been an important factor in Sara's artistic growth.

"Inaugurated on November 17, the gallery is a perfect ambience and elegant art spaces that

overlook the Arabian Sea. Our gallery's space with its fine tunes acoustics, well lit exhibition platforms and state of the art equipment will be a space that artists and art enthusiasts could look forward to holding and attending regular art related events," Ambekar said.

COVID-19
not finished
with us... yet!

RAY PETERSEN
MUSCAT, DEC 14

It appears within much of the community that the threat of COVID-19 is a thing of the past, given the clear lack of respect for social distancing and masking precautions evidenced during recent days.

Perhaps swayed towards laxity by the production of COVID-19 vaccines around the world, and the beginning of vaccine distribution and vaccination programmes in Russia, the UK, the US, local compliance has very much fallen to levels which can only be dangerous. A short informal survey, nevertheless, accurate has revealed that most of the population considers the danger has passed, yet that is far from true.

The concerned authorities must indeed be concerned. They should roll out an action plan for the inoculation of the population sufficient to achieve an acceptable level of herd immunity.

The issue with herd immunity however is that it, in theory according to the World Health Organization (WHO), requires a total 95 per cent inoculation

before the whole society is considered sufficiently protected. Global seroprevalence surveys indicate that, give or take, 10 per cent of the population has been exposed to COVID-19 to date and has developed the antibodies and an immune response, therefore the shortfall of 85 per cent must be vaccinated.

The WHO's Chief Scientist, Dr Soumya Swaminathan, cautions however that COVID-19 is so new, and we are still learning about it, that we don't yet know "how strong or lasting is the immune response." We do know, for instance, that resistance to the related SARS and MERS immunities decline over time. In the realm of COVID-19 future predictions, given we know so little about it, are a dangerous game.

It is about recognising the expertise of those who have all the data and placing our trust in them.

For now, though please Oman, continue to wash or glove those hands, social distance because there is safety in space, and wear those masks. Playing chance with your own health may well be your choice, but playing with others, is not!

■ FROM PAGE 1

Geminid meteors dazzles
skies of Sultanate

Although the shower could be visible on late evening hours on Sunday and Monday, around 2 am is the best time to see meteors, no matter where you are in the world. That's when the radiant point, the point from which the meteors appear to radiate, is highest in the sky.

The Geminids occur every year approximately between December 4 to 16, peaking on

the night of December 13 and the morning of December 14. This is the shower's "maximum" — the time when the most meteors fall per hour.

It is unique because the meteors are visible all night, since the constellation Gemini rises just an hour or two after nightfall. Most meteor showers require you to wait until midnight or pre-dawn for best viewing.

OBITUARY

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



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

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



SPELL OF CHARM

Yanqul is known for its natural beauty, heritage buildings and tourism landmarks. The word ‘Yanqul’ means connection, and the wilayat virtually connects three governorates. The wilayat is located in the eastern part of Al Dhahirah Governorate, overlooks some governorates from various destinations such as Al Buraimi and North Al Batinah.

Yanqul comprises several villages like Al Alo, Al Ganah, Al Madam, Al Sawader and notably Al Manjoreen.

The people of the wilayat are engaged in several traditional vocations such as cattle rearing and farming. The main crops cultivated in the area are dates, sugar cane and fruits .

People who love outdoor activities can enjoy the pleasant nature of Yanqul as its villages are known for its cold weather conditions. Villages of Baiha and Wadi Al Harem boast unique trees and also plants like pomegranates, guava and black pepper.

Noted aflaj such as Al Alaw, Baiha, Al Ayin, Al Sudairi and Al Aql add to the wilayat’s charm and beauty.

One of the most renowned landmarks in Yanqul is the old market, which is close to the former administrative centre of the wilayat. People come to buy commodities of their choice from this market. There are also a number of towers, forts and archaeological sites.

In all, there are 16 towers and

forts, and among them Bait Al Marah Fort is a major tourist attraction in Yanqul. In addition to the archaeological buildings, the ruins located on the top of Al Khatem mountain, are much sought after sites.

There are several mining areas, in addition to gold and silver exploration sites, particularly in Al Raki and Al Maiden.

Yanqul has witnessed implementation of several development projects, notably the first phase of the dualisation of 6 km Ibri-Yanqul road with a total cost of RO 5.5 million.

This project has reached advanced stages, and consists of two lanes on each side and provision for the drainage.

Work also continues on a project linking the Governorate of Al Dhahirah with the Governorate of Al Buraimi. It is Al Muri 30 km road in the Wilayat of Yanqul till Al Ain in the Wilayat of Dhank. The project is being carried out in accordance with global specifications, taking into account the nature and conditions of the areas and the road.

Al Waqbah, one of the eminent towns in Yanqul, is famous for its farms and green orchards

Al Waqbah is characterised by many natural sites, such as high peaks, caves, natural valleys, farms and pure water sources. The town is also famous for its aflaj.



Rising crude brightens hopes of recovery

OMAN CRUDE FUTURES CONTRACT AT \$50.70 PER BARREL

SAMUEL KUTTY
@samkutttyp

On the back of Oman's proactive policies, the positive trend on the oil market augurs well for the economy that is striving to recover from the COVID-19 shock and drop in revenues.

The price of Oman's crude oil benchmark, the Oman Crude Futures Contract, reached \$50.70 per barrel for the first time in nine months on Monday since the breakout of the pandemic.

According to Dubai Mercantile Exchange, the price of Oman's oil for delivery witnessed an increase of 13 cents compared to last Friday's price of \$ 50.57.

On the global market, Brent crude futures for February rose 67 cents, or 1.3 per cent, to \$50.64 a barrel, while US West Texas Intermediate crude futures for January were up 62 cents, or 1.3 per cent, at \$47.19 a barrel.

With Monday's rise, which experts say, resulted from the hopes that a rollout of coronavirus vaccines will lift global fuel demand, the monthly average price of Omani crude for delivery next January amounted to \$43.83 per barrel, up by \$2.22, compared to

The current rise in the oil prices coupled with the proactive policies being followed by the Omani government will slowly put the economy back on track

JOSE CHACKO
Financial expert

the current December 2020 delivery price.

The Sultanate's 2020 budget has been set on assumed average oil price at \$58 per barrel and projected fiscal deficit at RO2.500 billion, lower by 4.7 per cent over actual in 2019. For the first ten months of 2020, the Omani oil price has averaged only \$46.0 per barrel which is lower by 28.2 per cent over the corresponding period of last year.

At the same time, public spending amounted to RO3 billion in the second quarter of 2020, while revenues amounted to RO2.2 billion during the period. Net oil revenues decreased

by 19.6 per cent during the same period, gas revenues decreased by 22 per cent, and other non-oil revenues fell by 24.4 per cent.

"The revenues have been hit significantly as a result of the pandemic that has plunged the global market with serious fiscal implications on the economy. The current rise in the oil prices coupled with the proactive policies being followed by the Omani government will slowly put the economy back on track", said Jose Chacko, a financial expert.

Oman's nominal GDP declined by 13.4 per cent during the second quarter of 2020 compared to the same period of last year, according to preliminary data released by National Center for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

According to the monthly bulletin by the Central Bank of Oman, the nominal contraction in the economy was driven by a 20.0 per cent decline in the hydrocarbon sector, as well as the decline on non-hydrocarbon sector by 9.9 per cent during the second quarter of 2020.

Moreover, the average daily oil production decreased by 1.9 per cent to 952.1 thousand barrels during this period.

FOREIGN MINISTER RECEIVES PALESTINIAN OFFICIAL



Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister received today Major General Jibril Rajoub, Secretary-General of Fatah's Central Committee (FCC), Head of the Palestinian Olympic Committee, in Muscat on Monday. The meeting reviewed the latest developments in the Palestinian cause, besides other topics of common concern. The meeting reiterated the strong Omani-Palestinian relations and the Sultanate's firm stance towards the Palestinian cause, as well as its regional and international efforts aiming the comprehensive and just peace in the Middle East. The meeting was attended by Tayseer Ali Farhat, Ambassador of the State of Palestine to the Sultanate and some officials at the Foreign Ministry. – ONA

CMYF blood camp on Friday

MUSCAT: Chiru Mega Youth Force (CMYF), a voluntary organisation, is conducting a blood donation camp on Friday. The camp will be held at Bausher Blood Bank, opposite to the Royal Hospital.

CMYF founder-president Ramdas Chandaka called upon all humanitarians to participate in this noble cause of saving other's life.

The CMYF has been honoured by the Ministry of Health on several occasions in recognition of its continuing support for blood collection services in Oman.



The Egyptian School- Muscat

The Egyptian School Muscat (Al Ansab) is seeking experienced teachers for The IGCSE-GCE Department in the following subjects:

- 1- Biology IGCSE (Cambridge)
- 2- Chemistry IGCSE (Cambridge)
- 3- Physics IGCSE (Cambridge)

To work from the second semester (2020-2021)
Kindly send your CV to the following email address:

egvmuscat@yahoo.com

* Deadline is within one week of the advert date.

OES, EduCluster Finland renew pact

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 14

Oman Educational Services LLC has recently renewed its partnership agreement with EduCluster

Oman during an online signing ceremony, to broaden the scope of collaboration and to ensure the highest quality assurance for Finland-Oman School.

The renewed agreement was

signed by the respective Chief Executive Officers of Oman Educational Services LLC (OES) and EduCluster Finland (ECF), Dr Hussain al Salmi and Kati Loponen.

ISWK and ISWKi mark founder's day

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 14

The Indian School Al Wadi Al Kabir (ISWK) along with Indian School Wadi Kabir International (ISWKi) marked online Founder's Day on Monday. Indian School Al Wadi Al Kabir (ISWK) was honoured to have the online presence of Dr Biswajit Saha, Director (Training & Skill Education), CBSE, New Delhi, as Chief Guest for the evening.

The Principal in his Annual Report gave a comprehensive list of activities that was carried out for Academic Year 2020-21. He explained that despite the difficulties caused by COVID-19, the staff and students of ISWK continued with their academic and co-scholastic activities, uninterrupted. Except for the Annual Sports, all other activities, inter-house, inter-school have all been conducted, or will be completed by January 2021. The excellent Board Results of Class X & XII were also displayed and the toppers commended for their excellent performance.

99 Indonesians leave under MoL's exit plan

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 14

As many as 99 Indonesian citizens including children flew home under the present no-fine exit programme announced by the Ministry of Labour (MoL).

Of all the participants, 83 flew with free airline tickets provided by the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs thanks to the repatriation process facilitated by the Indonesian Embassy which worked closely with Omani authorities.

The Indonesian Ambassador Mohamad Irzan Djohan expressed his sincere appreciation towards all the relevant authorities for their cooperation with the Indonesian Embassy.

"On behalf of the Indonesian Embassy and the Indonesian government, I would like to express my utmost appreciation towards the Omani government and authorities for their cooperation, especially the Ministry of Labour, immigration authorities, and Royal Oman Police. It is only with our good

partnership that this amnesty programme can be carried out smoothly," Relieved that she can finally go home with no fines or any legal procedures, one of the Indonesian workers expressed their gratitude, "Alhamdulillah, finally I can go home to my family whom I have missed so much. I thank the Indonesian Embassy that has helped me go through the process." In the send-off ceremony, Ambassador Irzan advised the Indonesian workers to continue their life with optimism and hard work, and wished them success for their future endeavours in Indonesia. He also guided them to keep observing health protocol during the trip.

After arriving in Soekarno-Hatta International Airports (SHIA), they continued their trip to their respective hometowns, such as West Java, West Nusa Tenggara, and Central Java. Joining them in the first batch's flight and receiving the following batches in SHIA is Indonesian Embassy's official for Consular Affairs, Hari Yulianto (First Secretary).

Ministry of Interior
Governor of Al-Batinah North

ADVERTISEMENT

Companies specialized in the field of this Tender may obtain tender documents for the following tenders, on any working day between 8:00 a.m. and 1:00 Noon, from Quantity Surveying & Contracts Office, Suhar Municipality Building on payment of non-refundable tender fee as noted below:

Tender No.	Description of Work	Tender Fee (non refundable)
PRS/20/014 (Re-tender)	Propose of Lathe Works	R.O. 25
PRS/20/018 (Re-tender)	Upholstery work	R.O. 25
PRS/20/019 (Re-tender)	Hire of Mechanic	R.O. 30
PRS/20/020 (Re-tender)	Cleaning & washing of Vehicles	R.O. 25
PRS/20/021 (Re-tender)	Cleaning & washing of Equipments	R.O. 25
PRS/20/022 (Re-tender)	Supply of Clothes	R.O. 25
PRS/20/024 (Re-tender)	Supply of Chemical Items and Equipments	R.O. 25
PRS/20/025 (Re-tender)	Supply of Bitumen's Asphalts	R.O. 25
PRS/20/029 (Re-tender)	Hiring of Staff (Site Inspector & Land Surveyor)	R.O. 25
PRS/20/034 (Re-tender)	Maintenance of Road Markings	R.O. 25
PRS/20/038 (Re-tender)	Hiring of Technical Staff (Land Survey & Draughtsman)	R.O. 55

Time Line:



The Form of Tender (in small envelope) under wax sealed cover shall be placed in the tender box location in our Quantity Surveying & Contracts Office, by 10.00 a.m. All envelopes are to be clearly marked with the name of the Governor of Al-Batinah North and no other marks. The Tenderers shall submit with Form of the Tender (Financial Offer) a Certified Cheque or Tender Bond in the sum of 1% of the tender value valid for 90 days, issued by a locally registered bank in the Sultanate of Oman. Tenders without such bond shall be rejected.

