

Al Bashayer Festival from today

The 4th Annual Edition of the Al Bashayer Arabian Camel Racing Festival kicks-off on Monday at 7 am with the first event, a two-year-old race over 4 kms, a taster, an entrée, for almost sixty other events across the remainder of the week, culminating in a Grand Final Afternoon when the crème de la crème of the GCC camel racing bloodstock will compete for outstanding prize money, premium motor vehicles, amazing trophies, and of course, the prestige of being the best of the best. **DETAILS ON P4**



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OMAN OBSERVER

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P10

OAA
CONCLUDES
NATIONAL OPEN
ATHLETICS MEET



P13

GLOBAL WINS
CONTRACTS
WORTH RO
13.8 MILLION



P19

"THE SONGS OF
THE SUN" SHINES
ON THE DETAILS
OF LIFE



MUSCAT

HM CONGRATULATES
SERBIAN PRESIDENT

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik sent a cable of congratulations to President Aleksandar Vucic of the Republic of Serbia on his country's National Day. In the cable, His Majesty expressed his sincere sentiments and best wishes of good health and happiness, and the friendly people of Serbia further progress and prosperity.

OMAN, UAE HOLD
CONSULTATIONS

Sayyid Badr bin Hamad bin Hamoud al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, on Sunday conducted bilateral consultations with Shaikh Abdullah Zayed al Nahyan, Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of the United Arab Emirates(UAE).

PHOTO ON P2

25 PER CENT RISE IN
CYBERCRIMES

The cybercrimes in the Sultanate have risen by 25 per cent in 2020 compared with 2019, Brigadier Jamal bin Habib al Quraishi, Director-General of Inquiries and Criminal Investigations, said. He noted that those who fall victims of cybercrime usually do not report the case to police due to the sensitivity of information collected by the offenders. **SEE P3**



INSIDE



LIBYAN LAWMAKERS SEEK
UNITY AHEAD OF VOTE

P6



JAPAN QUAKE BRINGS BACK
MEMORIES OF TSUNAMI

P7

BEFORE HM, DEFENCE SECRETARY-GENERAL TAKES OATH OF OFFICE



Before His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, Dr Mohammed bin Nasser al Zaabi, Secretary-General at the Ministry of Defence took the oath of office at Al Barakah Palace on Sunday. — ONA

More vaccine doses arrive

VINOD NAIR

@vinot_nair

The Ministry of Health (MoH) on Sunday announced the start of the second dose of the Covid-19 vaccine produced by Pfizer-BioNTech for those who received the first dose of this vaccine after new batch of 17,500 doses of the vaccine arrived in the Sultanate on Saturday. The MoH called on all groups targeted by this vaccine in the past period to take the second dose to get the desired effect.

The MoH reported 684 new cases of Covid-19, bringing the total number of cases registered in the Sultanate to 137,306.

Three new Covid-19 related deaths were also reported, taking the total death toll to 1,542.

The total recovery cases reached 1,290,454, which is 94 per cent of the total recovery rate.

During the past 24 hours 14 patients were hospitalised, taking the total number of Covid-19



inpatients in hospitals to 140, including 39 in Intensive Care Units (ICUs).

Meanwhile, over 10,000 residents and citizens have taken the AstraZeneca vaccine since its launch last week.

The MoH had earlier postponed the second dose of the

Pfizer-BioNTech coronavirus vaccine due to production delays.

"The delay would include all countries of the world contracted by the company to expand the production lines resulting from the increased demand", the company said.

People who received the first

17,500

Doses of the
Pfizer-BioNTech
will be given as
second shot

dose of Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine will not be eligible to take any other vaccine as the second dose.

Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Saeedi had said earlier assured that a six-week delay will not impact the effectiveness of the vaccine.

The number of Pfizer-BioNTech vaccination doses distributed in Oman stood at 39,772 — given to 27,400 people as a first shot and to 12,272 people as a second dose. The manufacturer had confirmed that a six-week delay will not affect those who took the first dose.

Jobs at pvt
varsities,
colleges
Omanised

MUSCAT: Dr Mahad bin Said Baowain, Minister of Labour, issued a ministerial decision Omanising jobs at private higher education institutions. The aim is to replace expatriate manpower with Omanis.

Shaikh Nasr bin Amer al Hosni, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Labour for Labour, pointed out that the decision stipulates that Omanis will henceforth occupy all jobs at private higher education institutions, including administrative positions, financial jobs, heads of departments, registration, student affairs, student services and all other professions related to advisory, counselling and professional orientation jobs. — ONA

RO 1,000
fine for
violations

STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT, FEB 14

The government has decided to impose hefty fines against restaurants and cafes that violate the decisions of the Supreme Committee, which are meant to limit the spread of Covid-19.

Qais bin Mohammed al Yousuf, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP), issued ministerial resolution 29/2021 regarding dealing with violators of the decisions of the Supreme Committee.

Restaurants, cafes and places where shisha is served in violation of the decisions issued by the committee shall be imposed an administrative fine of RO 1,000, and the site will be closed for a month if the violation is repeated. **TURN TO P2**

Biden says democracy fragile after Senate acquits Trump

WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden said on Saturday that the Senate's acquittal of former president Donald Trump for inciting an insurrection was a reminder that democracy was fragile, and every American had a duty to defend the truth.

"This sad chapter in our history has reminded us that democracy is fragile", Biden said after the Senate failed to muster the two-thirds majority needed to convict Trump. Biden noted that a 57 senators — including a record seven Republicans



— voted to find Trump guilty, following a bipartisan vote by the House of Representatives to impeach the Republican former president.

"While the final vote did not lead to a conviction, the substance of the charge is not in

dispute. Even those opposed to the conviction believe Donald Trump was guilty of a 'disgraceful dereliction of duty' and 'practically and morally responsible for provoking' the violence unleashed on the Capitol."

SEE ALSO P8



Oman and UAE hold bilateral consultations

MUSCAT: Sayyid Badr bin Hamad bin Hamoud al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, on Sunday conducted bilateral consultations with Shaikh Abdullah bin Zayed al Nahyan, Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

The two sides touched on various aspects dealing with the Omani, UAE relations, as well as distinguished historic, cultural

ties.

Both Ministers affirmed keenness of their countries' leaderships to strengthen the constructive cooperation in different spheres to enhance the mutual interests.

They exchanged views on regional and international issues and latest developments. They also stressed the importance of the joint action within the

GCC framework, in addition to supporting all endeavours to achieve security, peace and stability for different countries and peoples.

Shaikh Abdullah bin Zayed al Nahyan and his accompanying delegation arrived earlier in the day on a short visit. The guest and his accompanying delegation were received and seen off by Sayyid Badr. — ONA

More acreage to be offered soon for development

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Energy and Minerals will sign as many as three or four concession agreements for the development of available acreage in the coming period, said Dr Salman al Shidi, Director General of Oil and Gas Investments at the Ministry.

In a statement to ONA, Dr Al Shidi added that the Sultanate's hydrocarbon reserves are stable at an estimated 4.5 billion barrels of oil and 24 trillion cubic feet (TCF) of natural gas.

Commenting on oil price trends, the official noted that — based on projections — prices of crude oil are expected to stabilise in the range of \$60 to \$65 per barrel during the course of the year, aided by depleting inventories and production cuts.

CPA asks travel, tourism agencies to follow rules

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

The Consumer Protection Authority (CPA) has called on all travel and tourism offices to abide by the laws, follow both domestic and international rules to avoid punitive action for not fulfilling the promise made to the passenger while booking a ticket or a package.

The International Air Transport Association (IATA) has stipulated various duties, rights and responsibilities for all parties to travel. Accordingly, air passengers have the rights to be protected while in transit, unjustifiable delays in services offered and claim the compensation the passenger is entitled to.

"All airline passengers have rights, duties and responsibilities so as the airlines and travel agencies do and the agencies should make it a point to avoid practices that violate the terms of travel, failing of which the Consumer Protection Authority (CPA) will initiate the necessary measures guaranteed by the law in order to preserve the rights of consumers and save their money and efforts," said a CPA official.

as the accused did not confirm the reservation. This has forced the consumer to book for the third time and pay additional amounts again, besides causing inconvenience and mental agony.

He took the case to the CPA which referred the same to the public prosecution which following which the travel agent was accused of having committed a misdemeanor for failure to comply with the proper provision of the service or to

All airline passengers have rights, duties and responsibilities so as the airlines and travel agencies do and the agencies should make it a point to avoid practices that violate the terms of travel

Workshop discusses CRT effect on industries

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion organised a workshop to discuss the effect of the Cost-Reflective Tariffs (CRT) on the local industries and new investments, under the auspices of Dr Saleh bin Said Masan, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion for Commerce and Industry, at the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI), on Sunday.

The workshop debated the challenges facing the industrial sector including the impact of CRT on local industries and new investments and finding suitable solutions for them with a special focus on improving energy efficiency for domestic industries so that they can compete in the regional and international markets.



A number of working papers that touched on the challenges faced by industrialists were presented at the workshop which also came up with several proposals to overcome these challenges. It discussed the effect of CRT on factories and industrial plants and

the method for calculating the electricity tariff for large electricity consumers.

The workshop witnessed an open debate between the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, the Authority for Public

Services Regulation, the Omani Industrialists Association.

The workshop was attended by representatives from the Authority for Public Services Regulation, the Omani Industrialists Association and owners of high-consumption industries. — ONA

■ FROM PAGE 1

RO1,000 fine for Covid violations

The Supreme Committee on February 10 had assigned the MoCIIP to monitor the compliance of restaurants, cafes, and places that serves hookah or shisha to customers.

Article 1 of the decision said that MoCIIP shall monitor the compliance of restaurants, cafes, and places where hookah is served with the decisions issued by the committee.

It will detect violations in restaurants, cafes, and places where hookah is served, and take the necessary measures regarding them.

It will enter restaurants, cafes, and places in which the hookah is provided to verify compliance with the committee's decisions.

■ TWO FALL FROM BUILDING



Two Asian expats were rescued by the rescue teams of the Public Authority for Civil Defence and Ambulance (PACDA) after falling from the top of a building under-construction in Al Maabala South in the Wilayat of Al Seeb on Sunday. They were rushed to hospital in critical health condition.

