

HM sends condolences to Emir of Kuwait

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of condolences to Shaikh Nawaf Al Hamed Al Jabir al Sabah, Emir of Kuwait, on the demise of Shaikh Naser Sabah Al Ahmed Al Jabir al Sabah. In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his sincere condolences and sympathy, praying to Allah the Almighty to rest the departed's soul in peace in paradise and grant his family patience. – **ONA**



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GOAL RECORD
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MOVE TO
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THE EGYPTIAN
VULTURE: CARRION
ROYALTY THRIVING IN
THE SULTANATE



MUSCAT

DEADLINE TO GET TAX INCENTIVES

The Tax Authority has announced the expiry of taxation incentives offered to private sector establishments for taxes due during 2020. The incentives were announced earlier by the Supreme Committee tasked with tackling developments resulting from coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic with a view to handling the economic impacts of the pandemic and the resumption of business activities. The Tax Authority urged all tax payers to submit their declarations and disclosure accounts about the fiscal year ending on December 31, 2019 and any other accounting period or fiscal year ending after this date. **DETAILS ON P4**

RO 92M PROJECT IN AMERAT OPENS

Haya Wastewater Project in the Wilayat of Al Amerat was inaugurated on Sunday under the auspices of Isam bin Saud al Zadjali, Chairman of Muscat Municipality. Sulieman bin Khamis al Qasbi, Acting CEO of Haya Water, said that this RO 92 million project consists of a treatment plant with a capacity of 18,000 cubic metres/day at the first stage which can be doubled to 36,000 cubic metres/day in the second stage. He added: "The length of the main and subsidiary wastewater networks implemented in parallel with this project stands at 575 km and about 40,000 inspection rooms of various sizes." **DETAILS ON P4**

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Cost-reflective tariffs on electricity and water from January 2021

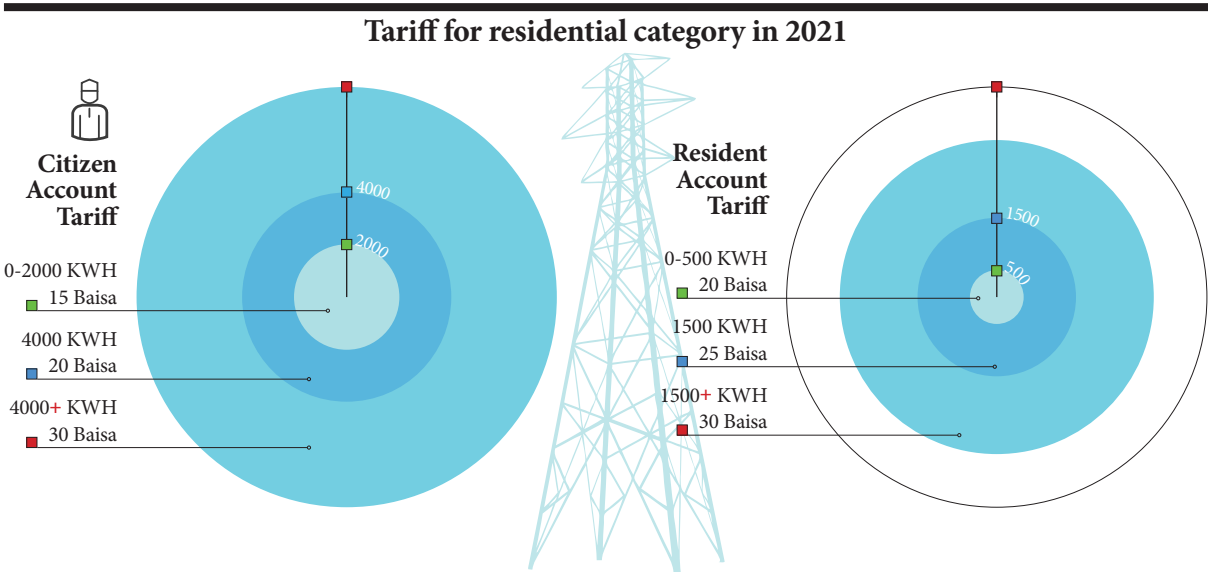
NATIONAL SUBSIDY SYSTEM FOR VULNERABLE FAMILIES

ZAINAB AL NASSERI
@zainabalnasseri

Dr Mohammed bin Hamad al Rumhy, Chairman of the Board of Directors of Authority for Public Services Regulation (APSR), issued decisions announcing the Cost-Reflective Tariffs (CRT) Regulation and the Permitted Tariffs Regulation for connection and supply of electricity and amending some provisions of the drinking water supply tariffs.

As per the decisions, the government will gradually lift the subsidy on water and electricity in a phased manner over a span of five years, from January 2021 till 2025.

As per a statement from the Ministry of Finance, this is one of the ambitious initiatives of the medium-term fiscal balance plan (2021-2025) to enhance the efficiency and sustainability of the two sectors, raising the efficiency of government spending, establishing financial sustainability rules, and linking it to the social protection system keeping in mind to support the entitled families.



who meet the conditions can apply for the support online till next January through the NSS website.

SOCIAL PROTECTION

Through this plan, the categories of subscribers are reclassified, and the tariff structure is approved, while the social protection system is strengthened by directing the subsidy to those who are eligible in the electricity and water sectors, provided that the process takes place gradually.

According to the initiative to redirect electricity and water subsidies, new tariffs for electricity and water services will be applied, and the subsidy will be gradually reduced over the coming years, in order to reach a fully unsupported tariff commensurate with the economic cost of electricity supply in 2025. **TURN TO P2**



Ahli Sidab 'A' cyclist Saud al Mandhari claimed the top honours in the Oman Cycling Association (OCA) Championship fourth stage at the weekend. Saud's teammate Talal al Maskari finished a close second, while Polish rider Szczepan Pietruska of North Road Oman ended third in the 98-km individual road race with 10 laps from the Civil Aviation Club building near the Muscat International Airport to The Wave. **DETAILS ON P12**

Ban on Britain flights over new virus strain

BERLIN: Several European Union countries were stopping flights from Britain, where a quickly spreading variant of the coronavirus has alarmed officials and sent London and south-eastern England into lockdown.

The Netherlands was the first on Sunday to announce an immediate ban on flights, with similar advisories quickly following from Belgium, Austria and Italy.

In Germany, a government spokesperson said plans were being drawn to restrict travel with



A traveller walks outside Euston railway station in London, Britain. – **Retuers**

ing from Sunday and over the Christmas period. The measures affect 16 million people. With some exceptions, in the hardest-hit areas, households are not allowed to mix, it is forbidden to stay overnight away from home and all non-essential shops are closed.

French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel spoke with top European Union leaders by phone on Sunday to iron out a joint approach. **SEE ALSO P8**

WTO hails Oman's role in boosting global trade

MUSCAT: The Sultanate's efforts to reinforce international trade and its pivotal role in the World Trade Organisation in various levels and fields has been commended by the officials of the organisation.

The WTO officials affirmed that the Sultanate is supportive of the international organisation's activities and it has a long history in international trade.

The Sultanate's legacy in global trade is being utilised through its membership in the WTO with high efficiency being a supportive partner which is ready to help other member states within the organisation.

They added that the Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) hosts the WTO chair and reaffirmed that the Sultanate's joining the conventions on curbing harmful trade practices gave local companies the right to protect their products against such practices. These conventions have contributed to an increased inflow of foreign investments. **TURN TO P2**

Cost-reflective tariffs on ELECTRICITY, WATER from January

FROM PAGE 1

NEW TARIFF STRUCTURE

The new tariff structure includes three categories: Large consumers’ category, which includes all subscribers of all categories (except for the residential category) who consume 100 megawatt hours per year or more. The CRT will be applied to all subscribers in this category.

The second category is for non-residential consumption where all the subscribers’ categories (industrial, commercial, government and tourism) have been merged to form a single tariff. Herein, the winter tariff becomes 21 baisas per kilowatt and the summer tariff becomes 29 baisas. The tariff for agricultural and fisheries activities, which will continue to be applied as a special tariff for these two sectors, was amended so that it would be 12 baisas for consumption from (0-3,000), 16 baisas for consumption from (3001-6,000) kilowatt, and 24 baisas for consumption over 6,000 kilowatts. There is also a category for residential consumption where its tariff has been divided into the citizen’s account tariff, the resident’s account tariff, and the additional accounts tariff.

The citizen account tariff will be applied to accounts registered in the names of citizens, not exceeding two accounts for each citizen. Fifteen baisas was specified for consumption from (0-200) kilowatt, 20 baisas for consumption from (2001-4000), and 30 baisas for consumption exceeding 4,000 kilowatts. Tariffs of resident accounts and additional accounts will be applied to accounts registered in the names of residents and additional accounts exceeding two accounts per citizen. An amount of 20 baisas was specified for consumption from (0-500) kilowatt, 25 baisas for consumption from (501-1,500), and 30 baisas for consumption that excess

1,500 kilowatts.

As for water, the new tariff structure includes the category of non-residential consumption which includes all non-residential uses. It has been decided that 4.5 baisas is identified per gallon and 990 baisas per cubic metre. The second category is residential consumption where tariff has been divided into citizen account, resident’s account and additional accounts. The tariff of the citizen’s account will be applied to accounts registered in the names of citizens, not exceeding two accounts for each citizen as 2.5 baisas per gallon and 550 baisas per cubic metre.

The resident account and the additional accounts will be applied to those registered in the names of residents and additional accounts that exceed two accounts per citizen. They are identified to be 3 baisa per gallon and 660 baisa per cubic metre.

SUPPORT SYSTEM

As for the mechanism for providing support to those who are eligible in the national support system, it will be through direct subsidies, which represents 33 per cent of the value of the bill and reaches a limited consumption ceiling (4,000 kilowatt / month) for electricity.

The same mechanism will be applied to water in the coming stages.

The categories covered by the subsidy include the following: If the monthly family income is less than RO 500, regardless of the number of family members. If the family income is RO 750 or less and the number of family members is five or more, if the income is RO 1,000 or less and the number of members is seven or more, if the income is RO 1,250 and the number of members is nine or more. But if the income is more than RO 1,250, the family is not covered by the support, regardless of the number of family members.

Electricity residential tariff in the Sultanate has not changed since 1987, which entailed an annual growth of subsidy that grew from RO 650 million in 2016 to RO 750 million by 2020, constituting 5 per cent of the State Budget and about 20 per cent of the expected deficit during 2021. If the government does not undertake any action about the subsidy, it may grow to **RO 900 MILLION BY 2025**

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA FOR SOCIAL PROTECTION NET

Number of household members	Household monthly income (RO)	Eligibility
Whatever the number	500 or less	Included
Five members or more	750 or less	Included
Seven members or more	1000 or less	Included
Nine members or more	1250 or less	Included
Whatever the number	More than 1250	Not included

WTO hails Oman’s role in boosting global trade

FROM PAGE 1

According to the latest data issued by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI), the overall foreign direct investment (FDI) amounted to RO 15.64 billion at the end of the first quarter of 2020.

The Deputy Director-General of WTO said: “We are lucky that the Sultanate is a member of the WTO for several reasons. One of these is its long history in international trade.”

Former US ambassador to

the World Trade Organisation, Peter Allgeier, said: “The WTO has benefited from the Sultanate’s constructive participation at a time when the organisation is seeking to confront a lot of challenges facing the international trade system. The US is grateful to the Sultanate for being the first Arab country to recognise the US as a young country at the beginning of the 19th century.”

Hilda bint Ali al Hinaiyah, representative of the Sultanate’s office at the WTO in Geneva,

underscored the multiple benefits of the Sultanate’s WTO membership including carrying out structural reforms, modernisation of laws and systems and the opening of markets to the WTO member states.

She added that the organisation has 164 member states all of which have opened their markets to Omani products which in turn led to an increase in non-oil products exports over the past 20 years. The export of Omani products has been extended to North America and Latin America.

— ONA

The WTO has benefited from the Sultanate’s constructive participation at a time when the organisation is seeking to confront a lot of challenges facing the international trade system



NEW TARIFFS WILL BE EFFECTIVE FROM JANUARY

Expats to PAY MORE for electricity and water

SAMUEL KUTTY

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Citizens and expatriates will have to shell out more to avail of electricity and water from next year.

"In line with the programme for reforming electricity and water subsidies, new tariffs will be implemented for electricity and water services effective January 1 2021," said a statement from the Ministry of Finance. Notwithstanding the financial ability, both citizens and residents are currently getting electricity and water at subsidised rates. But from next month only those from the financially vulnerable will benefit from the scheme through the National Subsidy System.

According to the statement, the Residential segment has been divided into two main categories — Citizen Account Tariff and Resident and Additional Accounts Tariff.

The Citizen Account Tariff will be applied to accounts registered in the names of citizens not exceeding two accounts per citizen. "Resident and additional accounts tariff will be applied to accounts registered in the names of residents and additional accounts for citizens beyond the allowable two accounts under the Citizen Account Tariff."

The Citizen Account Tariff will be applied to accounts registered in the names of citizens not exceeding two accounts per citizen. According to the statement, a tariff of 15 baisa has been indicated for consumption from 0-200 kilowatts, 20 baisa for consumption from 2001-400, and 30 baisa for consumption exceeding 4000 kilowatts.

Tariffs of resident accounts and additional accounts will be applied to accounts registered in the names of residents and additional accounts exceeding two accounts per citizen.

As per the new tariff system, 20 baisa has been specified for consumption from 0-500 kilowatt, 25 baisa for consumption from 501-150), and 30 baisa for consumption that excess 1500 kilowatts. Like electricity, the residential tariff for water is divided into Citizen Account Tariff, and Resident and Additional Accounts Tariff. Whereas the Citizen Account Tariff will be

applied to accounts registered in the names of citizens not exceeding two accounts per citizen, the Resident and Additional Accounts Tariff will be applied to accounts registered in the names of residents and additional accounts for citizens beyond the allowable basic two accounts under the 'Citizen Account Tariff'.

It has been decided that 4.5 baisa is identified per gallon and 990 baisa per cubic metre. The tariff of the citizen's account will be applied to accounts registered in the names of citizens, not exceeding two accounts for each citizen as 2.5 baisa per gallon and 550 baisa per cubic metre.