Comments:

- Has the right to distribution items or works or quantities there of between more than one contractor without giving reasons to the bidder.
- The Tender Committee is not obliged to accept the lowest or any tender that may.

Fuel tanker hit by ‘terror attack’ off Jeddah

AMMAN/BEIRUT: Saudi Arabia said a tanker hit on Monday while anchored at Jeddah port was targeted by an explosive-laden boat in an apparent terrorist attack.

A spokesman at the Ministry of Energy said the fuel transport ship was attacked while it was anchored in the fuel terminal in Jeddah in the early hours of the morning.

Emergency units extinguished the small fire that resulted from the attack, which caused no casualties or damage to the unloading facilities, he added in a statement published by the official Saudi Press Agency (SPA).

Earlier on Monday, shipping company Hafnia said that one of its oil tankers was hit while it was discharging at Jeddah port by an unidentified “external source,” which caused an explosion and subsequent fire on board. — dpa

US takes Sudan off terror blacklist

KHARTOUM: The United States on Monday removed Sudan from its terrorism blacklist and declared a “fundamental change” in relations, less than two months after the nation pledged to normalise ties with Israel.

The move opens the way for aid, debt relief and investment to a country going through a rocky political transition and struggling under a severe economic crisis exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

US President Donald Trump had announced in October that he was delisting Sudan, 27 years after Washington first put the country on its blacklist.

The US Embassy in Khartoum on Monday said the step had been formalised, and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo later confirmed that Sudan has been removed from the terror blacklist.

“This represents a fundamental change in our bilateral relationship towards greater collaboration and support for Sudan’s historic democratic transition,” Pompeo said in a statement.

Sudan’s army chief General Abdel Fattah al Burhan — who doubles as the head of the Sovereign Council, the country’s highest executive authority — offered his “congratulations to the Sudanese people.”



US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo greets Sudan’s Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok in Khartoum during a visit to Sudan’s capital in August. Pompeo on Monday hailed what he called a ‘fundamental change’ in the relationship with Sudan after it officially left the US terror blacklist. — AFP

nese people.”

“It was a task accomplished... in the spirit of the December revolution,” he said on Twitter, referring to a landmark month in 2018 when protests erupted against former president Omar al Bashir.

Bashir was deposed by the military in April 2019, four months into the demonstrations against his 30 years rule.

Pompeo said that “we commend the calls of the Sudanese

people for freedom, peace and justice, and we congratulate the members of the civilian-led transitional government for their courage in advancing the aspirations of the citizens they serve”.

The US Treasury said it planned to work with Sudan “to help clear its arrears at the international financial institutions and to advance Sudan’s efforts to secure debt relief in 2021”.

The European Union also

hailed the “significant milestone,” saying it would provide “positive momentum for the country’s economic recovery and move it closer to an eventual debt relief,” a goal it said the EU supports.

‘GLOBAL SIEGE’ LIFTED

Sudan’s Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok also welcomed Washington’s move in a post on Facebook, noting that it means “our beloved country... (is) re-

lieved from the international and global siege” provoked by Bashir’s behaviour.

The removal of the designation “contributes to reforming the economy, attracting investments and remittances of our citizens abroad through official channels” and creates new job opportunities for youth, the premier said.

As part of a deal, Sudan agreed to pay \$335 million to compensate survivors and victims’ families from the twin 1998 Al Qaeda attacks on US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, and a 2000 attack by the militant group on the USS Cole off Yemen’s coast.

Those attacks were carried out after Bashir had allowed then Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden sanctuary in Sudan.

Sudan in October became the third Arab country in as many months to pledge that it would normalise relations with Israel, after the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain.

The transitional government’s pledge came amid a concerted campaign by the Trump administration to persuade Arab nations to recognise the Jewish state, and it has been widely perceived as a quid pro quo for Washington removing Sudan from its terror blacklist. — AFP

UAE starts COVID-19 vaccinations in capital

ABU DHABI: The United Arab Emirates has launched COVID-19 vaccinations in the capital Abu Dhabi, health officials said on Monday, days after it approved the jab by Chinese drugs giant Sinopharm.

The Gulf nation is one of the first countries to start widespread inoculation, after Britain became the first to roll out a campaign using a vaccine by US pharmaceutical giant Pfizer and its German partner BioNTech.

Gulf countries UAE and Bahrain, where third-phase trials of the Sinopharm vaccine were carried out, have both officially registered it for public use after it was previously approved for emergency use for frontline health workers.

Residents in the capital can book an appointment through the Abu Dhabi Health Services (SEHA) hotline.

“Residents can book an appointment for the vaccine now, free of charge,” a SEHA operator said, with local reports saying at least 45 hospitals and clinics were equipped with the vaccine.

Sinopharm — which uses an inactive form of the novel coro-



UAE and Bahrain, where third-phase trials of the Sinopharm vaccine were carried out, have both officially registered it for public use after it was previously approved for emergency use for frontline health workers. — Reuters

navirus — is administered in two doses, 21 days apart, according to SEHA.

The UAE has so far recorded more than 184,000 novel coronavirus cases, including 617 deaths.

China has four vaccines, in-

cluding Sinopharm, in the final stages of development and is well advanced with mass human testing in a number of countries, including Brazil, the UAE and Turkey.

But unlike vaccines being de-

veloped by Moderna, AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson, little information has been published about the safety or efficacy of Chinese vaccines.

In Peru, clinical trials of a Sinopharm vaccine were suspended after neurological problems were detected in a test volunteer.

Chinese vaccine frontrunners Sinovac and Sinopharm had pre-orders for fewer than 500 million doses by mid-November, according to data from London consultancy Airfinity — mostly from countries that have participated in trials.

Britain’s AstraZeneca, meanwhile, has pre-orders for 2.4 billion doses, and Pfizer for about half a billion orders.

Two vaccines have undergone third-phase trials in the UAE — the Sinopharm project and Russia’s Sputnik-V, named after the Soviet-era satellite.

Dubai ruler Sheikh Mohamed bin Rashid al Maktoum said in November that he had received an experimental coronavirus vaccine, joining other top UAE officials to take part in the trials. — AFP

Kuwait forms cabinet with new oil, finance ministers

KUWAIT CITY: Kuwait formed a cabinet that includes new oil and finance ministers, state media reported on Monday.

The new government, whose formation was due after parliamentary elections earlier this month, has 10 new faces.

These include Mohammed al Fares who was named minister of oil and Khalifa Hamada who was appointed as finance minister, according to the official Kuwait News Agency (KUNA).

Al Fares is a board member in national oil conglomerate Kuwait Petroleum Corp, while Hamada served as finance ministry undersecretary for over a decade.

The 15-member cabinet is the first to serve under the new Emir Sheikh Nawaf Al Ahmad al Sabah, who took office in September following the death of his half-brother, Sheikh Sabah Al Ahmad al Sabah.

Besides Sheikh Sabah Al Khalid al Sabah, who was re-appointed premier by the emir earlier this month and tasked with forming the new government.

Sheikh Thamer Ali Sabah Al Salem al Sabah was appointed interior minister, while Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al Ali al Sabah was named deputy prime minister and minister of defence.

Sheikh Basel al Sabah retained his post as health minister, and Sheikh Ahmad Nasser Al Mohammad al Sabah as foreign minister.

“It appears to be a relatively technocratic government,” analyst Ayed al Mana said.

Political analyst Anwar al Rasheed said people hope that the new government will have a different approach to managing issues.

It is the second government in less than a year after the previous cabinet stepped down in November 2019.

— AFP

SHORT TAKES

ADDIS ABABA

Hamdok, Abiy to hold meeting on Ethiopia conflict

Sudan’s premier said he had agreed with his counterpart in Addis Ababa to hold an urgent meeting of a bloc of East African countries to resolve the crisis in Ethiopia’s Tigray region.

Sudanese Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok travelled to Addis Ababa on Sunday to discuss the Tigray conflict with his counterpart Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, the first foreign leader to visit the Ethiopian capital since fighting broke out in the region on November 4,



creating a humanitarian crisis.

IGAD was founded in 1996 and brings together the East African nations of Ethiopia, Sudan, Djibouti, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan and Uganda.

TRIPOLI

Libyan MP dies of COVID-19 in Morocco

Libyan MP Omar Garmil has died in Morocco weeks after being infected with COVID-19, multiple sources said on Monday.

The UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli and the UN mission in Libya offered their condolences without mentioning the cause or place of his death.

Garmil had participated in a meeting in Tangiers in late November with 120 other members of Libya’s House of Representa-



tives, where MPs pledged to “end the divisions” that plague their country.

He was then hospitalised in Tangiers, where he died from COVID-19 on Sunday, according to a Moroccan diplomatic source. — AFP

TEHRAN

Rowhani says spat with Turkey over poem is over

A disagreement between Iran and Turkey following a poem recited by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has been resolved, Iranian President Hassan Rowhani said on Monday.

On Thursday, Erdogan recited a poem in the Azerbaijani capital Baku about the division of territories predominantly inhabited by Azeris between Iran and Russia in the 19th century. Iran slammed the poem as interference in its domestic affairs and summoned the Turkish



ambassador, but all has now been smoothed over, Rowhani said.

“We were assured by the foreign minister as well as Turkey’s ambassador that Erdogan had quoted the poem without any ulterior motive,” Rowhani told a news conference.

In brief

■ MANILA



GOVT TARGETS DEAL FOR 25M DOSES OF SINO VACCINE

The Philippines aims to finalise negotiations with Sinovac Biotech this week to acquire 25 million doses of the Chinese company's COVID-19 vaccine for delivery by March, a coronavirus taskforce official said on Monday.

President Rodrigo Duterte, who has pursued warmer ties with Beijing, wants to inoculate all his country's 108 million people, preferably buying vaccines from Russia or China.

Philippine officials had met with Sinovac representatives on Friday and there would be another meeting this week to finalise a deal, Carlito Galvez, the country's vaccine chief, said.

■ ISLAMABAD



OPPOSITION TO LEAD MARCH TO CAPITAL IN BID TO OUST PM

The leaders of an anti-government alliance has urged tens of thousands of supporters to join a march to the Pakistani capital next months to demand the ouster of Prime Minister Imran Khan, who they say was installed by the military in a rigged 2018 election.

An alliance of 11 major opposition parties — Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) - has been holding mammoth rallies in since its inception in September to seek Khan's ouster and press the military to stop interfering in politics.

"The time to have a dialogue is over. There will be a march now," said opposition leader Bilawal Bhutto Zardari.

■ BANGKOK



PROTESTERS TO PAUSE FOR NOW AND RETURN NEXT YEAR

Thai protesters will take a break and return stronger next year, one protest leader said on Monday after months of demonstrations to remove the government and to demand reforms.

"This year has been just an overture," said Arnon Nampa, a rights lawyer who has become one of the most prominent faces of a movement that has posed the biggest challenge to the Thai establishment in years. "We'll take a break during New Year's holidays and will come back next year with more intensity and bigger turnout," Arnon told reporters at a police station.

— Reuters

Protesting Indian farmers step up pressure with hunger strike

NEW DELHI: Leaders of protesting Indian farmers began a one-day hunger strike on Monday against agricultural reforms they say threaten their livelihoods, stepping up pressure on Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government to withdraw the legislation.

Farmers have been demonstrating for nearly three weeks against deregulation of the agriculture sector that will allow them to sell produce to buyers beyond government-regulated wholesale markets, where growers are assured a minimum price.

"We want them to repeal the laws," said Gurbax Singh, a protest leader from the northern state of Punjab, which is at the forefront of the opposition, as he and other leaders began a hunger strike at a main protest site.

Small growers fear the changes, part of Modi's liberalising reforms, will mean the end of price support for staples such as wheat and rice and leave them at the mercy of big business.

Modi has sought to allay concerns, telling farmers they will gain new rights and opportunities.