Tender

مدائن
madayn

The Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn) announces the following Tender:

Tender Number	Tender Name	Last date of Buying	Date of Submission	Type of Work	Register Degree	Fee (R.O)
1/2021/PEIE/HQ-1	CONSTRUCTION OF INFRASTRUCTURE WORKS FOR IBRI INDUSTRIAL CITY - PHASE 1	08-03-2021	04-04-2021	Construction	Excellent	3000

Interested Companies registered with Tender Board may obtain the Tender documents from the E-Tendering website: <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om> against non-refundable payment as mentioned above for each set of document. Tenders should be submitted on line on given website. The Tenderer should enclose scan copy of Bank Guarantee issued by any bank in the Sultanate of Oman for the value of 1% of the Tender value validity for (90) business days, and addressed to The Chairman of Tender Committee mentioned in above tenders.

- Tender Inquiry:** All correspondence pertaining to the TENDER Inquiry must be online at eTendering System.
- E-Tendering System Inquiry:** All correspondence pertaining to the eTendering System technical support must be directed to the following helpdesk email address and phone number: etenderhd@ita.gov.om and +968 24166670, 24166409.

Note: Bid Submission will be online only.

No Document can be accepted as Manual except Original Tender Bond. Scan Copy of Tender Bond needs to be attached in system and original needs to be deposited before Bid Opening.

Madayn is not bound to accept the lowest or any other Offer and has the right to cancel these tenders and the tenderers have no right to claim for any compensations.

@madaynoman

madayn.om

in t f y o

25% rise in cybercrimes last year

STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT, FEB 14

The cybercrimes in the Sultanate have risen by 25 per cent in 2020 compared with 2019, Brigadier Jamal bin Habib al Quraishi, Director-General of Inquiries and Criminal Investigations, said. He noted that those who fall victims to cybercrime usually do not report the case to police due to the sensitivity of information collected by the offenders.

Cyber criminals can use various social media platforms to carry out their fraudulent schemes. The department of economic crimes had dealt with a lot of crimes committed via social communication programmes such as Whatsapp, Instagram, Snapchat as well as the fake trading platforms. A number of those fake companies that promote unreal investments luring their victims with large returns. Many people had fallen victims to such scammers only to find out that they are fake, Al Quraishi said.

Such fraudulent schemes promote their fake businesses mainly by posting some people purported to be successful investors who have gained a lot of money within a short span of time by trading currency, oil and stocks. They also exploit official newspapers and government websites to lure their victims, he said.

Royal Oman Police (ROP) have arrested a number of cyber criminals, Al Quraishi said, noting that many of the offenders are based outside the Sultanate, besides the victims do not have enough information about the offenders apart from numbers of bank accounts managed abroad. In this regard ROP cooperates with other countries through the International Criminal Police (Interpol) to try and bring the offenders to justice.

The department of liaison at Directorate-General of Inquiries and Criminal



Those who fall victims to cybercrime usually do not report the case to police due to the sensitivity of information collected by the offenders

Investigations has constant coordination with the Interpol and the International and Arab Police. The department receives information about the crimes and criminal methods from the member states seeking assistance in criminal cases. The ROP usually responds quickly to requests sent by member states as long as the requests are compliant with the law. With regard to cybercrimes, when we get informed about novel criminal methods detected by other member states, we usually take necessary measures and issue circulars in coordination with the relevant authorities to protect the public against those crimes,

he said.

The director-general of inquiries and criminal investigation said that cyber criminals can target all age groups, however teenagers are the most vulnerable to cyber extortion because normally lack awareness and knowledge. Hence, parents have a responsibility to watch their children and be aware of what they do when on the Internet.

Giving tips to protect ourselves against cybercrimes, the director-general of inquiries and criminal investigation said that Internet users should not disclose their personal and financial information. Internet users should apply safety measures when shopping online. Besides, Internet users should carefully evaluate the investment offers they receive online particularly those promising hefty and quick gains. People should be aware that the cyber criminals put their victims under psychological pressure by repeatedly contacting and urging them to accept their offers reminding them of the big rewards awaiting them.

Spreading rumours, fake news punishable by law

KABEER YOUSUF

@kabeeryousef

Those who share false news, rumours or unfounded information on social media about Covid-19 or the Supreme Committee decisions will have to face legal action, according to the law enforcement authorities.

False news doing the round regarding land closure, ban on expatriates, the expulsion of foreign workers etc for the past few days that is affecting the right flow of information.

Sources at the Public Prosecution said those who share rumours or baseless information will be dealt with legally and the punishment for the same would depend upon the nature, mode, and gravity of the shared information.

"Making or sharing false news, wrong information are offenses which are

strictly dealt with," the source said.

According to the cybercrimes Code-18, which deals with the said content, "any such attempt to share false information or the authenticity of which the sender is not aware of, will be punishable with fine ranging from RO 1,000 to RO 5,000 and imprisonment up to three years."

The Supreme Committee on Covid-19 has requested both citizens and residents to refrain from circulating unverified information related to the ongoing pandemic. "All citizens and residents in the Sultanate are requested to not circulate wrong information and follow the official social media guidelines and act accordingly," an earlier statement from the committee has said.

"What we need is not to panic but to be vigilant and follow the guidelines prescribed by medical experts on coronavirus," it said.

MAJIS INDUSTRIAL SERVICES SAOC (Majis)
 P.O. Box No. 553, Falaj Al Qabail, Postal Code 322, Sultanate of Oman
 Tel No. 26852421 Email: Tender@miscoman.com
 (Office Location: Administration Building, Opposite Sohar Aluminium and Sohar Power Co. at Sohar Industrial Port Area)



TENDER ANNOUNCEMENT
 Majis Industrial Services SAOC (Majis) is a closely held joint stock company fully owned by the Government of Oman. Majis is engaged in providing various water utility services at the Sohar Industrial Port Area and Sohar Free Zone. Tenders are invited from the qualified local contracting firms for the following tender: A brief Terms of Reference (TORs) is available at Majis' website (www.majisoman.com) for bidder's ready reference.

Sl. No.	Tender No.	Tender Description	Bids fees In R.O.	Last date for Obtaining Tender Documents	Last date for tender Submission	Contractor's grade with Tender Board
1	Majis/4/2021	UPGRADING OF SEAWATER INTAKE PUMPING STATION FOR COMMON COOLING WATER SYSTEM AT SOHAR INDUSTRIAL PORT	750/-	28 th February 2021	28 th March 2021	Excellent Grade/ First Grade

Bidders who have made electronic transfer of bid fee will be emailed soft copy of the tender document on the Sunday 28th February 2021. The companies participating must be registered with Majis' in e-tendering system (<http://tendering.majis.om/VendorLogin.aspx>) during the tendering stage. The payment of bid fee should be made by direct transfer to the following bank account of Majis. (Account Name: Majis Industrial Services SAOC, Bank: Bank Muscat SAOG, Account Number: 0423010783830018).

While making payment by direct bank transfer name of the firm should be clearly mentioned and an email sent to tender@miscoman.com with a copy of the money transmittal advice. Tender documents will be emailed to such firms only.

The Tender should be delivered in sealed envelopes, addressed to the EXECUTIVE, NOMINATION & REMUNERATION COMMITTEE "ENRC", Majis Industrial Service SAOC, P.O. Box No. 553, Falaj Al Qabail, Postal Code 322, Sultanate of Oman (at Majis's reception).

Tenderers must not display their identities on envelopes. Majis is not bound to accept the lowest or any other tender. Questions regarding this procurement process shall be directed to tender@miscoman.com.

Women love this traditional Al Laylam Souq

AMAL AL RIYAMI

@AMAL92ALRIYAMI

The Friday Souq in Nizwa is known for preserving the Omani heritage and market traditions. The souq comprises of many markets where different products are sold

One among them is Al Laylam Souq, which is one of the oldest markets in the Sultanate. Women flock to the souq held next to Al Shahba Castle because they can bargain and buy goods. The word Laylam in Arabic means street vendor men who visited the houses with his wares.

The market starts from early morning and lasts until noon. Some sellers continue to display their wares till evening.

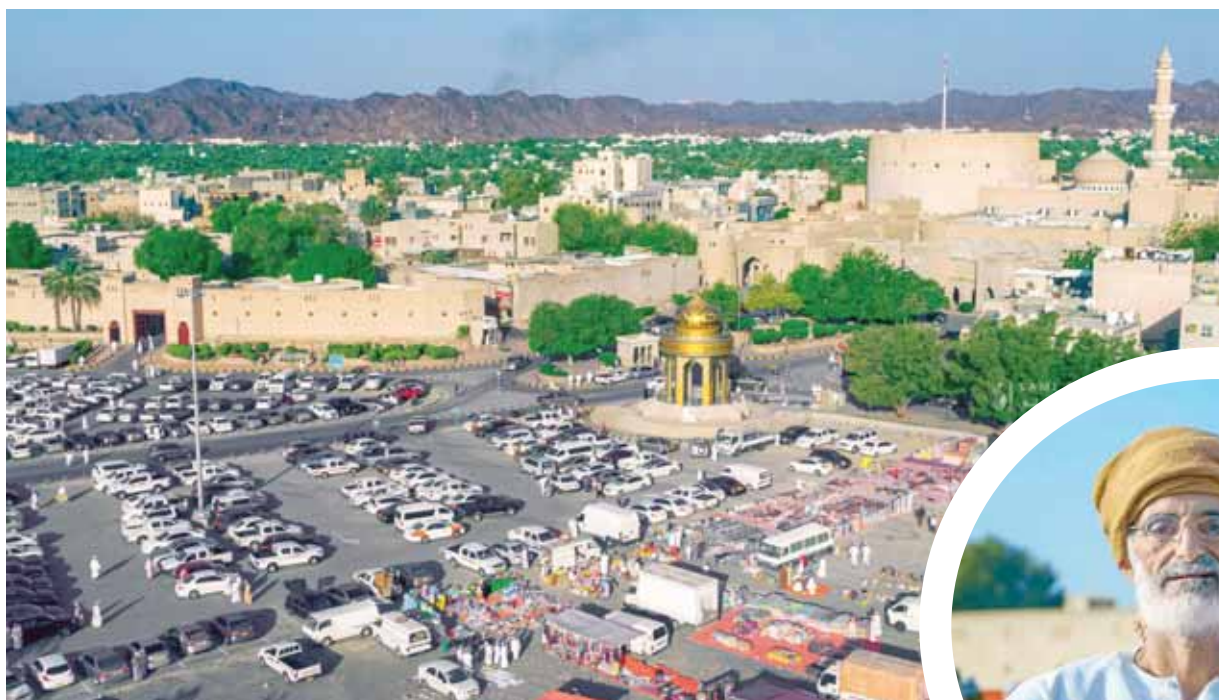
Sellers start preparing their wares from every Thursday. There is no fixed corner for each vendor. The seller chooses the place he wants in this square to sell his products.