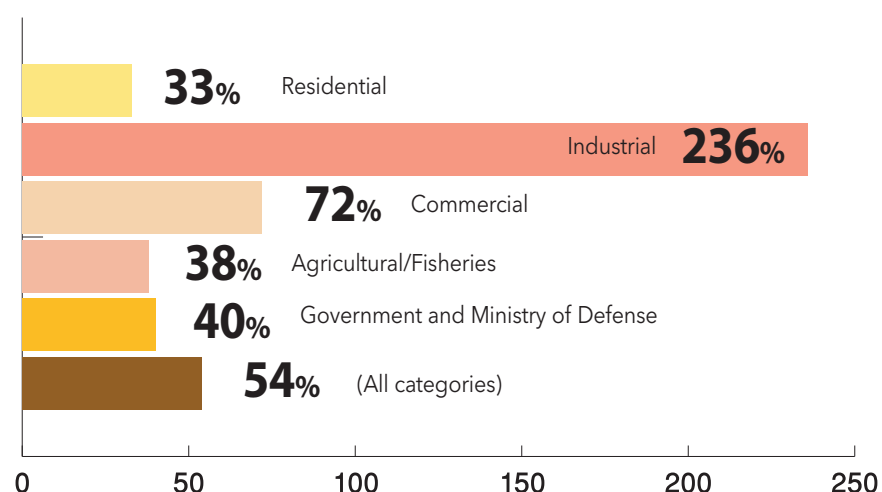
The resident account and the additional accounts will be applied to those registered in the names of residents and additional accounts that exceed two accounts per citizen. They are identified to be 3 baisa per gallon and 660 baisa per cubic metre.



Average consumption (Megawatt/Hour)

	2018	2005
Residential	17.0	12.8
Industrial	5,253	1,562
Commercial	29.6	17.2
Agricultural/Fisheries	57.3	41.4
Government and Ministry of Defence	105.7	75.5
All categories	27.5	17.9

VARIATION RATE



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Haya Water launches sewage project in Amerat

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 20

Haya Water inaugurated a sewage project in the Wilayat of Al Amerat to treat the waste water. The project was opened officially by Isam bin Saud al Zadjali, Chairman of Muscat Municipality, in the presence of Majlis Ash'shura, and Municipality Councils Members, Al Amerat Shaikhs and citizens.

In his speech, Sulieman bin Khamis al Qasmi, Haya Water's Acting CEO, said: "The new development in the Wilayat included a new sewage treatment plant, pumping stations with sewage and treated water networks, in addition to a network of optical fibre lines. The total cost of those projects about RO 92 million."

The trial operation was in December 2019. After four months, the sewage networks that are connected to the units through the two plumbing



stations were operated.

The treatment unit of Al Amerat Sewage Treatment Plant (STP), has a capacity of 18000 cubic meters per day in its first phase. The STP is designed to be

expanded in the second phase to 36000 cubic meters per day.

Al Qasmi added that the total length of the main and subsidiaries sewage networks that were implemented in

parallel with this project 575 km. In addition, the project including around 40,000 inspection rooms in different sizes."

The total number of units that are connected are

9,570 including residential, government and commercial units. Moreover, 4,830 connections that were implemented for the future urban expansion.

The new development in the Wilayat included a new sewage treatment plant, pumping stations with sewage and treated water networks, in addition to a network of optical fibre lines. The total cost of those projects about RO 92 million

SULIEMAN BIN KHAMIS AL QASMI
Haya Water's Acting CEO

The STP consists of 40 km of treated water networks equipped with several distribution points. It also consists of 700 km of the fibre optics and 7000 inspection rooms for fibre optics.

Health economics essential for Oman Vision 2040



STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 20

The Ministry of Health (MOH) represented by the Directorate General of Planning and Studies held a webinar on Sunday on health economics and financing under the auspices of Dr Fatima al Ajmi, MoH's Under-Secretary for Administrative, Financial, and Planning Affairs.

Dr Halima al Hinai, Acting Director-General for Planning and Studies attended the webinar along with a number of Directors-General and Directors from the Ministry and the Governorates.

Dr Al Ajmi emphasised in her welcome note the significance of health economics being an essential tool for planning and achieving Oman Vision 2040. Furthermore, MoH's Under-Secretary for Administrative, Financial, and Planning Affairs affirmed the Ministry's determination to establish an effective system for health economics and financing within MoH, thus promoting and uplifting health system competency and directing resources towards priorities.

The webinar is reflecting the continuous collaboration between MoH and the international organisation in terms of exchanging expertise and learning from international experience with regard to health field, pointed out Dr Halima al

Hinai, Acting Director-General for Planning and Studies.

The webinar targeted MOH's decisions makers with the aim of informing them about the importance of incorporating health economics within the strategic planning and advocating the establishment of an effective health economics system within the Ministry of Health.

Sessions addressed the Sultanate's health sector demographic, epidemiological, financial, and social challenges that have become apparent during COVID-19 pandemic, in addition to the importance of finding strategic mechanisms and plans to reduce these challenges.

Definition of health economics and its powerful tools to improve the decision making process in health sector were also reviewed. Moreover, sessions touched upon the significance of health economics in determining health priorities under the limited and inadequate financial resources that all countries of the world suffer from, including the Sultanate.

It should be noted that the webinar is part of the mission of the health economist Dr. Aaron Blackman conducted in collaboration with the WHO office in Oman and British Embassy to building capacity and developing competencies in the field of health economics and healthcare financing.

Tax incentives to private sector ends soon

MUSCAT: The Tax Authority has announced the expiry of taxation incentives offered to private sector establishments for taxes due during 2020. The incentives were announced earlier by the Supreme Committee tasked with tackling developments

resulting from coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic with a view to handling the economic impacts of the pandemic and the resumption of business activities.

In a statement received by Oman News Agency (ONA)

on Sunday, the Tax Authority urged all tax payers to submit their declarations and disclosure accounts about the fiscal year ending on December 31, 2019 and any other accounting period or fiscal year ending after this date. The Tax Authority also

called for the settlement of all due taxes payable for this tax year and before by December 31, 2020, at the latest, to avoid any fines or additional tax that might result from non-submission of tax declarations or disclosure statements. — ONA

Arrival of local produce pulls down prices



PHOTOS BY RAFAQQ PARAMBATH

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Prices of fruits and vegetables in the Sultanate have started coming down with the arrival of the local produce from across the country resting in reduced prices of the same, according to the market monitors.

A kilo of tomato which was sold at 500 baisa till last week was available for around 350 baisa with more produce reaching the market, prices are posed to dip

further, suppliers have said.

"Prices of local fruits and vegetables are to reduce further in the coming days, thanks to the beginning of harvest season in the country." Oman's crops cultivation season usually begins in December and lasts till March or so. Oman produces, besides tomato, chilli, pumpkin, cauliflower, ladies finger, cabbage, beans, cucumber, brinjal (eggplant) and a wide variety of leafy vegetables.

"We are expecting a better

climate this year highly congruent to better cultivation against last year which was not favourable," Ahmed al Shuraiqi, a Bahla-based farmer in his 70s told the Observer.

According to him, the increased production would reflect in augmented supply of the same in the local market resulting in reduced prices. One of the few countries which have stringent policy on quality and prices, Oman receives its major chunk of fresh food supplies from abroad.

With the distorted flight services during the pandemic, prices have made a sharp rise in the past few months. "We import majority fruits and vegetables from Asian, European, and the Far East and the increased transportation cost in the past few months has made prices high," said Abdulwahid of Suhul al Fayha, a leading fresh food supplier, adding "The present scenario would make demand for Omani fruits and vegetables high helping the local farmers."



Chartered flights helped airports to ease loss: CEO

STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT, DEC 20

Oman Airports presented the achievements of its staff members at the fifth consecutive annual CEO meeting on Sunday. Oman Airport's CEO, Shaikh Aimen al Hosni, conducted a visual presentation that encompassed all the achievements made despite the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to the closure of all international airports and the disruption of air traffic.

The Supreme Committee on COVID-19 allowed Oman Airports minimise eminent economic losses, and to safely orchestrate unlisted private flights with the assistance of national and international transporters, and the aid of some of the embassies of neighbouring countries.

The CEO of Oman Airports said that the complete return to operations was proving itself to be particularly challenging. "With the solidarity of all relevant parties and their assistance, the perseverance of national cadres in dealing with any new developments, and the professionalism of the



Muscat Airport first in the Middle East to acquire the health certification that the ACI (Airports Council International) recently adopted to recognise exceptionally thorough, professional and high-standard health and safety measures, procedures and policies

company's employees, Muscat Airport, Salalah Airport, Duqm Airport, and the fuel field airports all managed to gradually return to operations much quicker than anticipated."

The CEO said that although internationally, the aviation sector was met with countless challenges after the Pandemic, the company still managed to become the first airport in the Middle East to acquire the health certification that the ACI (Airports Council International) recently adopted to recognise exceptionally thorough, professional and high-standard health and safety measures, procedures

and policies. The CEO briefly outlined how Oman Airports managed to meet the objectives it set out for in its previous strategies for Vision 2020.

He said that in 2019, Muscat Airport managed to rank seventh internationally in the 15-25 million passengers' category in the service-quality assessment programme designed by the ACI, and Salalah Airport managed to rank fourth internationally in the 2 million passenger category.

The ACI's ranking system followed a very rigorous set of criteria, making the achievement of such rankings

a tremendous feat on a global scale. Al Hosni said that while these rankings are worth celebrating, they will only serve to motivate Oman Airports to direct its future operations towards reaching greater heights of excellence and exceeding, by a large margin, previously set expectations.

The CEO concluded the presentation by setting the outlines for the new five-year strategy that will be adopted by the company to meet the objectives of Vision 2040, which is setting out to be a fundamental cornerstone in the Sultanate's upcoming developmental direction.

■ TWO FISHING BOATS LAUNCHED



The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR) on Sunday launched two fishing vessels, Santiago and Fakhr al Bahar. The Santiago vessel belongs to the Omani Fish Company and uses hedge nets to catch small fish. Santiago rented by the Omani Fish Company is 65 metres long, 13.2 metres wide, with a total load of 1,674 tonnes. It has six fish conservation tanks, works in a seawater cooling method at a temperature -1 with a storage capacity of 1,200 tonnes. Its crew consists of ten foreign sailors and four Omanis. Fakhr al Bahar vessel, owned by Fakhr al Bahar Company, is registered under the Omani flag, is 38.65 metres long and 12 metres wide. The total shipload of the vessel is 963 tonnes while the netload is 96 tonnes.

12,474 residential plots allotted

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning allotted a total of 12,474 residential properties across the country at the end of November 2020, compared to 25,220 plots in the same period of 2019, which is a decrease of 50.5 per cent, according to statistics released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

The Governorate of North Al Sharqiyah was allotted 2,040 plots at the end of November 2020, which is the highest among governorates. This was followed by South Al Sharqiyah with 1,768; Al Dakhiliyah with 1,726 plots; Muscat with 1,680 plots; Ad Dhahirah with 1,425; and North Al Batinah with 1,398 properties.

There were 1,158 properties granted in Dhofar, 661 plots in South Al Batinah, 269 in Al Wusta, and 199 in Musandam. Al Buraimi was allotted 150 plots, which is the lowest among governorates.

Meanwhile, 342 residential plots were granted in South Al Sharqiyah in November 2020, and it was the highest among



governorates. Meanwhile, the governorates of Dhofar and Al Dhahirah witnessed a phenomenal increase in the number of lands allotted at the end of November 2020 compared to the same period of 2019 whereas allotment

of properties in the rest of the governorates showed a marked decline during the period of study.

The Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning allotted a total of 28,099 residential plots in 2019.

— ONA

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Electronic Tender (s)



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88/2020	REINFORCEMENT OF (11/0.433 KV)2021, PHASE (1) IN AL BURAIMI	C	29/12/2020	5/1/2021	33 /=
89/2020	NEW OUTGOING 11KV FEEDER, S FROM AL HADIRA PSS PHASE 2 AT SOHAR IN NORTH BATINAH GOVERNORATE	C	30/12/2020	5/1/2021	146 /=

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The Tenderers should enclose a copy of Bank Guarantee issued by any registered bank in the Sultanate of Oman for a value of (1%) of the submitted bid value valid for a period of (90) days from the date of Submission, and addressed to The Chairman of the Tender Committee. The original Bid Bond to be delivered in sealed envelope, and the tender number and title of project only are to be mentioned on the envelopes. The place of submission the original bond would be at MJEC Contracts & tenders office at MJEC building in AL Sawari Center in Sohar or at MJEC Contracts & tenders office at Muscat in Al Mubailah- opposite to the industrial Area beside to Bank Sohar, before 10 A.M. according to the assigned date of submission of the tender. Any Submission of original tender bond after the time and date mentioned in the advertisement will not be accepted and tenderer offer will be rejected.

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Palestinians prepare for post-Abbas power struggle

BALATA CAMP: In Palestinian refugee camps in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, some residents are preparing weapons for a potential power struggle when president Mahmud Abbas finally leaves the stage.

Abbas, 85, leader of the Fatah movement and of the Palestinian Authority (PA), has promised legislative and presidential elections in 2021, for the first time in almost 15 years.

Rivals are already seeking to build up a power-base.

In Balata camp, outside the city of Nablus, walls are plastered with posters picturing Hatem Abu Rizq, regarded as a “martyr” of Palestinian infighting.

On October 31, Palestinian media reported one dead and others wounded in Balata, where 30,000 people are crammed into one quarter of a square kilometre.

This time, the casualties were not the result of a clash with Israeli forces, although Abu Rizq spent almost 10 years in Israeli jails for his part in the Palestinian uprising of 2000 to 2005.

At the age of 35, he died in the eruption of intra-Palestinian violence in October.

Palestinian officials said he was killed by the premature explosion of a bomb he was about to detonate.

“But in truth he was killed



Palestinian children look out of their family's home window on a rainy day at Deir al Balah refugee camp in the central Gaza Strip. – Reuters

by shots,” says his mother, Um Hatem Abu Rizq, in the family’s tiny apartment in a dilapidated concrete building.

“He was looking to fight corruption, that’s why they didn’t

like him,” she weeps, kissing a giant poster of her son.

Was he working for exiled former Fatah Gaza security chief Mohammed Dahlan, as alleged by PA officials?

“If Hatem were with Dahlan, we would not live in such an apartment,” said his mother, whose two other sons are in hiding, fearing for their lives.

In the Palestinian territories,

Dahlan’s name comes up repeatedly in connection with the normalisation agreements between Israel and the Arab countries.

His name has been mentioned

as a possible contender for a “successor” to the 85-year-old Abbas, who has headed the Palestinian Authority since 2005 after the 2004 death of Yasser Arafat.