The reforms, contained in three laws enacted in September, loosen



Former union cabinet minister of food processing industries Harsimrat Kaur Badal speaks in support of farmers on Monday. — AFP

rules around the sale, pricing and storage of farm produce.

Six rounds of talks between government officials and farmers' union leaders have failed to resolve one of the most pressing issues facing Modi's government.

The government has said while the reforms can be amended it is determined to liberalise the sector. Farmers last week rejected a government's proposal to amend the legislation.

However, federal Agriculture Minister Narendra Singh Tomar said representatives of 10 farmers'

Six rounds of talks between government officials and farmers' union leaders have failed to resolve one of the most pressing issues facing Modi's government

organisations from across India had met him to voice their support for the laws. "A majority of farmers support the laws, but we

Ashraf Ghani calls for peace talks to be moved home

KABUL: The next round of negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government should be held at home, President Ashraf Ghani said on Monday, backing calls to move the talks from Qatar.

The warring sides have been engaged in direct talks since September at a luxury hotel in Doha, where the Taliban have their political office.

Negotiators from both sides on Saturday announced a pause in the talks until January 5, with the government delegation expected to return to Kabul this week to consult senior officials.

"We would prefer the second round of peace talks to take place inside Afghanistan," Ghani told a cabinet meeting, his spokesman Sediq Sediqqi tweeted.

"The Afghan government is prepared to negotiate anywhere inside Afghanistan under a tent or out in the cold.

"It is not appropriate to insist on holding talks in luxurious hotels. It is necessary that the people see how the talks happen, which issues are focussed on and why." — AFP

■ STEALTH FRIGATE HIMGIRI LAUNCHED



'INS Himgiri', alias 'Project 17A' — a Nilgiri-class frigate for the Indian Navy — was launched into the Hooghly River in Kolkata on Monday. — AFP

Swiss express regret over illegal adoptions from Lanka

GENEVA: Swiss authorities voiced deep regret on Monday for failing to prevent adoptions from Sri Lanka for two decades, despite indications of illegal practices, vowing to help adoptees to search for their origins.

"The Federal Council (Swiss government) expresses its sincere regret to those adopted and their families," Justice Minister Karin Keller-Sutter was quoted by the ATS news agency as saying.

A fresh government report has acknowledged the failures of Swiss authorities, at both the federal and cantonal level, to react to information starting in the 1970s indicating illegal and exploitative adoptions of Sri Lankan children were taking place.

A study by Zurich University

of Applied Sciences (ZHAW) in February found that nearly 11,000 Sri Lankan children had for decades been provided for adoption across Europe through organised and often illegal means.

Swiss authorities learned of the irregularities surrounding adoptions from Sri Lanka no later than 1981, but nothing was done to stop the practice until 16 years later.

The ZHAW study found that a total of 881 adoptions from Sri Lanka were approved in Switzerland between 1973 and 1997. The study described how babies and young children were produced for adoptions through "baby farms", with Swiss parents willing to pay between 5,000 and 15,000 Swiss francs for a child. — AFP

'Reconsider travel', Japan PM warns as virus spikes



Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga speaks during a meeting on coronavirus infection control in Tokyo on Monday. — AFP

pressure, including from medical advisors to the government.

"We have decided to take strongest steps possible in order

to stop the spread of the infections... so that all of you can welcome the New Year in peace and quiet," Suga told a special cabinet-

level meeting on anti-pandemic measures.

He said the travel subsidy programme would be suspended between December 28 and January 11, with the halt coming into effect earlier for hardest-hit areas, including the capital Tokyo.

He also urged the public to reconsider plans to visit relatives during the holiday season.

"I ask (the public) to carefully reconsider travel plans to return to home towns. I ask for your help so that all of us can spend a calm and quiet New Year," he said.

The call came as Japan sees rising infections — standing around 3,000 new cases per day — with doctors and nurses warning they are overwhelmed.

A poll by national broadcaster NHK found 81 per cent of re-

spondents had no plans to travel or visit their parents during the new year period, traditionally a busy travel time in Japan.

Japan has been less hard-hit than many countries — with 177,960 infections and 2,584 deaths recorded since the first case in January — and has avoided the strict lockdowns seen elsewhere.

With cases falling over the summer, the government launched campaigns to encourage travel and eating out, but these have been under fire as infections have risen, hitting daily records.

The cabinet's approval rating has plunged 17 points in the last month, to 40 per cent, according to an opinion poll released on Sunday by the *Mainichi Shimbun* newspaper. — AFP

London to move into toughest tier of COVID-19 restrictions

LONDON: London will be placed in the toughest tier of COVID-19 restrictions following a sharp rise in coronavirus infection rates, the *Daily Mirror* reported on Monday, as one of the world's richest cities struggles to contain the disease.

Earlier this month, the government implemented a three-tiered system of restrictions in England to try to keep a second wave of the virus under control following a month-long lockdown. More than 40 per cent of citizens were placed in the highest risk category.

However the capital, whose 9 million people and world-leading financial centre make it the engine of the British economy, is currently only in the second-highest tier of restrictions.

The *Daily Mirror* reported that Health Secretary Matt Hancock told lawmakers on a briefing call that London would be moving into the top tier, citing those on the call.

A countrywide review of the tier system was initially scheduled to take place on December 16.

The main difference between the top two tiers is that bars and restaurants, which can stay open under certain conditions in tier two, must close their doors in tier three and can only operate takeaway services.

There are also additional restrictions on socialising, but workplaces and schools are told to remain open.

"Moving into Tier 3 before Christmas will be deeply disappointing for Londoners,



London is likely to be placed into the toughest tier of COVID-19 restrictions following a sharp rise in coronavirus rates. — AFP

and a terrible blow to the capital's hospitality, leisure and cultural sectors," said John Dickie, Director of Strategy and Policy at business campaign group London First.

London was one of the first parts of the country to be hit by the coronavirus during the initial March-to-May peak, but until recently a second wave has been more concentrated in northern and central England.

Data published last week showed case rates per 100,000 people in London stood at 191.8, putting the city ahead of regions that have stricter rules in place, such as the West Midlands.

Based on that data, the government raised concerns

about the spread of the virus in London schools and announced a programme of mass testing. Two regions of the capital have unilaterally decided to close their schools altogether.

VACCINE DELIVERY

Meanwhile, National Health Service (NHS) England said that more than 100 parts of the country are taking delivery of the vaccine.

They will be working from newly set up local vaccination centres in villages, towns and cities covering every part of the country due to the special storage requirements of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine.

Nurses, paramedics,

pharmacists and other NHS staff will work alongside general practitioners to vaccinate those aged 80 and up, as well as care home workers and residents, in the new drive.

Previously, only patients in hospitals received the jabs.

In Scotland, residents in care homes will begin receiving the vaccine from Monday after the Scottish government received confirmation that the Pfizer vaccine can be "packed down."

The vaccines arrived in deep-frozen packs containing 975 doses at minus 70 Celsius, which previously meant they could not be split down into small batches to be taken to individual care homes. — Reuters/dpa

Electoral College votes to confirm Biden victory

WASHINGTON: The US Electoral College will confirm Democratic nominee Joe Biden as the next president, in a formal ratification vote on Monday, which comes as President Donald Trump continues to contest the election even as he keeps losing cases in the courts. The 538 electors are generally set to meet in state capitols in all 50 states and Washington throughout the day. The votes will be live-streamed. The Electoral College system distributes votes to each state based on population size.

The winner of the presidential election is the candidate to get more than 270 electoral votes. Biden won the election and states have certified the results in his favour.

While most states have laws binding electors to the popular



vote outcome in their territories, some do not, potentially creating some room for drama if certain officials decide to go rogue. In modern history this has not turned into an impactful issue. Trump is pushing a false narrative that the elections were rigged against him.

His legal team has lost dozens of cases in the courts, and one case brought by his allies was rejected at the Supreme Court level. — dpa

Russia rejects allegations of cyberattacks on US Govt

WASHINGTON/MOSCOW: Russian President Vladimir Putin's spokesperson on Monday rejected allegations that Russian state hackers had committed recent cyberattacks against the US government. "We have nothing to do with this," Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said in comments carried by Russian state news agency TASS.

US media reports on Sunday suggested that Russian hackers had been targeting the US Treasury and Commerce departments

and other government agencies.

Russia's embassy in Washington responded to the reports by saying that such allegations were "unfounded." "Russia does not conduct offensive operations in the cyber domain," the embassy said in a statement on its Facebook page. The embassy said the Russian government had received no reply from the United States about recent initiatives to engage in a "constructive and equal dialogue" about cybersecurity issues. — dpa

UK to pay more to victims of immigrant clampdown

LONDON: Britain on Monday announced an overhaul of the compensation scheme for victims of its clampdown on the "Windrush" generation of immigrants, with increased and faster pay-outs.

Home Secretary Priti Patel and Bishop Derek Webley, co-chairs of the cross-government working group on Windrush, wrote in *The Times* they recognised the need to "go further and faster to help those who need it" following complaints about the scheme.

In 2017, the Windrush scandal caused uproar after it emerged a generation of Britons of Caribbean

origin who moved to the UK legally between 1948 and the early 1970s had been wrongly detained or deported as illegal immigrants.

Under the changes, the minimum payment for victims will be raised from £250 to £10,000 (\$335 to \$13,400, EUR276 to EUR11,000), while the maximum payment will rise from £10,000 to £100,000.

The plans will also include "options for higher awards in exceptional circumstances".

So far, the compensation scheme has paid out more than £2 million and offered £1 million more.



The *Empire Windrush* was one of the ships that brought workers from Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago and other islands, to help fill post-war UK labour shortages.

But the working group said it needed to go further to address the damage done to those they said had been "so badly let down".

"We want these changes to make a real difference to people's lives, and urge everyone who may have been affected to apply," Patel and Webley wrote.

"We hope these changes will go some way to ease their lives, and enable them to move forward with hope and determination," they added.

Last month, a probe by the UK's Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) found the government broke the law with its

hardline immigration policy and characterised the deportations as a "shameful stain".

The EHRC lambasted the "hostile environment" policy against the Windrush generation, introduced in 2012 by then home secretary Theresa May, who went on to become prime minister.

The *Empire Windrush* was one of the ships that brought workers from Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago and other islands, to help fill post-war UK labour shortages.

Many of those caught up in the clampdown ultimately lost homes and jobs and were denied access to healthcare and benefits. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

BERLIN

Lockdown 'unlikely' to be lifted after January 10

The lockdown Germany is entering on Wednesday is unlikely to be lifted after the stated end date of January 10, says Chancellor Angela Merkel's chief of staff.

"I consider a comprehensive relaxation to be very, very unlikely," Helge Braun, who is in charge of Merkel's chancellery, told the RTL/n-tv broadcaster on Monday.

Speaking after the measure was announced, President Frank-Walter Steinmeier called for the population to stick together and



to show optimism in the face of the greater restrictions. "I'm sure that the responsibility that we are now showing, that the strain that we are now bearing and will have to bear for some time, is not in vain," he said. — dpa

ABIDJAN

Ouattara sworn in as president for third term

Ivorian President Alassane Ouattara took the oath of office for a third term on Monday, urging the opposition to help "defuse tensions" ahead of general elections early next year. The solemn ceremony was attended by 13 African counterparts as well as former French president Nicolas Sarkozy — but boycotted by the opposition, as was the election that returned Ouattara to power.

"I ask all political parties to seize this new opportunity... to defuse tensions through dialogue," the



78-year-old president said.

He had said earlier that he asked his prime minister, Hamed Bakayoko, to "resume discussions" with the opposition, which continues to contest the legitimacy of the October 31 election. — AFP

NEW YORK

Nurse receives first COVID-19 vaccine in US

A nurse in New York became the first person in the United States to receive the coronavirus vaccine on Monday. Sandra Lindsay, a critical care nurse at the Long Island Jewish Medical Center, received the Pfizer-BioNTech shot live on television.

"First Vaccine Administered. Congratulations USA! Congratulations WORLD!" President Donald Trump tweeted.

Lindsay said the jab "didn't feel any different from taking any other vaccine."



"I feel great. I feel relieved," she said.

"I hope this marks the beginning of the end of the very painful time in our history. I want to instill public confidence that the vaccine is safe. — AFP

Grow, so you can help others grow

The year 2020 has taught us to expect the unexpected.

The year brought in elements of doubt and it would be an understatement to say the new norm for a lifestyle. But as we are in the middle of the last month of the year, it is the best time to look back at this year and to reflect on how we ought to prepare for the new year.

We have also witnessed the last solar eclipse of the year. While some parts of the world looked forward to seeing the shadow cast by the moon for us it has been part of the night, but still, there were the stars to look out for – this reminds us of how life is: full of possibilities and potentials.