The market offers used products at cheaper prices. The buyers can bargain as there is no fixed price for the goods. All the sellers in this market are elderly Omanis who choose this market because there are no taxes and terms.

The merchandise sold in the market varies from clothes, perfumes, toys, bicycles, bed sheets, utensils, household items and carpets.

The market has lost its charm due to big stores and supermarkets.

— PHOTOS: SAMI AL HINAI



AL BASHAYER FESTIVAL

RAY PETERSEN

The 4th Annual Edition of the Al Bashayer Arabian Camel Racing Festival kicks-off tomorrow (Monday) at 7 am with the first event, a Two-Year-Old race over 4 kms, a taster, an entrée, for almost sixty other events across the remainder of the week, culminating in a Grand Final Afternoon when the crème de la crème of the GCC camel racing bloodstock will compete for outstanding prize money, premium motor vehicles, amazing trophies, and of course, the prestige of being the best of the best. The event is held under the auspices of His Highness Sayyid Asaad bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for International Relations and Cooperation Affairs, Personal Representative of His Majesty the Sultan, an avid enthusiast of the sport who recently noted that “The Al Bashayer Festival represents the premier sporting, social and cultural values of the Sultanate.”

RACING GLORY

Khalid bin Sultan al Junaibi is the on-course announcer for the racing, and prior to each race-day, he will host a studio discussion featuring special guests, officials, owners, breeders, and trainers, where they will discuss the upcoming races and identify likely winners and placegetters. This is no small task as, pending the final announcement of the fields thousands of the region’s fastest racing camels will descend upon the sleepy Wilayat of Adam in search of camel racing glory. Local owners whose colours are expected to be prominent during the week’s racing include Obaid bin Said al Junaibi, Abdullah bin Tawerish al Wahaibi and Obaid bin Mohammed al Wahaibi.

The morning races begin at 7 am, and the afternoon races at 2 pm under the stewardship of the Oman Camel Racing Federation, while preparations will be under way well in advance of those timings, and the racing on Monday is for two-year-old over 4 km, on Tuesday is for three-year-old over 5 km, Wednesday for four-year-old over 6 km, and the five-year-old and over race at the end of the week on Thursday, in the morning only, over 8 kms.

PRIZE LIST

While a liberal sprinkling of premier motor vehicles will grace the prize list for the first four days, it is Finals Day, featuring the highest graded camels, will see competition for the Al Bashayer Trophies and Khanjars in the morning. The Grand Finals in the afternoon will see the elite camel athletes compete for a Silver Sword and FJ Cruiser, and a Golden Sword and Toyota Land Cruiser.

The Al Bashayer Camel Track, near Adam, in Al Dakhiliyah, will resonate to the pounding hooves of camels loping gracefully at the head of a massive cloud of dust, accompanied by the roar of their escort vehicles circumnavigating the inside of the track, their horns blasting, as the tiny robots, resplendent in the camel owner’s special combination of colours, encourage the camels to run faster with a limited number of padded whip strokes, or to audible encouragement via microphone. It’s all so exciting, so much fun, and if you have never been before, pack the family in the car and check it out!

The morning races begin at 7 am, and the afternoon races at 2 pm under the stewardship of the Oman Camel Racing Federation



Survey lists most sought after skills in GCC for 2021

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 14

Among the most sought after skills in GCC countries, including Oman for 2021, are sales manager (17 per cent), sales executive (16 per cent) and accountant (13 per cent). These positions emerged as the top roles that GCC employers are hiring for in the coming quarter, revealed a survey conducted recently by Bayt.com, the Middle East's leading job site and YouGov, global online market research company. Furthermore, most GCC employers are demanding good communication in English and Arabic (64 per cent) as well as good leadership skills (42 per cent) as top skills for their hires.

Released bi-annually, the Job Index survey is an in-depth study that aims to measure the job availability and hiring trends. It also identifies trends in the MENA job market and provides an understanding of required skill sets and qualifications in the region.

The outlook looks promising for job-seekers across the GCC region, as intention to hire in a year's time is positive (68 per cent). Oil/ Gas/Petrochemicals (76 per cent), Advertising/Marketing/Public Relations (73 per cent) and Engineering/Design



(72 per cent) demonstrated the highest intention of hiring in the next one year across the MENA region.

Job-seekers will be pleased to know that hiring intention across many sectors is positive in the short-term as well, with top industries looking to hire new employees in the next three months are Advertising/Marketing/Public relations (70 per cent), Manufacturing (64 per cent) and Healthcare/ Medical Services (57 per cent).

Ola Haddad, Director of Human Resources at Bayt.com said: "The MENA region continues to evolve as the pandemic brings tremendous changes — affecting job opportunities for various industries and career levels. The Job Index gives us the opportunity to track, follow and communicate hiring trends and required skill sets, twice a year, so that job-seekers can plan and develop their skills accordingly and companies are able to attract top talent."

The majority of GCC compa-

nies will be hiring entry level staff especially Junior Executives (49 per cent). Meanwhile, Sales Manager (17 per cent), Sales Executive (16 per cent) and Accountant (13 per cent) are the top roles employers in the GCC region are looking for.

Furthermore, nearly 4 in 10 (39 per cent) of survey respondents state that they are looking for candidates with managerial experience, while 31 per cent want candidates with sales and marketing experience and 29 per cent are searching for those with mid-level experience.

When it comes to skill sets, good communication skills in Arabic and English (64 per cent) are highly sought after, followed by good leadership skills (42 per cent) and being a team player (39 per cent).

In addition, Engineering (27 per cent), Business Management (26 per cent) and Commerce (17 per cent) are the most sought after academic qualifications amongst employers in the GCC region.

IT/Internet/E-commerce (29 per cent), Healthcare/Medical Services (28 per cent) are seen as the industries that attract or retain top talent across the GCC region, followed by Advertising/Marketing/Public Relations (27 per cent).



The Directorate-General for Combating Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances in cooperation with the police command of North Al Batinah Governorate, arrested two people on charges of possessing drugs with the intent of trafficking in association with international drug gang.

Marginal dip in Omanis registered with public sector pension funds

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 14

The number of employed Omanis registered with public sector pension funds in the Sultanate totalled 196,238 as of end September, which is 0.2 per cent lower than the previous month.

According to the latest data released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information

(NCSI), they comprised 113,526 males and 82,712 females.

Those in the wage category ranging from RO 1,000 to less than RO 2,000 totalled 58,468 citizens.

This was followed by 35,751 citizens in the RO 700 to less than RO 800 wage bracket.

Those earning between RO 800 and less than RO 900 totalled 30,099.

By age category, employed Omanis between 35 and 39 years topped the list, reaching 54,115, followed by those between 30 and 34 years, reaching 42,902 citizens. Those between 40 and 44 years totalled 41,249.

The Sultanate has various citizen funds in the public sector, including funds at the Civil Service, Diwan of Royal Court and Central Bank of Oman.



Shell Oman Marketing Company SAOG

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DIRECTORS' REPORT FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 DECEMBER 2020

Dear Shareholders,
On behalf of the Board of Directors, I would like to present the Directors' Annual Report for Shell Oman Marketing Company SAOG for the year ended December 31, 2020.

SUMMARY FINANCIALS

In OMR'000	Quarter			12 Months		
	Q4/2020	Q4/2019	%	2020	2019	%
Revenue	90,130	134,936	(33.2%)	367,090	524,826	(30.05%)
Gross profit	7,490	9,177	(18.4%)	27,235	36,508	(25.40%)
Add: Other income	1,238	1,744	(29.0%)	4,927	6,582	(25.14%)
Less: Selling, distribution and administrative expenses	(6,957)	(7,389)	(5.8%)	(27,110)	(28,444)	(4.69%)
Less: Financing and taxation	(629)	(904)	(30.4%)	(2,468)	(3,659)	(32.55%)
Profit and comprehensive income	1,142	2,628	(56.5%)	2,584	10,987	(76.48%)

- Full-year Revenues were OMR 367 million, lower than the same period last year due to the continued impact of COVID-19 on sales volumes.
- Full-year Gross Profit was OMR 27.2 million, lower than the same period last year mainly due to reduction in sales volumes across all businesses during the pandemic and the decline in petroleum product prices which account for a stock loss of OMR 495 K.
- Profit and Comprehensive Income for the year was OMR 2,584 million, lower than the same period last year, mainly due to the drop in Gross Profit.

BUSINESS PERFORMANCE

Retail Business remains the largest segment of the Company. Despite a downward impact on volumes as a result of COVID-19 mobility restrictions and limited commercial activities throughout the year, the business remained resilient. The focus has been the safety of people, including customers and frontliners. Moreover, the business continued to introduce and adopt best practices to minimise the spread of COVID-19; reaffirming the "Commitment for Care" towards our customers and the community at large. The Company continued the journey of offering differentiated fuel by making Shell V-Power available for the customers across Oman.

In Non-Fuel Retail (NFR), the business continued to expand the range of products and services to customers. The business expanded the new generation of Shell Select experience in Oman with multiple convenience stores introduced during the year in collaboration with local Omani SMEs. Furthermore, the experience was enhanced with the launch of the digital ordering channel by Shell Select in partnership with local and regional providers. The Company has also extended the coffee experience through alliance agreements with international and Omani café brands. The growth also continued in the car care segment with many new car wash and oil change facilities opened during the year, providing customers with an integrated Retail experience.

Fleet Solutions Business remained challenging as customers faced the impact of COVID-19 and economic challenges which affected volumes. The focus remained on adapting to the new realities and support customers with the acceleration of our digitalisation journey, automation and addressing evolving customer needs. In addition, the business continued to leverage the Cards Management System to enable a superior experience for fleets customers.

Commercial Fuels Business environment remained challenging due to the macroeconomic impacts. However, the focus continued primarily on new opportunities, operational excellence and quality service to retain key customers.

Marine Business volumes had been impacted as a result of COVID-19 restrictions, with limited activity due to cancellation of several scheduled commercial and cruise vessels at key ports. However, the Company continued to serve local Marine customers without disruption, while adhering to the highest HSSE and operational excellence standards.