The PA’s governor of Nablus, Ibrahim Ramadan, has no doubt about Abu Rizq’s loyalties.

“Hatem Abu Rizq was with Dahlan,” he said, adding that since his death, 14 members of the government security forces have been wounded in attacks in Balata.

“These people only understand the language of force and need to understand that we are strong,” he said.

The United Nations envoy for the Middle East, Nickolay Mladenov, said he was “deeply concerned” about growing tensions between residents of Balata camp and the Palestinian security forces, and called for “all parties to show restraint”.

Emad Zaki, who heads a committee that oversees services for camp residents, said people wanted change.

“In Balata, it is not that people like Dahlan, but they are looking for an alternative to improve their lot... it is fertile ground.”

He said the dispute has sparked an influx of weapons into the camp outpacing that of the uprising, or intifada, of 20 years ago. — AFP

Bleak Christmas for Iraqi refugees stuck in Jordan

AMMAN: Saad Polus Qiryaqoz bitterly remembers the festive Christmas season in his Iraqi hometown of Bartella before he was forced to flee to neighbouring Jordan when militant took it over.

Up until 2014, when the IS group swept the Nineveh Plain in northern Iraq, Christians like Qiryaqoz had pulled out the stops over Christmas with celebrations lasting a whole month, he said.

“Our life was beautiful and we were happy before the IS seized our town and destroyed everything,” said the engineer and father of three in his modest apartment in the eastern Amman suburb of Marka. “Our life has now changed forever,” he added, surrounded by his wife, his son and one of his daughters, a small Christmas tree standing in a corner of the living room.

“Back home, Christmas lasted



An Iraqi refugee in Jordan prays at Church in Marka. – AFP

a whole month and there would be a 15-metre high Christmas tree in the square near the church. We would gather there with family and friends to pray and sing hymns... Now all that is over.”

More than 66,000 Iraqis live in Jordan, the United Nations says.

They were forced out in waves by conflict, starting with the 1990 first Gulf War, the 2003

US-led invasion of Iraq and the 2014 emergence of IS. Of those, between 12,000 and 18,000 are Christians, according to Wael Suleiman, who heads the Catholic charity Caritas in Jordan.

Most of the refugees in Jordan are there awaiting clearance to emigrate to a third country and build a new life, mostly because Jordanian law forbids them from holding jobs.

In 2016, two years after IS was driven out of Bartella and most of the Christian heartland in northern Iraq by Iraqi forces, Qiryaqoz, who had sought refuge in nearby Arbil, returned for a visit.

It was a shock, said the 56-year-old, “and there was no other option but to flee and find a safe haven for my family”, so in the spring of 2017, they moved to Jordan. — AFP

■ DISPLACED LIBYANS RETURN HOME AFTER 7 YEARS



Youths cycle along a road past destroyed buildings in the city of Tawergha, some 200 kilometres east of Libya’s capital close to the port city of Misrata. When Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi was toppled, people took revenge on those they saw as his supporters – including the entire town of Tawergha, whose 40,000 residents were forced to flee. Now, almost a decade later since militia forces rampaged through the town torching homes, destroying buildings and leaving farms in ruins, the people of Tawergha are coming home after years living in makeshift tent camps. – AFP

RIYADH

Rare Christmas sales at gift shops

Christmas trees and glittery ornaments are for sale at a Saudi gift shop, a once unthinkable sight in the Kingdom.

In recent years, festive sales have gradually crept into the capital Riyadh

“I didn’t ever imagine I’d see this” in Saudi Arabia, a Riyadh resident said at the shop selling trees, Santa Claus outfits as well as tinsel, baubles and other ornaments.

“I am surprised,” said the resident, declining to be



identified.

For decades, Christmas sales were largely underground, and Christians from the Philippines, Lebanon and other countries celebrated behind closed doors or in expat enclaves. — AFP

KHARTOUM

Sudan-Ethiopia border demarcation talks set

Sudan and Ethiopia will hold negotiations next week to delineate their shared border, a statement from Sudanese Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok’s office said on Sunday. The talks will be held on Tuesday, a week after Ethiopian forces reportedly ambushed and killed Sudanese troops along the border. “Hamdok and his Ethiopian counterpart Abiy Ahmed on Sunday discussed the meeting of the committee for delineating the borders which will be held on December 22,” the statement said. The two leaders met on the margins of a summit underway on Sunday in Djibouti of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), an East African regional bloc comprising eight countries. The last border talks were held in May in Addis Ababa but another meeting scheduled for the following month was cancelled. Sudan and Ethiopia share a 1,600-kilometre-long long border. In 1902 a deal to draw up the frontier was struck between Great Britain, the colonial power in Sudan at the time, and Ethiopia but the agreement lacked clear demarcation lines.

TEL AVIV

Facebook removes anti-vaccine ‘fake news’

Facebook has taken down content that spread lies in Israel against coronavirus vaccinations as the government seeks to drum up support for the programme, the Justice Ministry said on Sunday.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Saturday became the first person to be vaccinated in Israel. Opinion polls show some two-thirds of the public want to follow suit. The Justice Ministry said that, at its request, Facebook took down four



groups at the weekend that had disseminated texts, photographs and videos with “deliberately mendacious content designed to mislead about coronavirus vaccines”. — AFP

In brief

■ MANILA



8 DEAD IN FLOODS AS THOUSANDS FLEE HOMES

Nearly 10,000 people were evacuated from their homes in the northeastern Philippines as heavy rain across the country left at least eight people dead, authorities said on Sunday. The storm — which has inundated villages and destroyed scores of houses in recent days — is the latest to batter the disaster-prone archipelago.

Floodwaters reached waist-deep in 14 towns in the Cagayan Valley in the northeast of the main island of Luzon — which saw the worst flooding in decades last month — regional civil defence officer Francis Joseph Reyes said. — **dpa**

■ BANGKOK



BIGGEST SEAFOOD MARKET SHUT AFTER OUTBREAK

Thailand will test more than 10,000 people for coronavirus after an outbreak linked to its biggest seafood market, officials said on Sunday. Nearly 700 new infections have been linked to Mahachai market and port since a 67-year-old female prawn seller tested positive on Thursday — most cases among Myanmar workers who toil in the kingdom's multi-billion-dollar seafood industry.

Authorities ordered Myanmar workers around the market not to leave their residences. "We are locking and banning them from moving," the health ministry's permanent secretary, Kietphgum Wongit, said Sunday — adding authorities would provide them with food and water. — **AFP**

■ JAKARTA



LION AIR PLANE SKIDS OFF THE RUNWAY

A Lion Air passenger plane skidded off a runway after landing at Radin Inten airport in Lampung on the Indonesian island of Sumatra, local media reported on Sunday.

"All passengers and crew members are safe. They have been evacuated to the airport's terminal," Lion Air spokesman Danang Mandala Prihantoro was quoted as saying.

He added that the plane Boeing 737-900ER was travelling at low speed after it had landed and was turning towards the apron when it skidded off the runway.

The plane had flown in from Batam in Sumatra's Riau Island province and was flying to Tanjung Karang. — **Reuters**



The site of an attack in Kabul. — **AFP**

Nine dead as car bombing targets Afghan lawmaker

KABUL: A car bombing in Kabul targeting an Afghan lawmaker killed at least nine people, officials said.

Lawmaker Khan Mohammad Wardak survived the blast but is among 20 injured including women and children, Afghan Interior Minister Massoud Andarabi said.

It is unclear whether the explosive was planted in a car parked on the lawmaker's route or if a vehicle with the bomb was being driven by a bomber, Andarabi added.

No one has claimed responsibility for the blast.

Afghanistan has seen a sharp rise in violence, particularly bombings, in recent weeks as the Afghan government and Taliban

hold talks to find an end to the country's almost 20-year-long war. Separate bombings were also reported on Sunday in the provinces of Logar, Nangarhar, Helmand and Badakhshan, in which a number of civilians and security forces members were killed and injured.

On Friday, a suspected rickshaw bomb blast killed at least 15 civilians, including 11 children, in central Ghazni province.

The Afghan interior ministry in a statement said that the Taliban had killed 487 civilians and injured 1,049 others by carrying out 35 suicide attacks and 507 blasts in across the country over the past three months.

— **Reuters**

Nepal heads to election after PM loses majority

KATHMANDU: Nepal's president dissolved parliament on Sunday at the request of Prime Minister K P Sharma Oli's cabinet and announced that general elections would be held in April and May, more than a year ahead of schedule.

The move plunges the Himalayan country, which has seen revolving-door governance since street protests restored multi-party democracy in 1990, into political turmoil as it battles the coronavirus pandemic.

Seven ministers stepped down, including the tourism head, citing Oli's decision to go against the "popular mandate" given to them in the 2017 general election. Protesters burned effigies of him in various parts of the capital Kathmandu.

President Bidhya Devi Bhandari's office said in a statement that the April 30 and May 10 voting dates were recommended by Oli's cabinet following an emergency meeting.

Oli, 68, pushed for a fresh mandate after his Nepal Communist Party (NCP) accused him of sidelining his party in government decisions and appointments. He had led an alliance with former Maoist rebels to a landslide win in the last vote.

"The prime minister has lost the majority in the parliamentary



Riot police stand guard in Kathmandu as people protest after the parliament was dissolved on Monday. — **Reuters**

The prime minister has lost the majority in the parliamentary party, central committee and the secretariat of the party

BISHNU RIJAL

NCP central committee member

party, central committee and the secretariat of the party," said Bishnu Rijal, an NCP central committee member.

"Instead of seeking a compromise within the party, he chose to dissolve parliament."

Oli's decision came after some lawmakers from his party registered a vote of no confidence against him in the 275-member lower house of parliament, NCP lawmaker Pampha Bhusal said.

Sandwiched between China and India, politics in Nepal is also influenced by the priorities of its giant neighbours. India has been pushing back against Beijing's growing clout in a country that New Delhi considers its own backyard. — **AFP**

Modi surprises with Sikh temple visit amid farm protests

NEW DELHI: Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi made an unscheduled visit to a Sikh temple in New Delhi on Sunday, kneeling down in respect and freely clicking pictures with visitors at a time when the community is leading massive protests against his farm reforms.

Sikhs in India and abroad have rallied against recent deregulation of agriculture markets that they fear would

erode farm incomes by giving a greater say to profit-chasing private companies, instead of assuring a minimum price like in government-regulated wholesale markets.

Protesting farmers, mainly from Sikh-dominated Punjab and neighbouring Haryana, have blocked highways into New Delhi for the past three weeks demanding a repeal of the laws, which the government says



Farmers sit on a tractor as they listen to a speaker during a protest against the newly passed farm bills at Singhu border near New Delhi. — **Reuters**

widens the agriculture market and are crucial to boost storage and other infrastructure.

The protesters have repeatedly rebuffed Modi and his ministers' attempts to reach a compromise, in what has become the biggest challenge from the country's farmers in his six-year rule. On Wednesday, a 65-year-old Sikh priest committed suicide at one of the protest sites.

— **Reuters**

COVID-19: Sydney isolated from rest of the country

SYDNEY: Sydney was isolated from the rest of Australia on Sunday after all of the country's states and territories imposed travel restrictions on its residents as a coronavirus cluster in the city grew to around 70.

The Australian Capital Territory (ACT) sent a stern 'do not come to us' message to Sydney, the country's most populous city of more than five million people, warning its residents they would be quarantined for 14 days if they arrived. "If you are not an ACT resident and have been in greater Sydney...our message is simple: do not travel to the ACT," the ACT health department said.

The states of Victoria and Queensland, and the Northern Territory, banned people arriving from Sydney as of Monday. Queensland police will reintroduce road checkpoints at the New South Wales (NSW) state border to help enforce the new declaration of greater Sydney as a COVID-19 hotspot.



A health official takes samples for COVID-19 tests from residents of the northern beaches in Sydney on Sunday. — **AFP**

South Australia state imposed a 14-day quarantine for Sydney arrivals on Sunday and banned

travellers from affected suburbs. The island state of Tasmania took similar steps on Saturday. Western

Australia state imposed a hard border closure. Travellers from elsewhere in NSW, where Sydney

is the state capital, will require documents showing they are not coming from the affected Sydney suburbs if they wish to cross state borders.

About a quarter of a million people in Sydney's northern beach suburbs where the outbreak has occurred have been put into a strict lockdown until Christmas Eve. "If we can lockdown here and get rid of it, fantastic and everyone else can be free," Rachel Buxcon, a retired northern beaches resident said. "But if it extends, then we're all in it together."

NSW State Premier Gladys Berejiklian said public gathering across the rest of Sydney will be limited, with household gatherings capped at 10 participants and hospitality venues at 300, among other restrictions. "We must take this action now to ensure we keep on top of this outbreak," said Berejiklian. She also urged people in the greater Sydney area to wear masks in public, although it was not mandatory. — **Reuters**

Dozens of children freed after abduction in Nigeria



Muhammed Bello, a rescued student, is carried by his father as his relatives celebrate after he returned home in Kankara. – Reuters

KANO: Local vigilantes rescued dozens of schoolchildren abducted by bandits in the northern Nigerian state of Katsina after a gun battle, police said on Sunday.

Gunmen had abducted about 80 children on Saturday as they returned to Mahuta village after having attended a religious ceremony, said police spokesman Gambo Isah, of Katsina state police.

The incident came barely 48 hours after the release of 344 schoolboys kidnapped from a boarding school by bandits and held for six days.

According to local people, the number of children rescued following Saturday’s attack came to 113.

When the news spread across Mahuta, residents and vigilantes mobilised and went after the kidnappers, said Abdullahi Sada, leader

of a local vigilante group.

They set off in pursuit of the gunmen, who had been identified as ethnic Fulani herders.

“We laid siege on the area we knew they were holding the children and also took some Fulani settlements in the area hostage, warning that if anything happened to our children no Fulani would live in the area henceforth,” said Sada.

“They released 60 children around 3 am and this morning they called and said they had released the remaining 53 who are now being ferried from the bush,” he said. The children, from various seminaries in the town, had been travelling in the company of their teachers when they were kidnapped, said one of the teachers who gave his first name Tijjani.

— AFP

EU countries halt flights from UK as new virus strain spreads

LONDON: Several European countries placed new restrictions on travel to and from the United Kingdom on Sunday due to concern over a new strain of the coronavirus that is spreading rapidly there.

Belgium said it would close its borders to trains and planes coming from the United Kingdom and the Netherlands also suspended flights. Italy said it was planning a similar ban.

