

P13

SALE OF 49 PER CENT STAKE IN JINDAL SHADEED COMPLETED



P10

AHMED EMBARKS ON LE MANS ASIA DEBUT



P18

PAN-SEARED SALMON WITH CHAR-GRILLED PINEAPPLE SALSA



OMAN

All support to private sector

MUSCAT: The committee tasked with studying the economic impacts of coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on Wednesday held a meeting under the chairmanship of Sayyid Hamoud bin Faisal al Busaidy, Minister of Interior. The committee reviewed preventive procedures and precautions undertaken over the past period to support the sustainability of private sector businesses and enhance their ability to adapt to the current exceptional conditions resulting from the pandemic. The steps included commercial, industrial and incentive packages offered by the government, in addition to the Programme of Emergency Loans meant to help the most hard-hit entrepreneurs.

DETAILS ON P2

Doctors perform rare surgery

MUSCAT: A Royal Hospital medical team performed a bone marrow transplant on a seven-month-old baby girl with severe combined immunodeficiency (SCID) recently. The transplant was done in collaboration with the Bone Marrow Transplantation unit of the Sultan Qaboos University Hospital. After the transplant, the baby Fajer is in good health. The Pediatric Clinical Immunology department of the hospital is closely following her health. The child was diagnosed with SCID when she was two months old.

DETAILS ON P3

INSIDE



LEBANON PM DESIGNATE PLEDGES TO FORM 'EXPERT GOVT' IN RECORD TIME

P6



JAPAN'S SUGA ANNOUNCES PM RUN WITH STRONG PARTY BACKING

P7

WEATHER TODAY

MUSCAT

MAX: 37°C
MIN: 28°C

SALALAH

MAX: 29°C
MIN: 25°C

NIZWA

MAX: 40°C
MIN: 24°C

SUNRISE 05.49 AM

PRAYER TIMINGS

FAJR: 04:33

DHUHR: 12:12

ASR: 15:39

MAGHRIB: 18:30

ISHA: 19:42



HM’s efforts to foster economic freedom commended

WASHINGTON: Heritage Foundation of the United States commended the efforts of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik in promoting economic freedom, modernising the economy and strengthening ties with the United States.

A report written by researcher Anthony B Kim of the Heritage Foundation, and published in *The Daily Signal* said: “Washington has a unique opportunity to build on the good existing relationship and to reaffirm Oman as a trustworthy partner in dealing with many challenges facing the Middle East.”

Kim pointed out that Oman’s economy has been in the moderately free category for 25 years.

The report added that “Oman’s economic freedom score is 63.6, making its economy the 75th freest in the 2020 Index. Its overall score has increased by 2.6 points, with significant improvements in all areas related to the rule of law. Oman is ranked 6th among 14 countries in the Middle East and North



Africa region, and its overall score is slightly above the regional and world averages.”

The writer proceeded on saying that “An effort is under way to develop a new

bankruptcy and insolvency law, which will help in improving the country’s business environment and increase foreign direct investment inflows.”

READY FOR HARVEST



In the early morning, with the strength of youth and the experience of the grandparents, Abdullah al Saqri and others farmers go to the farm one km away from their home, carrying with them a basket made of palm wicker to pick pomegranates, which is the main crop in Al Jabal Al Akhdhar. The harvest season started from the last week of August, and continues till the end of September.

DETAILS ON P4

Scientists detect mysterious ‘intermediate mass’ black hole

PARIS: Scientists announced on Wednesday the discovery of a black hole — the oldest ever detected — that shouldn’t even exist according to the current understanding of cosmic monsters so dense not even light can escape their gravitational pull.

Born of a merger between two other black holes, GW190521 weighs in at 142 times the mass of our Sun and is the first “intermediate mass” black hole ever observed, two consortiums of some 1,500 scientists reported in a pair of studies.

“This event is a door opening into the cosmic process for the formation of black holes,” co-author Stavros Katsanevas, an astrophysicist at the European Gravitational Observatory, said in an online press conference. “It



Artist’s impression of a gas cloud swirling around a black hole.

is a whole new world.”

A so-called stellar-class black hole forms when a dying star collapses, and is typically three to ten solar masses in size.

Supermassive black holes found at the centre of most galaxies, including the Milky Way, range from millions to billions of solar masses.

Up to now, black holes with mass 100 to 1,000 times that of our Sun had never been found.

“This is the first evidence of a black hole in this mass range,” said co-author Michaela, an astrophysicist at the University of Padova and a member of the Europe-based Virgo Collaboration. “It may lead to a paradigm shift in the astrophysics of black holes.”

The findings, she added, support the idea that supermassive black holes could be formed through the repeated merger of these mid-sized bodies.

What scientists actually observed were gravitational waves produced more than seven billion years ago when GW190521 was formed by the collision of two smaller black holes of 85 and 65 solar masses. — AFP

‘MaskUp’, we aren’t free from pandemic

KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, SEPT 2

“We are not completely free from COVID-19 and adherence to safety measures shouldn’t be given a go by,” according to Unicef.

A statement issued by the UN body office at the launch of regional campaign ‘MaskUp’, urges everyone to always remember to wear a mask in public and gatherings.

“COVID is still there and we have to be careful. Don’t take things lightly. Continue wearing masks although it can become tiring and inconvenient. But this is the way to combat the disease,” said Dr Mahmud al Rahbi, Head of Emergency Department at Al Nahdha Hospital.

To encourage people around the region to wear masks, Unicef has launched a campaign featuring children and influencers to engage public to wear masks and highlight how to properly use them and dispose of them safely.

The Unicef regional office further said that one of the main ways that COVID-19 spreads is through the respiratory droplets that people throw out when they talk, sing, cough or sneeze.

“We now realise that the virus can be spread by people without symptoms, which means that some people can be carriers of the virus without even realising it.”

Physical distancing is made mandatory due to this factor. Since we cannot be away from others for long, the masks come handy so that one can wear them and speak to others.

“However, mask alone cannot protect you from the spread of COVID-19, and we all need to continue to maintain physical



We now realise that the virus can be spread by people without symptoms, which means that some people can be carriers of the virus without even realising it

UNICEF REGIONAL OFFICE

distancing and washing our hands frequently. Through these combined steps, we can beat COVID-19,” the statement further added.

According to Dr Mizun Tufail al Rahman, Senior Consultant Family Physician, Ministry of Health, it’s too early to let go of the preventive measures against the pandemic as she advised the public to be extra cautious.

“As Oman started to show recovery from the first wave, it’s too early to celebrate and fly with wings. All of us worked hard, from decision-makers, frontline heroes to common people...

TURN TO P2



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COMMITTEE REVIEWS COVID-19 IMPACT



MUSCAT: The committee tasked with studying the economic impact of coronavirus pandemic held a meeting chaired by Sayyid Hamoud bin Faisal al Busaidy, Minister of Interior. The committee reviewed preventive procedures and precautions undertaken over the past period to support the sustainability of private sector businesses and enhance their ability to adapt to the current exceptional conditions resulting from the pandemic. The steps included commercial, industrial and incentive packages offered by the government, in addition to the programme of emergency loans meant to help the most hard-hit entrepreneurs. The committee also studied a number of other topics related to its tasks and decided to submit recommendations in their regard to the Supreme Committee for appropriate action. — **ONA**

We aren't free from pandemic

FROM PAGE 1

It will be a big disaster to loosen up all the precautions, and we know this from the experience of several countries. Until this point, there is neither effective treatment nor immunisation against this disease. The best way is still prevention and prevention alone," she said.

Masks shouldn't, however, be worn by anyone unable to remove it without assistance, including infants and young children, or anyone who has difficulty in breathing.

Unicef and the WHO recommend that children aged five years and under are not required to wear masks. This recommendation stems from the principle of achieving child safety, and those children may be distinguished in their stages of development within different ages.

Families can click a photo or video while wearing a mask and send it to the Unicef's MENA social media platforms.

Nod for online examination at private HEIs

SAMUEL KUTTY
MUSCAT, SEP 2

Private higher education institutions HEIs in the Sultanate have been given an option to replace written exams with online examination.

This is one of the guidelines in the decisions announced by Dr Rahma bint Ibrahim bin Said al Mahrouqiyah, Minister of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, to be followed by these institutions during the first semester of 2020-2021.

According to the decisions, "the approved alternative should be accompanied by appropriate measures that will ensure the integrity of students and the quality of their research projects".

Institutions can adopt blended learning with a combination of both theoretical and practical components, "provided these procedures are approved by specialised academic councils, and they are in line with international standards and practices".

While calling for a safe and healthy environment for students and staff in accordance with the guidelines issued by the ministry

The higher education institutions must train the teaching staff on the methodologies of blended learning so that they will be able to evaluate students' performance

to prevent and contain the spread of COVID-19, the institutions can take decisions on the courses to be offered through e-learning, and others that require physical presence.

"This can be done with appropriate evaluation methods to ensure that the objectives and outcome specified for each course through the blended learning are achieved," it says.

The decisions ask educational institutions to be committed to developing a technical infrastructure



to maintain e-learning as a continuous process, and enriching its content for all academic courses.

The higher education institutions must train the teaching staff on the methodologies of blended learning so that they will be able to evaluate students' performance and follow up on their levels in a way that guarantees the quality of the educational process.

"Institutions should periodically survey the views of students and academics to ensure the effectiveness of blended learning and provide them with various aspects of support, with the necessity to define open lines of communication to support students academically and technically, whether by phone or e-mail," urge the decisions.

Educational institutions should

coordinate with the relevant authorities to provide practical training opportunities for students of applied programmes in accordance with approved study plans.

At the end of the first semester of the academic year 2020-2021, all the higher education institutions must submit a comprehensive report to the ministry about their experience in applying blended learning.

Madayn hosts training on future foresight

MUSCAT: The Public Establishment for Industrial Estates Madayn, represented by Madayn Industrial Academy, organised an online training programme on Wednesday on 'Future Foresight' as part of its constant efforts to qualify, train and develop the human cadres in the various industrial cities.

The programme, which was hosted by Mohammed al Ajmi, Information Systems Developer at Madayn, aimed at equipping participants with concepts and theoretical framework on the topic and related characteristics and mechanisms.

Moreover, the programme touched upon the notions of big data, artificial intelligence, genetic engineering and forecasting techniques. The participants were also briefed on the major international models in future foresight context, and the 'Delphi Method of Decision Making' model.

— **ONA**

DAILY INTAKE: 11 CUPS FOR WOMEN, 16 FOR MEN

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
MUSCAT, SEP 2

Water is essential no matter what the season is as we are now in the transition period between summer and winter. Although the summer reminds you to drink water, the cooler days may not make one thirsty enough to look out for a glass of water. However, experts point out that there is more to water than quenching thirst.

"It is very important to maintain our hydration status by drinking enough fluids to sustain our bodies, which encompasses about 60 per cent to 70 per cent water. Water helps in transporting oxygen and nutrients along the bloodstream in addition to lubricate the joints and further injuries are prevented," explained Shabib al Kalbani, Clinical Dietitian, Ministry of Health.

Water is exceptionally important

now during the COVID-19 period as it prevents infection.

"Water helps regulate our body temperature, which on average is 37 degrees Celsius. Our country is humid and we need to replenish fluids because we are not losing them from urination but losing them through the skin in addition to losing them through the metabolic process that is taking place in our body. According to my knowledge and the latest scientific consensus, women need to drink approximately 11 cups of water per day and men have to drink about 16 cups a day. By a cup I mean 250 ml," said Al Kalbani. It is not just water that can provide all the fluid one needs. "This fluid requirement not only comes from water, but it also comes from fruits and vegetables that are high in fluids such as watermelon and cucumber. They are high in water

"It is very important to maintain our hydration status by drinking enough fluids to sustain our bodies, which encompasses about 60 per cent to 70 per cent water. Water helps in transporting oxygen and nutrients along the bloodstream in addition to lubricate the joints and further injuries are prevented,"

Shabib al Kalbani
Clinical Dietitian, Ministry of Health



content so they are also important," pointed out the clinical dietitian. Interestingly, to keep coronavirus away we drink water to have a proper cleansing process of the body. This is besides our dependence on water to wash hands and feet and shower before entering homes, not to forget washing the clothes immediately.

Maryam Khalfan and her family have come up with, what they call, Corona tea. "It is made up of spices added into hot water such as cloves, turmeric, ginger and lemon, cardamom and cinnamon. You can drink it plain or flavour it with honey," she noted. Whatever healthy food we ingest it is water that helps the body in absorbing and assimilating minerals, vitamins, glucose, and amino acids in addition to other substances. We also need water to remove toxins and waste from our bodies.

Baby recovers after marrow transplant

MUSCAT: A Royal Hospital medical team performed bone marrow transplant on a seven-month old baby girl with severe combined immunodeficiency disease (SCID) recently. The transplant was done in collaboration with the Bone Marrow Transplantation unit of the Sultan Qaboos University Hospital (SQUH). After the transplant baby Fajer is in a good health. The Paediatric Clinical Immunology department of RH is closely following her health.

The child was diagnosed with SCID when she was two months old. SCID is an inherited primary immunodeficiency disease (PIDD) that weakens immune system, which makes the body unable to resist even mild infections.

After diagnosis, a treatment plan was prepared and initiated immediately. In order to reduce the chance of both regular and opportunistic infections, the infant was given oral microbial antibiotics daily in addition to a monthly Intravenous Immunoglobulin (IVIg) treatment provided by the Clinical Immunology department of RH.

As conventional treatments failed to control the severe bacterial pneumonia and blood infection as well as the associated hyper immunity her condition was badly deteriorating.

The medical team then decided to do bone marrow transplant (also known as a stem cell transplant). In this treatment, an infant with SCID receives healthy stem cells from a matched donor, usually a healthy brother or sister.

The infant's brother was selected as donor. The procedure was performed



Photo for Illustration

in the RH's Paediatric Intensive Care Unit (PICU) after receiving the stem cell from SQUH. Following transplantation, a substantial improvement was noted in the patient health.

While this kind of treatment is offered in SQUH, the child's health condition was unstable to be transferred to the SQUH's Bone Marrow Transplantation department. Therefore, there was a possibility of complications in case the child receives stem cells from the donor without the direct supervision of the bone marrow transplant team. Besides, the RH's PICU team was not

The infant's brother was selected as donor. The procedure was performed in the RH's Paediatric Intensive Care Unit (PICU) after receiving the stem cell from SQUH. Following transplantation, a substantial improvement was noted in the patient health

familiar with this type of treatment.

Despite lack of necessary laboratory examinations to identify the progress of the transplant, the PICU has spared no efforts to provide best care to the patient. The successful

procedure on this baby at RH will pave the way to more transplant surgeries for children with immunity disorders.

It is worth mentioning that SCID is considered to be the most serious PIDD. It may lead further

to an uncontrolled hyperimmunity. Hyperimmunity in children with severe combined immunodeficiency causes the immune system - which is damaged - to attack the body itself causing other health conditions as Hemophagocytic lymphohistiocytosis (HLH), bone marrow immunosuppression, or the development of blood and lymphatic system cancer.

This type of disease is very rare. However, due to the increase in intra-family marriages in Oman, it is estimated to affect 4.6-5 of every 100,000 Omani newborns per year.

— ONA

Stranded Ghanians to fly home on Saturday

KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, SEP 2

Ghanaian nationals, who are stuck in the Sultanate due to non-operation of international flights, will travel home on Saturday.

"Finally we can send these Ghanians who were stranded in the Sultanate after the flights were suspended some five months ago," said Joe Aboagye, representative of the Ghanaian Community, told the *Observer*.

"It is an occasion to thank the authorities of the Sultanate who facilitated the flight." Nearly 40 Ghanians were stranded due to the expiry of their visit visa, while some lost jobs as their contracts got over. Some of them are elderly people.

"It has been quite a process to find a flight for the Ghanians. Despite their long wait, it has come as a relief to them." The head of the Ghanaian Community of got Salam Air to fly the people back home and they were charged minimally, according to Joe.