Lubricants Business: The Lubricants Business was similarly hit by challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in the automotive space, but

saw some market recovery beginning in December 2020 due to the opening of commercial activities as per the relevant authorities' announcements. The business continued to maintain close relationships with key customers in Oil / Gas / Power / Government and Construction sectors. It continued to supply quality Shell lubricants from its ISO 9001-certified Shell lubricant blending plant at Mina Al Fahal. In addition, the business focused on reinforcing its market leadership by maintaining a strong customer base, seeking new accounts, expanding new revenue streams in different sectors and enhancing its product portfolio. The Company continued to work closely with partners and distributors to observe and adopt to the new realities and explore various digital platforms available in the sector to serve customers and maintain a competitive advantage in the market. The business was recognised for its 'Excellence in Industry Partnership with Construction & Infrastructure Sector' at the 'Dossier Construction's Infrastructure Awards & Summit' 2020.

Aviation Business: Original plans projected substantial growth in the Aviation sector, but the sector had been one of the hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. Both domestic and international travel declined significantly since March 2020. While the external environment was challenging, the Aviation business won new contracts in the cargo sector and retained key contracts at Muscat International Airport. In addition, a new airport entry was achieved in 2020 as the business successfully secured a concession agreement with Oman Airports to operate Duqm Airport, a testament to the Company's commitment to operational excellence at the fuel farm of both Muscat and Salalah International Airports. The Company continued operating at PDO's oil fields.

PROPOSED DIVIDEND

In light of the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the parallel challenges in the market, the Board of Directors has decided to propose to the shareholders that no Dividend be distributed for the year ended December 31, 2020. Whilst coming to this decision, the Board has considered the net income, financial commitments and cash generation of the Company, which was materially reduced by the sharp fall in sales demand caused by the pandemic. Although the Company has taken decisive steps to improve efficiency and reduce cash spend as a response to these challenges, it remains unclear as to how long both domestic and global conditions will take to fully recover. As a result, and after assessing various scenarios and current money market liquidity, priority has been placed on financial resilience and ensuring the long term financial strength and sustainability of the Company. The Board's proposal not to distribute a Dividend is fundamental to ensuring the Company has sufficient financial flexibility and balance sheet strength to manage potential uncertainty of 2021. Considerations have also been taken to balance the need to maintain capital investment to ensure the longer-term profitability and competitive position of the Company when full economic recovery returns.

The Board of Directors remains committed to the objective of growing long term shareholder value. The position on dividend payment for 2020 has resulted from unprecedented economic circumstances and does not represent a structural change in Shell Oman Marketing Company's dividend approach.

BUSINESS OUTLOOK

2020 was a year of unprecedented challenges driven by decline in oil prices and the COVID-19 pandemic. From an industry perspective, this translated into a sharp decline in demand largely resulting from decreased business activity and the impact of the restrictions imposed to reduce the spread of the disease. At the same time, 2020 saw the Company successfully adapt operations rapidly to the changing business environment. Much of the uncertainty of 2020 is expected to continue into 2021, with the speed of economic recovery, both domestically and globally remaining unclear. As a result, the Company is positioning to be able to both weather a challenging economic backdrop while continuing to invest in growth opportunities to ensure the Company retains its competitive position and captures the market's return should the external environment recovery accelerate.

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Shell Oman Marketing Company is committed to continue working in line with its CSR strategy that focuses on Road Safety, Community & Enterprise Development and the Environment. Emphasis is put on collaborating with key partners and stakeholders in the private and government sectors towards achieving the goals of Vision Oman 2040. The Company will focus its efforts and align its goals to creating sustainable value for society and the country which is meant to lead to improving business environment, supporting economic growth, diversifying sources of revenues, and stimulating investments in the country while reducing the impact of its operations.

HEALTH, SAFETY, SECURITY AND ENVIRONMENT

In 2020, the Company maintained an excellent HSSE performance and continued its Goal Zero journey with no harm and no leaks. The focus in 2020 was to maintain and improve the previous year's health, safety, security and environmental achievement of no harm and zero recordable Last Time Injury (LTI) and zero leaks. Moreover, the Company continued to focus on strengthening its Safety Behaviour Culture by encouraging self-care awareness, caring for others and fostering a timely intervention mindset, which was achieved through several initiatives, including Safety Day.

The Company has successfully managed the evolving risks related to COVID-19 with an effective business continuity plan. The collaboration and strict adherence to all instructions from authorities to reduce the risk of COVID-19 led to continuing operation of the business during the unprecedented year, whilst maintaining a high standard of safety throughout. The Company has also continued using its social media channels and Shell Service Stations to raise awareness on COVID-19 and engage the general public with Health and Safety messages. Shell Oman remains vigilant, with a high focus on the culture of safety through caring for others and for the environment, addressing potential risks, as well as encouraging the Safety Intervention mindset.

RISK AND CONCERNS

The speed of economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic remains a watch point for Company as does the overall availability of liquidity in the cash market. As a result, the Company remains balanced in ensuring a resilient balance sheet, while cautiously continuing with selective investments.

The Company's forward investment and business plan assumes stability in the fixed margin rates in the dominant retail segment, and this is dependent on the authorities. The Company tests investments against various scenarios, including changing price structures, forecasted demand and the evolving economic environment to ensure we continue to take robust investment decisions concerning the shareholders' available funds.

INTERNAL CONTROL SYSTEMS

The Board of Directors recognises that good corporate governance results from strong internal controls. The Board affirms its overall responsibility for reviewing the adequacy and the integrity of the Company's internal control and management information systems, including systems for compliance with applicable laws. There was no material loss reported during 2020 as a result of weaknesses in internal controls. The Management of the Company continues to take measures to strengthen the overall internal control environment.

BOARD CHANGES

The Shareholders have elected Richard Jory as the eleventh Director in the AGM held in March 2020. In addition, Mooi Fung Fong has replaced Mazhar Ud Deen as a nominee Director of juristic shareholder BV Petroleum Assurantie Maatschappij with effect from 31 March 2020.

IN APPRECIATION

We, in Shell Oman Marketing Company, would like to reaffirm our commitment as part of this nation to continue to stand shoulder to shoulder with our partners and stakeholders in the Sultanate and work to power its progress together and continue building on its achievements. We will continue to serve Oman and the people under the leadership of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tank and to support his vision for the Sultanate.

On behalf of the Board of Directors, I would like to express my sincere thanks to our stakeholders in the public and private sectors including our shareholders, the management, our employees, customers, and contractors for their support, loyalty, perseverance, dedication and effort in both building opportunities and facing the challenges of the rapidly changing business environment. The Board of Directors remains committed to pursuing all opportunities with a view to maintaining the Company's expansion while enhancing shareholders' value. We are grateful for your constant support as we secure growth and prosperity for the Company.

Walid Hadi

Chairman, Shell Oman Marketing Company SAOG Muscat, February 8, 2021

Audited Financial Statements for the Year ended 31 December 2020		
AUDITED STATEMENT OF COMPREHENSIVE INCOME		
	Audited Year ended 31 Dec 2020 RO'000	Audited Year ended 31 Dec 2019 RO'000
Revenue from contracts with customers	367,090	524,826
Cost of sales	(339,855)	(488,318)
Gross profit	27,235	36,508
Other income	4,927	6,582
Selling and distribution expenses	(22,643)	(22,899)
Administrative expenses	(4,467)	(5,545)
Operating profit	5,052	14,646
Finance costs	(2,001)	(1,780)
Finance income	26	47
Profit before income tax	3,077	12,913
Income tax expense	(493)	(1,926)
Profit and total comprehensive income for the year	2,584	10,987
Basic and diluted earnings per share (RO)	0.025	0.110
AUDITED STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL POSITION		
	Audited 31 Dec 2020 RO'000	Audited 31 Dec 2019 RO'000
ASSETS		
Non-current assets		
Property, plant and equipment	54,882	57,097
Intangible assets	69	177
Right-of-use assets	29,755	25,249
Total non-current assets	84,706	82,523
Current assets		
Inventories	6,646	7,202
Trade and other receivables	33,901	60,296
Bank balances	4,607	7,513
Total current assets	45,154	75,011
Total assets	129,860	157,534
EQUITY		
Share capital	10,000	10,000
Legal reserve	3,587	3,587
Retained earnings	36,302	40,318
Total equity	49,889	53,905
LIABILITIES		
Non-current liabilities		
Long term loan	6,667	6,000
Lease liabilities	25,770	22,463
Deferred tax liability	51	120
Employees' end of service benefits	301	271
Total non-current liabilities	32,789	28,854
Current liabilities		
Current portion of long term loan	3,333	-
Short term loan	-	11,000
Lease liabilities	3,375	1,923
Trade and other payables	40,003	59,851
Income tax payable	282	1,746
Provision for employee retention scheme	189	255
Total current liabilities	47,182	74,775
Total liabilities	79,971	103,629
TOTAL EQUITY AND LIABILITIES	129,860	157,534
Net assets per share (RO)	0.498	0.539
* The complete financial statements are available from the Muscat Securities Market (MSM).		
* The complete accounts will be sent by mail to any shareholder on request, in either Arabic or English, within 7 days of receipt of the request.		
* The request should be sent to the Chief Financial Officer or the address shown above.		
* The previous year's figures have been reclassified to conform to the presentation adopted in the current year.		

Libyan lawmakers seek unity ahead of vote

TRIPOLI: Members of Libya's divided parliament began arriving on Sunday in the western city of Sabrath ahead of a bid to unify the legislature after the selection of a transitional government to lead the conflict-torn country to elections.

Lawmakers plan to meet on Monday in the city to the west of the capital Tripoli, for a consultative meeting, parliamentarian Abdel-Moneim Balkour said.

Between 110 and 120 members of the 188-strong legislature are expected to attend the meeting, Balkour said.

He added that there were three items on the agenda: Unifying the assembly, a confidence vote on the government following its formation and finalising obligations relating to passing legislation.

Delegates from Libya's rival factions elected Mohammed Menfi as head of a three-member Presidency Council and Abdul-Hamid Mohammed Dbeibe has interim prime minister in a UN-hosted process in Switzerland on February 5.

The new authority will replace the UN-backed Government of National Accord, which has been in charge of Tripoli and western areas, and the competing eastern administration linked with warlord Khalifa Haftar.