Germany could also impose restrictions on flights from the United Kingdom and South Africa — which has also detected a new coronavirus strain, a German Health Ministry official said.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and scientists announced on Saturday that the new virus strain had led to spiralling infection numbers.

The UK government tightened its COVID-19 restrictions for London and nearby areas and disrupted the Christmas holiday plans of millions of people.

Belgian Prime Minister Alexander de Croo said the ban on incoming travel from Britain covers Eurostar services via the Channel Tunnel and will take effect for at least 24 hours from midnight on Sunday, broadcaster VRT said.

Belgium was also in touch with France over road transit



Travellers prepare to depart on the high-speed Eurostar service from St Pancras International railway station in London. – AFP

passengers from Britain, VRT said.

Italian Foreign Minister Luigi di Maio, announcing plans to halt flights to and from Britain, said: “Our priority is to protect Italy and our compatriots.”

The Netherlands banned flights carrying passengers from the United Kingdom from Sunday and the restrictions will remain in place until January 1, the Dutch government said. It is monitoring developments and considering additional measures regarding other modes of transport.

The government issued an

advisory saying “do not travel” unless it is absolutely essential.

Germany wants to ban all flights from the United Kingdom from midnight until January 6, *Bild* newspaper said, citing government sources.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s cabinet will vote later on Sunday on a decree prepared by the health minister and she will hold a phone call with French President Emmanuel Macron to discuss a coordinated EU response to the new strain of the virus detected in Britain, it said.

The chancellor was not

immediately available for comment.

Austria is also planning to ban flights from Britain, the APA news agency said, citing the health ministry.

Spain said that in response to the moves by some of its European Union partners, it had asked the European Commission and the European Council for a coordinated response from the bloc to the new situation.

Otherwise it would act unilaterally to defend its interests and citizens, the Madrid government said. — AFP

Trump has ‘blind spot’ on Russia: Romney

WASHINGTON: Republican US Senator Mitt Romney said a widespread data breach across the US government was “extraordinarily damaging” and that President Donald Trump has a “blind spot” when it comes to Russia, which US officials believe was behind the hack.

“We’ve come to recognise that the president has a blind spot when it comes to Russia,” Romney said on NBC’s “Meet the Press,” one of a series of Sunday morning TV interviews.

US officials and researchers say they believe at least half-a-dozen US government agencies have been infiltrated and thousands exposed in what appears to be one of the biggest such hacks ever uncovered.

Trump only acknowledged the hacking on Saturday, almost a week after Reuters first reported



Trump walks with Putin before taking a family photo at the G20 Summit in Osaka. Trump on Saturday downplayed a massive cyberattack on US government agencies, declaring it ‘under control’ and undercutting the assessment by his own administration that Russia was to blame. – AFP

it, downplaying its importance and questioning whether the Russians were to blame.

Revelations of the hack come at a vulnerable time as

the US government grapples with a contentious presidential transition and the coronavirus health crisis.

US Senator Mark Warner,

the top Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee, said on ABC that the hack could still be going on and that officials had yet to determine its full scope. But he stopped short of the aggressive language used by Romney, who called the hack “an invasion

“This is in that gray area between espionage and an attack,” Warner said. Still, he backed Romney’s call for retaliation, saying Washington needed to make clear to adversaries “that if you take this kind of action we and others will strike back.”

The team of President-elect Joe Biden, a Democrat, will consider several options to punish Russia over its suspected role once he takes office, from financial sanctions to cyberattacks on Russian infrastructure, people familiar with the matter say.

— Reuters

WHO urges action to contain new virus

COPENHAGEN: The World Health Organization is calling on its members in Europe to step up measures against coronavirus in the face of the new variant circulating in Britain, its European branch said on Sunday.

Outside Britain, nine cases of the new strain have been reported in Denmark, as well as one case in the Netherlands and another in Australia, according to the WHO.

“Across Europe, where transmission is intense and widespread, countries need to redouble their control and prevention approaches,” a spokeswoman for WHO Europe said.

The UN agency urged its members worldwide to “increase the sequencing of

SARS-CoV-2 viruses where possible and sharing of sequence data internationally, in particular, to report if the same mutations of concern are found,” she said.

The WHO noted “preliminary signs that the variant may be able to spread more easily between people” and “preliminary information that the variant may affect (the) performance of some diagnostic assays (tests).”

It said it had “no evidence to indicate any change in disease severity, but this is also under investigation.” Last week, Europe has become the first region in the world to pass 500,000 deaths from COVID-19 since the pandemic broke out a year ago.

— AFP

BANGUI

Call for postponement of elections

An opposition coalition in Central African Republic on Sunday called for postponement of elections a week before the vote, as the party of ex-president Francois Bozize denied claims that it was attempting to stage a coup.

The Coalition of the Democratic Opposition (COD-2020) made the call a day after the government said Bozize intended to march on the capital with his men, as a separate group of rebel forces seized control of key routes



to Bangui.

Newly consolidated rebel forces control a huge chunk of the country and their recent surprise announcement of unity has heightened tensions ahead of the December 27 presidential and legislative elections. — AFP

BERLIN

Drone crashes into iconic church ruins

A drone crashed into the bell tower of Berlin’s Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church on Sunday, a police spokesman said.

The Memorial Church was built between 1891 to 1895. After its destruction in World War II, the tower was deliberately left as a ruin.

Two men were attempting to capture footage of the landmark — set at Berlin’s Breitscheidplatz square, the scene of a deadly truck attack several years ago — when their unmanned aircraft collided with the bell tower and got wedged into its facade. “The drone apparently had a weak battery and got stuck in the Eiermann facade,” the spokesman said, referring to Egon Eiermann, the architect in charge of the church’s post-War reconstruction. Firefighters were able to remove the drone after a two-hour operation that involved the use of a cherry picker.

There is a no-fly zone around the church, but the men — aged 27 and 31 — claimed not to have known this. The drone has been confiscated. — dpa

RIO DE JANEIRO

Vaccination rush not justified: Bolsonaro

Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro dismissed the global hurry to buy and distribute coronavirus vaccines in comments posted online.

“The rush is not justified,” Bolsonaro said in the video posted on social media by one of his sons, Eduardo Bolsonaro.

“It is interference in the lives of the people,” he said.

The comments came after the Brazilian leader, who has played down the seriousness of the virus from the start of the pandemic,



criticised vaccine developers Pfizer and BioNTech on Thursday and seemed to stoke public fears about potential side effects from getting a jab. — dpa

You are what you speak!

Languages and cultures are connected as usually a particular language points out to a specific group of people. However, when a person communicates in a language other than his or her mother tongue, it means that he or she is also interacting with another culture that speaks the language. One cannot understand a culture without accessing its language.

Therefore, when someone learns a new language, the language acquisition process does not only involve learning its alphabet, the word arrangement, sentence formation and the rules of grammar. In fact, this also extends to learning other common norms of a particular culture, including customs and behaviours. Generally, a language is very much deep-rooted in the culture.

There are studies indicating that people's personalities are not stable as they would think. Rather people modify their behaviours, attitudes and even the thinking process depending on the society currently associated with. Hence, when bilinguals switch from one language to another, they simultaneously shift their personalities as well. Learning a new language is just like becoming another person who lives a new life for every language he or she speaks.

Case in a point, when one grows up in a specific society, it is predictable to learn the glances, gestures and changes in the tone of voice and other communication tools to emphasise



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ONE CANNOT UNDERSTAND A CULTURE WITHOUT ACCESSING ITS LANGUAGE

or adjust what he or she wants to do or say. Normally, such specific communication techniques of one culture are being learned mostly by imitating and observing people of that culture. Learning a language is as easy as one could think. Language is not law; it is in fact like music; speech marks the jazz for one should first learn the basic rules, and then becomes good enough to improvise.

Consequently, as people always need each other in the day-to-day life necessities, they are obliged to interact with other cultures and learn other languages. This helps sustaining good communication and mutual understanding between people and nations worldwide. For that reason, the lack of intercultural relations can lead to mistrust and misunderstanding, which could obstruct the common co-operation between human beings.

Intercultural understanding begins with individuals who have language abilities and who can thereby reflect one's own nation, culture or traditions to other cultures. Every nation needs such individuals to preserve the global community. A competent person in other languages can bridge the gap between cultures, promote national security and world peace and successfully connect the world.

As Nelson Mandela stated, "If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his own language, that goes to his heart."

On the other hand, learning a new language involves several difficulties along the way. The journey to multilingualism is like a ceaseless road trip with countless dead ends. Among these difficulties is mastering the sounds or phonemes that make the language and understand words arrangement rules. They also must acquire new vocabularies from the new language as well as practice them in dialogues. However, this would not be possible without learners communicating with people from the culture itself and understand the culture on its own terms.

Each language marks the road map of a culture; it tells you where its people come from and where they are going. Arabic, for instance, with its different dialects marks one of the most popular languages across the world. It is a language with a rich history and is spoken by almost 1.5 billion people worldwide and in Unesco's 22 member states where Arabic is the official language of these countries. In addition to its native speakers, millions of other people know Arabic as a foreign language since it is the language of the Holy Quran.

Arabic has an impact on people all over the world as many countries today officially use the Arabic numerical system. Likewise, it is a key source of vocabulary for many other languages like Portuguese, Spanish, English, French Swahili and Uzbek. It is becoming the widely spoken language in the globe.

TRANSITION PERIOD

Four years of brinkmanship at Brexit border

JOE STENSON

As the UK braces for the end of the Brexit transition period, the Northern Irish town of Warrenpoint reflects on four years at the heart of Britain's turbulent departure from the EU.

A port hub humming with ferries and freight, Warrenpoint sits on the Irish border and was the site of the deadliest attack on British troops during "The Troubles". Since the 2016 vote to leave the EU, all those elements became shuffling pieces in the intractable puzzle of Britain's bid to split with the bloc.

"Unfortunately we are very much in Warrenpoint right at the centre of a whole plethora of issues, historic and recent, around Brexit," said Mark Kelly, the head of the town's chamber of commerce.

As co-owner of a hardware wholesaler stocking around 70 per cent of goods from the EU, he has spent more time than most musing on the future after January 1.

On that date, the Brexit transition period freezing EU-UK relations will end and the full effect of the split will be felt.

"We just have to make the very best of it," Kelly said.

Unfortunately we are very much in Warrenpoint right at the centre of a whole plethora of issues, historic and recent, around Brexit

MARK KELLY

Chamber of commerce

Britain voted to leave the EU in June 2016 but talks between London and Brussels immediately stalled over the thorny issue of the Irish border, which bisects the estuary of Warrenpoint.

The 500-km boundary between Northern Ireland and EU member state Ireland was largely dissolved as a sectarian

conflict known as "The Troubles" wound down.

But up until 1998, some 3,500 were killed by bombs and bullets as unionists, republicans and security forces battled over the destiny of the British province.

The border was a flashpoint in killings, and there were fears that resurrecting infrastructure to police the new frontier of the EU could unravel a fragile peace.

In Warrenpoint, those fears were freighted with a dark significance.

On August 27, 1979, two Irish Republican Army bombs killed 18 British soldiers at "Narrow Water", which marks the border — the deadliest attack on troops in the conflict.

Outside the town, the spot remains marked by a rank of well-tended poppy wreaths.

"Northern Ireland has been in the eye of the Brexit storm since the very start," explained Jane Morrice, the former head of the EU commission in Northern Ireland.

Morrice — also an architect of the 1998 "Good Friday" peace agreement — said "there was not an understanding among the majority in Great Britain (England, Scotland and Wales) of the impact the border would have on these discussions".

Eventually, a deal was sealed for the UK and the EU to split, keeping the border open by aligning Northern Ireland to the bloc's single market and customs union.

The dark prospect of a hard Irish border has been avoided but for Warrenpoint, the changes will still be dramatic.

Warrenpoint's port — the second busiest in the region — will soon be a de facto EU-UK border as checks which would have been needed at the Irish border take place here instead. — AFP

COURT FIGHT

In east Jerusalem, Palestinian gets locked in five-year legal battle over his home

CLAIRE GOUNON AND HIBA ASLAN

The television in Zuheir Rajabi's lounge does not show films or the news: the only footage projected on its huge flat screen is from 10 surveillance cameras installed around his modest east Jerusalem home.

Rajabi lives in Silwan, a poor neighbourhood just outside the Old City in Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem, made up of dusty trash-strewn alleys, with electrical cables dangling low off their poles. The moustached 49-year-old Palestinian said that the surveillance footage offers him a sense of protection in case Jewish settlers harass him or clashes with Israeli police erupt again outside his door.

"This piece of paper proves my father bought this land from a Palestinian in 1966," Rajabi said, waving an Arabic document from the Jordanian authorities who controlled east Jerusalem until 1967, when Israel seized it in the Six Day War. "But the Israeli courts don't want to hear about it," the father of four said with a grunt, seated in his living room with its orange and grey walls.

Rajabi has been locked in a five-year legal battle with three Israelis — Yitzhak Ralbag, Avraham Sheferman and Mordechai Zarbiv — who represent a trust registered in the name of Rabbi Moshe Benvenisti that claims ownership of the land where his home sits.

The Benvenisti trustees have cited



Palestinian Zuheir Rajabi shows a document from the Jordanian authorities proving his ownership of the house, in the east Jerusalem predominantly Arab neighbourhood of Silwan. — AFP

IN 1970, ISRAEL PASSED A LAW ALLOWING JEWS TO RECLAIM PROPERTY THEY HAD LOST IN OR BEFORE 1948

19th-century documents from the Ottoman Empire, which controlled Jerusalem before the British mandate era began in 1920, showing that Silwan land was owned by the trust.

The trust rented plots to Yemeni Jews, who lived in the area until they were forced out by Arab riots in 1929 and 1936. In 1970, Israel passed a law allowing Jews to reclaim property they had lost in or before 1948, the year of Israel's creation which also saw authority over east Jerusalem pass from British to Jordanian control. In cases where

former east Jerusalem Jewish landowners or their heirs were unavailable, Israel granted administration of the land rights to a government entity called the General Custodian.

In 2001, the General Custodian declared the Benvenisti trust the rightful owner of two plots in Silwan, including one that Rajabi calls home. Rajabi, who heads the local branch of a Palestinian community organisation that runs recreational activities, is due to face Ralbag, Sheferman and Zarbiv in court again on December 22. — AFP



Oman Sail to host 2021 Asian Windsurfing Championships in Musandam

MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman has been chosen to host the 2021 Asian Windsurfing Championships, marking a return to elite international competition for the Techno293, Techno293Plus and the foiling Formula Windsurfing class, which is included for the first time in Asian Windsurfing Championship history.