"We also thank the other members of the Ghanaian community who helped to pay for those who could not afford the tickets. Special thanks to the Ghana Embassy in Riyadh, especially Collins Osei, Habib Issaka and Marcel Domaye," adds Joe.

The flight will leave Muscat at 6.20 pm on September 5 to Dubai. And from Dubai, it will take some more Ghanians and fly at 10 pm the same day.

AGREEMENT TO PROMOTE TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, SEP 2

German University of Technology in Oman (GUtech) and the International Emerging Technology Company (ETCO) have signed an agreement to establish GUtech Technology Transfer Office to promote technology transfer and structure GUtech technology transfer capabilities.

Dr Hussain al Salmi, Acting Rector of GUtech, and Azzan al Maamari, Acting Chief Executive Officer of ETCO, in signed the agreement, which will help the

university avail of ETCO consulting services for setting up the Office (TTO) in alignment with the University's vision to set the way for innovation and technology transfer.

ETCO operates in the advanced technology sector with a focus on attracting innovative projects, providing consulting services, propelling technology transfer locally and internationally. The company puts empowerment of societies at the forefront of its priorities by providing them with the latest advanced technologies to reach the future economy.



"I am glad to kick off the start of the academic year with a strategic partnership leading to the establishment of a TTO at

GUtech campus," Mohammed al Salmi said, adding "establishing a TTO at GUtech will help cement relationships between key faculty

members at GUtech as well as industry partners to bring in funds for research and licenses for innovative ideas." The Technology Transfer Office will offer the platform that will encourage the movement of technical skills, the development of industry-sponsored research projects, and consulting arrangements with companies and public entities," explained Al Salmi.

Acting as a bridge between GUtech and the industry, the Technology Transfer Office will be led by key international advisors tasked to set out the framework

for connecting GUtech researchers with industry partners for novel technologies, and to clearly define key policies in areas of ownership of intellectual property, transfer of rights, and other arrangements of key importance for the formation of spin-offs and the commercialisation of innovative ideas.

Abdulaziz Jaafar, Chairman of ETCO; Humood al Shukeiry, ETCO Programmes Director; Dr Christopher Moody and Dr Costas Chrysou ETCO strategic advisors; and GUtech members were also present at the signing ceremony.

Online lecture highlights Rub al Khali findings



MUSCAT: Supported by BP Oman, the National Museum of Oman in collaboration with the Geological Society of Oman organised a lecture entitled "Geology and Archaeology of the southern Rub al Khali: new findings."

Dr Mohammed al Kindi, Earth Sciences Consultancy Centre, and Maria Pia Maiorano, University of Naples, presented the lecture via videoconferencing on Tuesday.

The lecture reviewed several excavation operations carried out by a number of geologists and archaeologists in the south-east part

of Rub al Khali during 2019-2020, which unearthed a huge number of findings deduced for archaeology and climate issues.

The two lecturers highlighted that stone tools uncovered by the survey indicated that there was settlement in the Paleolithic and Neolithic periods. These tools included stone animal cleats, rock pestles, arrowheads, stone axes and fossilised animal bones that were hunted by humans in those ancient times.

The survey also revealed some sites that dated back to old, medieval

and late stone epochs. These findings will provide valuable information on the Holocene Medieval age settlement in the region.

The survey was carried out by a team of geologists and archaeologists, in coordination with the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism in the Wilayat of Al Mazyna in the Governorate of Dhofar during January of 2019 and 2020. The team was headed by Dr Mohammed al Kindi, Head of the Earth Sciences Consultancy Centre. The mission included a group of prominent geologists and archeologists. — ONA

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Let us rise with morning, pick pomegranates



AMAL AL RIYAMI
NIZWA, SEP 2

Abdullah al Saqri and other farmers rise with the morning and go to the orchards with wicker baskets to pick pomegranates, which are in bloom.

Abdullah takes careful steps through corridors lined with trees laden with the ripe red fruits to harvest the crop like his ancestors. His farm is in the Saiq village in Al Jabal Al Akhdhar, which is irrigated by aflaj.

The pomegranate harvest season in Jabal Akhdhar starts from the last week of August, and continues until the end of September.

Pomegranate trees are abundant in the villages and houses of Jabal Akhdhar. There are 27,000 trees, which yield up to 645 tonnes of fruits. The crop is characterised by high quality, large size, thin chaff, multiplicity of varieties and flavours.

Abdullah al Falahi, another farmer, spoke about his father's close association with the farm, which is like his family and worries about it and visits periodically, as if his soul is planted there.

The people of Al Jabal Al Akhdhar are known for their close association with their farms. For a long time, it was their only source of income. With changing times, youths now work in the cities. But their hearts remained attached to the farm. They become farmers when they return home.

From the outside they don't look like much, a bit like passion fruit if you think about it. But open them up and you'll find beautiful ruby coloured seeds that truly are jewels in nature's crown

The preparation for the harvest pomegranate begins in February by trimming dead branches and removing weeds.

The pomegranate trees need watering once every ten days in the summer period. In the winter it does not need much water as temperature dips sometimes below zero in Al Jabal Al Akhdhar. Therefore, it is irrigated once a month.

The harvest is not just for sale. The cheer is shared among relatives, neighbours and acquaintances. The surplus of it goes to the markets.

Al Jabal Al Akhdhar, which rises about three thousand metres above sea level, has a climate similar to that of the Mediterranean region. Pomegranates, peaches, almonds, apricots, and other produce are lapped by tourists and visitors.

The fruits of Jabal Akhdhar are also marketed in the neighbouring markets in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate such as Nizwa and Bahla. Jabal Akhdhar pomegranates are flying off the shelves of these markets despite its high prices.

Pomegranate prices vary from RO 2 to RO 8 eight riyals for ten pieces depending on the size of the pomegranate. Farmers consider this price fair in view of the great effort, care and constant follow-up from pruning the tree in January until harvest. The crop is 100 per cent organic and natural.



AMBASSADOR TO THAILAND PRESENTS CREDENTIALS



Issa bin Abdullah al Alawi presented a copy of his credentials as the Sultanate's Ambassador to Thailand before the Director-General of Protocols of Foreign Ministry in Bangkok on Wednesday. The meeting discussed bilateral relations between the two friendly countries on various fields. — ONA

IN BRIEF

A horse falls into 37-metre deep well

MUSCAT: A horse fell into a well in one of the farms in North Al Sharqiyah Governorate.

A statement issued online by the Public Authority for Civil Defence and Ambulance (PACDA) said, "The rescue team at the Civil Defence and Ambulance Department in North Al Sharqiyah Governorate tried to rescue a horse that had fallen into a 37 metre-deep well in a farm in Al Mudhaibi. The horse did not survive the fall and was found dead when taken out of the well."

Two arrested for stealing money

MUSCAT: Two people were arrested on charges of stealing money from a vehicle in the Wilayat of Sur in South Al Sharqiyah. In a statement issued on Wednesday, the Royal Oman Police (ROP) said the suspects stole RO 400 from the vehicle that was parked in a commercial area in Sur.

"ROP advises citizens and residents in the Sultanate to exercise caution while parking the car and not to leave valuable items inside the vehicle unattended," ROP said in a statement.

Environment Office finds new bat

MUSCAT: The Environment Office at Diwan of Royal Court, is conducting a study on various types of species of small animals such as bats and rodents found across the Sultanate.

Attention accorded to bats stems from the scarcity of data available about them in the West Asia region, particularly the Sultanate.

The Environment Office points to the existence of 143 species of virus-incubating mammals including bats that might transmit diseases.

The Environment Office said that after its study over the past three years, a new species of bats was found in Dhofar, with the total now standing at 26 species.

Zahrán bin Ahmed al Abdussalam, Assistant Director of Environment Affairs and supervisor of the bats' research team, underscored the significance of research and cooperation with international organisations to better understand the nature of such species, protect them in their natural habitats, determine the types of pathogens transmissible to human beings from them and study their environmental benefits.

Al Abdussalam added that bats are among the mammals that were not accorded sufficient attention in research in the Sultanate. As many as 1,400 species of bats are registered around the world, among them 26 in the Sultanate.

Al Abdussalam pointed out that the Environment Office is manned by a number of specialised Omanis who are well-versed and capable of conducting scholarly studies about Omani ecosystems and organisms. The studies include the survey on bats which the Environment Office



is undertaking in cooperation with the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, universities and other



institutions.

The latest environmental study on bats in various sites in the Sultanate, including Dhofar, began in

September 2017 after the formation of team of specialists and researchers in cooperation with the UK based Harrison Institute. — ONA

Google, Apple to directly put contact tracing on smart phones

NEW YORK: Apple and Google plan to directly integrate contact-tracing software into smart phones as they aim to broaden a jointly developed initiative to combat the coronavirus.

The technology, first launched in April on Apple's iOS software and Google's Android system, is meant to alert people through their smart phones when they come into contact with a person infected by the coronavirus.

However, adoption has been slow in the United States, with only a handful of states building smart phone apps that work with the system.

Under the change, public health authorities will be able to use the company's programme without

The technology is meant to alert people through their smart phones when they come into contact with a person infected by the coronavirus

building their own apps, and people who sign up for the service will not need to download a separate stand-alone app to use the system.

"As the next step in our work

with public health authorities on Exposure Notifications, we are making it easier and faster for them to use the Exposure Notifications System without the need for them to build and maintain an app," Apple and Google said.

Apple and Google have emphasised that the programme protects user privacy and requires participants to opt-in in jurisdictions where the system is employed.

"Exposure Notifications Express provides another option for public health authorities to supplement their existing contact tracing operations with technology without compromising on the project's core tenets of user privacy and security," Apple and Google said. — AFP

OVER 350 MIGRANTS IN QUARANTINE



Migrants on the Sea-Watch 4 civil sea rescue ship are seen off the coast of Palermo, Sicily, Italy, on Wednesday, as they approach a ferry where they will be under quarantine. More than 350 migrants including those rescued by a vessel sponsored by British street artist Banksy were being transferred onto a quarantine vessel off Sicily. "The first people have boarded the quarantine vessel and the operation is ongoing," Mattea Weihe, spokeswoman for the Sea-Watch humanitarian organisation, said. — AFP

High-tech tools to fight COVID-19 pose their own risks

SANTA CRUZ: A range of technologies designed to combat the spread of COVID-19 is being deployed across Europe, from tracking apps to infrared cameras, posing a threat to individual digital rights and privacy, a report warned on Tuesday.

Using such tools, despite the urgency surrounding the pandemic, calls for proper oversight and should not be rushed, said the report by Germany's AlgorithmWatch, a digital rights group, and Bertelsmann Foundation. The research traced technology in use across 16 European countries, including telephone apps to track viral contacts, facial recognition systems that scan social distancing in crowds and infrared cameras that measure body temperature.

"Securing public health can and must be compatible with democratic checks and balances," said Fabio Chiusi, project manager with AlgorithmWatch, in a statement. "May be used to justify the uncritical

adoption of tools and policies that risk undermining human rights," he said. Many tools being touted as weapons in the battle against the virus have not been rigorously tested, especially for use in a pandemic, the report said. Error rates in facial recognition systems spike by 50 per cent when they involve people wearing facial masks, according to a recent study by the US National Institute of Standards and Technology.

Thermal imaging technology designed to detect fevers also is prone to error, yet such scanners are rapidly being put to use in European supermarkets, stadiums and museums, said the report by AlgorithmWatch and Bertelsmann. In France, infrared cameras are being used in public schools and city halls to measure the temperatures of passersby, while the Italian city of Como has installed dozens of facial recognition cameras to monitor crowds for social distancing



A woman is being scanned for body temperature as she arrives in The Vatican on Wednesday. — AFP

violations, it said.

And sports spectators in Spain are being scanned by a system that detects anyone with a body temperature above 37° C (98.6 F), it said. Some European governments are not heeding recommendations by the World Health Organization that COVID-tracking technology be voluntary, it also said. In Poland, for example, citizens are forced to download a government app that uses geolocation and facial recognition to enforce quarantine orders.

The report also cautioned against proposed "immunity passport" systems, in which people would be able to obtain a certificate or demonstrate to an app that they are virus-free. Such systems, being tested in Britain and in Estonia, could lead to discrimination and exclusion, especially if authorities or employers could have access to the content of the passports, it said.

— Thomson Reuters Foundation



Macron backs Iraq ‘sovereignty’ on Baghdad visit

BAGHDAD: French President Emmanuel Macron met Iraqi leaders on Wednesday on his first visit to Baghdad where he stressed the war-scarred country must assert its “sovereignty” despite being caught up in US-Iran tensions.

Coming straight from a two-day trip to crisis-hit Lebanon, Macron is the most prominent world leader to visit Iraq since Prime Minister Mustafa al Kadhemi came to power in May.

The trip aims to “launch an initiative alongside the United Nations to support a process of sovereignty,” Macron said on the eve of his Iraq visit.

In Baghdad, he voiced his support for his Iraqi counterpart Barham Saleh to help fight IS group sleeper cells and resist foreign interference.

“Iraq has been going through a challenging time for several years, with war and terrorism” as well as “multiple foreign interventions,” Macron said.

“You have a transition to lead. France will be by your side so the international community can help.”

But there were few details on the much-vaunted “sovereignty” initiative. Iraqi officials said they



Iraqi President Barham Saleh (R) and his French counterpart Emmanuel Macron greet each other with an elbow bump as they hold a joint press conference at Baghdad's Al Salam Palace on Wednesday. — AFP

were not expecting new financial or military aid.

President Saleh said he looked forward to a longer visit by Macron in 2021, and Kadhemi said he hoped France and Europe as a whole could

help “restore stability” to the rocky region. “We do not want to be an arena for confrontations but a zone of stability and moderation”, the premier said, adding that France and Iraq would sign energy

agreements in the future and deepen military cooperation.

‘ESSENTIAL SOVEREIGNTY’
Iraq was ravaged by waves of sectarian conflict after former

Coming straight from a two-day trip to crisis-hit Lebanon, Macron is the most prominent world leader to visit Iraq since Prime Minister Mustafa al Kadhemi came to power in May

dictator Saddam Hussein was toppled in a 2003 US-led invasion, in which France did not take part.

The turmoil culminated in the IS group capturing swathes of Iraq and Syria six years ago before the militants were beaten back with international support, including a US-led coalition which did include French forces.

France has stressed its signs of support for Iraq in recent tumultuous months.

Top diplomat Jean-Yves Le Drian, who was the only minister to accompany Macron from Lebanon to Iraq, had also visited Baghdad in

July and urged the leadership there to “dissociate itself from regional tensions”. Macron last week insisted that “the fight for Iraq’s sovereignty is essential”.

He said Iraqis, who had “suffered so much”, deserved options besides domination by regional powers or extremists. Unlike most foreign visitors, the French president will not stop over in Arbil, capital of Iraq’s autonomous Kurdish region, but will instead meet Kurdish president Nechirvan Barzani in Baghdad.

FRENCH MEDIATOR ROLE

Earlier this year, in the aftermath of the IS group’s territorial defeat and as the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the last contingent of French troops deployed in Iraq as part of the coalition pulled out.

France is seeking to expand its economic ties with Iraq, despite the war-battered country’s problems — including being ranked among the 20 most corrupt countries in the world by watchdog group Transparency International. Macron was also likely to discuss the fate of 11 French nationals who were condemned to death last year by Iraqi courts for joining IS. — AFP

Lebanon PM designate pledges to form ‘expert govt’ in record time

BEIRUT: Lebanon’s prime minister designate Mustapha Adib pledged to form a ‘government of experts’ to drive desperately needed reforms in the disaster-hit and economically ailing country.

His announcement came after a high-profile visit by Emmanuel Macron during which the French president said political leaders had agreed on a reform road map involving a government being put together within two weeks, following last month’s devastating blast in the port of Beirut.

“As I leave Beirut, I want to say again and with conviction: I will not abandon you,” Macron said in a statement as he flew out on Wednesday.