Each event has two sides and this year too with the pandemic ruling it completely since March made us realise that at times the most important thing is to just survive. And the best thing to do for anyone who survives the year 2020 would be then to say a thank you and express gratitude.

What would be the best way to practice gratitude? Obviously to acknowledge surviving the year under the pandemic would be the first thing we ought to do. Secondly, maybe it is time to actually be there for others who are total strangers. The economy needs to come back and people need to pick up their lives, probably with new career directions and skills.

In Oman, there have been people



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who lost jobs, professionals who have moved on to retirement and expatriates who are going back in thousands that have not been seen ever before. Thoughts are probably heavy with financial commitments to be met and for the other long hours in hand. Not to forget the emotions of having to lose a loved one to the pandemic. On the other hand, there is loneliness that was felt by the elders in the family as they had to stay away from the other family members for their own good.

Maybe we have all come to a point where we have realised how important it is to truly practice what we believe in terms of career and how not to waste time on worthless complaints and judgments on others.

Life is precious to be wasted on unnecessary burdens we take up to enjoy the material world. At the same time, it is important to be impactful in life. What is the difference we could make to society or in a person's life? The stress we generate on ourselves and in others is not something that we notice until it is too late. When it manifests into mental or physical health issues is when someone would try to alert us to change our directions.

If our words can create a positive impact let us use them in a gentle way if not let us not use our words to hurt others. Life is too short to go around apologising, instead, we can use the time and energy in supporting and

encouraging others.

Forgiving is the other word we ought to keep close to us because every time we remember to forgive someone we are in the process of healing. It has been noted that a lot of times we tend to be hard on ourselves and never realise who we are without ever even knowing the true self. So if we do not want regrets we ought to know who we are and what we truly want in life. It is funny because a lot of the time we do not know what we truly want in life.

Most of the years in life are spent in catching up with expectations of others and never really knowing what we want to do in life. What is an achievement? Are achievements grades and awards, or personal satisfaction? Whatever the conclusions would be individually, the most important elements would be being responsible and joy of dignity. And if we can achieve that and have the ability to guarantee it to others that would be admirable. The beauty of it is that all that can be achieved not just with money but with kind words and inspiration. Financial independence is important and that is why it is important to bridge the gap between the haves and have nots.

The most important ingredient would be to have the blessing of inspiration. Being inspired is one of the best gifts in life and let us hope we get plenty of that by the time we reach the threshold of the New Year.

HIS OWN MARK

Tshisekedi silences doubters with political gains

SAMIR TOUNSI

With a string of tactical victories, DR Congo President Felix Tshisekedi has defied naysayers who saw him as a weak politician living in the shadow of a famous father, although the future of his strategy remains uncertain.

When the bear-like figure was sworn in as president in January 2019, the start of his tenure was hardly auspicious.

Tshisekedi launched into his inauguration speech and then briefly fainted — the outcome of intense heat and a hefty bulletproof vest that he was unaccustomed to wearing. For critics, the embarrassing episode was apt.

For years, Tshisekedi had only been known through his father, veteran opposition leader Etienne Tshisekedi — and he ascended to the presidency thanks to election results that many in the opposition condemned as bogus.

Strengthening this impression of weakness was the man who stood impassively next to Tshisekedi at his inauguration — outgoing president Joseph Kabila.

After taking over from his father, Kabila had ruled Africa's notoriously troubled giant for 18 years. Kabila handing over the reins peacefully was an exceptional moment in DRC's history —

but many privately thought he would remain the power in the background.

Today, Tshisekedi, 57, has rolled back much of this narrative, impressing many with a long-term strategy to make his own mark on the presidency.

He began by forcing out two Kabila-appointed security chiefs, intelligence boss

Kalev Mutond, and the armed forces' inspector general, John Numbi, and then named three new judges to the DRC's highest court.

Last week, he effectively ripped up a secretive agreement with Kabila under which he would share government with the ex-president's supporters, who wield a majority in parliament.

Thwarted by the coalition in his plans to push through reforms, Tshisekedi said he would seek to forge another governing majority within the National Assembly — or else he would dissolve the legislature.

“(He) seems to be a calmer man, rooted in common sense, almost a Belgian-style sense of compromise,” said Colette Braeckman, a specialist on the Democratic Republic of Congo for the Belgian newspaper *Le Soir*.

Last Thursday, impervious to accusations that the president was seeking to impose a “dictatorship,” pro-Tshisekedi legislators, along with new allies, pushed through a vote forcing out the assembly's speaker, Jeanine Mabunda.

Observers say these gains reflect Tshisekedi's understated qualities of calmness, courtesy and an ability to create relationships. “His father Etienne was stubborn and proud,” said one analyst in Kinshasa. “Felix is more diplomatic, more conciliatory, better able to listen to others.”

“(He) seems to be a calmer man, rooted in common sense, almost a Belgian-style sense of compromise,” said Colette Braeckman, a specialist on the Democratic Republic of Congo for the Belgian newspaper *Le Soir*.

Despite these gains, the future for Tshisekedi's hopes of wresting control over the levers of power remains unclear. For now, Kabila seems to be on the back foot, although many believe he retains substantial clout through allies in parliament and appointees in the military. — AFP

CRAWL OVER BROKEN GLASS?

Germany to be a Brexit fixer

ISOBEL FRODSHAM

Despite reports in the British press that German Chancellor Angela Merkel wants to make Britain “crawl across broken glass” rather than come to a Brexit trade deal, Germany appears not to have given up hope of a breakthrough.

Ulrich Hoppe, the head of the German-British Chamber of Commerce, said while there will be an “edge” when Britain leaves the bloc's single market on January 1, it shouldn't be a “cliff-edge” so some necessary compromises need to be made.

“We need to have a ‘nice divorce’ so that we can move on and have closer links in the future as well,” he told the BBC on Monday.

“It's 50/50 at the moment (in terms of getting a deal) and from my impression, Boris Johnson needs to sell it to his party and that is why we see a bit of grandstanding on the UK side.”

But he added that Brexit overall is “further down the agenda” in Germany as the trade surplus it has with Britain is around 50 billion euros (\$60.7 billion), which is 1 per cent of Germany's gross domestic product. “If Germany's GDP grows a bit more or a bit less, it's not that important as it is the other way round,” he added.

In an apparent response to a comment in Britain's Mail on Sunday where a source said she was “determined to make Britain crawl across broken glass rather than



German Chancellor Angela Merkel puts off her face mask before a press conference in Berlin on Sunday. — AFP

BREXIT IS ‘FURTHER DOWN THE AGENDA’ IN GERMANY AS THE TRADE SURPLUS WITH BRITAIN IS AROUND \$60.7 BILLION

reach a compromise”, Merkel said on Sunday she was still keen for a trade deal to be reached before Britain exits the EU single market on January 1.

“Every opportunity to reach a deal is highly welcome,” she said at a news conference in Berlin. Her comments have also been echoed by the German press - who say Berlin has secretly been helping ease tensions between Britain and the European Union.

Alexander von Schoenburg, editor-at-large at German newspaper

Bild, said Germany's EU ambassador had relayed a message from Berlin which helped talks continue beyond Sunday's supposed deadline. “Our foreign minister Heiko Maas insisted it was time to end the doctrinaire approach and ‘start looking for a political solution,’” he wrote in British newspaper the *Daily Mail* on Monday.

“If that meant talks had to go on beyond Sunday night, then so be it. As we have seen, his intervention proved decisive.” — dpa

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Ahli Sidab lift HM Youth Cup for second straight time

Salalah claim second spot, Seeb finish third

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DEC 14

The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth announced the top winners of the His Majesty the Sultan's Youth Cup for the year 2019. Ahli Sidab club lifted the prestigious HM Youth cup for the second consecutive time while Salalah Club were the runners-up and Seeb club came in third place.

Assigned by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, HH Sayyid Taimour bin Asaad al Said, Chairman of the Board of Governors of the Central Bank of Oman (CBO), awarded the trophies to the clubs' chairmen in presence of HH Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth and top dignitaries.

Dr Marwan al Juma, Chairman of Ahli Sidab received the winner's trophy from chief guest HH Sayyid Taimour bin Asaad al Said and HH Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said along with a cheque of RO 30,000. Runners-up Salalah received the silver shield and a cash prize of RO 28,000 and the



Seeb vice-chairman received the bronze shield and a cash prize of RO 26,000.

Al Nasr dropped one spot and came in the fourth place while Ibri Club remained in the fifth place as in the last year. Al Salam and Dhofar Clubs registered a comeback by attaining sixth and seventh places respectively. Al Bashayer Club dropped two positions than last year and came in the eighth place. Sohar were placed in ninth position and Saham remained in the 10th place.

The ceremony featured



handing over of the Youth Excellence Prize 2020 to the winners. In October, the ministry had announced the list of 21 winners for the Youth Excellence Award to honour the Omani youth for their contributions in the youth sector. Nine fields including the categories of individuals, initiatives, and youth enterprises were evaluated for the award.

As many as 38 clubs took part in this edition of the HM Youth Cup compared to 30 clubs in the last edition. The teams included Ahli Sidab, Seeb, Oman Club, Muscat, Bausher, Qurayat, Salalah, Al Nasr, Dhofar, Nizwa, Sohar, Saham, Al Suwaiq, Al Rustaq, Al Khabourah, Al Ittifaq, Al Nahdha, Bahla, Al Musannah, Al Shabab, Al Ittihad, Yanqul, Al Mudhaibi, Ibri, Majees, Al Wusta, Samayel, Khasab, Al Bashayer, Al Salam, Al Wahda, Sur, Al Taleia, Bedia, Al Oruba, Madha, Daba and Bukha.

Ahli Sidab Chairman Dr Marwan al Juma, said attaining some achievement is difficult but retaining it is more difficult. "The

achievement was an outcome of teamwork at the club level including top efforts from the players, administration, technical staff of all sporting teams, board members and youth committees. A dedicated thanks to Shaikh Khalid al Zubair, the honorary chairman," he added.

The chief of Muscat-based club added that the plan was clear from beginning to continue the development by taking part in all the youth, culture and sporting activities.

Sheikh Ali al Rawood Fadhil, Chairman of Salalah club, expressed satisfaction over the club's performance. "The year 2019 was an excellent year for us. Thanks to all the team members in sporting teams and youth groups. Being among the top winners of the HM Cup for Youth is a huge encouragement for the club to boost its number of sports activities. Our aim is to claim the first place award next year and we will work hard to achieve this target. Many thanks to all Ministry officials for their continuous support and looking forward to further support in the upcoming period," the Salalah chief added.

The HM Youth Cup considered different factors in the evaluation process. It featured clubs' contribution in the individual and group sports as well as the presence of clubs in domestic and external sports events. This time, the Ministry had added a new item in evaluation — the administration and financial management which included the reports records, competitions reports and other board meeting minutes.

Salalah club receives the silver shield. RIGHT: Seeb club receives the bronze shield. — PICS BY MOHAMMED MAHJOUB



New Zealand sweep Windies to top Test rankings

New Zealand shot to the top of the world Test rankings Monday when they thrashed the West Indies by an innings and 12 runs to wrap up an emphatic series win. It lifted the Black Caps to 116 points, equal with Australia at the head of the rankings table, and also extended their unbeaten home run to 15 Tests. — AFP



Ex-Liverpool manager Gerard Houllier dies at 73

Gerard Houllier, the French coach who set Liverpool back on the path to Premier League and European glory, has died aged 73. Houllier, who managed the Anfield giants from 1998 to 2004, died overnight Sunday to Monday after undergoing heart surgery. — Reuters

SECURED ONLINE SYSTEM TO DECIDE HOST CITY OF 2030 ASIAN GAMES



Olympic Council of Asia executive meeting from today

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DEC 14

The 74th Executive Board Meeting of the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA) will begin in Muscat on Tuesday at Kempinski Hotel.

The Oman Olympic Committee (OOC), the organisers, is set to start the meetings under medical protocol after completion of all the technical and logistic preparations.

The agenda list of executive board meeting witnessed roll call of the previous meeting, address by the OCA president and reports on the visit of the evaluation committee to the candidates of Doha and Riyadh to host the 2030 Asian Games. Also, the meeting will discuss the reports by the chairperson of the Standing Committee, the new executive board meeting including the date and venue and miscellaneous.

ous. Shaikh Ahmed Al Fahad al Sabah, chairman of OCA, will take part in the meeting.

The executive board meeting will be followed by the 39th General Assembly of the OCA on Wednesday at the JW Marriott Hotel Muscat. As many as 25 representatives from national Olympic committees will attend the meeting while 20 representatives will join virtually through MSTeams platform.