Taking place in Khasab, Musandam, and anticipating fifty of the best windsurfers to compete over six days between 11-16 October 2021.

These include past champions and promising young riders from 15 countries in Asia. Conditions are expected to be perfect for sailing with a combination of powerful sea breezes and pleasant waves making for ideal sailing conditions while shining a light on Musandam as one of Oman's most exciting and unexplored tourist destinations.

Piotr Oleksiak, International Windsurfing Association manager, said, "Oman has for many years now been a benchmark for the development of sailing in

This is a great opportunity for Oman Sail to showcase the excellent sailing and surfing conditions in the waters around Khasab and allow promising windsurfers the chance to test themselves against the best in Asia

DR KHAMIS AL JABRI
CEO, Oman Sail

the region and we are happy that windsurfing has been part of that journey. When deciding to come to Oman with the 2021 Asian Windsurfing Championships, we not only took into account the great venues and fabulous hospitality, but we also see this as an opportunity to showcase the



possibilities of building a windsurfing programme, not only in the neighbouring countries but worldwide. The Asian Windsurfing Championships is an event many are looking forward to and will include foiling for the first time with the introduction of the Formula Foil."

Oman recently hosted the Techno 293 Asian Championships, taking place during Mussanah Race Week in February 2020, where young Omani rider Ali al Sarhi claimed the gold medal in the youth class at, and compatriots Abdulrahman al Mujaini and Mohammad al Sarhi

who finished 3rd and 4th respectively.

Dr Khamis al Jabri, Oman Sail's CEO, said, "This is a great opportunity for Oman Sail to showcase the excellent sailing and surfing conditions in the waters around Khasab and allow promising windsurfers the

chance to test themselves against the best in Asia. The Championships also allow us to introduce a new audience to the wonderful hospitality on offer in Oman and build the capacity for Musandam to host additional events in the future. After such a long break, we are all very eager to get back on the water and into the competition once again."

The Sultanate of Oman has previously hosted a series of successful events including the 2013 Laser World Championships, the 2015 RS:X World Championships and the 2019 International Asian and Oceanian Optimist Championships.

A month after hosting the Asian Windsurfing Championships, in November 2021, Oman Sail will also welcome a 400-strong fleet of the world's best sailors and coaches for the 49er, 49erFX, and Nacra 17 class World Championships, a Paris 2024 Olympic Games qualifying event which is taking place in Asia for the first time in its history.



Barcelona's Lionel Messi controls the ball during the Spanish league match against Valencia at the Camp Nou stadium in Barcelona. — AFP

Messi equals Pele's goal record of 643

MADRID: Lionel Messi scored his 643rd goal for Barcelona on Saturday to equal Pele's record of goals for a single club as the Spanish giants were held 2-2 by Valencia.

Messi, 33, headed in from Jordi Alba's cross after his first-half penalty was saved to equal the mark set by the Brazilian great for Santos.

"These figures are impressive, we will never have a player so effective at this club," admitted coach Ronald Koeman.

"That's why he is No 1. What he's done for this club, it is impressive."

But Messi was eventually left frustrated on Saturday as a dogged Valencia forced a draw to leave Barcelona eight points behind leaders Atletico Madrid, who beat Elche 3-1 earlier in the day.

"There were times tonight with good football, we had total control of the match, especially after leading 2-1 where we tried to get the third, but there were also times when we lost the ball in the danger zones," added Koeman.

"What worries me is that sometimes the team doesn't know what the game is about.

"We know we're a team that always likes to attack and score goals, but there are also times when you have to defend and control the game.

TITLE NOT OVER

"But the race for the title is not yet lost, we are far behind, but it's a very complicated season for everyone. In two months, the situation may be totally different."

Barcelona started slowly and went a goal behind to Mouctar Diakhaby's unchallenged header from a corner after half an hour.

Antoine Griezmann earned

the penalty that led to Messi's record-equalling goal when the France attacker was nudged over by Jose Gaya.

Messi's spot-kick was saved by Jaume Domenech but the ball rebounded and from Alba's dinked cross, Argentina forward headed the ball into the net to draw level with Pele.

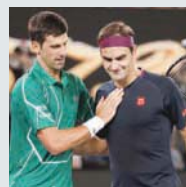
Barcelona went ahead thanks to a superb scissor kick from Uruguay's Ronald Araujo.

But Valencia's pressure was rewarded when Maxi Gomez got in front of Barca central defender Oscar Mingueza to turn in a cross and equalise. — AFP



Women's 2021 tennis season to start on Jan 5

The 2021 WTA season will start in Abu Dhabi on January 5, the governing body of women's tennis said, as it unveiled an early-season calendar that revolves around the Australian Open. The season will kick off with the Abu Dhabi WTA Women's Tennis Open, a WTA 500 level event on January 5-13. — AFP



Federer committed to playing Australian Open

All the world's top players, including 20-time Grand Slam champion Roger Federer, are expected to be in Melbourne for the coronavirus-disrupted Australian Open, tournament organiser Craig Tiley said. The opening Grand Slam of the year has been pushed back three weeks until February 8. — AFP

NEW ZEALAND WRAP UP PAKISTAN T20 SERIES AFTER SECOND STRAIGHT WIN

SEIFERT GUIDES KIWIS HOME



New Zealand's Tim Seifert (right) plays a shot as Pakistan's wicketkeeper Mohammad Rizwan looks on during the second T20I at Seddon Park in Hamilton on Sunday. — AFP

HAMILTON, New Zealand: Tim Seifert's 84 not out trumped an unbeaten 99 by Mohammad Hafeez as New Zealand claimed the second Twenty20 against Pakistan by nine wickets in Hamilton on Sunday to take the series with a game to spare.

The Black Caps chased down Pakistan's 163 for six with four balls to spare, after winning the first game in Auckland by five wickets.

Kane Williamson, back in the side after paternity leave, hit the winning runs with a boundary to be not out 57 but said the game

was all about the bowling of man-of-the-match Tim Southee and the batting of Seifert and Hafeez.

Seifert faced 63 balls for his 84, while Hafeez was in destructive form, which he attributed to taking up golf, as he plundered 99 from 57 deliveries while Southee restricted the remaining Pakistan batsmen with four for 21.

"It was a good surface, one that had a little bit for the bowlers and obviously if you could build partnerships you could gain some momentum," Williamson said.

"It was really satisfying to get across the line. A fantastic knock

by Seifert, a really good effort with the ball and obviously a brilliant knock by Hafeez, the master."

Opener Seifert batted through the innings and although denied a century because of the quality of his partners, he did match his career-best 84 against India last year. He put on 35 for the first wicket with Martin Guptill, who was out for 21, and shared in a 129-run stand with Williamson.

The 40-year-old Hafeez, out first ball in Auckland, was almost on his own for Pakistan with a career-best 99 which included 10 fours and five sixes.

It was his fourth half-century from six innings in the past year and he put the consistency down to taking up golf.

"I started golf last year and I realised the basics of the game are similar — good balance, good base, good swing, good follow-through that really worked for my cricket in the last year," he said.

Mohammad Rizwan's 22 was the next best score for Pakistan and captain Shadab Khan put the lack of a decent total down to his players not adapting to New Zealand conditions.

"It's not a technique issue, we're

not used to the pitches and that's why the conditions are a little bit difficult," he said.

"We have young openers and

they will learn quickly, hopefully."

Tim Southee was the pick of the New Zealand bowlers with four for 21. — AFP

SCOREBOARD

PAKISTAN		
M Rizwan c Seifert b Southee	22	
H Ali c Williamson b Southee	8	
A Shafique c&b Southee	0	
M Hafeez not out	99	
S Khan c Southee b Neesham	4	
K Shah c Guptill b Kuggeleijn	14	
F Ashraf c Williamson b Southee	4	
I Wasim not out	10	
Extras (lb2)	2	
Total (six wickets; 20 overs)	163	
Fall of wickets: 1-16, 2-16, 3-33, 4-56, 5-119, 6-133		
Bowling: Boult 4-0-33-0, Southee 4-0-21-4, Jamieson 4-0-43-0, Kuggeleijn 3-0-33-0, Neesham 2-0-10-1, Sodhi 3-0-21-1		
NEW ZEALAND		
M Guptill c Rauf b Ashraf	21	
T Seifert not out	84	
K Williamson not out	57	
Extras (w2)	2	
Total (one wicket; 19.2 overs)	164	
Fall of wickets: 1-35		
Bowling: Afridi 4-0-38-0, Rauf 4-0-39-0, Ashraf 3-2-0-19-1, Riaz 1-0-19-0, Khan 4-0-24-0, Wasim 3-0-25-0		

Mohsin's amazing treble highlight of OC Awards Night

SHAHZAD RAZA
MUSCAT, DEC 20

Mohsin Raza of Manis Azad International scooped an amazing treble of E Division awards amid maximum applause while Waleed Rahim al Balushi of OCT Al Hail A returned to claim C Division's Best Batsman prize after winning a similar award the previous night as Oman Cricket honoured teams and individual toppers from C to H Division at OCA ground in Al Amerat on Wednesday.

Mohsin was presented C Division's Best Batsman, Best Bowler and Best All-rounder awards by chief guest Janab al Sayyid Qais Khalid al Said, OC



Design Group captain receiving E Division Winner's Trophy

Vice-Chairman, in the presence of senior OC officials.

Bank Muscat's C Division campaign ended with a champion's trophy with Zubair CT a close second.

Here is a complete list of team

and individual toppers:

C Division
Champion: Bank Muscat.
Runner-up: Zubair CT. **Best Batsman:** Waleed Rahim al Balushi (OCT Al Hail A). **Best Bowler:** Mubashar Iqbal (Zubair



Captain receiving H Division Winner's Trophy

CT).

D Division
Champion: Unique Elegant.
Runner-up: Khalsa United. **Best Batsman:** Akbar Shaikh (Ideal International). **Best Bowler:** Aditya Dalvi (Unique Elegant).



Bank Muscat captain receiving C Division Winner's Trophy

E Division
Champion: Design Group.
Runner-up: Global Phone Tech.
Best Batsman: Mohsin Raza (Manis Azad). **Best Bowler:** Mohsin Raza (Manis Azad). **Best All-rounder:** Mohsin Raza

(Maniz Azad).

F Division

Champion: Spanion & VDD.
Runner-up: TR Engineering. **Best Batsman:** Ranjit Kumar (Spanio). **Best Bowler:** Avinash Sharma (Jotun CT). **Best All-rounder:** Doresh Devender (Danmark).

G Division

Champion: Gitacs. **Runner-up:** Vanderlande. **Best Batsman:** Arif Hussain (Gitacs). **Best Bowler:** Rafeeq Mohammed al Balushi (Gitacs).

H Division

Champion: Desert CT.
Runner-up: Rimal & Rock. **Best Batsman:** Nahas Theparambil Haneefa (Ghantoot Group). **Best Bowler:** H Gharti (Rimal & Rock).



Gitacs captain receiving the G Division Winner's Trophy



Spanio VDD captain receiving F Division Winner's Trophy



Waleed Rahim al Balushi of Al Hail CT A receiving Best Batsman award in C Division



Unique Elegant captain receiving D Division Winner's Trophy

Saud

races to top in fourth stage

Talal takes close second, Pietruszka finishes third in OCA Championship



ANUROOP
ATHIPARAMBATH
MUSCAT, DEC 20

Ahli Sidab 'A' cyclist Saud al Mandhari romped home with a timing of 1 hour 16 minutes and 29.12 seconds in the Oman Cycling Association (OCA) Championship fourth stage on the weekend.

Saud's teammate Talal al Maskari missed out on top spot by matter of seconds as he clocked 1:16:29.54, while Polish rider Szczepan Pietruska of North Road Oman finished third on 1:16:29.59 in the 98 km individual road race with 10 laps from the Civil Aviation Club building near the Muscat International Airport to The Wave.

North Road Oman's Paul Willcox of United Kingdom kept his overall lead in Open category for Omantel jersey despite finishing 28th with a timing of



1:16:31.00 among the 97 riders who competed on Friday. Willcox leads with 233 points after four stages but Mundher al Hasani of Ahli Sidab 'A' has come within a touching distance of Willcox with 230 points. Another U-23 rider Abdullah al Ghilani of Arsen Endurance is overall third with 216 points. Saud al Mandhari of Ahli Sidab 'A' (Elite) is fourth with

196 points and U-23 rider Mohammed al Wahibi, winner of the third stage, is fifth with 177 points. In Under-23 category, Talal al Maskari took the top spot, followed by Abdullah al Ghilani (1:16:29.85) and Waleed al Fahdi (1:16:29.85). Abdullah al Ghilani is the overall leader in the U-23 category for Bank Nizwa jersey



with 170 points. Mundher al Hasani is second with 165 points and Waleed al Fahdi is third with 145 points. Pietruska topped the 40 plus section, Mohammed al Kindi claimed second (1:16:30.87) and Willcox finished third. Willcox also leads the 40 plus category for the Sohar International Jersey with 190 points. Pietruska is second with

130 points and Ayman al Wahibi is third with same points. **AHLI SIDAB 'A' DOMINATE** Among the teams, Ahli Sidab 'A' (Saud al Mandhari, Talal al Maskari and Mundher al Hasani) are on top with 285 points, while Arsen Endurance (Abdullah al Ghilani, Waleed al Fahdi and Abdullah al Hashmi) are second on 185 points and

Ahli Sidab B (Mohammed al Lamki, Mazin Al Farei and Bader al Mandhari) are third on 150 points. Gulf Cycles are fourth on 128 points and North Road Oman are fifth on 115 points. OCA President Saif al Rashdi, who was the chief guest for the concluding ceremony, gave away the prizes for the top three winners in various categories. Saif al Rashdi congratulated the riders for their enthusiastic participation and promised good work by the OCA team in the upcoming stages. "The riders have put up challenging performances and hence raised the standard of the OCA Championship. The OCA is assuring all riders for further support in the coming races too," he said. Next race, Stage 5 of the total eight stages, will be held on the New Year Day, January 1, 2021. It will be a 123 km road race with three laps in Nizwa.

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Oman revamps power and water tariffs

CONRAD PRABHU
@conradprabhu

Revised electricity and water tariffs slated to come into force across the Sultanate with effect from January 1, 2021 will result in a significant uptick in the monthly bills of consumers — part of a momentous effort by the Oman's authorities to roll back longstanding subsidies on utilities and help rein in a widening government fiscal deficit.