The last government resigned in the face of public anger over the August 4 explosion that killed at least 190, wounded thousands and laid waste to entire districts of the capital.

“We hope that we will quickly succeed in forming a government made up of a coherent team that is focused on dealing with the many dossiers before us,” Adib said in a televised statement after concluding initial consultations.

“We will proceed from the principle that the government should be a government of experts.”

Government formation is usually a drawn-out process in multi-confessional Lebanon where a complex political system seeks to share power between different religious groups.

But the country’s deadliest peacetime disaster has created intense pressure for swift reforms to lift it out of its worst economic crisis in decades.

Adib started meeting parliamentary bloc leaders on Wednesday, as Pope Francis warned Lebanon faced “extreme danger that threatens the very existence of the country”.

“Lebanon cannot be abandoned to its solitude,” the pope said.

Lebanese lawmakers rushed to approve the nomination of the little-known 48-year-old diplomat on Monday just hours before the French president landed. Under Lebanon’s



A demonstrator holding a Lebanese flag with black stripes stands atop the Martyrs’ Statue at the Martyr’s Square in the centre of Beirut during an anti-government demonstration on Wednesday. — AFP

power-sharing system, the country’s main religious communities usually agree on a new government lineup before its announcement.

President Michel Aoun on Wednesday said that Macron’s “drive” to help Lebanon “must be matched by an honest Lebanese determination to help ourselves and to form a capable and transparent government as soon as possible.”

The forthcoming government, the president said, should take “immediate steps towards reform.”

Gebran Bassil, the president’s son-in-law and head of the Free Patriotic Movement said that ministerial portfolios in the new cabinet should not be reserved for specific parties as had been the case in the past.

Lebanon’s worst economic crisis

since the 1975-1990 civil war has seen poverty rates double to more than half the population, sent prices soaring and trapped people’s savings in the banks.

Visiting to mark the centenary of the former French protectorate, Macron strove to push for political change without being perceived as meddling in the country’s affairs.

But Lebanese newspaper *Al-Akhbar* complained the French president had behaved like the “supreme leader of the Lebanese republic” on his visit.

Macron promised to host two conferences in Paris in the second half of October — one to help drum up aid and the other to discuss progress on political reforms. He said he would be back in Lebanon in December. — AFP

HRW says Syria medics dying for want of virus protection

BEIRUT: Human Rights Watch said on Wednesday that front-line staff battling the novel coronavirus in government-held areas of Syria are dying in growing numbers for want of personal protective equipment.

It reported multiple deaths of doctors from COVID-19-related symptoms, many of which did not appear in government figures because no test was carried out.

“It is bewildering that as the obituaries for doctors and nurses responding to the COVID-19 pandemic pile up, official numbers tell a story at odds with the reality on the ground,” said HRW researcher Sara Kayyali.

Syria has recorded 2,830 cases, including 116 deaths, in government-held areas, but the health ministry has acknowledged it lacks the “capacity... to carry out widespread testing in the provinces”.

HRW said evidence suggested the official figures significantly understate the scale of the outbreak.

It said it had confirmed the deaths of 33 doctors from COVID-19-related symptoms

from a list published in August, while official figures at the time recorded 64 confirmed deaths among the whole population.

“Doctors and nurses operating in government-held areas said that there are severe shortages of supplies, particularly in rural areas,” the New York-based watchdog said.

Personal protective equipment provided by the World Health Organization did not appear to be reaching medical staff in sufficient quantities.

Health workers told HRW that hospitals equipped to treat COVID-19 patients were now all full and smaller centres lacked the ventilators and oxygen to do so.

WHO and “other organisations with a health mandate should publicly insist on expanding testing capacities... and equitable distribution of sufficient personal protective equipment to health workers throughout the country,” HRW said.

Several sources said last month that deaths among medical personnel in government-held areas had shot up in previous weeks. — AFP

Saudi Arabia opens airspace for UAE-Israel flights

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia agreed on Wednesday to permit UAE flights to “all countries” to overfly the kingdom, as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu signalled more direct flights linking the United Arab Emirates with the Jewish state.

The announcement comes after the first direct commercial flight from Tel Aviv to Abu Dhabi on Monday, which passed through Saudi airspace, to mark the normalisation of Israel-UAE ties. Riyadh’s decision marks another concrete sign of Saudi Arabia’s cooperation with Israel even after it refused publicly to follow the UAE in establishing diplomatic relations with the Jewish state.

The official Saudi Press Agency said the kingdom had accepted an Emirati request to allow the use of its airspace for “flights heading to the UAE and departing from it to all countries”.

Netanyahu, meanwhile, announced that Monday’s historic first commercial flight of an Israeli aircraft direct to the UAE across Saudi Arabia would not be the last.

“Now there is another tremendous breakthrough,” he wrote in a statement shortly after the Saudi announcement.

“Israeli planes and those from all countries will be able to fly directly from Israel to Abu Dhabi and Dubai, and back,” Netanyahu said, without giving any timeline. — AFP

Tunisia’s new premier, cabinet approved to battle economic woes

TUNIS: Tunisia’s parliament has approved a new technocratic government tasked with tackling deep social and economic woes in the North African country, ending weeks of uncertainty in the young democracy.

Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi was confirmed by 134-67 votes in an overnight session to lead Tunisia’s second cabinet in six months, made up of judges, academics, civil servants and private-sector executives.

The 46-year-old has pledged to revitalise the tourism-reliant economy hit by the coronavirus pandemic and to stop the “haemorrhage” of public finances by restarting oil and phosphate production after recent labour unrest.

“I am proud of this support,” Mechichi, the former interior minister,



Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi takes the oath of office during the new government swearing-in ceremony at Carthage Palace on the eastern outskirts of Tunis on Wednesday, following a confidence vote by parliament. — AFP

said early on Wednesday after the vote, vowing his government would “move forward on economic issues”, provided it is not bogged down by political infighting.

Tunisia’s parliament, elected last October, is deeply divided and many lawmakers were angry that Mechichi, the candidate picked in July by President Kais Saied, had bypassed the major political factions in building his cabinet.

The Ennahdha party, the biggest bloc in parliament, had however said hours before the vote it would back Mechichi “despite reservations”, averting a breakdown that would have forced unpopular new elections.

Tunisia has been praised as a rare success story among the 2011 Arab Spring popular uprisings that swept the region and brought down many autocrats, among them Tunisia’s long-time president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. — AFP

Afghan negotiators head to Doha as Taliban prisoner swap nears completion

KABUL: Afghan government-backed negotiators are set to head to Doha for peace talks with the Taliban, a top official said on Wednesday, as President Ashraf Ghani insisted Kabul had met all its commitments for negotiations.

Talks were supposed to begin in March but were repeatedly pushed back as the Taliban and the Afghan government squabbled over a prisoner exchange, which included hundreds of battle-hardened insurgents.

Kabul broke an impasse with the insurgent group on Monday by resuming the protracted prisoner exchange, offering a fresh impetus for peace talks to begin.

"The government has fulfilled all its commitments in the peace process that the international community had hoped for," Ghani told the negotiating team at a meeting at the presidential palace on Wednesday, his office said.

"The release of Taliban prisoners is a clear demonstration of the government's commitment to peace."

Kabul had baulked at the release of the final 400 Taliban inmates who Ghani described as "a danger to the world", before a group of



A man uses his phone as he rests at the Wazir Akbar Khan hilltop overlooking Kabul on Wednesday. — AFP

prominent Afghans approved their release for the sake of peace talks.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, a senior government official told AFP on Wednesday

that at least 200 prisoners have been released since Monday and the process "will continue today too". A Taliban official said "the last batch" of their prisoners were still

to be released and were expected to be freed later on Wednesday.

With the prisoner release almost complete, peace talks are expected to finally begin in Qatar.

The Afghan government-backed negotiating team "will leave for Doha tomorrow (Thursday)," said Fraidoon Khwazoon, spokesman to Afghanistan's High Council for National Reconciliation, which is leading the overall peace process.

'CRITICAL STAGE OF PEACE'

The date for talks to start is still to be fixed. Paris and Canberra had opposed the release of militants on the list tied to the killing of French and Australian civilians and troops in Afghanistan.

It is not known if those militants have been released.

In return for the 400 prisoners, the militant group has freed four Afghan commandos and are expected to release two more on Wednesday, a Taliban official said.

"We expect the Taliban to live up to their commitments on the release of the remaining captives," Ghani's spokesman Sediq Sediqqi said on Twitter.

The prisoner exchange was agreed in a deal between the Taliban and the United States in February, which said Kabul should release a total of 5,000 militants in return for the Taliban freeing 1,000 Afghan troops. — AFP

IN BRIEF

FB officials quizzed on hate speech policies

NEW DELHI: Executives of social media giant Facebook were questioned on Wednesday by an Indian parliamentary panel after allegations of bias in how the company's in-house policies for regulating hate speech are applied on the platform. The panel called Facebook India's representatives after a report in the *Wall Street Journal* newspaper alleged the company overlooked hate speech posts by leaders and right-wing Hindu groups affiliated with the country's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The *Wall Street Journal* report accused Facebook of not applying its hate speech rules to anti-Muslim rhetoric, and provided examples of when posts were not removed even after being flagged. Facebook has denied any bias, and said it is a non-partisan platform.

— dpa

Flash floods kill 16 in N-W Pakistan

ISLAMABAD: Flash floods and landslides triggered by heavy rains in the mountainous north-west of Pakistan have killed 16 people, said officials on Wednesday, as a deadly deluge in the populous southern city of Karachi continued for a second week. Most people were swept away by the gushing waters of rivers and mountain streams in the province of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, which shares a border with Afghanistan, local rescue official Bilal Faizi said.

The tourist town of Swat and nearby district of Nowshera, which hosts a large number of Afghan refugees in makeshift camps, were the worst-hit regions, Faizi added. — dpa

COVID-19 surge continues in India

NEW DELHI: India's COVID-19 caseload continued to surge on Wednesday, with the Health Ministry reporting 78,357 new infections mostly outside of Mumbai, Chennai and Delhi - the main coronavirus hubs in the South Asian country. Health experts in India have expressed concern that the return of migrant workers from urban centres to their homes in rural areas would lead to outbreaks in locations where health infrastructure is poor. In Maharashtra, which has reported the highest number of cases by state, there was a more than 500-per-cent spike in infections in August in five largely rural districts, data from the state government showed. — dpa

Thai royal consort reclaims king's favour

BANGKOK: A Thai royal consort who was purged for "disloyalty" after running afoul of the Queen has made a sudden and unexpected comeback, with the king reinstating her titles. Sineenat Wongvajirapakdi was stripped of her rank and titles last year just three months after she became the consort, accused on national television of "disloyalty" and "ambition" to match the position of Queen Suthida.

She has not been seen in public since October, but that looks set to change.

"Sineenat Wongvajirapakdi is not tarnished," said a decision by the king published by palace mouthpiece Royal Gazette, confirming she would once again take the honorific title of "Chao Khun Phra", or noble consort. — AFP

One found as Japan coast guard hunts for missing cargo ship

TOKYO: Japan's coast guard said on Wednesday one person was found during a search for a cargo ship with 43 people on board after receiving a distress call from the East China Sea during a typhoon.

An alarm signal was received in the early hours from a vessel around 185 kilometres west of Japan's Amami Oshima island, the coast guard said.

It said it believed the call for help had been sent by a ship called Gulf Livestock 1, on its way to the Chinese port of Tangshan from Napier in New Zealand.

"We were informed by the defence ministry that a person wearing a life jacket was found" in the sea where the ship went missing, a coast guard official said. The person, whose identity and condition is unclear, was found by a patrol plane sent by the defence ministry.

A rubber boat was also

spotted from the plane, but the coast guard official said they have not confirmed if it belonged to the ship.

Four coast guard vessels and several planes were involved in the search-and-rescue operation.

One of the vessels arrived in the area more than 10 hours from the distress call and three were still heading there in stormy conditions.

The coast guard said it had not detected any additional signals.

The distress call came as strong winds and heavy rain lashed the area overnight with the passage of Typhoon Maysak.

The crew reportedly includes 39 Filipinos, two New Zealanders, an Australian and a Singaporean.

Local media also said the ship was carrying 5,800 cows.

— AFP

Japan's Suga announces PM run with strong party backing

TOKYO: Japan's chief cabinet secretary Yoshihide Suga formally announced his bid to become the country's next prime minister on Wednesday, with growing party support making him the race's clear favourite.

Suga unveiled his candidacy following days of speculation about his plans and shortly after the ruling Liberal Democratic Party set a September 14 vote on Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's successor.

A parliamentary vote will follow two days later, with lawmakers expected to endorse the new LDP leader as prime minister.

Suga pledged to "do my utmost to continue the work of party leader Abe, who poured his spirit and strength into the job".

Abe announced last week he would step down for health reasons, and Suga warned that "in this national crisis, there must not be a political vacuum."

"There is not a moment to waste."

The 71-year-old has long been mooted as a potential successor to Abe — having served



for years as his close advisor, government spokesman and policy coordinator.

Now that many of the LDP's most powerful factions have coalesced around him, experts said Suga appears to have an almost insurmountable lead in the race.

He won't run unchallenged, with former defence minister Shigeru Ishiba and LDP policy chief Fumio Kishida already announcing they will stand.

And whoever inherits the top

job will face a raft of challenges, from the coronavirus pandemic and a tanking economy, to ensuring the postponed Tokyo Olympic Games can go ahead.

SCALED-BACK VOTE

The LDP has opted for a scaled-back leadership vote that will not include rank-and-file members, instead polling only MPs and three representatives from each of the country's 47 prefectures.

The decision has elicited some criticism, but party officials said it would take too long to organise a broader vote.

Experts said the format favours Suga, who lined up support even before he made his candidacy official.

His selection "is increasingly assured, as the LDP's factions — with the exception of the factions headed by rival candidates Shigeru Ishiba and Fumio Kishida — have lined up behind Suga," said Tobias Harris, a Japan expert at Teneo consultancy, in a note.

Suga has effectively been the face of the government for years as its chief spokesman. — AFP

Two Koreas on high alert as typhoon approaches peninsula

BUSAN, South Korea: Flights were grounded in South Korea and storm warnings issued on both sides of the Korean peninsula as a typhoon forecast to be one of the most powerful in years made its approach on Wednesday.

More than 300 domestic departures were cancelled as Typhoon Maysak churned across waters south of the resort island of Jeju, packing gusts of up to 162 kilometres per hour.

South Korean Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun said the storm was forecast to be similar in strength to 2003's Typhoon Maemi, which left 131 people dead and more than 4

trillion won (\$3 billion) in damage.

"We are especially concerned," he added. Maysak -- named after a Cambodian tree -- was predicted to make landfall early Thursday west of Busan on the southern coast, then make its way up the eastern side of the peninsula before heading northwards into the Sea of Japan, known as the East Sea in Korea.

"The winds could become more powerful" into Thursday, South Korea's Meteorological Administration said, forecasting heavy downpours of more than 400 millimetres.

The Busan municipality deployed tens of thousands of sandbags around



A woman stands with an umbrellla before Gwangalli beach in Busan on Wednesday. — AFP

the port city to fend off floodwaters.

Maysak was forecast to make landfall again later on Thursday near North Korea's industrial city of Chongjin.

Natural disasters tend to have a greater impact in the North due to its creaking infrastructure, and the country is vulnerable to flooding as many mountains and hills have long been deforested.

Pyeongyang's state media said authorities had taken "urgent measures" to minimise the damage.

"Heavy rain and strong winds are expected to hit various areas of the DPRK," said the official KCNA news agency. — AFP

Maldives tightens tourist virus rules

MALE: The Maldives has tightened entry requirements for tourists after a spike in coronavirus infections at more than a dozen resorts, the foreign ministry said on Wednesday.

The Indian Ocean archipelago reopened its luxury resort islets in mid-July after a months-long lockdown, and did not require visitors to be tested or carry virus-free certificates when entering the country.