The top agenda of the General Assembly is to decide the hosts of the 2030 Asian Games. Doha and Riyadh are the two competing cities who submitted their bids for hosting the Asian Games. Both cities delegations will present a visual presentation of their bid which will include their main features and facilities.

Then the OCA's official committee will present the report that features the outcome of the com-



mittee's visit to both cities. Later, the voting will begin through secured online system and the result will be announced accordingly. The organising committee of the winning city will sign the contract with OCA later.

During the meeting, the OCA

will sign the contract with the Organising Committee of the Asian Youth Games Tashkent 2025. The Olympic Solidarity at the International Olympic Committee (IOC) will review its latest developments in the sports arena. ANOC progress will be

addressed in the meeting as well.

The meeting will also include visual presentations and reports from the organising committees of the Asian sessions. The latest preparations for hosting the sixth Asian Beach Games (Sanya - China), the third Asian Youth Games

(Shantou - China), and the sixth Asian Indoor and Martial Arts Games (Thailand), and the 19th Asian Games (Hangzhou - China 2022) will be discussed.

The Sultanate delegation will be represented at the meeting by Sayyid Khalid bin Hamad al Busaidy, OOC Chairman, and Shaikh Badr bin Ali al Rawas, Board member.

On the other hand, Sayyid Khalid al Busaidy met Fahad bin Jalawi al Saud, Director General at Riyadh 2030 bid and Vice-Chairman of Saudi Olympic Committee.

Earlier, the OOC chairman inaugurated the 'Doha Majlis' at the JW Marriott Hotel Muscat in presence of Shaikh Joaan bin Hamad al Thani, President of Qatar Olympic Committee. Doha Majlis features the details of the Doha 2030 bid and its main facilities.

Nadeem, Khawar power IT Works to victory

MUSCAT: IT Works rode on wonderful performances by star Oman all-rounders Muhammed Nadeem and Khawar Ali to destroy AER by 116 runs in a Premier Division 50-over League game at OC Turf 1 in Amerat on Saturday.

Nadeem top-scored with a solid 70 while Khawar contributed vital 40 as IT Works made their way to a respectable 260 for 7 in 50 overs. Young Muzahir Raza claimed 3 for 55.

AER's chase never really took off and they were bundled out for a disappointing 144 in the 43rd over, Nadeem and Khawar causing most of the damage with three wickets each. Only Imran Rijvi and Sachin Kumar made any notable contributions with the bat, scoring 30 and 27 respectively.

MUBASHAR STARS IN ZUBAIR VICTORY

Magnificent all-round display by

Mubashar Iqbal powered Zubair CT to a comfortable win over OCT Seeb in a high-scoring 30-over B Division League match at Muscat Municipality ground 2 in Amerat on Friday.

Opting to bat first, Zubair posted a robust 253 for 6 on the board in 30 overs thanks to valuable knocks from Naveed Akhtar (57), Mubashar (46), Chandana Jagath (43) and Mohammed Amjad (42). Yunus al Balushi and Faris al Balushi took two wickets each.

OCT Seeb were never really in command, spending much of their 29 overs in trying to catch up with an ever-climbing run rate. In the end, they managed to score only 193 all out due largely to brilliant bowling by Mubashar, who claimed 4 for 50, while Arif Khan and Mustansar Hussain bagged two wickets each. Samir Othman (45) and Abbas al Balushi (34) were OCT Seeb's main scorers.



LC Tech's Noushad Haneefa and Jaleel Mahamoud.

NOUSHAD BOWLS LC TECH TO AN EASY WIN

In another B Division game, brilliant bowling by Noushad Haneefa, who picked up 5 for

20, and a superb 50 by Jaleel Mahamoud were the highlights of LC Tech's easy 7-wicket victory against OCT Al Hail A at Muscat Municipality ground 1.

The Al Hail side was dismissed for a paltry 108, Noushad doing the bulk of the damage with his 5-wicket haul. LC Tech chased down the modest total in the 16th over, scoring 109 for 3 thanks to a solid half-century by Jaleel.

RAI BATS OHI TO VICTORY

Abhishek Rai slammed a hurricane 54 off only 22 balls as Douglas OHI thrashed Khalsa United in a C Division T20 League match at Muscat Municipality ground 1.

Apart from Rai's fifty, Waleed Rahim's fluent 35 was the other notable score in OHI's 185 for 8 in 20 overs. Majid Rafique bowled well, taking 4 for 19.

Khalsa failed to rise to the occasion and make a match of it, managing only 115 for 8 in their quota of overs, Deepesh Mehta top-scoring with 22. Santosh Wishwakarma and Viplav Kumar claimed two wickets each.

BRIEF SCORES

Premier Division
IT Works 260-7 in 50 overs (Muhammed Nadeem 76 - 8x4, 2x6, Khawar Ali 40 - 6x4; Muzahir Raza 3-55) beat AER 144 all out in 42.2 overs (Imran Rijvi 30 - 3x4, 1x6, Sachin Kumar 27 - 2x4, 1x6, Khawar Ali 3-18, Muhammed Nadeem 3-29, Ihtesham Muhammed 2-14) by 116 runs

B Division
Zubair CT 253 for 6 in 30 overs (Naveed Akhtar 57 - 10x4, Mubashar Iqbal 46 - 4x4, 2x6, Chandana Jagath 43 - 4x4, 1x6, Mohammed Amjad 42 - 6x4, 1x6, Yunus al Balushi 2-47, Faris al Balushi 2-37, Samir Othman 2-29) beat OCT Seeb 193 all out in 29 overs (Samir Othman 45 - 8x4, Abbas al Balushi 34 - 4x4; Mubashar Iqbal 4-50, Arif Khan 2-26, Mustansar Hussain 2-23) by 60 runs

C Division
Douglas OHI 185 for 8 in 20 overs (Abhishek Rai 54 - 6x4, 2x6, Waleed Rahim 35 - 4x4, Majid Rafique 4-19, Yasir Abdul Latif 2-24, Irbaz Gawai 2-18) beat Khalsa United 115 for 8 in 20 overs (Deepesh Mehta 22 - 1x4, Santosh Vishwakarma 2-19, Viplav Kumar 2-27) by 70 runs

TRAIL BOARD

Hamdan al Khatri

At UTMB Oman

2019



170k



68 hrs

2020



150k



28 hrs,
54 mins



RAISING THE TRAIL BAR IN STYLE

HARIDEV PUSHPARAJ
MUSCAT, DEC 14

Hamdan al Khatri has been at the forefront of Trail Running in Oman and is one of the pioneers of the niche sport in the Sultanate.

The shy, unassuming lad has been on a single minded mission since last year and that was to better his own personal record in Trail Running.

Having competed in the 170k event at the UTMB Oman in 2019, Hamdan had racked up a runner-up finish in a timing of 68 hours.

To push his body and mind further and test the limits of his endurance, Hamdan aimed at holding his own running challenge in 150k and wrapping up the race in under 30 hours.

The uncompromising and dedicated runner that he is, Hamdan closed out the race in 28

hours and 54 minutes. The race began at the Bayt al Rudaayah Castle at Birkat al Mouz, Nizwa and thereafter Hamdan wined himself to the geographically challenging terrain of Jabal Akhdhar and Jabal Shams.

In an exclusive interview with *Oman Daily Observer*, Hamdan al Khatri outlined his motivation and drive to take up this tough challenge.

"I am doing this for multiple reasons. First of all, to improve my level compared to last year. I need more workouts. Second, to support those who are interested in trail running, I would like to inspire them with my efforts. Thirdly, we are trying to do something for the environment. Some people don't care about the environment, so we are trying to educate them. Also, we are trying to bring some sponsors for Omani runners," Hamdan revealed.

PACE THE RACE

The journey of completing an endurance race of 150k is an experience in itself and Hamdan delves into that experience with his thoughts.

"I have gained experience on how to pace the 150k race and that has been a big learning for me. Now, I don't go too fast at the beginning and slow down towards the finish. I have maintained a balance between going at a fast pace and slowing down. It is a very big achievement for me to successfully cover the 150k distance in under 30 hours. We know the Jabal Akhdhar mountains are not easy and the temperature as you know is such that it gets under three degrees at some places," he added.

With 2020 being the 'Year of Covid', Hamdan's preparations were affected too but the thorough professional that he is,

The uncompromising and dedicated runner that he is, Hamdan closed out the race in 28 hours and 54 minutes. The race began at the Bayt al Rudaayah Castle at Birkat al Mouz, Nizwa and thereafter Hamdan wined himself to the geographically challenging terrain of Jabal Akhdhar and Jabal Shams

found a way around it.

"I had two events lined up this year in Croatia and France, both of which were postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The UTMB in Oman was also cancelled because of the pandemic. However, I continued to train alone. Some days there were some restrictions but I used to finish my training before the curfew. I was doing some training in Wadi Bani Kharous, Wadi Bani Auf and sometimes in Jabal Shams alone. I was trying to be on the safe side by not exposing myself to other people."

TECHNICAL IMPROVEMENTS

Hamdan stated his goal was to make some significant improvements in his technique that will aid his running and that paid off.

"I did 170k in the last UTMB

by Oman and I finished second in the race. I did it in 68 hours. But this year for the 150k race the route was different and more challenging. It is dangerous in some places. My big achievement in this race was my ability to control the race and my speed. I did not take a long time at the check point. I directly took my food and water and I kept going. Also, my legs were not getting tired and I felt a lot more stronger. Since I was cycling, I had more endurance strength," he added.

As the torturous 2020 nears a finish, Hamdan as everyone else on the planet hoped that normalcy returns to professional sport.

"I hope everything gets back to normal. I will try to be in France for UTMB 170k in August 2021 and try to find a sponsor and do my best," he signed off.

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Al Riadah

البنك الأهلي

VAT, subsidy reforms, income tax to yield RO 6 billion for Oman over 5 years

KEY MEASURES:
A raft of new initiatives has been approved in support of the government’s fiscal consolidation efforts. They include plans for rationalisation of government service fees, maximisation of returns commercial and government lands, rollback of subsidy on cooking gas (LPG), and adoption of energy conserving street lighting systems

CONRAD PRABHU
@conradprabhu

The Omani government’s landmark Medium Term Fiscal Plan (MTFP) — a far-reaching blueprint for achieving fiscal sustainability — envisions contributions from Value Added Tax (VAT), a new personal income tax for high-earners, and the gradual rollback of electricity and water subsidies, aggregating in excess of RO 6 billion in value over the five year (2020-2024) timeframe of the fiscal plan.

According to details shared by the National Programme for Fiscal Balance (Tawazun), VAT on goods and services — a new indirect tax due to be implemented with effect from April 2021 — is expected to yield additional revenues totalling RO 2.585 billion over the 2020-2024 timeframe of the fiscal plan.



Likewise, personal income tax — slated for introduction on the affluent starting from 2022 — is anticipated to generate RO 1.267 billion over the same period.

The Medium Term Fiscal Plan, first unveiled by the Ministry of Finance (MoF) last month, outlines a number of measures to help reduce the primary and over-

a number of policy reforms and initiatives approved by the government for implementation as part of the Tawazun Programme.

Reductions in civil, security and defence expenditures planned over the five-year period will cumulatively amount to RO 5.001 billion in value.

Additionally, Tawazun is expected to capture RO 1.478 billion in spending efficiencies in development expenditures during this period.

In essence, the five main initiatives to achieve fiscal balance over the medium term — (i) reduction in civil, security and defence expenditures, (ii) Value Added Tax (iii) Water and Electricity subsidy reforms (iv) Personal Income Tax), and (v) Development Expenditure Spending Efficiencies – are expected to contribute around 75 per cent of the fiscal impact envisioned by

the Medium Term Fiscal Plan, say officials.

Furthermore, a raft of new initiatives has been approved in support of the government’s fiscal consolidation efforts.

They include plans for rationalisation of government service fees, maximisation of returns commercial and government lands, rollback of subsidy on cooking gas (LPG), and adoption of energy conserving street lighting systems.

Also envisaged are measures to strengthen Oman’s fiscal management systems. Initiatives planned towards this end include moves for the introduction of a centralised procurement system, national assets register, single treasury account, Government Financial Management Information System (GFMIS), Endowment Management, Debt Management Office, and Macro-Fiscal Unit.

Pact signed for financing of Duqm cement grinding plant



BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 14

Supporting initiatives to scale up the robust industrial sector in the Sultanate, ahlibank has announced the financing of RO 8.1 million for Duqm Cement Factory LLC’s new cement grinding plant in Duqm Special Economic Zone (SEZ).

A signing ceremony with Duqm Cement Factory LLC, a wholly owned subsidiary of Raysut Cement SAOG, Oman’s largest cement manufacturer, took place last week. Signing the agreement on behalf of ahlibank was Hanaa al Kharousi, General Manager – Corporate Banking, while Raysut Cement Company was represented by its Group CEO Joey Ghose.