On Sunday, the Authority for Public Services Regulation (APSR) unveiled on behalf of the government a roadmap for the scrapping of electricity and water subsidies, alongside a strategy for channelling part of the proceeds towards economically weaker sections of the Omani populace.

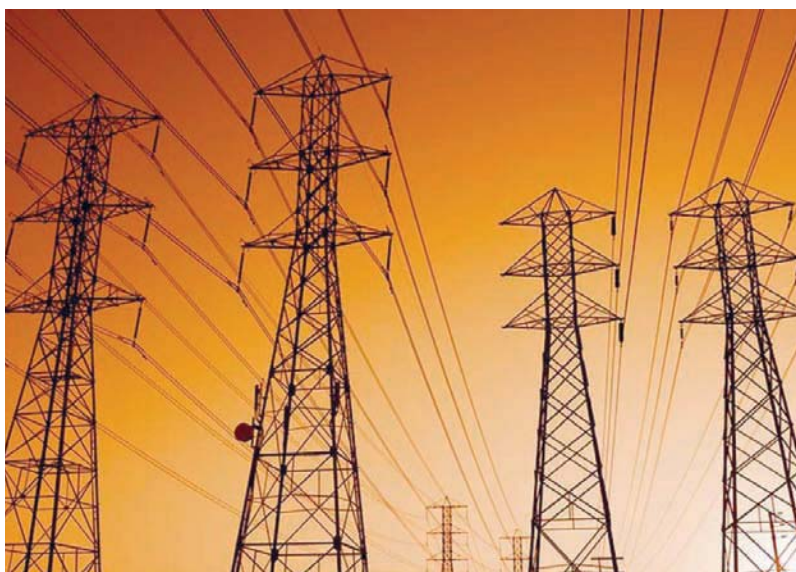
“The electricity and water subsidy reform programme forms part of the set of initiatives under the Sultanate’s Medium-Term Fiscal Plan (2020-2024),” said the Authority in a statement on the landmark initiative.

“The subsidy reform initiative seeks to enhance the efficiency and sustainability of the utilities sector, improve the efficiency of government spending and its financial sustainability whilst

also enhancing the social safety net ecosystem by rechanneling government subsidies to the segments of society most in need.”

Electricity tariffs have been revised across the board. For major customers consuming 100 megawatt-hours (MWh) of power per annum, a revamped Cost Reflective Tariff (CRT) structure will be applied based on their consumption trends. For other types of non-residential customers, including industrial, commercial, government and tourism establishments, consuming less than 100 MWh of electricity per annum, a single uniform tariff is applicable. A premium rate applies for consumption during summer months. On the other hand, agricultural and fisheries-related customers will be covered by a separate, relatively concessional tariff structure.

The residential segment will be governed by different sets of tariffs. For nationals, a Citizen Account Tariff will be applied to accounts registered in the names of citizens not exceeding two accounts per citizen. For expatriates and foreigners, Resident and Additional Accounts



Tariffs will be applied to accounts registered in the names of residents and additional accounts for citizens beyond the allowable two accounts under the Citizen Account Tariff.

Similarly, a significant upward revision has been announced in the tariff structure for potable water consumption.

The highest rate of 4.5 baisas/gallon is prescribed for non-residential consumers. But, as with the electricity tariffs for residential customers, a differentiated tariff

system will be applied for citizens (2.5 bz/gallon), on the one hand, and residents / additional account holders (3 bz / gallon), on the other.

Importantly, the revised tariffs will contribute to a dramatic reduction and eventual phase-out of subsidy on electricity and water, which is projected to burgeon to a staggering RO 900 million in 2025 if left unchecked.

Explaining the rationale behind the reforms, the Authority said: "According to the current

approach, electricity and water subsidies are extended to almost all electricity and water consumers in Oman, regardless of the living standards and category of customer.

The subsidies also cover non-residential categories such as industrial, government and commercial categories.

Furthermore, the electricity tariff for residential categories in the Sultanate has remained the same since 1987 and has never been affected by the changing economic events such as inflation, fluctuating oil prices, and the growth in demand over the years.

This led to an increase in government subsidies over the years which reached almost RO 750 million in 2020 constituting 5 per cent of the State's general budget and around 20 per cent of the projected deficit during the current year. Should the government refrain from taking any action in connection with the subsidies, they are expected to reach up to RO 900 million by 2025," it stated.

The subsidy burden on the government has grown year-on-year in trend with rising demand growth for electricity and water.

More than RO 8 billion has been invested by the government in power and water distribution infrastructure over the last 10-15 years to keep pace with exponential demand growth. Electricity accounts surged 141 per cent over the 2005–2019 timeframe, while electricity supply increased by 253 per cent.

On the other hand, water accounts (for erstwhile Diam) increased by over 187 per cent and the total distributed water reached a robust 180 per cent during the period from 2010 to 2019.

According to the Authority, the medium-term fiscal balance plan (2020-2024) provides for part of the savings accruing from the rollback of subsidies to be gradually redirected to vulnerable sections of the Omani community starting from January 1, 2021 until 2025.

Eligible categories registering under the National Subsidy System (NSS), will receive support in the form of a 33 per cent discount on the total bill value and up to a specific consumption ceiling (4,000 kWh/month) for electricity. A similar mechanism will be applied to water during the coming phases, it said.

Non-residential Category in 2021		
Category	Threshold (kWh/month)	Tariff (bz/kWh)
Large Customers	-	Cost Reflective Tariff (CRT)
Non-residential Category	Winter Rates (From 1 January to 30 April and from 1 October to 31 December)	21 Bz
	Summer tariff (From 1 May to 30 September)	29 Bz
Agricultural and fisheries activities	0-3000	12 Bz
	3001-6000	16 Bz
	More than 6000	24 Bz

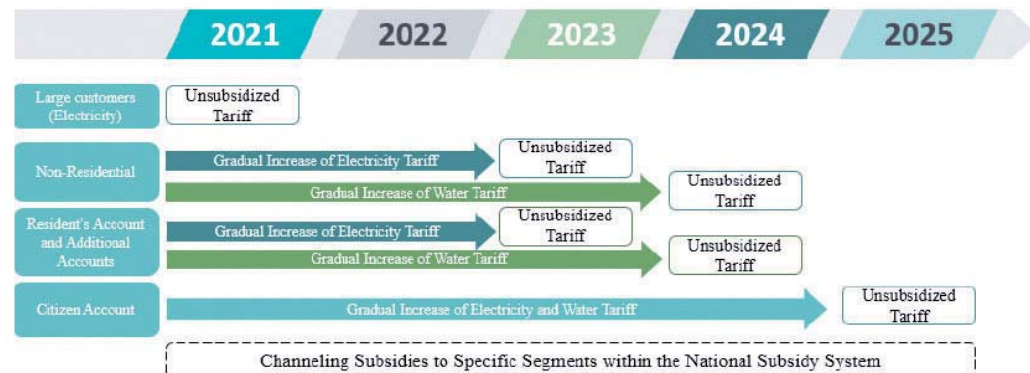
Table (1): New electricity tariff structure for non-residential consumers

Residential Category in 2021		
Category	Threshold (kWh/month)	Tariff (bz/kWh)
Citizen Account Tariff	0 – 2000	15 Bz
	2001 – 4000	20 Bz
	More than 4000	30 Bz
Resident and Additional Accounts Tariff	0 – 500	20 Bz
	501 – 1500	25 Bz
	More than 1500	30 Bz

Table (2): Residential electricity tariff in 2021

Category	Tariff Unit	Tariff in 2021
Tariff for Non-residential Categories	(Bz/Gallon)	4.5 Bz
Citizen Account Tariff	(Bz/Gallon)	2.5 Bz
Resident and Additional Accounts Tariff	(Bz/Gallon)	3 Bz

Table (3): Water tariff in 2021



Move to strengthen Sultanate's Islamic banking sector

CONRAD PRABHU
@conradprabhu

Seeking to build on the robust growth of the Islamic banking sector in the Sultanate, the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) is rolling out a number of initiatives designed to further underpin the role of sharia-compliant Islamic finance in contributing to the country's economic development.

In addition to the formulation of a strategy for the growth of the Islamic banking industry, the banking and financial services regulator is also weighing the

launch of sharia-compliant central bank liquidity facilities in line with its role as 'lender of last resort'. Besides, it is looking at the introduction of financial safety nets for the Islamic banking sector.

“It is expected that these initiatives will pave the way for an even more resilient Islamic banking sector ready to serve the banking needs of the country for the diversification of the economy under the Tanfeeth Programme,” the Central Bank noted in its 2020 Financial Stability Report issued here last week.

The sector has grown rapidly since the advent of Islamic banking in the Sultanate in 2012 following the promulgation of Royal Decree 69/2012 amending the Banking Law, which also paved the way for the issuance of a comprehensive Islamic Banking Regulatory Framework and the establishment of a Sharia Governance Framework.

A pair of two full-fledged Islamic banks, coupled with six Islamic Banking Windows of conventional banks, now account for a combined asset base of RO 4.88 billion, as of December 2019,



representing 13.87 per cent of total banking assets.

Commending the steady expansion of the sharia-compliant banking services industry, the Central Bank noted: "The

Islamic Banking sector has been consistently recording double-digit growth in deposits, and gross financing for the last seven years. Despite the rapid growth, the asset quality of the Islamic

banking financing portfolio remained strong with a low non-performance financing (NPF) ratio of 1.07 per cent at the end of December 2019, which is among the lowest in the region.”

The 2020 Financial Stability Report listed the retail and construction sectors as the biggest beneficiaries of funding support from Islamic banks and windows, accounting for 36.8 per cent and 20.2 per cent of total financial respectively. Manufacturing and other service sectors received just over 10 per cent apiece of total financing, it added.

Port of Salalah to ramp up gypsum export capacity

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 20

Port of Salalah, with annual exports of 9 million MT of Gypsum in 2019, is the world's largest exporter of Gypsum and is working on expanding its capacity to meet the future market demand of this commodity as well as limestone exports.

The close proximity to prime mining and quarrying locations has enabled the port and the exporters to grow the export volumes.

Port of Salalah collaborates closely with the exporters on improving and adding to its portfolio of services.

In addition to the deepwater berths of up to 18m of depth that can receive cape-size vessels thereby giving its customers increased flexibility, Port of Salalah has also been investing in new equipment and resources to improve productivity and reliability

Oman has been blessed with a diverse range of mineral deposits ranging from copper to gypsum and limestone and the government has initiated several measures to unlock the vast opportunities and potential of this sector leveraging its strategic location on the global trade lane and proximity to destinations



that have a high demand for these products like India and South East Asia in addition to traditional markets in the Far East.

The Government of Oman has invested and plans to continue investing in logistics infrastructure in the Sultanate to ensure that Oman plays an active role in global commerce and progress its vision

"Oman is witnessing rapid

changes in the year 2020. A reform in the government structure and new legislative laws are opening the opportunity for foreign investments which will lead to increased profits due to economic diversification.

The country's mineral wealth is being realised, thus focusing on investing in the downstream capabilities will increase the business generated from local

raw materials. Port of Salalah has an extensive client portfolio and a well-equipped general cargo terminal that caters to the country's largest mining companies as well as provides services related to importing and exporting raw materials," stated Mark Hardiman, CEO of Port of Salalah.

Demand for Oman gypsum continues to be strong for

importers in South East Asia and the Far East.

A diverse group of mining companies like Kunooz Gypsum, Global Mining, Dhofar Mining, Zawawi Minerals, Al Jood Natural Resources already operate mines in Dhofar while Majan Mining has a strong presence in Limestone exports.

Scott Watson, Chief Executive Officer of Kunooz Oman Holding,

**ROBUST
APPETITE: Demand
for Oman gypsum
continues to be
strong for importers
in South East Asia
and Far East**

commented: "Over the last five years I've witnessed gypsum exports grow, making Oman through Salalah Port to world's biggest exporter of gypsum. Combined with limestone exports, makes Salalah Port the key logistics hub for exporting both commodities to India, South and South-East Asia, Japan, East Africa and South Africa. Salalah Port is also emerging as the export hub for the value-added business of limestone, gypsum board, and gypsum powder."

Trade and manufacturing have been hugely impacted globally by the pandemic and the same has had an impact on the demand for aggregates in the second quarter of this year.

Despite these challenges, the mining companies have managed to recover the volumes in the last quarter and overall gypsum volumes for 2020 are expected to be close to volumes handled in 2019.

Turbocharged commodities looking for more in 2021

OLE S HANSEN

Commodity markets maintained their strong momentum ahead of year-end as the so-called 'everything' rally continues to be fed supportive news.

Apart from the weaker dollar and vaccine optimism lifting the prospects for 2021, the market is also being supported by speculation about more near-term stimulus from governments and central banks.

These developments highlight the current challenge where markets are pricing in a brighter tomorrow while the pandemic is still raging across many countries, especially in winter-hit regions across the northern hemisphere where the prospect for improvement - vaccine or not - is unlikely to occur until warmer weather arrives in March and April.

The combination of a global market flushed with cash, driving wild speculation across markets, and the potential for another supercycle in commodities led by China and its unstoppable appetite for raw materials, has seen the Bloomberg Commodity Index rose by close to 9 per cent this quarter.

Still on track for an annual loss, mostly due to heavy losses in energy during the early stages of the pandemic, the prospect for 2021 is looking increasingly bright.

The combination of the green transformation driving demand for key industrial metals, including silver, a weaker dollar, increased demand for inflation hedges, a pickup in fuel demand as global mobility recovers and not least rising demand outside China as governments go on a spending spree to support jobs. Adding to these the risk of elevated food prices as the weather becomes



more volatile.

The ongoing 'everything' rally this past week was particularly noticeable in metals. Leading from the front we find industrial metals where HG copper-topped \$3.6/lb and LME copper \$8000/t for the first time in seven years.

That strength has been filtering through to semi-precious metals, with silver trading up by more than 7 per cent on the week after breaking key technical levels, both against the dollar and against gold.

Rising demand, especially from China, looks set to remain strong in 2021 when the rest of the world emerges from the COVID-19 cloud, thereby raising concerns about available supply following years of under investments. The metals rally in 2020 has been the sharpest in a decade with Goldman Sachs seeing echoes of the spike in the early 2000s when Chinese demand started a near decade-long super cycle.

One of the main obstacles for a commodity rally during the past decade has been the ample availability of raw materials. Oversupply during the past decade and especially during the past six years kept the commodity sector as a whole in a state of contango where the spot price, due to ample availability, trades cheaper than deferred prices.