The government must win a vote of confidence at a parliamentary session, the date of which has not been set yet. — dpa



Amazigh and Libyan national flags are seen fluttering at the Martyrs' Square in the centre of Libya's capital Tripoli days ahead of commemorations of the 10th anniversary of the uprising against Gaddafi's regime. — AFP



Forces loyal to Yemen's government get into position during clashes with Ansar Allah fighters in Al Jadaan area about 50 kilometres northwest of Marib in central Yemen. — AFP

Dozens killed in overnight clashes in northern Yemen

DUBAI: Dozens were killed in overnight clashes in Yemen as Ansar Allah fighters intensified attacks to seize the government's last northern stronghold, officials said on Sunday.

Earlier this month, the Ansar Allah resumed an offensive to seize oil-rich Marib, some 120 kilometres east of the capital Sanaa.

The city's loss would be disastrous for Yemen's beleaguered leadership.

Two government military officials said at least 16 pro-government forces were killed and 21 wounded in the past 24 hours, adding that "dozens were killed" among Ansar Allah ranks.

The Ansar Allah have cut off supply lines to a district about 50 kilometres south of the city, with "the goal to lay siege to Marib", one of the sources said.

Yemen has been embroiled in a bloody power struggle since 2014 between its government, supported by Saudi Arabia, and Ansar Allah fighters, who control the capital Sanaa and most of the north.

The fighters have also escalated attacks against Saudi Arabia, drawing condemnation from the international community.

The kingdom said it had foiled

The upsurge in violence comes shortly after the US decided to remove the fighters from its list of terrorist groups

en is unimpeded, and to pave the way to restart peace talks.

Observers say the Ansar Allah fighters are seeking to take control of Marib as leverage before entering into any negotiations with the internationally recognised government.

If the city falls into fighter hands, the Ansar Allah will have full control of north Yemen, weakening the government's negotiating position, according to observers. Saudi Arabia has invested heavily in Marib in recent years, and the coalition has intensified air strikes to stop the fighters from seizing the city. — AFP

Lebanon kicks off vaccinations against Coronavirus

BEIRUT: Lebanon on Sunday gave its first Covid-19 vaccines dose to a doctor and an elderly actor, as it started an inoculation drive it hopes will keep the pandemic in check amid deepening economic crisis.

Mahmoud Hassoun, the head of the intensive care unit at the key Rafik Hariri Hospital battling coronavirus, was the first person to get the jab, a correspondent said. "Hopefully this will be the start of the end of this plague in the country," Hassoun said.

He received a Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine, a day after the very first 28,500 doses landed at Beirut's airport.

Healthcare workers and those over 75 years are the first to be vaccinated under the national rollout plan.

Popular Lebanese comedian Salah Tizani, 93, who is best known by his stage name Abu Salim, was second to roll up his shirt in front of the cameras. "I'm telling everyone to come and get vaccinated and not be scared. Better to get vaccinated than to be knocked down by this deadly virus," he said.

Caretaker premier Hassan Diab visited the Rafik Hariri Hospital in Beirut and praised the hard work of healthcare workers, but said he would wait his turn to be



Lebanon's caretaker health minister Hamad Hassan administers a dose of Covid-19 vaccine to a member of the healthcare staff at the Rafik Hariri Hospital in Beirut. — AFP

vaccinated.

"Today is not my turn," said the 61-year-old premier. "The priority is for the health sector, which has... made great sacrifices," he said.

Healthcare workers at three Beirut hospitals in total were to receive their first shot on Sunday.

From Monday, another 18 hospitals across the country are to join in the vaccination campaign, health ministry adviser Mohamad Haidar has said.

The World Bank has allocated \$34 million to inoculate two million of Lebanon's six million inhabitants.

Lebanon has been under a lockdown since mid-January, after an unprecedented spike in cases blamed on holiday gatherings that forced overwhelmed hospitals to turn away patients for lack of beds.

The pandemic has compounded the woes of Lebanese, already struggling with a dire economic crisis and reeling from a devastating explosion at Beirut's port last summer that killed more than 200 people, injured thousands and destroyed swathes of the capital.

The Lebanese pound has lost more than 80 per cent of its value to the dollar on the black market, prices have soared, and many have seen their savings trapped in the banks. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

DUBAI

'Hope' probe sends home first image of Mars

The UAE's "Hope" probe sent back its first image of Mars, the national space agency said, days after the spacecraft successfully entered the Red Planet's orbit. The picture "captured the largest volcano in the solar system, Olympus Mons, emerging into the early morning sunlight," it said in a statement.

The image was taken from an altitude of 24,700 kilometres above the Martian surface on Wednesday, a day after the probe entered Mars' orbit, it said in a



statement. Shaikh Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktoum, UAE Prime Minister and Dubai's ruler, shared the coloured image on Twitter.

"The first picture of Mars captured by the first-ever Arab probe in history," he wrote. — AFP

TEL AVIV

Israel plans to reopen restaurants in March

Israel plans to reopen restaurants around March 9 and restart tourism with Cyprus as part of a gradual return to normality thanks to a Covid-19 vaccination campaign, officials said.

With more than 41 per cent of Israelis having received at least one shot of Pfizer Inc's vaccine, Israel has said it will partially reopen hotels and gyms on February 23 to those fully inoculated or deemed immune after recovering from Covid-19.



To gain entry, these beneficiaries would have to present a "Green Pass", displayed on a Health Ministry app linked to their medical files.

The app's rollout is due this week. — Reuters

BEIRUT

12.4m people food insecure in war-torn Syria

A record 12.4 million people in war-torn Syria are struggling to find enough food to eat, the UN food agency has said, in an increase it described as "alarming". The figure means "60 per cent of the Syrian population are now food insecure", the World Food Programme said, based on results of a nationwide assessment in late 2020.

It marks a sharp increase from 9.3 million people who were food insecure in May last year.

"More Syrians are slipping deeper into hunger, poverty and food insecurity than ever before," WFP spokeswoman Jessica Lawson said.

"It is alarming that a basic meal is now beyond the reach of the majority of families." — AFP



In brief

■ BEIJING



BEIJING SMOG CASTS GLOOM OVER NEW YEAR HOLIDAY

Beijing was once again shrouded in smog on Saturday after several days of heavy pollution which have plagued China's capital during the Lunar New Year national holiday.

Visibility across Beijing was severely limited by the smog on the second day of Lunar New Year, with the tops of the city's Beijing's tallest group of buildings in the east of the city almost completely covered by the haze.

The PM 2.5 level — which measures pollution — in the city's urban areas reached 239 micrograms per cubic metre according to state news agency Xinhua. — **Reuters**

■ WASHINGTON



US HAS 'CONCERNS' ON COVID INFO FROM CHINA

The United States has 'deep concerns' about China's response to the Covid-19 crisis and wants Beijing to "make available its data from the earliest days of the outbreak," national security adviser Jake Sullivan said.

The statement came days after a World Health Organization team of inquiry returned from Wuhan, China, the epicentre of the pandemic with no clear finding on the origin of the virus.

Members had to walk a diplomatic tightrope during their stay, with the US urging a "robust" probe and China warning against politicising the issue. — **AFP**

■ MANILA



PHILIPPINES ANNOUNCES ADDITIONAL EASING OF RESTRICTIONS

The Philippine government has announced the further easing of coronavirus restrictions starting next week, including allowing the reopening of cinemas, game arcades and some tourist attractions.

The government task force dealing with the coronavirus also allowed more people to attend religious gatherings starting February 15, presidential spokesman Harry Roque said.

"Religious gatherings in general community quarantine areas shall be allowed up to 50 per cent of the seating or venue capacity," he said. Other businesses allowed to resume operations included traditional cinemas, driving schools, game arcades. — **dpa**

Japan quake brings back memories of 2011 tsunami

IWAKI: The stench of alcohol filled the small bar on Sunday as Aoi Hoshino swept up glass from whiskey bottles smashed in a strong earthquake the night before, one appearing to be an aftershock from a devastating quake that hit the Fukushima area in 2011.

The 7.3 magnitude quake struck shortly before midnight on Saturday and cracked walls, shattered windows and set off a landslide in Fukushima, the area closest to the epicentre. More than 100 people were injured.

Hoshino, 46, swept broken glass from some 20 shattered whiskey bottles into a garbage bag in her bar on a back street in the city of Iwaki, roughly 200 km north of Tokyo and not far from the quake's epicentre.

"We were hit by this coronavirus pandemic, and so we were looking forward to reopening our shops, and now this happens," she said, referring to a locally declared state of emergency that had closed her bar from January and was set to lift on Monday.

"It's just one thing after another." The Japan Meteorological Agency (JMA) said the quake was believed to be an aftershock from the magnitude 9.0 quake on March 11, 2011 that set off a tsunami, killing nearly 20,000 people along a wide swath of northeastern Japan, and the Fukushima nuclear accident, the world's worst in 25 years. The agency warned of aftershocks for several days.

Hoshino said Saturday's



A staff member of library tries to restore books after they fell from book shelves by a strong earthquake at Iwaki City library in Iwaki, Fukushima prefecture. — **Reuters**

quake brought back frightening memories.

"My body immediately reacted, and I couldn't stop trembling. My legs were shaking too, but I couldn't gauge whether it was safer to run out or stay in, so I ended up doing a weird little dance," she said with a chuckle.

At least 121 people were injured, NHK national television said, including several who suffered fractures, but there were no reported deaths.

The JMA predicted heavy rains in the quake-hit region on

The quake shook buildings in Tokyo, cutting power to hundreds of thousands of buildings across eastern and northeastern Japan

Monday, warning that earth may have been weakened by the quake, leaving it prone to landslides.

Train service to much of northern Japan was halted on Sunday. Repairs to East Japan

Railway Co's Tohoku Shinkansen bullet train line could take around 10 days, national broadcaster NHK reported.

The 11:08 pm quake shook buildings in the Japanese capital Tokyo, cutting power to hundreds of thousands of buildings across eastern and northeastern Japan. By morning, though, power was restored to virtually all.

Several thousand households remained without water, forcing residents to line up with plastic jugs to receive water from trucks. — **Reuters**

Inferno on Afghanistan-Iran border as oil tankers catch fire

KABUL: Dozens of oil and gas tankers carrying millions of dollars' worth of fuel caught fire on Saturday, creating an inferno at Afghanistan's biggest trade crossing with Iran, officials said.

The blaze broke out in the early afternoon at Islam Qala port, 120 kilometres from the western city of Herat, engulfing the tankers that were parked nearby after crossing the border.