Since then, 29 local staff and 16 foreigners have tested positive at the resorts, officials said, where they were also being isolated. — AFP



Duch, Khmer Rouge torturer, dies aged 77

PHNOM PENH: The chief torturer behind Cambodia's genocidal Khmer Rouge died on Wednesday while serving a life sentence for crimes against humanity, leaving just one surviving leader of the regime that killed an estimated two million people in the 1970s.

Kaing Guek Eav, 77, better known by his alias Duch, served as the head of the infamous Tuol Sleng prison in the late 1970s and was convicted of crimes against humanity in 2012 by a UN-backed tribunal for his role in the "Killing Fields" regime. His death leaves Khieu Samphan, the head of state and de facto public face of the regime, as the sole surviving Khmer Rouge member convicted by the tribunal.

"The souls of the victims and my parents have received justice," Norng Chan Phal, who survived internment at Tuol Sleng as a child, said outside what is now a memorial centre.

Duch had been in and out of hospital for years and was admitted again this week, tribunal spokesman Neth Pheaktra said. According to a doctor's letter confirming his death shown to AFP, Duch had symptoms of "acute respiratory distress". — **AFP**

Navalny poisoned: Germany

BERLIN: Germany said on Wednesday that Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny was poisoned with a Novichok nerve agent, the same type of chemical used in Britain against ex-double agent Sergei Skripal, dramatically ramping up tensions with Moscow.

Tests carried out by the German army on Navalny, who is being treated in a Berlin hospital, have provided "unequivocal evidence of a chemical nerve agent from the Novichok family," German government spokesman Steffen Seibert said in a statement.

"It is a shocking event that Alexei Navalny has become the victim of an attack with a chemical nerve agent in Russia.

"The government condemns this attack in the strongest terms. The Russian government is urgently requested to provide clarifications over the incident," he added.

Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said Germany had called in Russia's ambassador to demand answers on the case.

Navalny, 44, fell ill after boarding a plane in Siberia last month. He was initially treated in a local hospital before being flown to Berlin for treatment.

The nerve agent Novichok is a military-grade poison that was developed by the Soviet government towards the end of the Cold War and can be deployed in an ultra-fine powder, liquid or vapour.

Alexei Navalny

Top opponent of the Kremlin



AFP Photo/Maxim Zmeyev

Born June 4, 1976, Moscow region

Organised major demonstrations against Russian President Vladimir Putin, sentenced to numerous short prison terms

2011-2012
Emerges as opposition leader, critics call him a nationalist

2017
Jailed 3 times for organising protests against Putin



The Charite hospital last week reported "some improvement" in Navalny's condition but he nevertheless remains in a medically induced coma and on a ventilator.

The severity of the poisoning meant that it was too early to determine potential long-term effects, the hospital warned.

Charite doctors said they believed

July 2019
• Sentenced to 30 days in prison for calling for protest at Moscow city hall

• Rushed to hospital suffering acute allergic reaction and said he may have been poisoned

October 2019
His organisation, Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK), is declared as a "foreign agent"

July 2020
Calls the vote to extend Putin's rule a "huge lie" offices raided

August 20
Hospitalised in suspected poisoning

August 22
In a stable condition in hospital after being flown to Berlin

August 25
Kremlin spokesperson dismisses poison claim

Sept 2
Tests show Navalny was poisoned by a Novichok chemical nerve agent, says German government

the anti-corruption campaigner was poisoned with a substance that inhibits the cholinesterase enzyme, a feature of nerve agents.

The case has drawn parallels with two suspected Kremlin-linked poisonings in Britain.

In 2006, President Vladimir Putin was blamed for the radiation poisoning death of former KGB

Tests carried out by the German army on Navalny, who is being treated in a Berlin hospital, have provided "unequivocal evidence of a chemical nerve agent from the Novichok family," German government spokesman Steffen Seibert said in a statement

agent Alexander Litvinenko in the British capital. In 2018, the Kremlin was also accused of being behind the attempted murder of ex-double agent Sergei Skripal in Salisbury, southwest England, using a Novichok nerve agent.

"Only the state (FSB, GRU) can use Novichok. This is beyond any reasonable doubt," Ivan Zhdanov, the director of Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation, said on Twitter on Wednesday, referring to the FSB internal security and GRU military intelligence services. — **AFP**

Fresh virus restrictions across UK as cases rise

GLASGOW: Coronavirus restrictions were tightened in the Scottish city of Glasgow and extended in parts of northern England on Wednesday following a surge in infection rates.

The new measures come amid a steady uptick in cases across Britain, which has suffered Europe's deadliest outbreak of Covid-19, with more than 41,500 confirmed deaths.

Regional restrictions imposed on the towns of Bolton and Trafford in England's Greater Manchester area were due to be lifted on Wednesday but at the last minute they were prolonged.

Local politicians had called for a continued ban on social gatherings in homes and private gardens, with Manchester mayor Andy Burnham advising the public to ignore any relaxing of the rules.

But in a statement released just as the restrictions were due to be lifted, Health Secretary Matt Hancock said they would stay.

"We continually monitor outbreaks across the country and have seen infection rates increase more than three times in Bolton in under a week, and double in Trafford since the last review," he said.

"We have always been clear we will take swift and decisive action where needed to contain outbreaks."

Restrictions were however lifted as planned in other areas of north and northwest England Wednesday, including Burnley, Hyndburn, Stockport and parts of Calderdale, Kirklees and Bradford.

Elsewhere, the devolved government in Scotland reimposed restrictions on Glasgow and two surrounding areas, warning against visiting other people's houses.

The measures, which will last two weeks, came after 66 new cases were recorded in the area on Tuesday.

Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon — herself a Glasgow resident — acknowledged "how difficult this would be" but said it was "essential to, I hope, nip this in bud and avoid tougher restrictions".

On the city's streets, many people accepted the new measures were necessary — but questioned how they would be enforced. — **AFP**

Anti-government protesters and police clash in Bulgaria

SOFIA: Bulgarian police and protesters clashed on Wednesday as parliament met to begin discussion on a new constitution aimed at appeasing weeks of anti-government rallies.

Demonstrators have been blocking roads and staging daily rallies in the capital Sofia and other cities for almost two months.

They are pressing for the resignation of Prime Minister Boyko Borisov and chief prosecutor Ivan Geshev over their perceived links with behind-the-scenes oligarchs.

Borisov has already sacked several key ministers and recently proposed adopting a new constitution, but the protesters have dismissed these moves.



Protesters shout slogans during an anti-government demo in Sofia, on Wednesday. — **AFP**

Thousands of demonstrators took to the streets of central Sofia on Wednesday, shouting "Resign" and "Mafia", and throwing rocks, eggs and tomatoes.

Police used pepper spray and tear gas and said they arrested eight protesters, while 20 officers were injured in clashes outside parliament.

Sixteen people, including protesters, were admitted to hospital, according to emergency services.

The clashes came as parliament began its autumn session, which is expected to discuss the government's proposal for a new constitution

In a statement inside parliament, President Rumen Radev, who has voiced support for the protesters' demands, called on lawmakers to

"emerge from the crisis with dignity" by paving the way for early elections.

"Confidence is definitely lost," he said. Borisov, in power almost without interruption for more than a decade, has so far refused to resign before his third term expires in March next year.

Analysts have dismissed the conservative premier's proposal for a new constitution as an attempt to win time and cling to office.

Activists too have slammed it for failing to improve the accountability of the chief prosecutor — an issue long highlighted by Bulgarian and international observers as well as the European Court of Human Rights — while trying to limit the rights of the president. — **AFP**

Trump in Kenosha calls anti-racism protests 'domestic terror'

KENOSHA: President Donald Trump on Tuesday took his tough law-and-order message to Kenosha, the latest US city roiled by the police shooting of a black man, as he branded recent anti-racism protests acts of "domestic terror" by violent mobs.

Trump has been hoping for months to shift the election battle against Democrat Joe Biden from a referendum on his widely panned coronavirus pandemic response, to what he sees as far more comfortable territory of law and order.

And in the Wisconsin city of Kenosha, in upheaval since a white police officer shot 29-year-old African American Jacob Blake in front of his three young sons, the Republican found his mark.

"These are not acts of peaceful protest but really domestic terror," Trump said after touring damaged areas of the city, describing multiple nights of angry demonstrations last week that left two people dead.

Crowds lined the barricaded streets where the president's motorcade passed, with Trump supporters on one side and Black Lives Matter protestors on the other, yelling at one another from a distance and in sometimes tense face-to-face encounters.



President Donald Trump tours an area affected by civil unrest in Kenosha, Wisconsin on Tuesday. — **AFP**

"Thank you for saving our town," read the sign of one supporter along the road. "Not my president," read another.

Under heavy security that blocked off the road, Trump visited a burnt-out store where he told the owners "we'll help you rebuild."

"These gentlemen did a fantastic job," he said, in reference to law enforcement units that quelled the violent protests.

"This is a great area, a great state," Trump said, adding later that his administration was committing at least \$47 million to Wisconsin law

enforcement, small businesses and public safety programs.

"We'll get Kenosha back in shape," he said.

Trump had suggested in Washington that a meeting with the Blake family was possible during his high-profile trip, but it did not materialize.

A microcosm of the racial and ideological tensions of the Trump era, Kenosha has seen Black Lives Matter protests, riots, and the arrival of armed, white vigilantes, culminating in an incident in which a 17-year-old militia enthusiast, Kyle Rittenhouse, allegedly shot dead two people and badly injured another.

Democrats and police-reform advocates view Kenosha as a symbol of institutional racism.

They see Rittenhouse, a Trump supporter, as emblematic of right-wing militias that are increasingly brazen about brandishing weaponry in political settings.

Trump, however, came with a different priority: countering what he has repeatedly described as the "anarchy" in Democratic-led cities.

Trump has refused to condemn the growing presence of armed vigilantes on the streets, calling the alleged killings by Rittenhouse "an interesting situation." — **AFP**

Private sector also needs to be part of change



ALI AL MATANI

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Private sector is one of the most important pillars of development in any country, including Oman. However, certain changes in this sector is always needed to meet the requirements of time, particularly when efforts are being made to achieve Oman's Vision 2040.

The development of private sector as an active partner in the progress of the country is necessary for overall advancement. This is necessary for the fulfilment of our future aspirations. It requires complete changes in framework, legislation, work culture and its values and ethics. Certain practices have entered into our work culture which were alien to our society. It is important to fix them. Whatever we do there should be our own principles of doing it.

Today, there are 250,000 companies in the private sector in the country. They are in different fields and economic activities. This is considered another important arm of the state. At the time when the state is on the spree of structuring and re-structuring its working to make it more effective and meet the requirements of changing times, it should also look at the private sector so that the process of improvement and modernisation is complete. If the private sector is left behind in the process, we would feel walking with just one leg at the end.

If the changes are being brought, it should not remain confined to the government or public sector. The private sector is also part of the national service. It should also undergo the process of modernisation,

restructuring and updating. This sector will play a pivotal role in the future. They should shoulder responsibilities as partners with the government in the development of the beloved country.

There is no denying that the state gives high regard to the private sector. However, it would be further encouraging and motivating for this sector if it also gets opportunities to participate in national celebrations and ceremonies.

The private sector can also be given a role in the process of formulation of rules and regulations related to it. It is either impossible or difficult and cumbersome task to implement a law on a sector which was not made a partner in its formulation or its opinion is not taken in this

regard through Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI).

It is also important to empower the OCCI, by not limiting it just to be a representative of the private sector. Certain frameworks and legislations should be developed to help it participate in the areas concerned more effectively and become more productive. For example, it can play major role in attracting domestic and foreign investments.

Here, it is worth mentioning that the businessmen should run their business themselves rather than depending entirely on foreigners. This practice has distorted the image of this sector due to the behaviour of some expatriate workers.

The private sector must also be self-reliant. The people of the country

should also help it in this process. The issue of social security affects all sectors and segments of the country. Therefore, there should be concerted efforts to accommodate the citizens.

We hope that there will be radical and real changes in the basic philosophy of the private sector. If these changes are brought in, they will coincide with the latest developments taking place in the country. The private sector is an integral part of the country, it cannot live without being affected by the changes taking place in the surroundings.

Therefore, a well thought of restructuring and fresh rules and regulations are required to give it the right direction and make it a stronger partner in the process of the development of the country.



Maurice Srour is pictured with his wife at their home in Beirut. — Reuters

Locked out by COVID, refugees' lives on hold

EDWARD MCALLISTER



When Michelle Alfaro left her office at the United Nations in Geneva on March 13, her job finding homes for the world's most vulnerable refugees was under control. Four days later, the new coronavirus had knocked it into chaos. Governments across the world announced border closures, lockdowns and flight cancellations. The United Nations was forced to suspend the programme.

"Everything collapsed that week," said Alfaro, who manages resettlements for the UN refugee agency, UNHCR.

Millions of people have been thrown into limbo by the new coronavirus. Those Alfaro works with had been promised escape from war, violence, conflict or persecution. After submitting to a review process that can take years, and winning a chance to make new lives in countries such as the United States and Canada, thousands suddenly learned — often by phone — their flights would no longer take off.

Ubah Mohamed was one of them. A 23-year-old Somali, she ran away from her husband after he tried to force her to join the terror group Al Shabaab, militants who would later kill her father. She was due to fly to the

United Kingdom on March 24.

"I didn't know where I was going," she said of her five-year ordeal as a refugee. "I was just going. I had no control."

In the first half of 2020, refugee resettlements fell 69 per cent from 2019 levels to just over 10,000, UN data show. The programme resumed in June, but at a much slower pace.

The pandemic has hit as attitudes to immigrants have been hardening, loosening another thread in increasingly frayed international efforts to maintain global solidarity.

Nationalism, fear of infection, economic worries and ageing voters' resistance to change are undermining a long-established post-war consensus that people at risk of persecution, abuse or violence deserve to be sheltered.

The British government this month asked the armed forces to help deal with a rise in the number of boats carrying migrants from France. In Greece, the government has rebuffed thousands of migrants from Turkey this year and stiffened patrols to stop refugees arriving by boat. The European Union has pumped billions of dollars into African states in an attempt to stem the flow of migrants to its southern shores. — Reuters

Lebanon's embattled savers try to rebuild

GHAIDA GHANTOUS, ISSAM ABDULLAH



Like many Lebanese expatriates, Nadim Srour wired savings back as a nest egg for his return. Now those deposits have crumbled in an economic crisis and a Beirut blast has destroyed his home.

"Our lives turned 180 degrees," said the 43-year-old who returned from the Gulf with his wife and two sons in September 2019 — a month before Lebanon's banking system imploded and a year before the port explosion shattered a swathe of Beirut.

"Now we are ruined."

His story is far from unique in a nation that piled up a mountain of public debt to rebuild after its 1975-1990 civil war, attracting savers with high interest rates, but squandered most of the cash amid mismanagement and corruption.

The system that some economists likened to a state Ponzi scheme collapsed last year. Banks drew down the shutters on savers like Srour, who now face strict limits on the amount they can withdraw, while the real value of those deposits has been slashed as Lebanon's pound has crashed.

"We have money and they will not give it to us. We are being driven like sheep," said Srour, who left the United Arab Emirates after a construction downturn there and has now joined Lebanon's growing ranks of jobless.

A minister in January put the unemployment rate at above 35 per cent. Economic hardship has only deepened since then.

Compounding the crisis, a huge quantity of highly explosive material

A charity helped Srour find a Beirut flat for his family, while his elderly parents and brother, who is unable to work due to childhood injuries sustained in the civil war, have moved to the mountains, a place of refuge in Lebanon's troubled times

stacked up in unsafe conditions in a warehouse in Beirut port blew up on August 4, killing more than 190 people and destroying houses — including the apartment of Srour's parents where he had returned to live until he could buy his own place.

A charity helped Srour find a Beirut flat for his family, while his elderly parents and brother, who is unable to work due to childhood injuries sustained in the civil war, have moved to the mountains, a place of refuge in Lebanon's troubled times.