Raysut Cement Company

Chairman Ahmed bin Yousuf al Ibrahim and Acting Deputy Group CEO Salim bin Ahmed al Ibrahim were also present.

“ahlibank is pleased to finance Duqm Cement Factory LLC’s new cement grinding plant in Duqm Industrial Estate. The partnership with Duqm Cement Factory will go a long way in enhancing the industrial sector’s growth in Oman as the factory will be a feeder to infrastructure projects in the area from industrial, logistics, real estate and tourism and will help in generating more employment opportunities,” said Hanaa al Kharousi.

Joey Ghose, Group CEO of Raysut Cement, said, “We would like to extend our sincere gratitude and appreciation to ahlibank for financing the construction of Duqm Cement Factory’s new

grinding plant in Duqm SEZ. Through strategic partnerships with the public and private sectors, the Bank has ensured the all-round development of Oman’s diverse sectors.”

“The new cement plant will spur economic activities in and around the Duqm SEZ and thereby bring more and more businesses to the region,” he added.

Raysut Cement held a groundbreaking ceremony triggering the start of the construction of the plant on November 10.

The company will be producing three varieties of cement: Ordinary Portland Cement (OPC), Portland Limestone Cement (PLC), and Granulated Glass Blast Furnace Slag (GGBFS).

FOSS Centre of Excellence to be set up in the Sultanate

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Transport, Communications, Information Technology (MT-CIT) has signed an agreement with Indian multinational IT corporation Wipro for the operation of a Centre of Excellence in Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) in the Sultanate.

The agreement was signed by Dr Ali bin Amer al Shidhani, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Transport, Communication and Information Technology. Representing Wipro at the signing was Sanjeev Tayal, Regional Director – Middle East.

Also present were a number of officials from inside and outside Oman from the oil and gas, banking, telecommunications and information technology sectors.

Based on the operating agreement, the two parties will cooperate in several areas, the most important of which are: providing the right environment for the development of open source software-based technology solutions, sharing knowledge, studies and data on FOSS, as well as equipping the human competencies and expertise needed to contribute to the development of FOSS through training, guidance, technical support and exchange of experiences.

“Free and open source software (FOSS) has an important role to play in promoting the



VALUE ADDITION:
The Centre of Excellence for Free and Open Source Software is the first of its kind in the Middle East and aims to provide a sustainable model to support local value addition in Oman’s ICT sector

digital economy and development in modern technologies such as: artificial intelligence, cloud computing, Internet of Things and big data analysis.

“We look forward to operating the Centre of Excellence in collaboration with Wipro to accelerate the adoption of this software locally across startups and SMEs and thus support the marketing of Oman as a regional hub for providing innovative open source software services,”

said Dr Al Shidhani.

Sanjeev Tayal, Regional Director for the Middle East at Wipro, stressed the company’s role in enhancing the local value added in the ICT sector in Oman, where the FOSS centre is one of the company’s many initiatives in the region to transfer knowledge and technology to local competencies. The signing ceremony included a panel discussion entitled, ‘Empowering Oman Vision 2040 through the Empowerment of FOSS’, with the participation of speakers from the US and UK.

The Center of Excellence for Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) in Oman is the first of its kind in the Middle East and aims to provide a sustainable model to support local value addition in Oman’s ICT sector by localising technology, promoting open innovation, adopting FOSS, providing technical support services, development, research and development and training. — ONA

Economic policy measures helped mitigate pandemic impacts in GCC: IMF report

PRUDENT ACTIONS: With lower oil prices resulting in large fiscal deficits, some governments moved to cut expenditure, reprioritise spending within existing budget envelopes so that new health and social priorities could be met without increasing overall spending, or raise additional non-oil revenues

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 14

A report by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has noted efforts by GCC governments to mitigate the effects of the coronavirus pandemic and the wider economic recession on their local economies and national populations.

The report, titled ‘Economic Prospects and Policy Challenges for the GCC Countries’, is based on a virtual meeting hosted by the IMF of finance ministers and Central Bank governors of the Gulf region held in October.

Gulf governments, the report said, enacted a range of economic policy measures to mitigate the damage to activity.

These include the deferral or exemption from taxes and fees (mostly aimed at businesses) and job support and other social benefits (aimed at households), cuts in policy interest rates as the Federal Reserve reduced rates, deferral of loan repayments for bank customers, relaxation of macroprudential rules, and the injection of liquidity into the banking system.

At the same time, with lower oil prices resulting in large fiscal deficits, some governments moved to cut expenditure, reprioritise spending within existing budget envelopes so that new health and social priorities could be met without increasing overall spending, or raise additional non-oil revenues, it said.

“Overall, while monetary easing (measured by the reduction in the policy rate) in the GCC has exceeded the global average, the aggregate fiscal response has been smaller than in many other regions. This can be attributed to the already large size of government spending as a share of the non-oil economy in the GCC and because the majority of GCC nationals work in the public sector where there have not been job losses,” the multilateral financial institution stated.

GCC economies are expected to contract this year before recovering in 2021, according to the report. The non-oil economy is projected to contract by 5.7 per cent this year, with a recovery to 2.9 per cent growth forecast for 2021. Real oil GDP is projected to contract by 6.2 per cent in 2020



and grow by 1.2 per cent in 2021 as countries produce in line with the Opec+ agreement through end-2021.

Overall, real GDP is projected to contract by 6 per cent in 2020 compared with the pre-COVID-19 October 2019 projection of 2.6 per cent growth. In 2021, assuming progress in containing COVID-19, overall GDP growth is anticipated to strengthen to 2.3 per cent, somewhat slower than in other emerging market economies due to the subdued growth of the oil sector under the Opec+ agreement and assumed stronger fiscal consolidation in the GCC, the report said.

“The GCC countries face a double impact from

the coronavirus and lower oil prices. GCC authorities have implemented a range of appropriate measures to mitigate the economic damage, including fiscal packages, relaxation of monetary and macroprudential rules, and the injection of liquidity into the banking system, and there are recent signs of improvement. Low oil prices have caused a sharp deterioration of external and fiscal balances, and fiscal strains are evident in countries with higher debt levels,” it stated.

The immediate priority is to continue to meet the health and economic needs arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, the report stressed. Countries should continue to implement the health

measures necessary to contain the pandemic, treat those infected, and support households and firms.

Fiscal and monetary policy should remain accommodative until the recovery is well-established, although the focus of support measures should move from being broad-based to targeting households and businesses most in need (and for the latter those likely to be viable in the post-COVID environment). Careful planning will be needed to gradually withdraw support without disrupting the recovery, it further noted.

Once the recovery is established, substantial and sustained fiscal consolidation will

be needed. Credible medium-term adjustment will help rebuild buffers and reduce vulnerabilities to future shocks.

Adjustment speeds will have to balance the strength of the fiscal position with the need to avoid excessively dampening growth — those with high debt levels will need to adjust more quickly. Phasing out subsidies, reforming public wage bills, ensuring high efficiency of spending on infrastructure, and creating space for additional social spending will be critical. Diversifying sources of government revenues will also be essential. Reducing the procyclicality of fiscal policy with respect to oil price swings will be a key part of the reforms.

Further structural reforms are needed to strengthen private sector led growth and job creation.

Labour market reforms will need to reduce large public sector wage premiums to encourage more nationals to work in the private sector while enhancing education and skills.

Continuing to increase female labour force participation is essential. Addressing constraints on access to credit for SMEs is critical. Governments could promote well-designed credit guarantee schemes, strengthen the availability of information needed for assessing credit risks, and continue to support the adoption of digital technologies to enlarge financing options, the report added.

NBC signs incubation agreement

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 14

The National Business Centre (NBC), which is part of the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn), signed an incubation agreement with Tamkin Digital Transformation Company.

Tamkin offers services related to digital transformation through usage of fourth generation technologies including Internet of Things, cloud

computing and cloud ERP for resource management system, and fieldwork management system.

The company also offers consultancy services in change management, and mainly focuses on applications related to smart offices, maintenance work and asset tracking.

Under the incubation agreement, NBC will provide Tamkin with a variety of services including office space, access to intensive training, and coaching

and mentoring sessions.

These services aim at developing the entrepreneurial skills which will eventually contribute to the growth of the company, partnerships, and easy access to business mentors.

NBC is an initiative launched by Madayn at the Knowledge Oasis Muscat (KOM) to offer promising Omani entrepreneurs a platform to develop their business ideas and advance them into growing ventures.

Tanweer hosts virtual contractors forum

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 14

The Rural Areas Electricity Company (Tanweer), member of Nama group, recently hosted the Contractors Forum, which brought together the company’s key contractors, suppliers and consultants.

The Contractors Forum brings together local and international contractors and suppliers to share their experience and learning.

The forum also provides a unique opportunity for the suppliers and contractors to learn about Tanweer’s future business opportunities, and expectations.

In addition, the Forum aims to reinforce the importance of two-way communication and provides transparency as well



as facilitate positive interactions with the contractors aimed at enhancing their financial capacity to successfully undertake Tanweer’s projects.

The event also provides an opportunity and the need for developing and supporting local small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

The event attended by more

than 200 people representing several local and international contractors and suppliers.

Tanweer’s licence covers Musandam Governorate, Al Wusta Governorate, most of Dhofar Governorate, and parts of Al Dakhiliyah, Al Dhahirah, and Al Sharqiyah South governorates. It also operates the desalination plant in Al Duqm.

Khazaen inks three investment pacts with local companies

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 14

Khazaen, the newest economic city in Oman has been consistently gaining momentum over the past few months. Three new agreements have been recently signed by Khazaen that reiterate the economic city’s growing preference among local and foreign investors.

The first agreement was signed with Al Wajen United Projects to build a factory for manufacturing of lights and electrical fittings. The second agreement was signed with Digital Energy Management to build factory for the assembly of switchgears, meters and electrical distribution boards while the third agreement was signed with Al Samsman Trading for constructing a factory for camping and outdoor specialised equipment.

The agreements were signed by Khalid al Balushi, CEO of Khazaen Economic City and CEOs of the companies. “Khazaen Economic City witnessed a growing interest from companies and investors to relocate or establish their projects in the City which reiterates the confidence of local and foreign investors



in Khazaen as an ideal destination, particularly after the recent completion of the phase one of infrastructure works,” said the CEO of Khazaen Economic City.

Ibrahim al Kindi, CEO of Al Wajen United Projects, said the company will build a factory for the manufacturing of light and electrical fittings.

“We are confident that we took the right decision to invest in Khazaen Economic City to build a light and electrical fittings factory, thanks to the unique advantages and offerings of the City as well as the incentives provided to us that include waiver of rent charges for certain periods enabling us to focus on the core establishment activities.”

Adnan Azam, CEO of Digital Energy Management, said: “We aim through our

investment at Khazaen Economic City to expand our businesses in the Sultanate and address new markets. We are fully convinced about our decision to invest in Khazaen due to the availability of required spaces, ready infrastructure and the City’s expected growth in the future.”

Sameer al Zadajly, CEO of Al Samsman Trading said: “We are proud to sign this agreement to build a camping and outdoor specialised equipment factory at Khazaen Economic City, the future business hub of the Sultanate. The City offers ideal location, unparalleled connectivity to main roads in addition to a wide range of incentives for local and foreign investors making it the ideal investment destination in the Sultanate and the wider region.”



In brief

■ SAN FRANCISCO

REDDIT TO BUY TIKTOK
RIVAL DUBSMASH

Social network firm Reddit said on Sunday it would buy short-video platform Dubsmash, becoming the latest company to expand in a space dominated by Chinese-owned TikTok.

The financial terms of the deal were not disclosed, but a spokeswoman for Reddit said the acquisition was based on a combination of cash and stock.

The success of ByteDance's TikTok has prompted many social media companies to add short-video services to their platforms, with Snapchat Inc rolling out "Spotlight" in November and Facebook Inc launching "Instagram Reels" earlier this year. — **Reuters**

■ OSLO

EQUINOR BUYS 49%
STAKE IN RUSSIAN
OIL VENTURE

Equinor has agreed to buy a 49 per cent interest in Russian onshore petroleum assets from Rosneft for \$550 million, the Norwegian oil company said.

The payment is for a stake in limited liability company LLC KrasGeoNaC (KGN), which holds 12 conventional onshore exploration and production licences in eastern Siberia, Equinor said.

One of the 12 licences covers the North Danilovsky development, which started operations in July and is expected to produce 40,000 barrels of oil per day (bpd) by 2024, with subsequent plans to increase this to 70,000 bpd, it added. — **Reuters**

■ CALIFORNIA

US GAMING PLATFORM
ROBLOX TO DELAY IPO

US gaming platform Roblox Corp has put off its planned initial public offering (IPO) until next year as it works with advisers to improve the process to benefit employees and investors, the company told employees in a memo seen by Reuters.