"There were between 200 and 300 fuel tankers there and we managed to save some, but most have been engulfed and the fire is so huge that nobody can get to within even a kilometre of it," said Younus Qazi Zada, head of the Herat Chamber of Commerce.

"The initial estimate is of millions of dollars of losses, but we have to wait until the fire is extinguished for a proper assessment of damage."

At least 17 people have been taken to hospital, some of them with serious burns, said Ibrahim Mohammadi, head of the Herat ambulance service.

Jailani Farhad, the spokesman for the governor of Herat province, said dozens of tankers were ablaze.

"We don't have the required facilities to contain it, so through the foreign ministry, we have asked the government of Iran to help us contain the fire," he said.



Fire and smoke rise from an explosion of a gas tanker in Herat, Afghanistan. — **Reuters**

The cause of the fire was unknown, he added. Videos posted on social media show towering flames and huge clouds of thick black smoke billowing into the sky.

Around 60 per cent of Herat province was without power as a result of the fire, Afghan energy company DABS said.

Islam Qala is one of the major ports in Afghanistan, through which most official trade with Iran is conducted.

Afghanistan has received waivers from Washington allowing it to import oil and gas from Iran despite US sanctions.

Iran foreign ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said the border "was held open for trucks, cars and people running from the fire" towards Iran.

India flash flood death toll hits 50

NEW DELHI: Twelve more bodies were recovered from areas of northern India along a river system hit by flash floods a week ago, bringing the death toll to 50, officials said.

A huge chunk of a glacier fell into the Alaknanda river system in Uttarakhand state last Sunday triggering a massive flood that washed away parts of two hydro power plants, roads and bridges in the region.

Five bodies were recovered from a tunnel in the Tapovan power project, state police chief Ashok Kumar said by phone from state capital Dehradun.

These were the first bodies to be recovered from the site, the focus of rescue operations in the region, where sludge-clearing and drilling operations have continued round the clock over the past seven days.

A total of 35 men were at work in the tunnel when disaster struck.

Seven more bodies were recovered from the Raini area, where another smaller power project was destroyed in the disaster.

"Chances of finding survivors in the Tapovan tunnel are quite remote. It appears that the casualties occurred soon after the disaster as the bodies were found buried in debris," Kumar said.

"It's a herculean task. We have cleared 150 metres of muck and debris from the 2.5 kilometre tunnel, but we will keep on with the rescue efforts," he added. — **dpa**



Protesting engineering students march during a demonstration against the military coup in Yangon. — **AFP**

Myanmar warns public not to hide fugitive protesters

YANGON: Myanmar's new military regime warned the public not to harbour fugitive political activists on Sunday after issuing arrest warrants for veteran democracy campaigners supporting massive nationwide anti-coup protests.

Much of the country has been in uproar since last week when soldiers detained Aung San Suu Kyi and ousted her government, ending a decade-old fledgling democracy after generations of junta rule. Security forces have stepped up arrests of doctors and others joining a civil disobedience movement that has seen huge crowds throng streets in big urban centres and isolated frontier villages alike.

Police are now hunting seven people who have lent vocal support to the protests, including some of the country's most fa-

mous democracy activists.

"If you find any fugitives mentioned above or if you have information about them, report to the nearest police station," said a notice in state media on Sunday.

"Those who receive them will (face) action in accordance with the law."

Among the list of fugitives was Min Ko Naing, who spent more than a decade in prison for helping lead protests against an earlier dictatorship in 1988 while a university student.

"They are arresting the people at night and we have to be careful," he said in a video published to Facebook on Saturday, skirting a junta ban on the platform, hours before his arrest warrant was issued.

"They could crack down forcefully and we will have to be prepared." — **AFP**

US Senate acquits Trump of inciting deadly Capitol riot

WASHINGTON: The US Senate acquitted Donald Trump on Saturday of inciting the mob that stormed the Capitol last month, sparing him from conviction in his second impeachment trial in a year despite broad condemnation of his role in sparking the deadly siege.

The Senate voted 57-43 in favour of convicting the former president, falling short of the two-thirds majority needed to do so, on a charge that he incited the insurrection that left five people dead, forced lawmakers to flee, and put his own vice president in danger while overseeing the certification of Democrat Joe Biden's election win. Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell, who voted "not guilty," in the trial, offered scathing remarks about Trump after the verdict.

"There is no question that President Trump is practically and morally responsible for provoking the events of the day," he said. "The people who stormed this building believed they were acting on the wishes and instructions of their president."

President Joe Biden said that while the vote did not lead to a conviction, the substance of the charge was not in dispute, and a record number of Republicans had voted to convict Trump.

"This sad chapter in our history has reminded us that democracy is fragile," Biden said in a statement. "That it must always be defended. That we must be ever vigilant. That



US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, with House impeachment managers, speaks to the press after the Senate voted to acquit former US President Donald Trump, in the US Capitol in Washington, DC. — AFP

violence and extremism has no place in America. And that each of us has a duty and responsibility as Americans, and especially as leaders, to defend the truth and to defeat the lies."

In the vote, seven of the 50 Senate Republicans joined the chamber's unified Democrats in favoring conviction after a week-long trial in the same building ransacked by Trump's followers after they heard him deliver an incendiary speech on Jan. 6.

During the trial, senators

viewed graphic video of the assault, including scenes of a police officer screaming in pain as he was crushed in a door, the mob chanting "hang Mike Pence" as it hunted the vice president, and lawmakers having near-misses with rioters as security officers hurried the elected officials into hiding for their own safety.

Trump left office on Jan. 20, so impeachment could not be used to remove him from power. But Democrats had hoped to secure a conviction to hold him responsible

for the siege and set the stage for a vote to bar him from serving in public office again.

"The bottom line is that we convinced a big majority in the Senate of our case," said Representative Jamie Raskin, the lead Democratic prosecutor from the House of Representatives.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said Republicans' refusal to hold Trump accountable would be remembered "as one of the darkest days and most dishonourable acts in our nation's history." — Reuters

Kosovo begins voting in parliamentary election

PRISTINA: Kosovars began voting on Sunday in a parliamentary election that an anti-establishment party is expected to win, further complicating Western efforts to resolve the country's decades-long territorial dispute with Serbia.

Opinion polls suggest the Vetevendosje party will win 45 per cent to 55 per cent of the vote among ethnic Albanians, who make up 90 per cent of Kosovo's 1.9 million population. While that would be nearly double its result in a 2019 election, the party may still need a partner to govern.

Vetevendosje leader Albin Kurti, who served as prime minister for five months last year, has won support on pledges to fight widespread corruption and on a stance that there should be no compromise in a dialogue with Serbia, which lost control over Kosovo in 1999 after Nato bombed its forces.

"Kosovo as an independent state, this Sunday, is returning to its people as the source of sovereignty," Kurti told reporters after casting his ballot. "We should vote with love for the country"

The state election commission said turnout by 11 am was 8.3 per cent, one percentage point lower than in the last election in 2019, mainly due to freezing temperatures.

If Vetevendosje does



A Kosovo Albanian woman casts her vote during Parliamentary elections at a polling station in Pristina. — AFP

not secure a majority of 61 seats it may have to join forces with either the now-ruling Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), or the opposition Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) or Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK).

"There are a lot of challenges ahead of us, we have the issue with Serbia, the pandemic situation and strengthening the state," Ramush Haradinaj, whose AAK is seen as a potential kingmaker, said after casting his ballot.

Serbia, backed by Russia, does not recognise Kosovo's independence, citing the need to protect the rights of its Serb minority. Negotiators from the European Union and the United States have failed to secure a compromise to allow Kosovo to join international bodies such as the United Nations and Nato.

— Reuters

Spain's Catalonia holds key vote under cloud of pandemic

BARCELONA: Catalonia voted on Sunday in a close election overshadowed by the pandemic and which Madrid hopes will unseat the region's ruling separatists more than three years after a failed bid to break away from Spain.

The vote in the wealthy northeastern region could see a high level of abstentions as Spain battles a third wave of coronavirus infections.

Some 5.5 million people are eligible to vote, but polls have suggested a turnout of just 60 per cent, compared to roughly 80 per cent during the last regional election in December 2017.

To decrease the risk of contagion,

regional authorities set up polling station in spacious venues such as around FC Barcelona's football stadium and the bullring in the port city of Tarragona.

"It's obvious that it's not the best moment to hold an election," Sergi Lopes, 40, said at a polling station in Barcelona.

"But when you take the metro to go to work everyday, you are also being exposed."

The regional government tried to postpone the elections until the end of May because of the surge in coronavirus infections but the courts blocked that move.

Polls opened at 9 am and will close at 8 pm, with results expected at around midnight.



A worker moves a pallet with ballot boxes containing personal protective equipment ready for distribution to polling stations during the coronavirus disease outbreak in Barcelona. — Reuters

The regional govt tried to postpone the elections until the end of May because of the surge in coronavirus infections

The final hour of voting will be reserved for people infected with Covid-19 or undergoing quarantine. During this time polling staff will wear gloves, facial screens and protective gowns.

While more than 40 per cent of the 82,000 people assigned to help staff polling stations on the day had asked to be recused, all polling stations were operating normally

as of noon, said the Catalan government.

Voters entered one by one to avoid crowding, forcing people to stand in lines outside under intermittent rain.

"They will say there is a lot of abstention. It's raining, there are queues, we are getting wet... it's not well organised," said Josep Maria Prats, a 59-year-old health worker as he waited to vote in Barcelona.

The drop in turnout adds to the uncertainty of the outcome.

Polls put the Socialists who govern at the national level neck-and-neck with the two pro-independence parties which have governed Catalonia together for the past five years. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

KIEV

Three Ukrainian soldiers killed in mine blast

Three Ukrainian soldiers were killed in a mine explosion in the war-torn east of the country, Kiev said, as an uptick in violence tested last year's ceasefire. They were killed when an explosive device went off near the village of Novoluganske some 50 kilometres northeast of the main separatist stronghold Donetsk, the military said in a statement.

The latest casualties came after two Ukrainian soldiers were killed in clashes with Russian-backed separatists on Friday,



testing last year's ceasefire that had brought relative calm to the simmering conflict. During a visit to the frontline, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said that separatist attacks had increased recently. — AFP

CONAKRY

Guinea declares new Ebola outbreak

Guinea declared a new Ebola outbreak on Sunday, as tests came back positive for the virus after at least three people died and four fell ill in the southeast — the first resurgence of the disease there since the world's worst outbreak in 2013-2016.