Srour's savings have been frozen for two years under a deal allowing him to convert his Lebanese pounds to dollars. But he can only withdraw at an exchange rate of 3,900 to the dollar, well below the

pound's street value which has touched 8,000. The pound was previously pegged to the US currency at 1,500.

Banks also limit how much savers can withdraw. "Now we stand in line outside the bank and hope we get a turn," Srour said.

The curbs have not been formalised as capital controls and the central bank has said deposits would not be subject to a "haircut", or a reduction in the total depositors will receive.

But such comments offer little reassurance to Srour or his father, Maurice, who rebuilt his savings once before after a 1980s currency crisis. Although he has money in the bank, his family can only take out the equivalent of \$1,000 a month.

"Even if I want to use it to fix my house, the bank won't give it to me," Maurice Srour said.

The central bank has instructed Lebanese banks to offer interest-free, dollar loans to help those making repairs. But borrowing at any rate does little for those without salaries.

"I don't want a loan. I want my money," said Samir Sfeir, a 75-year-old retiree with cuts on his arms from the port blast.

He can only withdraw \$700 a month from the bank and has turned to the generosity of friends to help rebuild his home.

Joe Nader, a 48-year-old bank employee and property owner, has been repairing a furnished apartment building for his 13 tenants. But he struggles to find the dollars suppliers demand.

— Reuters

OMAN ٢٠٢٠ DAILY

Observer

ESTABLISHED ON 15 NOVEMBER 1981

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Abdullah bin Salim al Shueili

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PRINTED AND PUBLISHED BY: Ministry of Information
P.O. Box 974, Postal Code 100, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman

NUGGETS RALLY FROM 3-1 DEFICIT TO BEAT JAZZ IN SEVEN GAMES

LOS ANGELES: Nikola Jokic had 30 points as the Denver Nuggets reached the Eastern Conference semi-finals with a thrilling 80-78 game seven victory over the Utah Jazz on Tuesday.

The 25-year-old Serbian star, who also had 14 rebounds and four assists, had been taking a back seat to Canadian scoring phenom Jamal Murray in the series, but Jokic busted out in the winner-takes-all showdown in Orlando, Florida.

"We didn't quit. We just didn't want to quit. I am glad we won the game," said Jokic.

Murray scored 17 points and Michael Porter finished with 10 points and nine rebounds for the Nuggets, who advanced in a series for the first time in franchise history after being 3-1 down, becoming just the 12th team in league history to achieve such a comeback.

"A lot of teams would have just given in, especially when you consider we've been here 57 days away from our families," Nuggets coach Michael Malone said.

The Nuggets will face the Los Angeles Clippers in the Eastern Conference semi-finals. The first game is Thursday in the NBA's quarantine bubble in Florida.

Tuesday's game finished with a wild sequence that included Utah's Mike Conley throwing up a desperation shot at the buzzer that ringed the basket but failed to drop.

"It looked good, man. Sometimes, it's just the way it works," Jazz star Donovan Mitchell said.

"We fought hard and came back. I'd go to war with any one of these guys in the locker room, any one of these coaches. We could've easy chalked it up in the first half. We have grit and fight. That's all you can really ask for."

Mitchell also had a chance to tie it on Utah's previous possession but he lost the ball on a drive to the basket. Denver immediately went down to the other end but they missed an easy layup on their final possession of the game that would have sealed it. Mitchell led the Jazz with 22 points and nine rebounds.

CELTICS STRETCH LEAD

In the Eastern Conference, Jayson Tatum scored a career playoff high 34 points and Marcus

Smart drained five three-pointers in the fourth quarter as the Boston Celtics rallied to beat Toronto 102-99 in game two of their series.

Kemba Walker finished with 17 points and Jaylen Brown had 16 points and eight rebounds for the Celtics, who grabbed a 2-0 lead in the best-of-seven Eastern Conference semi-final.

Game three is Thursday.

"Marcus Smart has been a winner since he's gotten here," said Celtics coach Brad Stevens of Smart, who finished with 19 points and six threes.

"We've been in the playoffs every year since he's been here and that's not a coincidence."

The teams were tied 28-28 at the end of the first quarter but the defending NBA champion Raptors led 78-70 heading into the fourth.

O.G. Anunoby scored 20 points, Fred VanVleet finished with 19 points and seven assists and Pascal Siakam tallied 17 points for the Raptors, who had chances to pull even but made some uncharacteristic mistakes down the stretch.

Kyle Lowry made a pair of free throws with 61 seconds remaining to cut the Celtics lead to just one, 100-99, but that was as close as Toronto would get. Losing has been an unfamiliar feeling for the Raptors in the NBA bubble. Toronto had only lost one game during the seeding round, a 122-100 setback to the Celtics. —AFP



Oman futsal team resumes training after six months



ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, SEPT 2

After an absence of more than six months from indoor hall training sessions, Oman national futsal team will resume the first preparatory camp in mid of September after the pandemic break.

According to the plan which adheres to the precautionary measures and medical protocol set by OFA medical team, all the players will be tested for COVID-19 on September 15 at Badr Al Sama

Hospital. After completion of 72 hours from the COVID-19 test, all the players who tested negative can resume the training from ground with full implementation of the medical protocol.

The Sultanate futsal team coached by the national coach Younis al Fahdi is gearing up to take part at the AFC Asian Futsal Championship before end of current year. Turkmenistan expressed their inability to host the event while Kuwait showed their full readiness to stage the championship.

It is predicted that the event will be moved once again by a month later and the revised schedule is in December.

The former Seeb captain affirmed previously in statements to *Oman Daily Observer* the team will have more than ten preparatory games during September and October ahead from the Asian Championship assignment. The friendlies will be against Kuwait, Thailand, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. The upcoming stage of

the team's preparation will depend on the domestic camps while the overseas camps may come in later stages. According to coach Younis al Fahdi, the final squad of the team will be announced after completion of the internal camps. He said the number of players will drop from 20 players in the first domestic camp until selecting the top 14 players prior to the tournament.

Oman Futsal team members had trained remotely during the last period through using the "Zoom"

application under supervision of coach Ricardo Silva. The Sultanate futsal team's fitness coach had delivered many sessions since last April. The technical staff focused on maintaining the fitness level of the players besides developing the strength and endurance skills.

The AFC Futsal Championship draw clubbed Oman in Group A besides Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Vietnam. Japan, one of the favourites, are clubbed in Group B alongside Lebanon, Kyrgyz Republic

and Kuwait. Group C comprised four-time runners-up Uzbekistan, Indonesia, Bahrain and China. Iran, title holders of the last edition, were grouped in Group D alongside Korea Republic, Saudi Arabia and Thailand. The upcoming edition of the Asian Futsal Championship will be the final stage of Fifa Futsal World Cup qualifying. The top five teams at the AFC Asian Futsal Championship will represent the continent at the Fifa Futsal World Cup Lithuania 2020.



SERENA, MURRAY

ADVANCE TO SECOND ROUND



NEW YORK: Serena Williams' quest for a record-equalling 24th Grand Slam got off the mark as Andy Murray rolled back the years with a vintage comeback at the US Open on Tuesday.

Six-time winner Williams powered past 96th-ranked Kristie Ahn after Murray came from two sets down to win a five-set thriller in his first singles Slam match in 18 months.

The pair both progressed to the second round on day two of a US Open that is unrecognisable from previous tournaments, without spectators and with stringent measures to prevent COVID-19 infections.

Williams defeated Ahn 7-5, 6-3 as she started the latest bid of her protracted pursuit to match Margaret Court's Grand Slam title with a straight-sets win at Flushing Meadows.

The 38-year-old overcame the loss of her first service game in the opening set to advance at a virtually empty Arthur Ashe Stadium, where artwork by black artists is displayed in honour of the Black Lives Matter movement against racial injustice.

"I was really happy with how I just fought for every point no matter how I was playing," said Williams.

It has been more than three years since Williams won her 23rd Grand Slam title at the 2017 Australian Open — when she was already pregnant with daughter Olympia.

She has come close since, reaching four major finals only to come away empty-handed, but should have a better chance this time around with several top players absent because of coronavirus concerns or injury.

World number one Ashleigh Barty, the second-ranked Simona Halep and Canadian Bianca Andreescu — who stunned Williams in



last year's final — are all absent from the behind-closed-doors tournament.

A title win for Williams would also see her become the most decorated women's player at the US Open in the modern era. She is currently tied with Chris Evert on six.

NAVARRO TRIBUTE

Murray secured a stunning 4-6, 4-6, 7-6 (7/5), 7-6 (7/4), 6-4 come-from-behind victory in a bruising 4 hours and 39 minutes encounter against Japan's 49th-ranked Yoshihito Nishioka.

The Scotsman, who has barely played in 2020, said he had learnt a lot about his physical condition and the metal hip he received during surgery last year.

"I've just played a four-and-a-half hour match when I never thought I'd be able to," he told reporters.

"I'm not sitting here with my hip throbbing and aching. I'll be able to sleep fine tonight," Murray added.

Tenth seed Garbine Muguruza, the 2016 French Open champion and 2017 Wimbledon winner, advanced to round two with a 6-4, 6-4 victory over Japan's Nao Havino.

She dedicated the win to compatriot Carla

Suarez Navarro, who revealed on Tuesday that she had been diagnosed with Hodgkin lymphoma and will require six months of chemotherapy.

"You know, she's such a nice woman, so sweet, so kind, so humble. When these things happen to these good people, I feel, like, so sad about it," said Muguruza.

Also in the women's draw, second seed American Sofia Kenin needed just over an hour to score a 6-2, 6-2 win over unseeded Belgian Yanina Wickmayer at Louis Armstrong Stadium. And ninth seed Johanna Konta beat compatriot Heather Watson 7-6 (9/7), 6-1 in a tie dubbed the "Battle of Britain."

There was disappointment for 40-year-old Venus Williams though who bowed out in the first round for the first time in her career, losing in straight sets to Karolina Muchova.

Another veteran, Belgium's 37-year-old Kim Clijsters, also fell at the first hurdle.

Clijsters making a comeback for the second time in her career and playing in her first Grand Slam draw since 2012, was beaten in three sets by Ekaterina Alexandrova, losing 3-6, 7-5, 6-1.

THIEM ADVANCES

In the men's competition, number two seed Dominic Thiem progressed to round two when opponent Jaume Munar retired after the second set at Louis Armstrong Stadium.

Munar abandoned before the start of the third set, with Austria's Thiem leading 7-6 (8/6), 6-3. Thiem now faces India's Sumit Nagal, who became the first Indian man since 2013 to the reach the second round of a Grand Slam event with a 6-1, 6-3, 3-6, 6-1 win over Bradley Klahn of the United States. — AFP



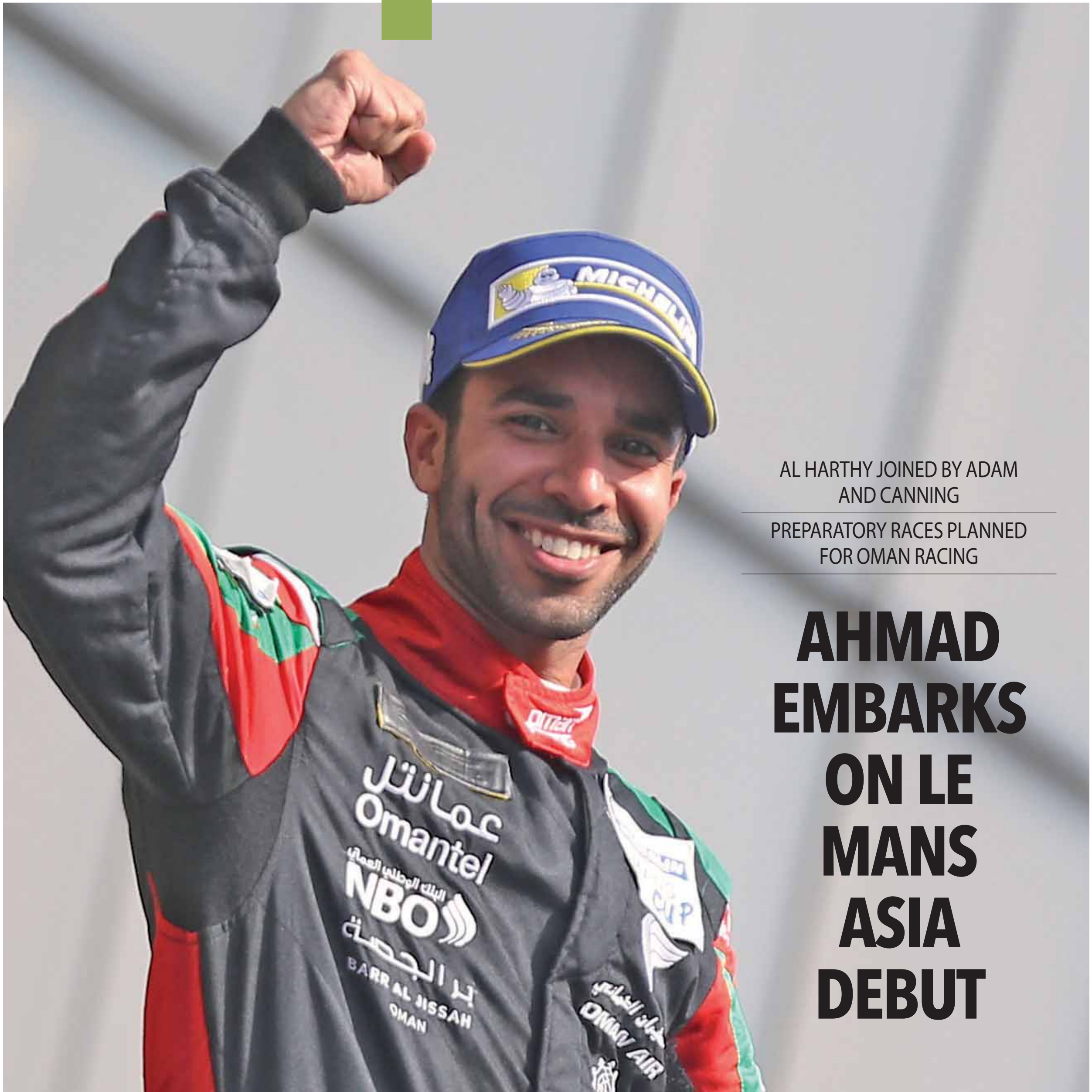
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AL HARTHY JOINED BY ADAM
AND CANNING

PREPARATORY RACES PLANNED
FOR OMAN RACING

AHMAD EMBARKS ON LE MANS ASIA DEBUT

ANUROOP ATHIPARAMBATH
MUSCAT, SEPT 2

Oman motor racing sensation Ahmad al Harthy is embarking on return to action with a debut in the high-profile Asian Le Mans Series at the start of 2021.

“This is a new challenge. It’s a huge opportunity provided the prize of an entry to the Le Mans 24 Hours next year,” the decorated Oman Racing driver said during a remotely-held press conference in Muscat on Wednesday.

The outbreak of the global COVID-19 pandemic has completely changed the racing programme of Ahmad and Oman Racing as the resulting ‘lockdown’ restrictions meant the planned British GT Championship title bid couldn’t take place.

“Due to the COVID-19 situation globally, and the various travel restrictions, we had to re-look at our plans, make some difficult decisions and consider the next step — and the most appropriate thing for us to do was to look ahead to racing in the Asian Le Mans Series,” explained Al Harthy. “We’ve never had the chance to race in



the championship before. Sometimes with problems come opportunities. As we always do, everyone at Oman Racing will be going all-out to try and win.”

Working tirelessly behind the scenes during the past few months, along with Tom Ferrier’s TF Sport team which prepares and engineers the Oman Racing Aston Martin Vantage GT3 car, Al Harthy has been able to put together the programme in the forthcoming Asian Le Mans Series.

Retaining the steadfast support of long-term backers Oman Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, National

Bank of Oman, Omantel and Barr Al Jissah, double Blancpain Endurance Cup Pro-Am Champion Al Harthy hopes he can make it to the 2021 Le Mans 24 Hours.