"We've seen companies take innovative approaches to creating a more market-based relationship between investors and companies," Roblox Chief Executive David Baszucki said in the memo.

Baszucki said the company expects to list early next year. The San Mateo, California-based firm had filed to raise \$1 billion through an IPO on the New York Stock Exchange and was expected to join a year-end IPO wave. — **Reuters**

Stocks look for vaccine-led recovery

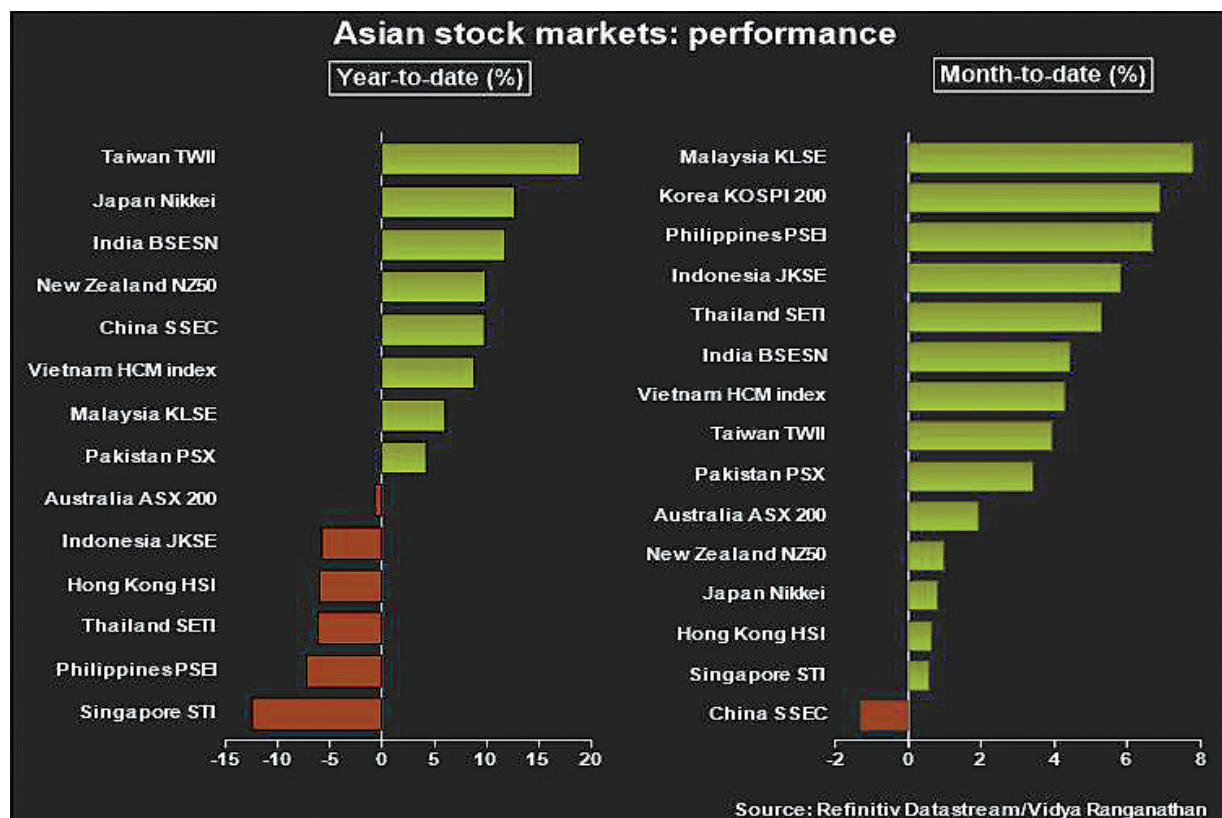
SYDNEY: Stocks started a busy week with guarded gains as investors gauged the chance of added US fiscal and monetary stimulus, while the British pound rose in relief as a last-gasp extension to Brexit talks dodged a hard divorce.

Progress on coronavirus vaccines cheered risk sentiment, with the first shipments speeding across the United States as part of an historic mission to inoculate more than 100 million people by the end of March.

"The vaccine has and will likely continue to provide a tailwind to the market that is allowing investors to look beyond record case levels, hospitalisations, and deaths," said analysts at JPMorgan in a note.

E-Mini futures for the S&P 500 responded by rising 0.5 per cent, while March Treasury bond futures slipped 4 ticks. Eurostoxx 50 futures added 0.6 per cent and FTSE futures 0.3 per cent. MSCI's broadest index of Asia-Pacific shares outside Japan edged up 0.1 per cent, having hit a string of record highs last week.

Japan's Nikkei added 0.6 per cent as a survey showed the mood among hard-hit Japanese



businesses had improved in the December quarter. Sterling firmed on both the euro and the dollar after Britain and the European Union agreed to continue talks on post-Brexit trade beyond Sunday's deadline.

Against the dollar, the pound rose 0.7 per cent to \$1.3321 and away from Friday's close of

\$1.3222. The euro slipped 0.5 per cent to 91.09 pence, off a three-month top of 92.29. "Our base case remains that a 'thin' free trade agreement will be reached before the end of the year," analysts at Goldman Sachs wrote in a note.

"That said, there is plenty of uncertainty and our economists, given the lack of progress in

recent weeks, now see rising risks of a no-deal outcome."

That could see the euro climb to 96.00 pence, while a deal could send the pound rallying to 87.00 per euro, Goldman predicted. The single currency has already been charging hard against the US dollar, which many analysts believe has entered a cyclical

Central bank trims economic outlook

PARIS: The French economy will rebound next year as coronavirus restrictions are lifted although not as fast as previously expected, the central bank forecast on Monday.

After contracting about 9 per cent this year, the euro zone's second biggest economy will post growth around 5 per cent in 2021 and 2022 before easing to slightly more than 2 per cent in 2023, the Bank of France forecast in its quarterly outlook.

The rebound has been knocked

back after a second lockdown had to be imposed at the end October following a new outbreak of infections which is gradually coming under control.

Prior to the second wave, the bank had forecast in September a contraction of 8.7 per cent this year and growth of 7.4 per cent in 2021 and 3 per cent in 2022.

The French economy would not return to pre-crisis levels of output until mid-2022, it said, whereas that had previously been

expected early next year. Despite the anticipated rebound, the unemployment rate is expected to keep rising to 11 per cent in the first half of 2021 before falling to 9 per cent by the end of 2023.

Drawing on the findings of its monthly business climate poll, the central bank said the economy was operating down 8 per cent of normal levels in December, which meant output would contract 4 per cent in the fourth quarter from the previous quarter. — **Reuters**

Japan business
confidence improves
again after virus plunge

TOKYO: Confidence among major Japanese manufacturers has recovered further after plunging on pandemic woes to its worst level since the global financial crisis, a key survey showed on Monday.

The Bank of Japan's December Tankan business survey — a quarterly poll of about 10,000 companies — showed a reading of minus 10 among big manufacturers, after recording minus 27 in the previous survey and minus 34 in the June survey.

The latest figure compared with a market consensus estimate of minus 15.

The June figure was the lowest since June 2009 when worldwide financial shocks hammered the planet's third-largest economy.

The short-term business sentiment survey reports the difference between the percentage of firms that are upbeat and those that see conditions as unfavourable.

A negative reading means more companies are pessimistic than optimistic. It is considered to be the broadest indicator of how Japan Inc. is faring.

The latest reading comes after the government last week approved more than \$700 billion in fresh stimulus to fund projects from anti-coronavirus measures to green tech, the country's third such package this financial year.

"The sharp rebound in the Q4 Tankan supports our view that Japan's economy will rebound relatively swiftly from the dislocation caused by the pandemic," said Tom Learmouth, Economist at Capital Economics in a commentary.

Japan officially exited recession last month after three quarters of contraction, but the world's third-largest economy now faces a spike in COVID-19 infections, with record numbers of new cases reported in recent weeks.

The latest survey also comes ahead of the Bank of Japan's two-day monetary policy meeting from Thursday, which is widely expected to keep the current monetary easing tools but also likely to extend its special measures in response to COVID-19.

— **AFP**

Suspected Russian hackers
spied on US Treasury emails

WASHINGTON: Hackers believed to be working for Russia have been monitoring internal email traffic at the US Treasury and Commerce departments, according to people familiar with the matter, adding they feared the hacks uncovered so far may be the tip of the iceberg.

The hack is so serious it led to a National Security Council meeting at the White House on Saturday, said one of the people familiar with the matter.

US officials have not said much publicly beyond the Commerce Department confirming there was a breach at one of its agencies and that they asked the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency and the FBI to investigate.

National Security Council spokesman John Ulliyot added that they "are taking all necessary steps to identify and remedy any possible issues related to this situation."

The US government has not publicly identified who might be behind the hacking, but three of the people familiar with the investigation said Russia is currently believed to be responsible for the attack.

Two of the people said that the



breaches are connected to a broad campaign that also involved the recently disclosed hack on FireEye, a major US cybersecurity company with government and commercial contracts.

In a statement posted to Facebook, the Russian foreign ministry described the allegations as another unfounded attempt by the US media to blame Russia for cyberattacks against US agencies.

The cyber spies are believed to have gotten in by surreptitiously tampering with updates released by IT company SolarWinds, which serves government customers across the executive branch, the military, and the intelligence services, according to two people familiar with the mat-

ter.

The trick — often referred to as a "supply chain attack" — works by hiding malicious code in the body of legitimate software updates provided to targets by third parties.

In a statement released late on Sunday, the Austin, Texas-based company said that updates to its monitoring software released between March and June of this year may have been subverted by what it described as a "highly-sophisticated, targeted and manual supply chain attack by a nation state."

The company declined to offer any further detail, but the diversity of SolarWinds' customer base has sparked concern within the US intelligence community that other government agencies may be at risk, according to four people briefed on the matter.

SolarWinds says on its website that its customers include most of America's Fortune 500 companies, the top 10 US telecommunications providers, all five branches of the US military, the State Department, the National Security Agency, and the Office of President of the United States. — **Reuters**

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A SHOWROOM in Al Qurum in strategic location with extravagant interior design on 280 sqm is offered for sale at RO 25,000. 92470024.

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features



Omq Film Awards announced

This award is an opportunity to lay down the basis of the local cinema that can make an influence and create an atmosphere of competition supported with unique artistic talents... [P18](#)

INSIDE STORIES

MUSIC & DANCE



FLAMENCO ARTIST'S SHOW 'A BALM' FOR PANDEMIC-WEARY SOULS

Music and dance as a healing balm for pandemic-weary souls is what Spain's Joaquin Cortes had in mind for his new show that opens this Christmas ahead of a global tour... [Story on Page P20](#)

YOUTH



BUILDING TOMORROW'S MINDS

More than 3,000 students from Oman and other Arab countries, are taking the opportunity to become the next leading social innovators in the region by participating in 'Tatawwar: Building Tomorrow's Minds', a joint program by HSBC and Potential.com ... [Story on Page 19](#)

READ



THE KITE RUNNER

The Kite Runner is the first novel by Afghan-American author Khaled Hosseini. Published in 2003 by Riverhead Books, it tells the story of Amir, a young boy from the Wazir Akbar Khan district of Kabul. Characters: Amir or Soraya, Assef, Sohrab.

MOVIES



DISNEY UNVEILS FLURRY OF NEW PROGRAMMING AMID RAPID STREAMING GROWTH

Walt Disney Co. announced a heavy slate of new productions for its streaming services including Marvel and Star Wars series on Disney+ and programming from reality fan-favourites the Kardashians for Hulu... [Story on Page 19](#)

CELEBRITIES



'IRREPRESSIBLE' BRITISH ACTRESS BARBARA WINDSOR DIES AGED 83

Barbara Windsor, one of Britain's most popular actresses and best known for her roles as pub landlady Peggy Mitchell in the BBC TV soap "EastEnders" and in the bawdy "Carry On" films, has died aged 83. Windsor, a household name in Britain known simply as "Babs", died at a care home in London on Thursday night, her husband Scott Mitchell said.



OMQ FILM AWARDS ANNOUNCED

MAI AL ABRIA

Khalid's sincere efforts to honour his deceased friends and to keep their names always alive, are seeing the light today with the announcement of the OMQ Film Festival winners' results. Khalid al Abri, the owner of OMQ Company said "Those who have made an impact and left a fingerprint in the community, should be celebrated in their lives and after their death. In the field of photography, Mohammed al Nahdi, Ahmed al Abadi and Oman al Adawi will remain always in the hearts and minds of their beloved ones and will always save their memory to the next generations".