The impact on passive long investments can be seen in the below chart.

Since 2014, a portfolio of 24 major commodities carried a negative roll yield which at times was as high as five per cent on an annual basis.

From an investment perspective, this headwind combined with a generally strong dollar and low inflation reduced the attraction of the sector. In recent months, however, the roll yield has turned positive with the change so far being led by the agriculture sector where key crops have rallied strongly in response to lower production and rising demand.

Looking ahead to 2021 the expected pick up in demand as well as the reflation theme look set to underpin the sector, especially markets where supply may struggle to meet demand. We are focusing on copper, platinum and soybeans to mention a few.

Nothing ever goes in a straight line, especially when it comes to commodities. And while a bullish outlook for 2021 is growing we also have to acknowledge that the rally over the past few months has been driven by a very optimistic vaccine outlook driving the dollar down and stock markets higher.

With this in mind we may have

reached levels that raise a few questions as 2021 gets underway.

Not least in the oil market where Brent crude oil popped above \$50/b for the first time since March. This during a period where the only bright spot is strong demand from China and India while lockdowns continue to impact fuel demand elsewhere.

In their latest oil market reports for December, OPEC, IEA and EIA all warned that the rebalancing of the global oil market may take longer than previously expected.

Following a demand loss of 9.2 million barrels/day in 2020, the three forecasters now see a 5.8 million barrel/day recovery in 2021 with the IEA seeing the oil glut staying until end-2021.

Having rallied non-stop since the early November vaccine announcements, Brent crude oil has now recovered 61.8 per cent of the January to April collapse. Given the near-term outlook for supply and demand, the rally is likely to pause with \$50/b being the level to gravitate around until an actual improvement in demand becomes more visible.

Gold and not least silver, the star performer this past week, enjoyed the continued surge in risk sentiment driven by a weaker dollar, US lawmakers making progress towards a stimulus deal and the FOMC strengthened its commitment to supporting the recovery.

Silver, up 7 per cent on the week, was helped by a continued rally across the industrial metal sector. Once it broke the downtrend from the August high it raced higher to the next level of resistance at \$26/b.

Gold meanwhile is on track for its biggest annual gain in a decade has paused with \$1900/oz the next major level to break.

(The writer is Head of Commodity Strategy at Saxo Bank)

PRESS RELEASE

BANK MUSCAT TO ACCEPT GREEN SPORTS APPLICATIONS ONLINE TILL JANUARY 6



Bank Muscat has announced it will be accepting applications for the 2021 edition of its Green Sports programme till January 6, 2021, and has requested all teams considering the programme to apply well in advance of the deadline.

Green Sports, the bank's longest-running CSR programme, was started in line with its commitment to sustainable development and social responsibility. This year the bank has moved to digital

submission of applications as part of further developing the programme. Applications are being accepted online at <https://www.bankmuscat.com/greensports>. The new registration process is user-friendly and can be easily done using a computer, a tablet or even a mobile phone.

The criteria for availing the Green Sports support include that sports teams should have been in existence for at least three years and have a minimum of 300 members.

OAB RECEIVES HR EXCELLENCE AWARD

Oman Arab Bank (OAB) received the Human Resources Excellence Award recently, during its participation in the Business Summit organised by the Oman Economic Review magazine.

The award is in recognition of the Bank's achievements, made in the field of human capital management during 2020, as part of its strategy and programmes aimed at creating a work environment that is one of the best within the private sector.

Adil al Rahbi, Head of the Human Resources Division at OAB, said, "The Oman Arab Bank management believes that the cornerstone of the Bank's success in achieving its objectives is directly dependent on implementing a forward-looking strategy in the talent management and development field. This is possible by preparing and qualifying the team and enhancing their skills, in line with the highest



international standards, as well as developing a clear succession and career growth plan and a performance-driven culture"

A few years ago, OAB launched its new transformation strategy based on four main pillars: customer service, innovation, strategic partnerships and talent management. The strategy's main objective is to place OAB at the forefront of the local banking sector.



In brief

■ NEW YORK

US SHOPPERS GRAB
LAST-MINUTE
HOLIDAY GIFTS

Many US holiday shoppers, wary of spending time in stores during the latest surge of COVID-19 cases and nervous about packages not arriving before Christmas, were on a mission: snatch up last-minute gifts fast or pick up online purchases in-store. The “Super Saturday” before Christmas is traditionally the busiest day of the year for holiday purchases, and this year online retail has been extra busy. But news reports about high-priority vaccine shipments have many Americans fretting that gift deliveries could be delayed this week.

“If you haven’t ventured out and you haven’t gotten your gifts, you almost have to,” said Marshal Cohen, chief retail industry adviser at NPD Group. — Reuters

■ NEW DELHI/BENGALURU

APPLE PUTS
SUPPLIER WISTRON
ON NOTICE

Apple Inc has placed supplier Wistron Corp on probation, saying it would not award the Taiwanese contract manufacturer-new business until it addressed the way workers were treated at its southern India plant. Early findings of an Apple audit in the wake of violence at the Wistron plant in India’s Karnataka state showed violations of its ‘Supplier Code of Conduct’, the Cupertino, California-based tech giant said in a statement.

Contract workers angry over unpaid wages destroyed property, gear and iPhones on December 12, causing millions of dollars in losses to Wistron and forcing it to shut the plant. — Reuters

■ PALO ALTO

TESLA SHARES
JUMP TO
RECORD HIGH

Shares of Tesla Inc rose to a record high in a frantic day of trading as investors geared up for the electric carmaker’s much-anticipated entrance into the benchmark S&P 500 index.

The company headed by billionaire Elon Musk on Monday will become the most valuable ever admitted to Wall Street’s main benchmark, accounting for over 1 per cent of the index. The shares have surged some 70 per cent since mid-November, when its debut in the S&P 500 was announced, and have soared 700 per cent so far in 2020.

Tesla’s shares ended up 6 per cent at a record \$695. Tesla’s addition to the S&P 500 is forcing index-tracking funds to buy about \$85 billion worth of the shares by the end of Friday’s session so that their portfolios reflect the index, according to S&P Dow Jones Indices. — Reuters

Tech stars quit Silicon Valley as politics, pandemic weigh

SAN FRANCISCO: Silicon Valley is seeing departures of some of its high-profile stars as a pandemic-linked shift to remote work and political polarisation have dulled the allure of the key tech industry hub.

Nightmarish traffic and high living costs were already causing disenchantment even before the pandemic spoiled the serendipity of the northern California destination for top talent. Droughts and rampant wildfires have also taken a toll.

Those leading the exodus include Tesla chief Elon Musk and Oracle founder Larry Ellison along with Palantir co-founder Peter Thiel and the data analytics firm’s chief executive Alex Karp.

Some companies are also packing up and moving their headquarters including Silicon Valley stalwarts Oracle and Hewlett Packard Enterprise, both headed for Texas.

Founded in 1977 in Silicon Valley, Oracle said in December it was moving to position the company “for growth and provide our personnel with more flexibility about where and how they work.”



Combination of file pictures shows, Peter Thiel (top L), co-founder of PayPal, Alex Karp (top R), CEO of Palantir Technologies, Larry Ellison (bottom L), CEO, Oracle, and Tesla CEO Elon Musk. — AFP

HPE, a spinoff of the historic Silicon Valley firm Hewlett-Packard, said it was moving to Houston “to meet customers where they are in their digital transformations in these extraordinary times.”

“There was always a risk over California that a critical mass of people would say there is no sense doing business there because people can’t live here,”

said independent tech analyst Rob Enderle, a native of the state who left it for Oregon some six years ago.

States where taxes and living costs are lower are courting tech companies that can negotiate for incentives to move there.

Meanwhile, Oracle co-founder and chief technology officer Larry Ellison told employees that he is moving to the Hawaiian island of

Lanai, which he bought eight years ago, and will telecommute.

The move comes with increasing numbers of technology firms allowing workers do their jobs remotely due to the pandemic, diminishing the need for campus-style headquarters for which the region is known. Twitter for one has said employees may work remotely indefinitely.

Tesla co-founder and chief executive Elon Musk has confirmed that he left California for Texas after a heated squabble earlier this year with authorities over his efforts to defy a state shutdown of his factory to stop the spread of COVID-19.

Musk justified the move by saying he needed to be closer to two of his biggest projects: the development of rockets by his company SpaceX in the southern part of the state, and construction of a Tesla automobile plant near state capital Austin.

“How many people have the option of moving to their island?” Creative Strategies analyst Carolina Milanesi said, cautioning against viewing the latest departures as sign of a mass exodus. — AFP

China could restrict bank tie-ups with fintech platforms

BEIJING: China’s former finance minister Lou Jiwei suggested that China could restrict the number of banks a single fintech platform can partner with, to prevent any platform from gaining too much market share, state media reported on Sunday.

China’s regulators last month warned the country’s tech giants that they face closer scrutiny. A planned \$37 billion stock listing of Alibaba’s Ant Group, scheduled to be the world’s largest, was then abruptly suspended.

Speaking at a wealth management forum on Saturday, Lou, who remains influential as the external affairs director at a top advisory body to the Chinese government, warned that a fintech platform with an oversized market share can lead to bad debts, the Securities Times said.

“We can limit the number of banks that any single platform can work with, so as to let more platforms do similar businesses under the same conditions,” he said.

— Reuters

■ FARM WORKERS HIT BY TRAVEL CURBS



A man transport sacks of olives in olive oil business, in the village of Madena about 250 kilometres from Athens. Travel restrictions imposed to limit the spread of the virus have severely affected the movement of farmworkers, many of whom are immigrants. The closure of the border with Albania and the obligation to obtain a certificate are causing a shortage of labour in a sector which relies mainly on seasonal workers. — AFP

North Korea to redevelop flagship tourist resort

SEOUL: Pyongyang plans to redevelop its flagship Mount Kumgang tourist complex into an international resort, a year after leader Kim Jong Un ordered South Korean-built buildings there demolished, state media reported on Sunday.

The resort — once a prominent symbol of inter-Korean economic cooperation — was built by South Korea’s Hyundai Asan on one of the North’s most scenic mountains, drawing hundreds of thousands of Southern visitors.

But last year Kim condemned the development with the South as an eyesore and described facilities there as “shabby” and built like “makeshift tents in a disaster-stricken area or isolation wards”, ordering their removal.

On Sunday, the official Korean Central News Agency reported that Kim Tok Hun, the North’s premier, stressed “the need to build the tourist area our own way” to turn it into a “cultural resort envied by the whole world”, during his visit to the area.

He also called for pushing ahead to turn the area into a “modern and all-inclusive international tourist” resort, it added.

The Mount Kumgang complex was once one of the two biggest inter-Korean projects, along with the now-shuttered Kaesong Industrial Complex, where Southern companies employed North Korean workers while paying Pyongyang for their services. — AFP

S’pore gets shot in the arm from global drug demand

SINGAPORE: Scientists in protective clothing work in a high-tech laboratory at a pharmaceutical plant in Singapore, whose coronavirus-hit economy has received a shot in the arm from robust global drug demand.

The city-state is on course for its worst-ever recession this year but factory activity has held up, thanks partly to countries rushing to stockpile medicines during the pandemic.

The nation just half the size of Los Angeles has become a centre for drug makers and is home to more than 50 factories, owned by big players including Pfizer, Roche, GlaxoSmithKline and Takeda.

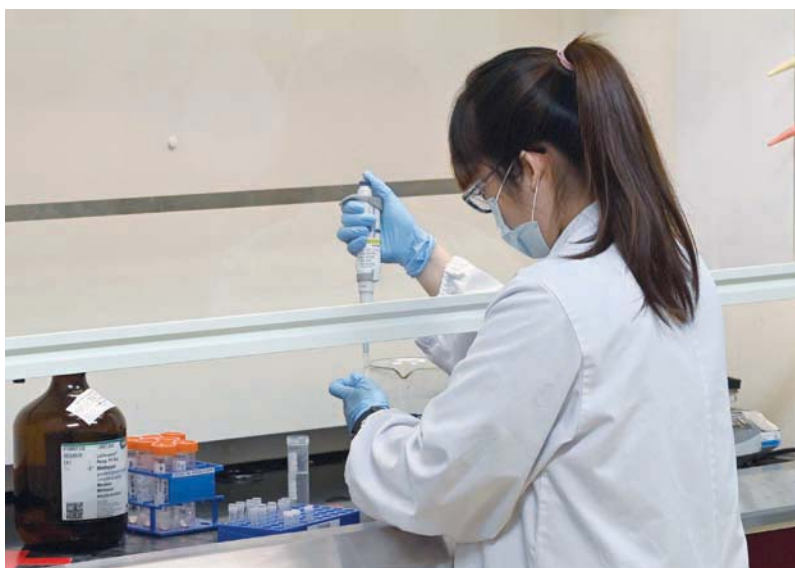
Singapore’s drug sector “plays an important role in the global pharmaceutical industry supply chain”, Rajiv Biswas, Asia Pacific

The health of
Singapore’s drug sector
is a rare bright spot
for the city’s economy,
and also for trade
worldwide

chief economist at consultancy IHS Markit, said.

And in 2020, “governments and private-sector firms have been building up inventories of critical drugs as a result of the severe supply chain disruptions in many countries during the pandemic”, he added.

Data highlights the benefits for the trading hub — biomedical manufacturing, which covers pharmaceuticals, has grown strongly, with output expanding 90 per cent on-year in September alone.



A biochemist working in the quality control lab manufacturing medical products at Takeda Pharmaceuticals in Singapore. — AFP

Exports also defied expectations of a collapse and posted growth most of the year, helped by drug shipments, although they slipped back in October and November.

While much attention has focused on vaccine development, strong demand for medicines to treat illnesses ranging from asthma to epilepsy has underpinned the

continued good fortunes of the pharmaceutical giants in the city, industry players and analysts say.

It is a much-needed boost after Singapore’s economy shrank more than 13 per cent in the second quarter when the country introduced tough virus curbs.

With borders largely closed, the key tourism sector has been particularly hard-hit with arrivals falling to just 13,400 in October from 1.7 million in January.

Singapore’s outbreak has been relatively mild, however, with the city-state recording around 58,000 cases and 29 deaths, while the economy began recovering in July-September as restrictions were eased.