Al Harthy-Adam partnership continues

With his sights on nothing less than GT3 championship success in the Asian Le Mans Series, Al Harthy has the tremendous continuity of teaming with Aston Martin works driver Jonny Adam — with whom he claimed both his Blancpain titles — and young British talent Tom Canning.

As a result of the ongoing



uncertainty surrounding COVID-19, organisers of the Asian Le Mans Series took the decision to move the new campaign to the start of 2021 and also put together a calendar of a quartet of four-hour races over just a three-week window in January.

The condensed and rescheduled Far East championship will begin on January 9 at the Chang International Circuit in Buriram, Thailand, with a second four-hour race at the same track just two days later on January 11. Drivers and teams will then travel to Sepang International Circuit in Malaysia for round three on January

23, and round four on January 26.

Al Harthy suggested that some one-off outings in European based categories may well be on the cards in the coming months as part of preparations for a return to competitive action.

“I’m delighted to be teaming with Tom [Canning] and, of course, Jonny,” said Al Harthy, “Jonny and I have won so much together, I really think all three of us make a very strong line-up for the Asian Le Mans Series. If things work out well in Europe with fewer restrictions on travel in the weeks and months to come, we’ll probably do

2021 ASIAN LEMANS SERIES CALENDAR

Rd1 - Chang International Circuit, Thailand (4hr race) -Jan 9, 2021

Rd2 - Chang International Circuit, Thailand (4hr race) -Jan 11, 2021

Rd3 - Sepang International Circuit, Malaysia (4hr race) -Jan 23, 2021

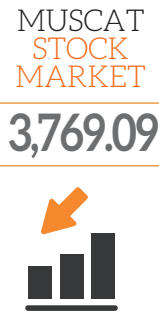
Rd4 - Sepang International Circuit, Malaysia (4hr race) -Jan 26, 2021

some one-off races as well.”

“Although we’ve been away from the track for quite a while now, since the pre-season British GT test in March, I’ve been working hard to keep fit and motivated, and I’ve been concentrating on the world of motorsport a lot. I’m really looking forward to being back and doing what we do best!”

“The prospect of representing Oman outside always excites me and all the Sultanate sportspersons should strive to excel internationally and make the country proud,” Ahmad concluded.

business



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NORTH AL BATINAH REPRESENTS OMAN IN GLOBAL STEM CONTEST P14



CREDIT SUISSE FACES PROCEEDINGS OVER SPYING SCANDAL P15



OIL AGENCY UNDER SCRUTINY FOR MISSING BILLIONS P16

320,000 domestic, farm workers targeted for mandatory health cover in Oman

ONGOING ROLL-OUT: Tourists and visitors to the Sultanate are also expected to be brought under the purview of the Dhamani scheme in the near future.

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, SEPT 2

Oman foresees an estimated 320,000 domestic and farm workers being brought under the coverage of the Unified Health Insurance Policy (Dhamani) by the end of 2021.

Domestic workers and farmhands are targeted for coverage in the first phase of the implementation of the much-awaited mandatory health insurance programme. With effect from the first quarter of this year, newly arriving expatriate labour falling in two segments are required to be suitably covered as a precondition for working in the Sultanate. Coverage will be extended to existing workers in these categories when their visas come up for renewal.

Tourists and visitors to the Sultanate are also expected to be brought under the purview of the scheme in the near future.

According to senior officials of the Capital Market Authority (CMA), the inclusion of domestic and farm workers will dramatically ramp up the number of people enjoying health insurance coverage in the Sultanate. That number currently stands at approximately 500,000 insured lives, covering



Omanis and expatriates as well.

In an article published in the latest edition of Middle-East Insurance Review, senior CMA officials Ahmed al Maamari, Vice-President (Insurance Sector), and Dr Mohamed Ghazaly, Expert Advisor, stressed the importance of the Dhamani health insurance programme as a “national initiative” to “promote local and international investment, and create sustainable growth of the private health and

insurance sectors in Oman”.

The Dhamani health insurance system mandated by the Council of Ministers will cover private sector employees including their dependents (expatriate and local), domestic (and farm) workers and all visitors entering the Sultanate, they noted.

“The aim is to guarantee essential health care coverage, improved access, quality and affordability of health care for all

Omanis and expatriates residing in (and visiting) Oman,” the officials said in the joint interview.

“The supporting regulatory framework and policies will encourage the private sector to raise revenues, pool and fund the ecosystem using the insurance mechanism as an alternative funding tool.

This will complement the existing, primarily government block funded healthcare financing



CMA officials Ahmed al Maamari, Vice-President (Insurance Sector), and Dr Mohamed Ghazaly, Expert Advisor.

The aim is to guarantee essential healthcare coverage, improved access, quality and affordability of healthcare for all Omanis and expatriates residing in (and visiting) Oman

system to offload the extra burden and empower the private health care and health insurance sector to positively contribute to health care and health funding capacities.”

Ahead of the implementation of the Dhamani scheme in earnest, the CMA has taken steps to pave the way for the development of the platform on which the system will be run in an integrated and holistic manner. A contract for

the e-Health System incorporating an e-Claims Exchange has already been awarded. Phase 1 of this platform is expected to be fully deployed by the second half of 2021.

“This phase will include the implementation of the e-claims cycle comprising complete digitalisation, automation and standardisation of health insurance claims. **TURN TO PAGE 14**

Sale of 49 per cent stake in Jindal Shadeed completed



BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, SEPT 2

Indian power and steel conglomerate Jindal Steel and Power Limited (JSPL) confirmed on Wednesday that its Mauritian arm has sold a 48.99 per cent stake in its Oman asset, Jindal Shadeed Iron and Steel LLC to Vulcan Steel, a subsidiary of Templar Investment, an investment company and part of the promoter group of JSPL.

The transaction represents the first tranche of the sale, which the company aims to complete within a specified time, it said in a filing. Earlier, in June JSPL had said that it would sell its entire stake in its Oman asset for an enterprise value of over \$1 billion to Templar Investment.

“Jindal Steel & Power (Mauritius) Ltd (JSPML), wholly owned subsidiary, has sold 4,86,999 shares, representing 48.99 per cent of the share capital of JSIS Oman, to Vulcan Steel, a Mauritius-based private limited company, a subsidiary of Templar Investment in the first tranche,” the filing said.

Set up in 2011, Jindal Shadeed’s Sohar complex is a key source of hot briquetted iron (HBI), steel billets and rebars for the infrastructure, construction and hydrocarbon industries in Oman and the wider region. The integrated mill features a Direct Reduction Iron (DRI) plant, Steel Melting Shop (SMS) and rebar manufacturing unit.

Omani biofuels JV inks pact with feedstock supplier

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, SEPT 2

Wakud International LLC, the Omani-led joint venture behind the planned development of the country’s first biofuels project, has signed a partnership agreement with Modern Arabian Projects LLC for the collection of used cooking oils in Oman for conversion into biodiesel.

Modern Arabian has been collecting used cooking oils in the Sultanate for over 14 years and is the largest collector covering all of the country. Wakud is building a biofuels plant in Khazaen Economic City which can convert used cooking oils into biodiesel.

Commenting on the partnership, Talal Hasan, Chairman of Wakud, said: “We are humbled to have Modern Arabian as a partner. There has recently been a misconception that commercial establishments throw away their used cooking oil. This is not true and it’s thanks to the silent work of Modern Arabian which has contributed significantly to maintaining Oman’s natural environment by collecting this feedstock for over a decade.”

Valerian Mathias, CEO of Modern Arabian, commented: “We are excited to work with Wakud on this innovative solution to create a circular economy within Oman. We have the necessary infrastructure and feedstock to help



Wakud is building a biofuels plant in Khazaen Economic City which can convert used cooking oils into biodiesel

Wakud with their mission of building a biofuels hub in Oman.”

Maher al Habsi, General Manager of Wakud, commented: “Our ambition is to scale Wakud outside of Oman and Modern Arabian can help us do that with

their logistics expertise in the region.”

Recently, Wakud announced plans to build a biofuel refinery in Khazaen Economic City. The project is a joint venture with Green Fuels, a biofuels technology company based in the United Kingdom. Wakud is also one of the strategic projects that is supported by the Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Unit as well as EJAAD. Wakud’s mission is to develop a sustainable biofuels ecosystem in Oman and they are aiming to be operational by Q2 2021.

OOMCO eyes strategic partnership with OQ

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, SET 2

Leading fuel marketing firm Oman Oil Marketing Company SAOG (OOMCO) has announced that its Board of Directors has approved a strategic partnership with OQ, the wholly Omani government-owned integrated energy group, to explore business opportunities locally and internationally, as well as rebrand OOMCO’s business network under the OQ umbrella.

“This strategic partnership agreement shall support OOMCO to scale up its operations much faster than the current organic approach, benefit from future OQ brand equity internationally and locally and be an important player in the fuel retail business globally,” said the publicly listed company in a filing to the Capital Market Authority (CMA) on Wednesday.



North Al Batinah represents Oman in global STEM contest

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, SEPT 2

Oman is participating in the fourth round of first international competition recognising excellence in the development of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) skills among students.

The Sultanate is among 99 countries from around the world taking part in the multi-week competition which kicked off on July 1 and concludes on September 25, 2020. Selected to represent Oman as the national team this year is North Al Batinah Team under the supervision of the Ministry of Education. Team Oman, with Radiya al Ajmi as coach, consists of six students of Grades 9 to 11 from different schools.

Commenting on the competition, team member Shahd al Maqbali said: "The title of this year's competition is 'Connecting Communities' in light of the pandemic-imposed lockdown that can led to the isolation of societies and the suspension of most activities. The competition aims to develop STEM skills among students and spread STEM culture in various societies, thus helping foster the growth of a generation with the right skills to face the challenges of the future."

According to Hawraa al Nuaimi, also a team member,



The competition aims to develop STEM skills among students and spread STEM culture in various societies, thus helping foster the growth of a generation with the right skills to face the challenges of the future

this year's competition three types of challenges: 20 social media challenges and 5 technical challenges, in addition to interviews with inspiring STEM figures from around the world.

Madona Samer said: "I participated in a lot of robotics competitions and technical projects, but this participation is very different. I have learned from the experiences of other countries around the world to implement STEM in my life."

Ghadeer al Kishri stated: "For me, First Global is not just a competition, it is a large community that includes many individuals from different environments and different cultures, and designs. It also includes interesting and useful challenges that allowed everyone to present their cultures and experiences."

Fatima al Ajmi added: "Participation in this competition has given me the opportunity to learn new information and new skills and exchange experiences with others. It allows me to interact with other teams from different countries."

Emtenan al Hamdi noted: "I find this competition one of the most creative competitions. It develops the leadership skills of the participants and sheds light on a number of innovative personalities from which I learned that failure is the beginning of success."

Sharakah and BP Oman help young Omani start-ups

MUSCAT: In partnership with BP Oman, Sharakah (Funds for the Development of Youth Projects) has recently launched the 'Zaad Al Ruwad' virtual workshop series to equip Omani entrepreneurs with the right knowledge and skills to start and manage a business.

Shamsa al Rawahiya, BP Oman Social Investment Manager, commented: "We're hoping to help Omani entrepreneurs establish their own businesses in a practical manner by covering topics such as costs and resources required, as well as pricing for products and services. The workshops aim to provide entrepreneurs an understanding of managing real-life challenges and opportunities associated with having your own business."

Umaima al Ghadani, Sharakah Investment Manager, commented: "Sharakah has successfully delivered more than 30 'calculate it right' workshops across the Sultanate. 'Zaad Al Ruwad' comes as a continuation of this work, with the same objectives and goals but with a more intensive and detailed approach to helping entrepreneurs."

Targeted towards final year college students, start-up entrepreneurs and existing SME business owners, the first workshop was held in collaboration with Al Rudha; a BP Oman social investment partner. The remaining workshops will be implemented in association with other BP Oman social investment partners that have experience in supporting SMEs, including MEDRC, Tawasul, Youth Vision and Youth Sada.

Omantel wins 'Happiness at Work' award

MUSCAT: Omantel recently won the Happiness at Work Award in the Best Employee Engagement Programme (private sector) category 2019 at the third edition of the Happiness at Work Award virtual ceremony that was organised by Sustainable Mindz (Dubai). The award witnessed competition between 62 nominations that were evaluated by an independent panel of jurors after a thorough assessment based on multiple parameters.

Najla bint Khamis al Bahloul; Senior Manager, Employee Engagement at Omantel's Human Resources Unit said: "Our employee engagement experience has created a unique, attractive and productive work environment that stimulates innovation and provides everything that brings satisfaction to Omantel customers. Employee engagement revolves around the employee irrespective of his/her position or job grade, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, it became necessary that we continue to adopt the same approach that enhances the relationship among employees on one hand and between employees and the Company on the other."

Further detailing the initiative, she said, "At the outset, we have implemented business continuity plans by enabling our employees to work remotely from home to ensure their safety of our customers. The new approach involves all employees who are provided with the latest devices, facilities and programmes required for working from home without affecting the quality of service provided to our customers."



Al Bahloul commented that the COVID-19 pandemic demanded a new and effective work system aimed at continuity of Omantel's services despite the fact that employees could no longer access their workplace.

"We devised effective communication plans through which we were able to implement the diversification and integration programmes that facilitated providing telework-based services. These programmes include the principles of safety and ongoing communication, provision of personal protective equipment (PPE), digital gadgets, IT programmes and equipment, instant messaging, HR communication, training and e-learning opportunities. These programmes also provided flexible working schedules, virtual physical fitness sessions, functional cooperation, regional events, leadership engagement initiatives, activities relevant to engaging employees in providing advice, virtual gatherings, various events" Al Bahloul added.

The next stage of Omantel's employee engagement plan depends on the cultural transformation and employees' experience.

Lummus named technology provider for mega stream cracker at Duqm

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, SEPT 2

Lummus Technology, the leading licensor of proprietary petrochemicals, refining, gasification and gas processing technologies, has been selected as the technology provider for a world-scale mixed-feed Steam Cracker that will form the centrepiece of the giant Duqm Petrochemicals complex coming up downstream of the Duqm Refinery project currently under construction in the Sultanate.

The award is one of 12 technology license packages announced by Duqm Refinery and Petrochemicals Company (DRPIC), which is developing the refinery and the associated petrochemicals complex. The award of the license packages to international technology providers comes ahead of a Final Investment Decision (FID) by DRPIC's two shareholders – OQ, the integrated energy group of the Sultanate of Oman, and Kuwait Petroleum International (KPI).

Lummus Technology has also been named as the technology provider for the Natural Gas Liquids Extraction and C4 block unit technologies including Butadiene, CDMtbe, and Butene-1 separation.

The derivative unit technologies were awarded to UOP LLC, (Aromatics), Scientific Design Company INC, (Ethylene Oxide Ethylene Glycol), Univation Technologies LLC, (Linear Low Density Polyethylene), Basell Polyolefine GmbH, (High Density Polyethylene), Basell Poliolefine Italia Srl, (Polypropylene), Linde Aktiengesellschaft, (Air Separation Unit), Air Liquide Engineering and Construction, (Syngas) and OQ will provide shareholder proprietary technology for both the ethylene and propylene derivative OXO units.



On this occasion, Dr Salim al Huthaili, CEO of DRPIC stated: "We are glad to reach this milestone of the project despite the challenges of COVID-19.

The creativity and agility of the project team is remarkable. We are now looking forward to progressing towards the next stage in the project which includes working with the reputable international technology licensors to finalise the FEED and strive to achieve Final Investment Decision (FID) next year.

We are also happy to report the good progress of the Refinery construction again despite the COVID-19 challenges. We thank our shareholders, Kuwait Petroleum International (KPI), OQ and project partners

for their commitment and continued support. Once completed, Duqm Petrochemical Complex should significantly improve DRPIC's contributions to our shareholders."