The seven patients fell ill with diarrhoea, vomiting and bleeding after attending a burial in Goueke sub-prefecture. Those still alive have been isolated in treatment centres, the health ministry said.



It was not clear if the person buried on February 1 had also died of Ebola. She was a nurse at a local health centre who died from an unspecified illness after being transferred for treatment to Nzerekore. — Reuters

MOSCOW

Russians hold protests after Navalny jailing

Supporters of Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny plan to hold candle-lit gatherings in residential courtyards across Russia on Sunday despite warnings that they could be arrested.

Navalny's allies have declared a moratorium on street rallies until the spring after police detained thousands of people in the past few weeks at protests against the opposition politician's arrest and imprisonment. But they want Russians to show solidarity with Navalny by



gathering outside their homes for 15 minutes on Valentine's Day evening, shining their mobile phone torches and arranging candles in the shape of a heart. — Reuters

We live in deeds, not in years

Since the Coronavirus pandemic has broken out and turned over life for nearly everyone, not only in the Sultanate, but also across the world. Our frontline heroes and other essential workers had to face more risks than others do. Over the past year, doctors, nurses, police and military personnel have been providing quality professional care and security under extraordinary conditions.

Doctors and nurses, for instance, have been bravely fighting the virus through the care they were providing to their patients. Being coronavirus warriors, they have been in a constant battle with the pandemic. Since the onset, they knew very well that the fight would be tough, but they had to handle it with all the resources available. However, they promised not to rest until the virus is defeated and lives saved. Therefore, they have spent days and nights in PPE kits.

These Covid warriors saved countless lives and held out hope for many patients. What Covid-19 patients could admit is that they could lose hope to live, but doctors and nurses have injected new life in their patients. Doctors and nurses cannot let patients die just because



Abdulaziz Al Jahdhami
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THESE COVID
WARRIORS SAVED
COUNTLESS LIVES
AND HELD OUT
HOPE FOR MANY
PATIENTS

they cannot afford to live. The ultimate dedication, commitment and courage of doctors and nurses deserve our deepest gratitude and admiration. On the other hand, police and military forces have been maintaining public order, securing people and controlling checkpoints all around the country during the lockdown periods. Days and night all year around, they have been on their toes to combat the spread of Covid-19 virus. They have been on the frontline battling with other forces from different government parties.

LONG BATTLE
Throughout the year long battle, our Covid warriors have even forgotten what a good night sleep is. Some have not been able to look after their families as they should have. However, these are the great sacrifices, which one has no regret in making for ensuring security and stability of society, taking care of patients, for whom doctors are the only hope and country overall.
In battles, soldiers usually feel firsthand the horrors of war and they know who they are fighting, so they could recognise their enemy. However, the Covid-19 virus is different as the enemy is invisible and sometimes

deadly. Hence, the task is unbelievably harder. With such a challenge, this coronavirus has shown the world's limited ability to deal with major disease outbreaks.
All medical and military heroes around the world have been facing an extraordinary workload in overwhelmed healthcare facilities, and with no end of the pandemic in sight. They have been working in stressful and scary work environments, as they were themselves exposed to infection. Moreover, healthcare workers experience mental stress at hospitals. As human beings, they feel the sorrow of loss when their patients succumb to the virus. They live with the danger that the virus might reach their families and loved ones.
All our Covid heroes in Einstein's saying "Only a life lived for others is a life worthwhile". They always try to live by these words as many lives depend on them on various occasions. Dear heroes, may your days be full of good health just as you help many people regain normal life, feel safe and remain secured at all times. Henceforward, one shall answer this question, what are you doing for others?

COVID-19 NEW BLOW

Russia's rising poverty fuels discontent

ANDREA PALASCIANO

Since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, crowds have grown at the Martha and Mary Convent in central Moscow.
The white-walled women's monastery houses one of Russia's best-known charities that gives out free food parcels, among other projects.
"Before the pandemic we had around 30 to 40 people a day", Yelena Timoshchuk, a social worker at Miloserdie (Mercy) said, leaning against a table loaded with bottles of sunflower oil.
"Now we get about 50 to 60 people daily. It's a heavy workload."
Many of the visitors who queue for packages containing buckwheat, sugar and tea are retired but there are also those who have lost their jobs or had their salaries cut.
The coronavirus pandemic has delivered a new blow to Russia's stagnating economy, which was already chafing under Western sanctions, low oil prices and weak corporate investment.
Observers say that rising poverty, falling incomes and lack of tangible government support during the pandemic are fuelling discontent with President Vladimir Putin's two-decade rule and strengthening the opposition.

Before the pandemic we had around 30 to 40 people a day. Now we get about 50 to 60 people daily. It's a heavy workload

YELENA
TIMOSHCHUK
A social worker,
Miloserdie

Answering the jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny's call, tens of thousands of people have protested across Russia over the past few weeks, and his team plans more protests ahead of parliamentary elections in September.
Russians' real disposable incomes have been falling for the past half-decade, and contracted by 3.5 per cent in 2020, while the cost of basic foodstuffs surged.
Aware of growing anger over falling living standards, Putin in December ordered ministers to introduce emergency measures to cap prices.
Despite government efforts to rein in inflation, the cost of sugar was 64 per cent higher in January than it was a year earlier.
Wearing a red cap over long braids, 66-year-old Sandra said she had stopped going shopping and instead turned to Miloserdie's free food parcels.
"You can't buy anything anymore", said the pensioner, who did not give her last name. "Before I could afford to feed the birds but now even grain is expensive."
"From the point of view of political consequences, the current situation does not look good", said Igor Nikolayev, head of strategic analysis at FBK Grant Thornton.
"The risks for the authorities have increased."
Older Russians were particularly "very sensitive" about rising prices because they brought to mind runaway inflation that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Nikolayev said.
He suggested the Russian government might unveil a new economic package to dampen social discontent ahead of the parliamentary polls.
"They have to do something", added Nikolayev.
According to a recent poll by the independent Levada Centre, 43 per cent of Russians do not rule out protests motivated by economic demands, a level last seen in 1998. — AFP

AWAY FROM SCREENS

Homeschooling taking off in US as pandemic shutters schools

CYRIL JULIEN

Faced with long school closures because of the coronavirus pandemic, many US parents have taken to homeschooling to ensure their children's education continues despite the massive disruptions of the past year.
"It's all me: I make the lesson plan, execute the lesson plan, then do it again the next week", said Catherine Strokes, whose daughter's school shut last year because of the pandemic.
Homeschooling "exploded" when the virus caused school closures across the country in March 2020, according to the National Home School Association, based in Colorado.
The number of children being taught at home in the United States rose from between four and five million in 2019 to almost 10 million last year, the NHSA estimates.
Nearly 51 million students, from kindergarteners to 12th graders, were supposed to have gone to public schools after the summer of 2020, but most schools opted for online instruction instead.

Strokes, 37, who works part-time, made her decision in July, when school officials in Fredericksburg, Virginia were still undecided on how to start classes the following month.
More than fear of Covid-19, it was this uncertainty that pushed her into homeschooling.
"Like most people with a part-time job, I had to know what day my kids would go to school, but they kept canceling school at the last minute, lengthening break or going all virtual, it was this instability for me and my



Joachim (right), 8, and Colin (left), 10, whose school was closed following the Coronavirus outbreak, do school exercises at home with their dad Pierre-Yves in Washington on March 20, 2020. As millions of families hunker down amid the coronavirus crisis, the sudden reality of schooling from home risks widening the education gap between those with the means and support to keep up with lessons, and those who risk falling behind. — AFP

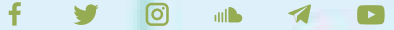
MORE THAN FEAR
OF COVID-19,
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HER INTO HOME-
SCHOOLING

daughter", she told AFP.
Isabelle, aged seven and in second grade, therefore joined her big brother Aidan, 10 and in the fifth grade, who had already been studying at home for more than a year with his mother, a member of the Organization of Virginia Homeschoolers.
Many parents do not want their children to spend the day staring at a screen, believing it is bad for their health, or find it too difficult to supervise online courses, Andrea Cubelo-McKay, President of Virginia

Homeschoolers, told AFP.
Some religious communities also educate their children at home.
This type of instruction affords a certain "flexibility", said Strokes.
"I decide when school starts, when our day is done, I decide when we take a break", she said.
She takes on all subjects on the curriculum — reading, writing, science and math — so that Isabelle doesn't fall behind her in-school classmates, but she does concentrate on what she considers most important. — AFP

sport

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OAA CONCLUDES NATIONAL OPEN ATHLETICS MEET

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, FEB 14

The Oman Athletic Association (OAA) concluded their first event for the season of 2021 on a successful note as they organised the National Open Athletics Championship on Friday at Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex.

The championship was the first official activity for the OAA after one year of no-action due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.

The athletics open gathering, which was implemented under medical protocol and without audience attendance, featured sprinting, throwing and jumping competitions for senior, youth and junior categories.

Oman national athletics stars returned to the domestic tracks after a long break.

The Sultanate's top sprinter, Barakat al Harthy, bagged the gold medal in the 100 metres and 200 metres run for the senior category, while Sameer al Riyami ended second in 100 metres run and Ammar al Sefi finished the



distance in third place.

The Sultanate's sprinting icon, Barakat al Harthy, stated that the event is crucial to start adapting and entering the competition mood.

"We are awaiting the approval of the long and comprehensive preparation plan which will be funded by Oman Olympic Committee and OAA prior to the top assignments including

the World Athletics Championship and 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games. Moving further in the plan, having camps abroad and taking part at the international events will shape our readiness in better speed for the forthcoming events. My aim and my teammates' aim are to raise the Sultanate flag high in all the upcoming championships," he ended.



In the youth category at 100 metres and 200 metres competition, Hussain bin Hatim clinched the gold medals.

Sprinter Mohammed al Saqri got the silver medal in the 100 metres run, while Yahya al Rawahi took the bronze medal.

Talented sprinter Abdullah al Handhali impressed all as he captured the gold medal in 100 metres and

200 metres sprints in junior category, while Moyad al Salami ended second in 100 metres.

The bronze medal went to Yousef al Zaabi.

Through the competition, OAA aimed at discovering more potential and talented sprinters and athletes for the national team.

Also, the objective of the championship was to evaluate the status of the existing national athletes after completion of the long domestic camp in Muscat and Suhar in the last few months.

In javelin competition for senior category, Basheer al Hajri bagged the first place award, while Abdulhameed al Ghilani clinched the gold medal in youth category. Abdullah al Balushi was the winner for the junior class in the same competition.