The city had long been a major exporter of electronics, from microchips to computer hard disks, but has sought to diversify its manufacturing sector. — AFP

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features



THE EGYPTIAN VULTURE: CARRION ROYALTY THRIVING IN THE SULTANATE

“When vultures surround you,” says an African proverb, “try not to die.” The Egyptian Vulture (Neophron Percnopterus) has a somewhat checkered reputation, which is surely attributed to its other common name as the ‘White Scavenger’ vulture and suffers too from the others in its ornithological group having names of comparative elegance and gravitas such as the kites, hawks, and eagles... **P18**

INSIDE STORIES

HUMAN INTEREST



‘SESAME STREET’ UNVEILS ROHINGYA MUPPETS TO HELP REFUGEE CHILDREN

Children’s TV show “Sesame Street” has unveiled its first Rohingya Muppets to help thousands of refugee children overcome trauma and tackle the pandemic’s impact in the world’s largest refugee settlement in Bangladesh... **Story on Page P19**

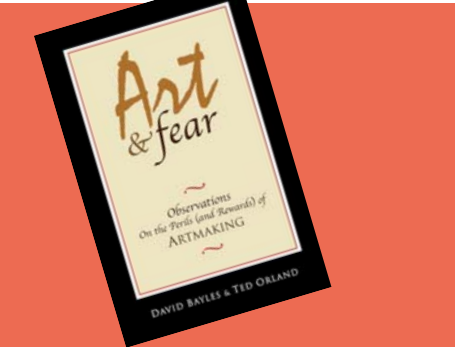
LIFESTYLE



BIG BEN TO TOLL FOR BREXIT AS WELL AS NEW YEAR

Big Ben — an enduring symbol of Britishness for more than 150 years — will toll as the Brexit transition period ends, the House of Commons said Thursday... **Story on Page 19**

READ



ART & FEAR

Art and Fear is a non-fiction book written by artists for artists. The point of the book is to help the young and/or struggling artist survive in the art world and to conquer the various difficulties, obstacles and fears that the developing artist faces. Authors: David Bayles, Ted Orland Genre: Self-help book

CINEMA



ANIME ‘DEMON SLAYER’ SET TO DETHRONE GIBLI CLASSIC FOR JAPAN BOX OFFICE CROWN

An anime epic in which a teenager hunts down and beheads demons has become the surprise sensation of Japanese cinema during the pandemic, and could soon be the country’s top-grossing film of all time... **Story on Page 20**

CELEBRITIES



JUSTIN BIEBER TEAMS UP WITH FORMER RIVALS FOR CHRISTMAS SONG

This year, the Canadian singer-songwriter pop star Justin Bieber and the health workers are back, singing his hit “Holy” together to raise funds to help Britain’s state-run National Health Service (NHS) tackle the coronavirus pandemic.



The Egyptian Vulture: Carrion royalty thriving in the Sultanate

BY RAY PETERSEN
PHOTOS BY LENA PETERSEN

“When vultures surround you,” says an African proverb, “try not to die.” The Egyptian Vulture (Neophron percnopterus) has a somewhat checkered reputation, which is surely attributed to its other common name as the ‘White Scavenger’ vulture and suffers too from the others in its ornithological group having names of comparative elegance and gravitas such as the kites, hawks, and eagles.

A recent visit to Masirah Island saw us locate what appeared to be a rather sedentary trio of the species near the beautiful Biyad Beach, 20 kilometres South of the swanky Masirah Island Resort on the sandy Eastern coast-

line. They appeared to spend much of their day watching us, though at sunrise each day obviously went searching for food as they were often ‘on the wing’ as we arrived for our early morning fishing session, taking advantage of the coolest part of the day; both they and us!

Our local expert, Darrel Pinto, explained that though most of the birds on Masirah Island tend to migrate between Africa and India, the Egyptian Vulture, being bigger and heavier, tends to find and make their home where their needs are largely met, and this is clearly true of this small ‘family.’ Jose Donazar is widely acknowledged as an expert on the species, and he (et al) writes that once the male has found and mated with a partner, he will stay with her to ensure the safety of the



resultant chicks. Ironically, another male, may assist with the ‘minding,’ duties as a ‘friend,’ no more than that.

Once the chicks hatch after around six weeks and leave the nest as fledglings after another fourteen to sixteen weeks, returning to the

nest for another four to six weeks before taking their leave on a ‘rite of passage,’ flight which may take them as far as 500 kms again according to Donazar et al, resting for a year in Africa before returning to their birthplace. Being young and

strong by now, their next task is to seek out a mate and in their third to fifth years, when their distinctive plumage achieves its full colour, a partner is their main priority.

Renowned for feeding mainly on carrion, such as roadkill, or beached fish, the Egyptian Vultures are not averse to seeking perished lizards, mice, birds, and eggs. The Greek philosopher wrote almost in their praise as ‘righteous creatures,’ “not attacking even the smallest living creature.” These magnificent predators are also very much opportunist feeders, though in the seaside environment their shyness near humans means they will often be ‘beaten to the punch’ by the ubiquitous seagulls.

The Environmental Society of Oman has identified the

species as “the region’s most threatened, and since 2012 has actively studied the habits and movements of the birds, with gratifying results through surveys and tracking. It is a positive sign that although numbers globally are decreasing, these stern-faced, humourless looking relics of bygone ages appear to be thriving in the Sultanate, at least for now.

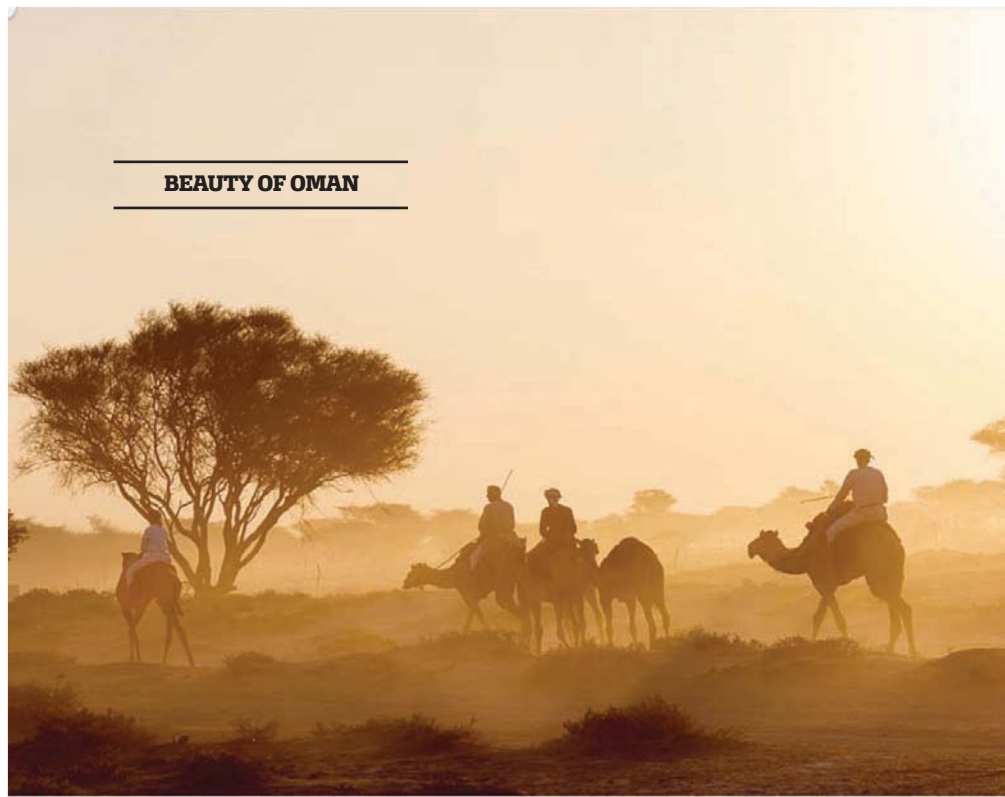
Although change is constant, in nature, the vulture may never become an eagle, yet still deserves its day in the Sun, so to speak, and not simply be the object of derision, horror and dread. In the same way that not every Hollywood actor is handsome, so the vulture reminds one easily of the craggy, yet thoroughly robust Sean Bean of Game of Thrones, not terribly ‘flash,’ but unforgettable.





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HUMAN INTEREST

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'Sesame Street'

unveils Rohingya Muppets to help refugee children

Children's TV show "Sesame Street" has unveiled its first Rohingya Muppets to help thousands of refugee children overcome trauma and tackle the pandemic's impact in the world's largest refugee settlement in Bangladesh. Six-year-old twins, Noor and Aziz Yasmin, will feature alongside the show's famous characters like Elmo and Louie in educational videos in Rohingya language in the camps, according to Sesame Workshop, the non-profit organisation behind the show. "Noor

and Aziz are at the heart of our efforts to bring early education ... to children and caregivers ... impacted tremendously by the dual crises of displacement and the COVID-19 pandemic," Sherrie Westin, president of the social impact at Sesame Workshop, said in a statement.

"For most Rohingya children, Noor and Aziz will be the very first characters in media who look and sound like them... (they) will bring the transformative power of playful learning to families at a

time when it's needed more than ever before." According to UN figures, children make up more than half of about 730,000 Rohingya who arrived in Bangladesh in 2017 after a mass exodus from Myanmar and now live in camps in Cox's Bazar.

Earlier this year aid agencies said the risks of child marriage and trafficking had increased in the camps as the pandemic led to scaling back camp activities and shutting youth services. Sesame Workshop described Noor as a pas-

sionate and curious girl who loves to make up funny new rules for games, while her brother is a storyteller whose creativity can, at times, distract him from his daily tasks. Bangladeshi non-government organisation BRAC, a partner of the programme, said the video segments would begin "soon". "This will definitely help the Rohingya children stay connected to their roots," said BRAC spokeswoman Hasina Akhter.

— Thomson Reuters Foundation

LIFESTYLE

Big Ben to toll for Brexit as well as New Year



Big Ben — an enduring symbol of Britishness for more than 150 years — will toll as the Brexit transition period ends, the House of Commons said Thursday.

The famous clock, whose chimes feature on television and radio broadcasts, has been under repairs since 2017 and is currently only used on special occasions.

It will strike at 12, 4, 9, 10 and 11:00 pm and then at midnight on December 31 to ring in the New Year, the House of Commons said.

The statement did not attach any particular significance to the 11:00 pm chimes.

But at midnight Brussels time, or 11:00 pm UK time (2300 GMT), Britain will leave the European Union single market and customs union.

The announcement was welcomed by pro-Brexit media.

"Big Ben WILL bong for Brexit!" wrote the *Daily Express* tabloid.

Big Ben has been under wraps since August 2017 for repairs and restoration of the clock and the tower. It last tolled on Armistice Day on November 11, the anniversary of the end of World War I.

Huge crowds usually gather to celebrate New Year's Eve around Big Ben,

and as fireworks are set off nearby on the River Thames in central London.

But this year the advice is to stay away due to the coronavirus pandemic and events have been cancelled.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson failed to get the clock to chime at 11:00 pm on January 31 when Britain formally left the European Union.

Britain has since been locked in an 11-month transition period, where EU rules still apply, as it tries to secure terms of its future relationship with the bloc.

Johnson had backed the idea of crowdfunding to pay to restart the clock, coining the slogan: "bung a bob for a Big Ben bong."

A bob is the equivalent of five pence and a slang expression for money.

The House of Commons authorities refused because of cost, and instead a countdown clock was projected onto the facade of Johnson's 10 Downing Street office and residence.

"Big Ben" is the name of the bell, while the 315-foot (96-metre) tower holding it is called the Elizabeth Tower.

It was designed in neo-Gothic style by parliament architect Augustus Pugin and was completed in 1856. — AFP



Anime ‘Demon Slayer’

set to dethrone Ghibli classic for Japan box office crown

An anime epic in which a teenager hunts down and beheads demons has become the surprise sensation of Japanese cinema during the pandemic, and could soon be the country's top-grossing film of all time.

“Demon Slayer”, a full-length flick based on the hit manga series is threatening to dethrone Studio Ghibli’s “Spirited Away”, the fantastical 2001 tale that won an Oscar for best-animated feature.

The story of Tanjiro, whose life transforms when his family are killed in a demon attack, has taken 30.3 billion yen (\$290 million) at cinemas since its October release.

At one recent screening in Tokyo, a group of female friends said they had come to see the film because “it’s a hot topic” in Japan.

Drawing long lines around the country, “Demon Slayer” has dispatched “Titanic” from the number two spot and

looked on track to beat Hayao Miyazaki’s classic by Christmas.

But this week, there was a plot twist: the Ghibli film’s total sales were revised upwards to take into account a re-release over the summer — raising its takings to 31.7 billion yen and staving off “Demon Slayer” a little longer.

The new film’s stunning success comes despite — and perhaps because of — the pandemic, with people in Japan urged to avoid crowds, putting most other forms of mass entertainment off-limits.

Kei, a 25-year-old who saw the film with his sister, said he thought people with more free time was just one reason for its success, with its high production values a bigger draw.

“This movie is a big hit because the animation is very unique and beautiful. It’s very creative,” he said.

Japan has seen a relatively limited outbreak of the virus, with fewer than 2,600 deaths so far, although record numbers



of new cases have been recorded in recent weeks.

The country has not implemented the strict lockdown measures seen elsewhere and movie theatres have largely stayed open, though with restrictions including mask-wearing.

‘INVISIBLE, FRIGHTENING THREATS’

A sophisticated marketing campaign, including tie-ups with shops and res-

taurants, and well-known actors voicing the characters have also helped boost the film — whose full title is “Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba the Movie: Mugen Train”.

And some say the relative dearth of other recent high-profile releases means it may have faced less competition than in a normal year.

But Yuka Ijima, an assistant professor at Tokyo’s Daito Bunka university who focuses on manga and psychology, said: “Demon Slayer” also taps into some particularly relevant themes, with its focus on family ties and the battle between good and evil.

“In the past, the concept of a ‘demon’ was used to embody invisible, frightening threats, like diseases and epidemics including smallpox,” which could resonate with people’s fears during the virus cri-

sis, she told reporters recently.

The film, set in Japan’s 1912-26 Taisho era, began life in 2016 as a manga series published in the popular comic magazine “Shonen Jump”.

Its popularity grew when it was adapted into a televised anime series, and sales of the manga boomed this spring when the Japanese government urged residents to stay home to stem the spread of COVID-19.

The movie’s spring release was pushed back to October, “at a time when there was a certain sense of security” as infections in Japan declined and people felt more comfortable going to the cinema, Ijima said. Its success has been a rare bright spot in the economic malaise that has accompanied the pandemic in Japan.

One research institute estimated the entire series has generated an economic impact of 270 billion yen (\$2.6 billion) in Japan alone.

— AFP