From his side, Shane Macnamara, Duqm Petrochemicals Project Director said: "Due to the increasing global demand for petrochemical products, Duqm Petrochemicals will become a significant player in the region, benefiting from its strategic location on the Oman eastern sea board with direct access to international markets. Working with long established technology licensors enables us to develop a world-class project empowering the future development of downstream petrochemical industries in the Special Economic Zone of Duqm."

320,000 domestic, farm workers targeted for mandatory health cover in Oman

FROM PAGE 13

All stakeholders will follow the end-to-end e-claims cycle from submission to payment of claims in electronic format using the Dhamani electronic platform. Some additional features include member eligibility verification, prior authorisation and basic reporting and analysis of utilisation data," said the officials.

Envisaged in the second phase is the integration of processes such as e-prescription (and pharmacy benefits management), e-referrals (for consultation, laboratory and radiology), payment gateways, enhancement of data analysis through data warehousing and the introduction of utilisation monitoring systems to ensure sustainability.

"The third phase will introduce enhanced business intelligence and advanced analytics for quality management, member profiling, advanced monitoring (of fraud, abuse and waste) and the introduction of member engagement portals, as well as a digital health insurance marketplace," the CMA officials noted.

The scope of the Dhamani scheme is

proposed to be periodically expanded to cover other segments of the population, including Omani and expatriate workers (and their dependents) in the private sector. However, the timeline for this phased expansion will be based "approvals and directives from the Council of Ministers with close monitoring of the industry," the officials added.

Exxon weighs global job cuts after unveiling Australian lay-off plan

MELBOURNE: Exxon Mobil Corp is assessing possible worldwide job cuts, a spokesman said on Wednesday, after the company announced a voluntary lay-off programme in Australia.

Exxon is the latest oil major to embark on axing jobs spurred by a historic collapse in fuel demand because of the coronavirus pandemic.

The company has slashed capital spending this year by 30 per cent to around \$23 billion and said in August it planned both capital and operating expense cuts to defend its dividend after reporting losses in the first and second quarters.

"We have evaluations underway on a country-by-country basis to assess possible additional efficiencies to right-size our business and make it stronger for the future," spokesman Casey Norton, based at the company headquarters in Irving, Texas, said in emailed comments to Reuters.

The comments mark a shift, after Exxon said in July it had no plans for layoffs due to the pandemic and no percentage targets to reduce its workforce through this year's employee reviews.

In Australia, Exxon said on Wednesday it had completed a review of its current and future project work in the country and was seeking volunteers to quit the company.

"This programme will ensure the company manages through these unprecedented market conditions," it said in a statement.



Exxon's Bass Strait offshore platform in Australia is pictured in this file photo. — Reuters

The company has slashed capital spending this year by 30 per cent to around \$23 billion and said in August it planned both capital and operating expense cuts to defend its dividend after reporting losses in the first and second quarters.

The company did not say what percentage of its workforce it was seeking to cut, but said in Australia

it would consider all employees who expressed an interest in voluntary redundancy.

"Until other study work is complete, it would be premature to draw conclusions for other

countries," Norton said.

Exxon is looking to sell its 50 per cent stake in the Bass Strait oil and gas joint venture in southeastern Australia, which analysts have estimated could fetch up to \$3 billion. Analysts have speculated it could also sell or close its Altona plant in Melbourne, Australia's oldest refinery. — Reuters

Oil rises towards \$46 on US inventory drop

LONDON: Oil rose towards \$46 a barrel on Wednesday, gaining for a third day, supported by a report that US crude inventories fell and as surveys showing stronger manufacturing raised hopes of a recovery from the coronavirus pandemic.

US crude stocks fell by 6.4 million barrels, the American Petroleum Institute (API) said, more than forecast. Manufacturing surveys around the world showed expanding activity in August, although the outlook remains shaky.

Brent crude, the global benchmark, was up 3 cents at \$45.61 a barrel as of 1010 GMT, climbing for a third day. US West Texas Intermediate rose 11 cents, or 0.3 per cent, to \$42.87.

"Market players are currently riding a wave of optimism, though it could come crashing down at any moment," said Stephen Brennock of oil broker PVM.

— Reuters

Deutsche Bank chief executive warns of 'zombie' firms in pandemic

FRANKFURT: Deutsche Bank's chief executive on Wednesday warned that government aid to ailing firms to cope with the coronavirus pandemic may lead to "zombie" companies that end up weighing on the German economy.

A large number of so-called zombie firms in Germany would have "a serious impact on the productivity of our economy," Christian Sewing said in a speech in Frankfurt.

"Zombie" companies are businesses that survive on the back of government subsidies or bailouts, avoiding the insolvency they might otherwise suffer, and are seen as a driver of inefficiencies in an economy.

The government of Chancellor Angela Merkel has pledged over one trillion euros (\$1.2 trillion) in aid to shield companies and citizens in Europe's top economy from the virus fallout, including through loans, grants and subsidised shorter-hours



This would be detrimental at a time when COVID-19 is accelerating many structural upheavals — from digitisation to the pressure to operate more sustainably — when the economy must therefore adapt exceptionally quickly.

CHRISTIAN SEWING,
CEO, Deutsche Bank



programmes.

Sewing cited a study by credit agency Creditreform, which said that the number of these zombie companies in Germany could double to one in six as a result of bailouts related to the pandemic.

This would be detrimental, he said, "at a time when COVID-19 is accelerating many structural upheavals — from digitisation to the

pressure to operate more sustainably — when the economy must therefore adapt exceptionally quickly."

The bank's chief argued that this process of restructuring in the economy is held up "when companies are primarily waiting for everything to go back to the way it was before."

Sewing's warning comes a day after former European Central Bank president Mario Draghi said that governments should use stimulus funds to create jobs for young people rather than prop up jobs for those that already have them.

"Subsidies will have to go down but at the same time jobs will be created," Draghi said, Bloomberg News reported.

"It's very good if the government succeeds in giving jobs and taking out subsidies, and again it's especially good for young people."

The ECB is providing 1.35 trillion euros to support the economy through the pandemic. — AFP

Taking a leaf from Fed, BOJ may need to focus more on jobs



A Japanese flag flutters atop the Bank of Japan building in Tokyo. — Reuters

TOKYO: The Bank of Japan (BOJ) may need to pay more attention to job and household income in guiding monetary policy, deputy governor Masazumi Wakatabe said, as the coronavirus pandemic pushes the economy deeper into recession.

In an online briefing on Wednesday, Wakatabe said there were many lessons to learn from the US Federal Reserve's new policy strategy that focuses more on creating jobs and boosting household income.

"Personally, I feel there is room to consider the idea, voiced by some people, that monetary policy should focus more on job and income

conditions," he said. "The BOJ doesn't need to directly set them as targets. But it can take job and income conditions more into account in debating policy."

The BOJ is mandated by law to achieve price and financial system stability, but does not have a target on jobs growth.

A few academics have called on the BOJ to target jobs or nominal gross domestic product (GDP) to strengthen its commitment to maintain ultra-easy policy longer.

Wakatabe said overseas examples will be "very useful" for the BOJ in enhancing its policy framework as many nations face

the same damaging effect on jobs and consumption from COVID-19.

He declined to comment on Japan's political situation but said the BOJ's current monetary policy was "most appropriate" for now, regardless of who becomes the new prime minister.

Japan is facing a leadership race this month after Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's decision to step down. Yoshihide Suga, the top spokesman, is emerging as the front-runner to succeed Abe, heightening expectations that many of the premier's stimulus policies will be maintained. — Reuters

CORPORATE ESPIONAGE

Credit Suisse faces proceedings over spying scandal

ZURICH: Swiss financial regulators said on Wednesday they had launched proceedings against Credit Suisse following a probe into a spying scandal that rocked the country's second-biggest bank.

The scandal began to unravel last September with the discovery that surveillance had been ordered on a star banker who jumped ship from Credit Suisse to rival UBS, amid fears that he was preparing to poach employees and clients.

"FINMA has opened enforcement proceedings against the bank," the Swiss Financial Market Supervisory Authority said in a statement.

"It will pursue indications of violations of supervisory law in the context of the bank's observation and security activities, and in particular the question of how these activities were documented and controlled."

The proceedings are expected to take several months.

In December, FINMA said it had appointed an auditor to investigate Credit Suisse's corporate governance in relation to the spying scandal. The probe is now complete, the regulator said.

The case began following revelations in Swiss newspapers that Iqbal Khan, a former wealth management chief, had been tailed by private investigators after he unexpectedly left for UBS, Switzerland's biggest bank.

At the beginning of October, former chief operating officer Pierre-Olivier Bouee resigned, explaining that he "alone" had ordered the surveillance, without notifying his superiors, in an attempt to protect Credit Suisse's interests.

Bouee wanted to make sure Khan was not seeking to take other employees with him, according to an internal investigation launched by the bank.

The scandal began to unravel last September with the discovery that surveillance had been ordered on a star banker who jumped ship from Credit Suisse to rival UBS, amid fears that he was preparing to poach employees and clients.

But the scandal bounced back when subsequent press revelations accused Credit Suisse of spying on another employee, and then claimed that the bank had also monitored members of the environmental campaign group Greenpeace.

The bank's chief executive Tidjane Thiam, while insisting that he had not been personally involved, resigned in a bid to put an end to the scandal.

In a brief statement, Credit Suisse said it would continue to cooperate fully with FINMA and learn from the episode.

"The observation of employees is not part of the culture of Credit Suisse," the bank said. — AFP



The logo of Swiss bank Credit Suisse is seen below the Swiss flag at a building in the Federal Square in Bern. — Reuters



ASSESSING RISKS

Pandemic imperils UN's 17 development goals



HAIDER AL LAWATI

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International organisations began to assess the risks resulting from the continuation of the coronavirus pandemic, in particular the damage caused to the economic and social institutions.

Progress made in alleviating poverty and improving the conditions of the sick and underprivileged has been significantly impacted. Disruption to education, social work and other services need to be evaluated as well.

The recent UN report on the COVID-19 confirms that the pandemic has been particularly damaging to the most vulnerable and impoverished segments of the population, widening social imbalances that countries have been trying to address for more than 15 years.

According to the report, global efforts to achieve the objectives set

TODAY, DUE TO THE WIDESPREAD PANDEMIC, IT IS CONSIDERED AN UNPRECEDENTED HEALTH, ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CRISIS THAT MAKES THE ACHIEVEMENT OF THESE GOALS EVEN MORE DIFFICULT

out under the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) by 2030, have been disrupted the pandemic, derailing the roadmap charted by most countries in meeting these targets.

Everyone today feels that the pandemic has become a challenge for countries and peoples that could create more crises and disasters and cause further delays in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

There are shortfalls in the achievements of goals related to, for instance, improving maternal and child health, expanding access to electricity and increasing

the representation of women in government, among other areas.

Today, the COVID-19 pandemic has become the worst human and economic crisis for the global population. The number of deaths has exceeded 570 thousand people, while the number of cases is close to 13 million people in 196 countries.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres confirms that the progress made on the delivery of the 17 SDGs continues to fall short of intended targets.

Today, due to the widespread pandemic, it is considered an unprecedented health, economic

and social crisis that makes the achievement of these goals even more difficult. The pandemic does not affect everyone uniformly — the magnitude and intensity vary across different groups of people.

The report shows that the poorest, most vulnerable and the most affected by this pandemic are children, elderly, handicapped, and migrants and refugees, while women bear a disproportionate burden.

The main findings of the report expect that about 71 million people in the world will be pushed into extreme poverty in the current year 2020, the first increase in global poverty since 1998.

This is caused by lost incomes along with declining ways of social protection for them and high prices. Because of this crisis, about 1.6 billion workers, or half of the world's workforce, will be weakened and

affected greatly, as estimates indicate that their income has decreased by 60 per cent because of this crisis. More than a billion slum dwellers around the world are at great risk from the effects of the pandemic.

In the educational sector, the closure of schools by 90 per cent around the world effects 1.57 billion students and causes more than 370 million children to lose the school meals on which they depend.

As for access to computers and the Internet in homes for distance learning, many countries reported their peoples' inability to do this.

As more families fall into extreme poverty, children in poor and disadvantaged communities are at much greater risk of falling prey to child labour, child marriage and trafficking — which necessitates greater monitoring and preventative action by global authorities.

NIGERIA'S LIFELINE



People travel on a locally built passenger boat loaded with oil containers through a creek on the River Nun in Nigeria's oil state of Bayelsa.

— Reuters

Oil agency under scrutiny for missing billions

Nigerian oil agency under scrutiny for missing billions

Investigators are looking for billions of dollars in missing or stolen funds from a Nigerian agency created to develop the oil-rich but impoverished Niger delta.

Like the rest of the nation's opaque oil sector, officials say the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), based in the southern oil city of Port Harcourt, has been a pit of corruption and mismanagement since its establishment 20 years ago.

Nine states in the oil region rake in trillions of naira (billions of dollars) every year thanks to huge payments mandated from the central government and oil majors.

To date, over 12,000 projects have been approved for the commission, but only a fraction have been executed, a recent parliamentary probe revealed.

This year alone, more than 81 billion naira (\$215 million) have been allegedly misappropriated by officials and contractors, with some believed to have been spent on international flights and training while the nation's airspace was shut due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Last month, the government approved auditors led by Ernst & Young to examine the finances of the agency.

Godswill Akpabio, the minister for Niger Delta Affairs, said the appointment of a team of auditors followed a probe ordered by President Muhammadu Buhari in October.

Akpabio, himself under parliamentary scrutiny for alleged graft, said the auditors would examine projects approved by the NDDC over the last 19 years.

"Through this exercise, we will know the amount of monies that have gone into the region in the last 19 years and whether the value we have received so far

are commensurate with the monies that have entered into NDDC," he said.

In a public hearing last month, NDDC head Kemebradikumo Pondei fainted while being questioned by lawmakers.

Despite sitting on Nigeria's multi-billion-dollar oil and gas riches, the Niger delta remains impoverished and underdeveloped, sparking militant unrest in the early 2000s.

AFRICA'S LARGEST CRUDE PRODUCER AND EXPORTER DEPENDS ON THE OIL SECTOR FOR A HUGE CHUNK OF GOVERNMENT REVENUES AND ABOUT 90 PER CENT OF ITS FOREIGN EXCHANGE EARNINGS

At the time, attacks on oil facilities reduced Nigeria's oil output to one-third, hurting revenue.

Africa's largest crude producer and exporter depends on the oil sector for a huge chunk of government revenues and about 90 per cent of its foreign exchange earnings.

In southern Bayelsa state, broken promises are clear to see as construction sites abandoned by NDDC contractors litter the landscape. Partially-finished projects to protect the shoreline and build link roads to remote communities are deserted.

An eight-kilometre (five-mile) route was supposed to reach Ogbia, the home area of former president Goodluck Jonathan.

The project was awarded in 2013 to a company owned by a cousin of the

former president but never completed.

Community leaders are upset that well-connected contractors, mostly from the region, are abandoning sites after collecting huge sums.

"I cannot tell of a project that has been completed by NDDC in this community even though we have a series of such projects," Duateki Oriango-Oruwari said.

"For those of us residing in the riverine regions, we experience coastal erosion every day."

Another community head, Alex Ekiyor complained that people from the region who get the jobs are not doing them. "What is most depressing and sad is the fact that when the government awards these projects to our own sons, they abandon them."

Several contractors denied abandoning sites, saying they had not been paid by the NDDC.

Azibaola Robert, the cousin of former president Jonathan, said his firm was owed roughly \$1.5 million. "When the money is paid, we will remobilise to site and the projects will be executed," he insisted.

He blamed unrest by angry local residents for stalling projects in the Niger delta. "While dredging sand from a river in a nearby community for the project, locals from the community seized our machines insisting that we must employ them or pay them a particular amount of money," he said.

Industry watchers however say for the ongoing probe to be meaningful, the government must stop appointing politicians and cronies into the NDDC.

"They see such appointments as compensation and not a call to service," columnist Shaka Momodu wrote recently in independent *This Day* newspaper.