Out of a total of 42 participating films, the best eight were awarded last night in a ceremony held under the patronage of Sayyid Ibrahim al Busaidy, Minister of State and Governor of Musandam. RO 15,000 were devoted to the Award in its first edition to the winning films which are: Best Integrated Film: Distress, Best idea: Fence Without Shadow, Incentive prize: Hamed's car, Best Director: A Film from Earth for Humans, Best Photographer: Folding, Best Actor: Monsters, Best Cinema Effects: The Last Survivor, Best Sound Editing: Innocence.

It should be noted that the arbiters in the competition are one of the elite directors and individuals of artistic companies in the Sultanate of Oman, namely director Mustafa al Lawati from Akkasa Company, director Issa al Subhi at Sultanate of Oman TV, director Haitham al Tobi from Point Company, director Anwar al Asami from Reality

CG, and Director Dawood al Kiyumi from KI-Bros Production.

The OMQ Film Award is an artistic initiative in cooperation with the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth that features the harvest of those deceased young photographers in photography, the values they believed in and the works they left that inspired others, so the award is a memorial to them in order to encourage the advancement of film-making among creative and innovative Omani youth. It provides messages and ideas that rise to reach outside the country.

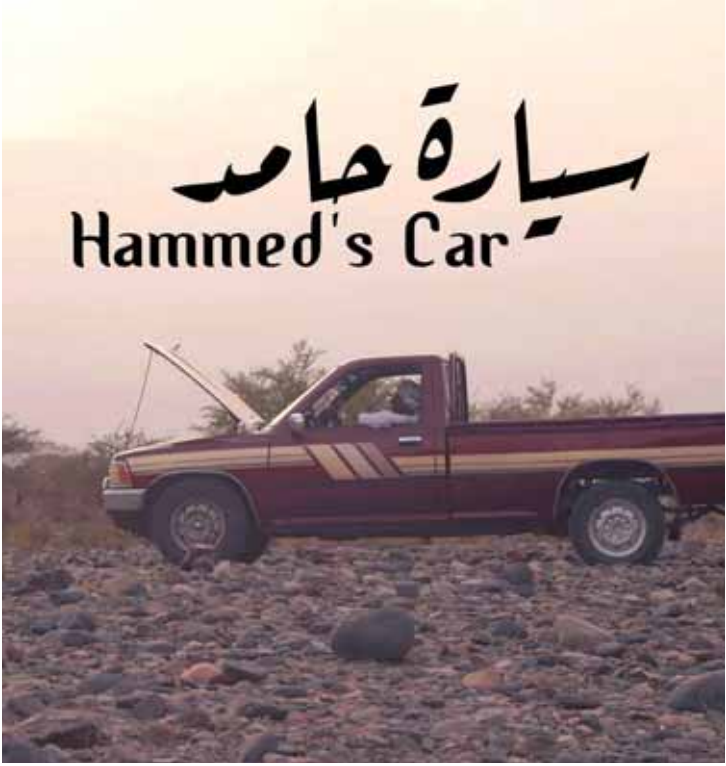
"This award is an opportunity to lay down the basis of the local cinema that can make an influence and create an atmosphere of competition supported with unique artistic talents", says Khalid. the Award prepares local films to compete in a regional and international levels, he adds.

"We believe in the importance of cinema in creating culture, imparting ideas and opinions neutrally. It is also an efficient method to develop skills of youth, and create positive societal features. the award encourages Omani youth to feature their own world and to develop this field in creative and artistic ways that contribute to strengthening cinematic production locally".

The prizes are divided as follows: RO 5,000 for the best integrated film, RO 3,000 for the best idea and RO 2,000 for the incentive award. As for individuals, RO 1,000 will go for each best director, best photographer, best actor/actress, best cinema effects editor and best sound engineer.

The themes of the film were narrowed to documentary, promotional and cinematic fields for youth aged between 18 to 35.

Distress wins best Film award





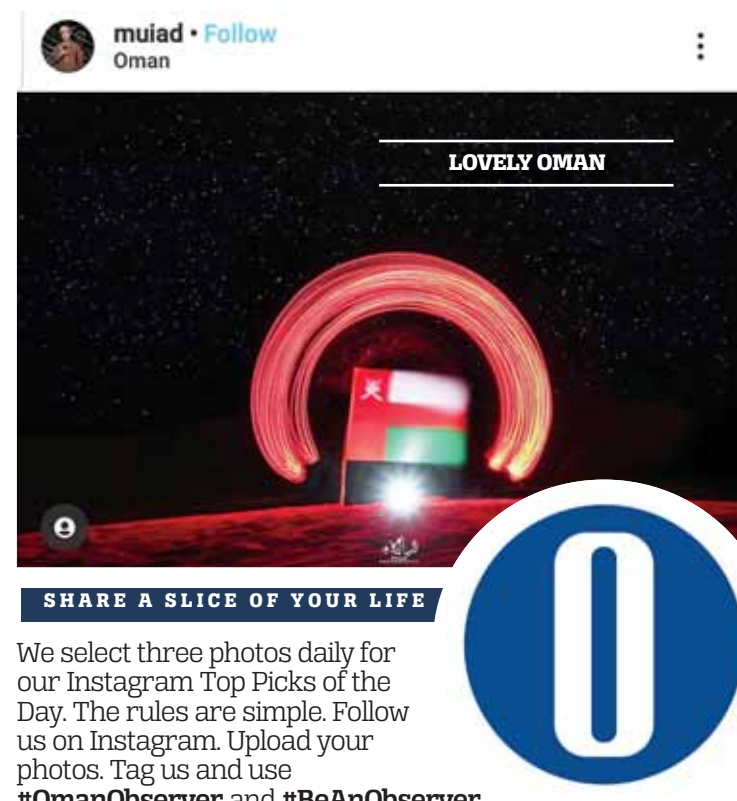
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YOUTH

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Building Tomorrow's minds

More than 3,000 students from Oman and other Arab countries, are taking the opportunity to become the next leading social innovators in the region by participating in 'Tatawwar: Building Tomorrow's Minds', a joint programme by HSBC and Potential.com.

The 3rd edition of 'Tatawwar' has seen an increase in the number of participants, reflecting the youth's growing interest to work towards a brighter future and prioritise sustainable business. This edition has also witnessed greater engagement with leading government institutions such as ministries of education and youth authorities from across the region.

Organizers are calling on schools and their teachers to register soon as the deadline nears on December 31,

2020, and benefit from the opportunity to engage their students in developing their hard and soft skills.

"Innovation plays a crucial role in enhancing the lives of people in a sustainable and efficient manner as well as in solving many of the challenges we face today. Through 'Tatawwar', we hope to empower students, enabling them to come up with innovative solutions. We encourage teachers as well to register and support their students through this initiative," said Shadi Banna, Chief Empowerment Officer of Potential.com.

Recent studies have shown that nearly eight out of 10 young people in the Middle East have high levels of optimism about their future and have confidence in their capability to compete in global job markets.

Through 'Tatawwar', students are encouraged to develop soft skills such as creativity, collaboration,

adaptability, and emotional intelligence, and use innovation and creativity to create projects that promote a sustainable future, focusing on three of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, namely climate action, human health and wellbeing, and clean water and sanitation.

As an interactive platform, 'Tatawwar' provides various activities for students between 15 to 18 years old to explore their skills and talents with the support of schools, parents, and the business community.

Sabrin Rahman, Regional Head of Sustainability, Middle East, North Africa and Turkey, HSBC, said: "The closure of schools and universities has affected youth across the region and has significantly changed how they live and learn during and post the pandemic. Social entrepreneurship skills can provide a greater range of options, as well as speed and agility, to a world

adapting to the aftermath of COVID-19, ensuring the next generation have the right skills to adjust to the new demands of the 'Great Reset'."

Students, schools, parents, NGOs, and any other partners who are keen to help empower the next generation of social innovators in the region can register through www.tatawwar.com. Once registered, they will have time until January 15, 2021 to submit their innovation solutions. This gives teachers the chance to start the new term in their schools with a project-based activity that the school can submit to the program.

A panel of judges will select the top 20 projects that qualify for the final round, where students will be asked to further develop their projects with the support and extensive coaching of key industry leaders. Three prototypes will be chosen as winners and will receive cash prizes.

Since 'Tatawwar' has started, a total of nine winners and 30 ambassadors have already graduated from the program. These students underwent extensive mentorship to help them improve on their social entrepreneurship, financial literacy, and employability skills. As an interactive platform, 'Tatawwar' continues to gain prominence, considering the practicality and effectiveness of online learning.

MOVIES

Disney unveils flurry of new programming amid rapid streaming growth



WALT DISNEY CO. announced a heavy slate of new productions for its streaming services including Marvel and Star Wars series on Disney+ and programming from reality fan-favourites the Kardashians for Hulu. The aggressive push coincided with news of fast growth for Disney+, which hit 86.8 million subscribers and nearly reached its most ambitious 2024 goal. The global coronavirus pandemic forced consumers to shelter at home and made them desperate for entertainment. The media conglomerate said it plans to release 10 new TV series in the Marvel and Star Wars franchises over the next few years.

Another 15 live-action Disney Animation and Pixar shows and 15 Disney Animation and Pixar feature films will be available on the streaming service. Customers should expect something new every week, executives said in a presentation to investors.

The company announced new programming for Hulu and Star, a general entertainment service it will launch overseas in February.

This will include content from the popular Kardashian family, which this year announced it was ending its long-running reality show on NBCUniversal's E! network.

Disney shares rose 4 per cent in after-hours trading during the presentation. The US entertainment industry has raced to catch up to Netflix Inc this year. Disney, AT&T's WarnerMedia and Comcast Corp's NBCUniversal restructuring

operations to focus on streaming video services.

Launched a year ago, Disney+ is helping Disney close the gap quickly. Including Hulu and the ESPN+ sports streaming services, Disney has about 137 million subscribers. Netflix, which pioneered streaming in 2007, had 195 million paying subscribers at the end of October. Shares of Netflix slipped 0.6% during Disney's presentation.

Hollywood is closely following Disney's plans a week after AT&T Inc's Warner Bros upended the film business by saying it would debut all 17 of its 2021 movies on its HBO Max streaming service on the same day



they hit theatres. Cinema chains are unhappy about losing the window when they can screen movies exclusively in theatres before films hit streaming services.

AMC Entertainment Holdings Inc, Cineworld Group and Cinemark Holdings Inc are watching to see if Disney, the box-office leader last year, plans big changes to the slate of movies it has set for theatres.

Disney and other studios previously moved some films to streaming when the coronavirus pandemic closed many cinemas. — Reuters



Flamenco artist's show 'a balm' for pandemic-weary souls

Music and dance as a healing balm for pandemic-weary souls are what Spain's Joaquin Cortes had in mind for his new show that opens this Christmas ahead of a global tour.

After a year away from the stage, the legendary flamenco artist who has been dancing for nearly four decades returns to the spotlight on December 23 when his new show debuts at Madrid's WiZink auditorium.

"Culture is both necessary and vital for everyone, and dance and music are medicine for the soul," he said between rehearsals in the Spanish capital.

Acutely aware of the damage caused to the arts by the pandemic which has cancelled countless shows, tours and concerts, Cortes wants his new act to encourage people back into theatres.

The idea is to show that "it's safe, that people have to get out and watch shows," said the 51-year-old who was born into a gypsy family in the southern city of Cordoba.

"Just like when you go to the supermarket or in the metro and nothing happens, it's a lot safer," he said, referring to restrictions on numbers in theatres and the mandatory use of masks.

"We have to move forward, life goes on," said this Unesco goodwill ambassador who was nominated for his sup-



port for and defence of Roma culture.

Entitled "Esencia" ("Essence"), the new show fuses flamenco with jazz dance and salsa, with music composed by Cortes and well-known flamenco musicians the Carbonell brothers.

'My fantasy world'

The idea was to fuse "everything I've learned and experienced through my global travels" over a decades-long career that began when he was admitted to Spain's National Ballet at the age of 14.

"It's the maturing of an artist... your own fragrance, your own essence, your life, your way of expressing the many things you've absorbed that comes out in your dance and the way you express yourself as choreographer, as creator," said Cortes, known for fusing flamenco with classical and contemporary dance.

The plan is to take the show around the world starting in March or April, although he admits much will depend on the rollout of anti-COVID vaccines.

Produced entirely on his own without any third-party backing, "Esencia" will see him performing alongside artists like flamenco singer Estrella Morente.

"For me returning to the stage is very important, I cut my teeth on a stage. The stage is my bedroom, it's my fantasy world," he says.

"I'm looking forward to getting back because, for me, it's essential." — **AFP**