— AFP

RAISING EQUITY

Giants risk overloading China's growth boards

China's tech-focused growth boards are at risk of losing focus. Carmaker Geely wants to raise \$3 billion on Shanghai's hot STAR exchange, part of a surge of mature companies chasing stratospheric valuations on venues built for earlier-stage firms. The trend could water down Beijing's push to help smaller, cash-strapped companies raise equity.

Shanghai's STAR market was launched in part to serve young companies that are excluded from the main boards because of strict profitability requirements. China needs to fund its next wave of

CHINA NEEDS TO FUND ITS NEXT WAVE OF BIOTECHNOLOGY AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE UPSTARTS, WHICH BURN THROUGH CASH AT LIGHT SPEED BUT LACK COLLATERAL FOR LOANS

biotechnology and artificial intelligence upstarts, which burn through cash at light speed but lack collateral for loans.

Besides having looser listing criteria, however, the STAR board also scrapped the semi-official valuation cap of roughly 23 times earnings for companies going public on mainland exchanges.

That lured executives at older companies, who correctly concluded that STAR traders would juice their valuations.

State-backed chip-making champion Semiconductor Manufacturing International (SMIC), for example, debuted at a price of 109 times 2019 earnings, which yanked up its Hong Kong-listed stock too.

On average, companies in the STAR 50 index have seen their shares more than triple since listing, and currently trade at around 90 times historical earnings – six times higher than peers on the main Shanghai board.

So far, most of the companies on STAR are profitable, suggesting well-established entities with adequate access to capital markets have benefited more than start-ups. SMIC traded in New York for 15 years before opting for a Hong Kong-STAR dual listing. Geely and the Alibaba-backed Ant Group, which already boast deep-pocketed backers, are eyeing the same setup.

Even Dongfeng Motor, a state-owned dinosaur founded in 1969, announced plans to launch a secondary listing almost immediately after Shenzhen's tech-focused ChiNext board rolled out similar liberalisations to compete with STAR.

Geely and Ant have interesting business models. But letting mature companies dress up as bleeding-edge innovators and climb onto growth boards dilutes their purpose and distorts index weightings. If everyone is special, nobody really is. — Reuters



A building of the Geely Auto Research Institute is seen in Ningbo, Zhejiang province, China, in this file photo. — Reuters



Lone revellers brighten Notting Hill's empty streets on carnival day

Notting Hill Carnival, a highlight of the British summer, may have been cancelled this year because of the COVID-19 pandemic, but a couple of colourful individuals on Monday were determined to bring some festival spirit to west London's quiet streets.

The carnival, seen as a symbol of interracial tolerance, dates back to the 1960s and celebrates Britain's Afro-Caribbean community. It usually attracts more than a million visitors over the August Bank Holiday weekend, but its

trouble maintaining social distancing during their informal processions.

London's police have urged people to stay at home and avoid large gatherings over the holiday weekend, and no large gatherings related to the carnival had been reported by mid-afternoon on Monday.

Singer Adele stoked an online debate by posting a picture of herself wearing a Jamaica-flag bikini top with her hair in Bantu knots on Instagram, in honour of the carnival.

Some accused Adele, who is white and hails from London, of



parade has been replaced this year by a virtual festival.

However, one man danced along the route of the procession on an unseasonably cold day on Monday in a purple headdress and shorts.

Separately, another man in a black and yellow outfit dodged London taxis as he celebrated the public holiday, which did not have the usual road closures in place.

Notting Hill's streets, usually packed for the holiday, were virtually empty, and neither man had

cultural appropriation, but opposition Labour lawmaker David Lammy said that the singer of hits such as "Hello" and "Someone Like You" had captured the carnival's spirit.

"This humbug totally misses the spirit of Notting Hill Carnival," he said in a tweet in response to accusations of appropriation.

"Adele was born and raised in Tottenham, she gets it more than most. Thank you Adele. Forget the Haters." — Reuters





INSTAGRAM TOP PICKS



COOK LIKE A CHEF

Get full stories online at www.omanobserver.om

Pan-seared salmon with char-grilled pineapple salsa



SOCIAL DISH-TANCING

Most of the restaurants and hotels in the country are now open but they are operating under strict guidelines enforced by the relevant ministries. There is a 'new normal' to the dining experience and this includes temperature check as well as proper social distancing by limiting restaurant capacities to 50 per cent and with restriction of only four people per table.

For those who are still uncomfortable dining out and exposing their families to possible infections, we are bringing back 'Cook Like A Chef' where we ask reputable and unique chefs to share easy-to-do recipes at home.

The food at home doesn't have to be stale and repetitive. Curated twice a week from our numerous contributors coming from luxury hotels to international chains and local food champions, we hope you will enjoy these selections and let us know on Instagram and Twitter via our handle @OmanObserver of what you'd like to see next featured in our series.

ABOUT THE DISH

If you don't know how to cook fish, then it can be a total nightmare to deal with. Salmon is one of them. If you don't know how to manage it properly, it can easily stick to a pan and you will have a mess before you.

Salmon is rich in protein and can be a great source for Vitamin A, multiple B-vitamins and even Vitamin D. It is also packed with minerals like magnesium, potassium, zinc and selenium.

When preparing this dish, avoid the most common mistake a lot of newbies in the kitchen make and that is taking off the skin. Not only is this part tasty but it provides a safety layer when you are cooking this fish.

ABOUT THE CHEF

CHEF AJAY
DHOUNDIYAL

Executive Chef
In-Charge of F&B & Kitchen
Park Inn by Radisson Muscat

Executive Chef Ajay Dhoundiyal leads the culinary team of Park Inn by Radisson Muscat Hotel since September of 2012 and currently in-charge of F&B department. With over 2-decade experience in the culinary industry, Chef Ajay operates seamlessly to winch the dining experience of the hotel guests.

He has over 20 years of experience in the culinary industry. His career has taken him across various hotel brands like Hyatt, Kempinski, Starwood, and Radisson hotel groups. As the Executive Chef of the hotel, he leads the culinary team, preparing and managing the operations of the hotel's dining outlets and banquets. He specialises in international cuisine and strives to create interesting banquet menus.



INGREDIENTS:



Salmon Steak 220 gm
1 tbsp Olive Oil
Kosher Salt
Freshly Ground Black pepper

SIDE DISH:
Charred pineapple salsa,
charred onion, Char-grilled
pineapple slices

PINEAPPLESALSAINGREDIENTS
1 cup char-grilled pineapple
1/2 cup diced red bell pepper
1/4 cup chopped red Onion
2 tbsp chopped coriander
1.5 tbsp jalapeno pepper chopped
(Remove Seeds)
1tbsp lime juice
Salt to taste

Mix all ingredients in a bowl,
adjust seasoning if required.

PREPARATION
AND COOKING
INSTRUCTIONS

Pat Dry salmon fillet, Season
the salmon with salt and
ground black pepper.

Heat the oil in a nonstick pan,
cook the salmon without moving,
skin side down, golden and
crisp.

Flip the salmon fillet carefully
and reduce the heat, cook for
another side 3.4 minutes.

Remove fillet from the pan,
once it's cooked.

Place 2 -3 slice char-grilled
pineapple on the plate, along
with grilled salmon served with
pineapple salsa.

ENTERTAINMENT

Couples design their own "virtual babies" at Dutch art exhibit



AMSTERDAM: Couples who want children of their own got a brief taste of parenthood by creating their own "digital babies" during a virtual reality art exhibit in the Netherlands.

Visitors selected the baby's character traits, physical appearance and other features by answering questions on a computer tablet.

They sat in sofas in a futuristic room with soft lighting and flowing drapes, which was all part of an installation called "IVFX: posthuman parenting in hybrid reality," created by Dutch visual artist Victorine van Alphen.

"I had lots of deep, personal conversations that inspired me," Van Alphen said, including with people who wanted to have children but couldn't, someone who had lost a child and neighbours considering artificial insemination.

"There were lots of beautiful, inspiring conversations, anecdotes and background discussions that formed this

strange, futuristic project," she said. "I kind of gave myself the 'mission impossible' to create a presence in virtual reality."

Among the question was whether you would allow your artificial creation to reproduce.

"It's definitely smart," said Jennifer van Exel, discussing the options with her partner Frouke Engel.

Their choices were then used to form a computer generated infant — a pulsating pink creature in an incubator, which squealed and had a red glowing heartbeat.

"I don't know if you can say it has a head. I am not sure other people will be able to relate to it," said van Exel, peering at the new life form through 3D goggles while singing a lullaby.

"We're the parents, so obviously we created it and you want to be compassionate and loving, but it's nothing human so it's really hard to actually relate to it." — Reuters



The debris that makes up the beautiful sand

RAY PETERSEN

It is just one little picture, yet... there is so much to see that tells whatever story you wish of it. The flotsam and jetsam, the discarded, unwanted, un-needed, the lost, and the lonely. These shells, stones, bones, corals, and such will one day become the sand between someone's toes, a playground for creatures of the land, sea, and sky, immensely attractive, starkly, and ruggedly beautiful. Even now a riot of mostly earthy, natural, pastel shades, an eau naturel version of 'Where's Wally.'

Collected debris of the sea such as this is the greatest contributor to the sands of the beautiful Omani coastline with shells, corals, sea urchin spines, sponges, the exoskeletons of dead sea animals and fossils worn down to become the soft, sandy beaches that grace our shores. It is not only the sea however that creates sand, as much of its local composition consists of wadi fallen and washed rocks, and windblown, and rain-washed miniscule rocks washed to the shore from the mountain heights.

Geologist Jon Erikson estimates some three billion tonnes of rock is dissolved in water, and carried by streams, wadis and rivers to the sea each year to be washed as sand, with another 25 billion tonnes of heavier rock washed deeper, part of a much longer process. However, there is no need for alarm, as Erikson writes we can understand the pace of the process, known as the and in fact all geological change, if we consider that "This is sufficient to lower the entire land surface area of the Earth by as much as an inch, in only 2000 years."

The ubiquitous action of the sea also plays its part, with its relentless crushing of the many different components, silica in the context of quartz being strong, and with reduced chemical activity a key element of the sparkling, lightly jewelled grains of sand that catch and reflect



1) The White Sand of Hyams Bay Beach, Australia. The whitest beach in the world.

2) Papakolea Green Sand Beach, Hawaii

3) Punaluu Black Sand Beach, in Hawaii



light so pleasantly here in Oman. In other parts of the world the local geological features 'colour' the beaches through iron, for black sand, basalt for green sand, and calcium carbonate for white sand, iron oxide for

red sand, and golden sand having a greater content of animal matter, and sandstone base has that colour we all know so well.

It is believed in the South Sea Islands that you can wash the sand from your hands, but

not from your soul, and here in the Sultanate we have it all, blue skies, a gentle breeze, gentle waves, salt air, golden sun, and that gorgeous, golden sand between your toes. How good is that?

ENTERTAINMENT



'Game of Thrones' creators to adapt Chinese sci-fi trilogy for Netflix

LOS ANGELES: The creators of television's "Game of Thrones" are to adapt a best selling Chinese science-fiction book trilogy for a Netflix series.

Netflix said on Tuesday that the English-language adaptation will cover all three of the award-winning Chinese novels — "The Three-Body Problem," "The Dark Forest," and "Death's End," written by Liu Cixin.

The books tell the story of humanity's first contact with an alien civilisation.

"Liu Cixin's trilogy is the most ambitious science-fiction series we've read, taking readers on a journey from the 1960s until the end of time, from life on our pale blue dot to the distant fringes of the universe," David Benioff and D B Weiss, the creators and executive producers of television's hit medieval fantasy series "Game of Thrones," said

in a statement.

Benioff and Weiss will be joined by "True Blood" screenwriter Alexander Woo for the Netflix project, which also has the blessing of novelist Liu.

"I set out to tell a story that transcends time and the confines of nations, cultures and races; one that compels us to consider the fate of humankind as a whole," Liu said in a statement.

"The Three-Body Problem" was first published in book form in 2008 and became one of the most popular science fiction novels in China. An English translation followed in 2014.

No date or casting was announced for the project which is the first in a production deal between Benioff, Weiss and Netflix that was announced a year ago and reported to be worth about \$200 million. — Reuters



BBC reverses course in 'Rule Britannia' singing row

LONDON: The BBC has rowed back on a plan to omit the words from two patriotic songs at the pomp-laden climax of a classical music festival this month after critics including Prime Minister Boris Johnson accused it of seeking to censor Britain's past.

With COVID-19 restrictions limiting the size of the choir and preventing an audience from attending, the broadcaster planned to play orchestral versions of "Rule Britannia" and "Land of Hope and Glory", which are normally sung by flag-waving fans.

On Wednesday, it said a select group of BBC singers would now sing the words at the Last Night of the Proms after its initial plan prompted the prime minister to accuse it of showing a "cringing embarrassment about our history, about our traditions and about our culture".

Rule Britannia! includes the line: "Rule, Britannia! Britannia rule the waves; Britons never, never, never shall be slaves."

The BBC said it had been looking for a solution. "While it can't be a full choir, and we are unable to have audiences in the hall, we are doing every-

thing possible to make it special and want a Last Night truly to remember," it said in a statement.

The annual musical jamboree, normally the conclusion to a summer-long series of concerts, has attracted criticism in the past for being jingoistic, while its defenders argue it represents a joyful outpouring of tradition and patriotism.

The outgoing boss of the BBC, Tony Hall, had said the decision was taken purely due to COVID-19 restrictions but a report in the Sunday Times said the principal guest conductor had wanted to modernise the evening.

As the publicly-funded broadcaster, the BBC often finds itself caught in the political and cultural crosshairs and has been accused by some members of Johnson's party of being too metropolitan and out of touch with much of the country.

"Pleased to see common sense has prevailed on the BBC Proms," Culture Minister Oliver Dowden tweeted.

The opposition Labour Party said it was the right decision. — Reuters

features

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The debris that makes up the beautiful sand

Have you ever wondered what makes up the sand that you step on when you go to the beach? Would you believe that some of these were hardened shells, bones and corals before? It may have taken them numerous years to be the fine sand we know them today but here’s a look into this fascinating process... **P19**



BABY CARE

‘Smart crib’ aims to help rockabye baby

FREMONT, CALIFORNIA: As every new parent knows, sleep can go out the window after the arrival of a newborn. That was certainly the case for parents Radhika and Bharath Patil, who seeking relief for their own disrupted sleep patterns, put their electronic engineering backgrounds together to create a “smart crib.” Their crib, powered by artificial intelligence, combines a baby monitor, rocker, bassinet and crib in one. “It’s not the amount of work around

the baby that tires the parents, it’s the lack of sleep,” Radhika Patil, Cradlewise chief executive, said in an interview. According to a recent study, new mothers lose an hour of sleep per night on average and it can take them up to six years to regain pre-pregnancy sleep levels. It was for their first child that Patils built the Cradlewise smart crib, using a patented silent rocking mechanism combined with a set of cameras to monitor the baby and transmit live

through a smartphone app. “So we have a baby monitor that’s looking at the baby and detecting the early signs of wake-up, and it starts the rocking as well,” Radhika Patil said. Early detection is key, she said, adding that the sooner parents can detect the baby waking up, the easier it is to get the child to fall back asleep. The Patils used AI to come up with the sensing feature. They say that allows parents to learn and log the baby’s sleep patterns and monitor for breathing and physical movements indicative of disrupted sleep. It also records how much rocking is needed for the baby to fall back asleep. The crib also comes with a library of music that will play based on the settings. There is already a “smart” bassinet on the market that logs sleep patterns and provides rocking for



babies up to 6 months old. The Patils’ smart crib includes cameras and is designed for children up to age 2. They hope to deliver the product, now in pre-order, to the market by late October, priced at \$999. “Once you put the baby in, the crib

takes care of everything. That’s the aim,” Bharath Patil said. Of course, a parent’s work is never done. “Sometimes you need to intervene,” he added. “Sometimes you need to change some settings.” — Reuters