Khamis al Qasmi was the winner for the shot put competition at senior level while Abdulrahman al Abri received the gold medal for the youth category. Abdulbasit al Rubaei was the champion in the junior level.

Nizwa, Majees and Sohar advance to final round

ANUROOP ATHIPARAMBATH
MUSCAT, FEB 14

Nizwa joined toppers Ahli Sidab from Group 3 to advance to the final round of the His Majesty's Cup hockey championship. Nizwa have 10 points after ending their group campaign behind Ahli Sidab, who have 15 points.

Muscat have no chance for the next round with three points and only last match against Ahli Sidab left, while Al Bashayer lost all their six matches.

In Group 1, Majees and Suhar advanced with nine points each and Majees topping on better goal average. Third team in the group, Al Salam have only three points after ending their four matches.

In Group 2, Al Nasr topped with



18 points, winning all six group matches. Dhofar came second with 12 points. Salalah are third with six points, while Al Ittihad failed to open account.

In Group 4, Bausher topped with 12 points after winning all four group matches. Seeb, though lost twice against Bausher, made it to the next round after prevailing over Qurayat two times. Seeb have six points, while Qurayat lost all matches.

On Sunday, Salalah beat Al Ittihad 2-0 in an inconsequential match which concluded the Group 2 matches at Al Saada Sports Complex in Salalah.

On Saturday, Sohar beat Al Salam 4-2 in the last group A match at the Sohar Sports Complex.

Earlier, Al Nasr defeated Dhofar

2-1 to complete their sixth win in Group 2.

Basim Khater struck the opening goal for Al Nasr in the 19th minute. Abdullah Awad made the score 1-1 after finding target for Dhofar in the 36th minute.

Qasim Moosa netted the winner in the 47th minute.

Shafi Talib of Dhofar got the player of the match award from Oman Hockey Association (OHA) Chairman Talib al Wahaibi.

On Friday, Majees edged Sohar 1-0 in Group 1, while Bausher thrashed Seeb 3-1 in Group 4.

Egyptian recruit Mohamed Adel found the target in the 41st minute.

On Thursday, Al Nasr thumped Al Ittihad 6-0 and Ahli Sidab pummelled Al Bashayer 13-0.



Messi leads Barca to thumping Alaves win

Barcelona might not be able to catch Atletico Madrid but they may fancy their chances against Paris Saint-Germain after Lionel Messi scored twice in a 5-1 thrashing of Alaves on Saturday. Messi fired in two sensational long-range efforts and would have had a hat-trick at Camp Nou had a dubious VAR decision not gone against him.



Spezia stun Milan to give Inter chance at top spot

AC Milan's charge for a first league title in a decade took a big hit on Saturday after they were deservedly beaten at promoted Spezia and gave Inter Milan an opportunity to claim top spot in Serie A. Milan had the chance to stretch their lead over Inter to five points and put 10 between themselves and third-placed Juventus.

India eye victory after Ashwin spins out England



CHENNAI: India built a commanding lead of 249 after spinner Ravichandran Ashwin helped skittle England for 134 on day two of the second Test on Sunday.

The hosts were 54 for one at stumps in Chennai with Rohit Sharma on 25 and Cheteshwar Pujara on seven.

India are in sight of a victory that would level the four-match series after their crushing defeat in the opening Test.

Sharma, who hit 161 in India's first innings, survived a stumping chance on 20 when England wicketkeeper Ben Foakes failed to gather the ball to his left off Moeen Ali. Jack Leach trapped Shubman Gill leg before for 14 with his left-arm spin and the opener walked back after an unsuccessful TV review. Ashwin had earlier claimed five wickets as England collapsed in response to India's 329, conceding a lead of 195.

England assistant coach Graham Thorpe said it was one of the most difficult batting pitches he had seen.

"The guys have plans but they didn't happen today for us," said Thorpe.

But Ashwin said batsmen have to adapt on a spinners' pitch like they do on tracks that favour fast bowlers.

"It's about being very patient (on a turning track) like you play on a seaming wicket. You need to really tide through the

It's about being very patient (on a turning track) like you play on a seaming wicket. You need to really tide through the early phase and then start putting runs on the board

R ASHWIN
Indian spinner

early phase and then start putting runs on the board", he said.

"So I think the same kind of expectations and benchmarks need to be set on a challenging pitch."

It was the veteran off-spinner's second successive five-wicket haul and his 29th in 76 Tests. Left-arm spinner Axar Patel and fast bowler Ishant Sharma took two wickets each.

England's Foakes made an unbeaten on 42 off 107 balls.

"It was extremely difficult (to bat) against a high-quality spin outfit and the pitch was playing tricks", Foakes told Channel 4 television.

— AFP

SCOREBOARD

India first innings (0/N 300-6)

R Sharma c Ali b Leach.. 161
S Gill lbw Stone 0
C Pujara c Stokes b Leach 21
V Kohli b Ali 0
A Rahane b Ali6 7
R Pant (not out)..... 58
R Ashwin c Pope b Root.. 13
A Patel st Foakes b Ali 5
I Sharma c Burns b Ali..... 0
K Yadav c Foakes b Stone... 0
M Siraj c Foakes b Stone... 4
Extras: 0
Total: (all out, 95.5 overs) 329

Fall of wickets: 1-0, 2-85, 3-86, 4-248, 5-249, 6-284, 7-301, 8-301, 9-325

Bowling: Broad 11-2-37-0, Stone 15.5-5-47-3, Leach 27-3-78-2, Stokes 2-0-16-0, Ali 29-3-128-4, Root 11-3-23-1

England first innings

R Burns lbw I Sharma 0
D Sibley c Kohli b Ashwin 16
D Lawrence c Gill b Ashwin 9

J Root c Ashwin b Patel..... 6
B Stokes b Ashwin 18
O Pope c Pant b Siraj..... 22
B Foakes (not out)..... 42
M Ali c Rahane b Patel..... 6
O Stone c R Sharma b Ashwin..... 1
J Leach c Pant b I Sharma.. 5
S Broad b Ashwin..... 0
Extras: (B-4, LB-4, NB-1) .. 9
Total: (59.5 overs, all out) 134
Fall of wickets: 1-0, 2-16, 3-23, 4-39, 5-52, 6-87, 7-105, 8-106, 9-131

Bowling: Sharma 5-1-22-2, Ashwin 23.5-4-43-5, Patel 20-3-40-2, Yadav 6-1-16-0, Siraj 5-4-5-1

India second innings

R Sharma (not out) 25
S Gill lbw Leach 14
C Pujara (not out)..... 7
Extras: (B-5, LB-3)..... 8
Total (1 wkt, 18 overs) 54
FALL OF WICKETS: 1-42.
Bowling: Stone 2-0-8-0, Leach 9-2-19-1, Ali 7-2-19-0

West Indies clinch thriller to sweep series

DHAKA: A second-string West Indies team under stand-in captain Kraigg Brathwaite completed a 2-0 series sweep against Bangladesh with a dramatic 17-run win in the second test on Sunday.

Chasing 231 for victory, Bangladesh came close before being bowled out for 213 with the spin trio of Rahkeem Cornwall (4-105), Brathwaite (3-25) and Jomel Warrican (3-47) claiming all 10 wickets.

Opener Tamim Iqbal top-scored for the hosts with a breezy 50 and Mehidy Hasan Miraz made 31 down the order but Bangladesh fell short at the Shere Bangla National Stadium in Dhaka.

West Indies had pulled off the fifth-highest successful run chase in test history with their three-wicket win in the series opener in Chattogram.

Brathwaite led a weakened squad to Bangladesh after several players, including test captain Jason Holder, opted out of the tour citing Covid-19 concerns.

"Coming here without some players, with the protocols and so on — very thankful to God for opportunity to captain West Indies," Brathwaite said.

"Boys stuck to their plans, they were very disciplined.

"Cricket means everything to us. People will be proud. People wrote us off but we kept it simple, enjoyed it, and we proved them wrong."

Bangladesh captain Mominul Haque rued the absence of injured all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan.

"When the openers were batting, we thought we can chase it, but the middle order collapsed", he said.

— AFP



West Indies' John Campbell (top) celebrates with team-mates. — AFP

SCOREBOARD

West Indies first innings: 409
Bangladesh first innings: 296
West Indies second innings (0/n: 41/3)

K Brathwaite c Liton b Nayeem6
J Campbell b Taijul 18
S Moseley c Mithun b Mehidy..... 7
N Bonner b Nayeem 38
J Warrican lbw Jayed..... 2
K Mayers lbw Jayed..... 6
J Blackwood st Liton b Taijul..... 9
J Da Silva c Soumya b Taijul..... 20
A Joseph c Najmul b Taijul..... 9
R Cornwall c Mushfiqur b Nayeem 1
S Gabriel (not out) 1

Extras: 0
Total (all out; 52.5 overs) 117

FALL OF WICKETS: 1-11, 2-20, 3-39, 4-50, 5-62, 6-73, 7-104, 8-114, 9-116.

Bowling: Taijul 21-4-36-4, Nayeem 15.5-5-34-3, Mehidy 6-1-15-1, Jayed 10-4-32-2.

Bangladesh second innings

T Iqbal c Moseley b Brathwaite..... 50
S Sarkar c Cornwall b Brathwaite 13
N Hossain c Moseley b Cornwall 11
M Haque c Cornwall b Warrican 26
M Rahim c Da Silva b Warrican 14
M Mithun c Moseley b Cornwall 10
L Das c Da Silva b Cornwall 22
M Hasan c Cornwall b Warrican 31
T Islam lbw Cornwall 8
N Hasan lbw Brathwaite 14
A Jayed (not out)..... 0

Extras: (B-8, LB-4, nb2) 14

Total (all out; 61.3 overs) 213

Fall of wickets: 1-59, 2-70, 3-78, 4-101, 5-115, 6-147, 7-153, 8-163, 9-188.

Bowling: Cornwall 30-5-105-4, Joseph 2-0-16-0, Gabriel 2-0-8-0, Warrican 16-3-4-47-3, Brathwaite 11-1-25-3

Maniz Azad end C Division campaign on top of table

MUSCAT: Maniz Azad International ended their C Division league campaign in style, beating Al Waad Trading by 5 wickets at Muscat Municipality ground 1 and topping the table with six wins and 12 points from seven games.

Having played out their games, Douglas OHI also have 12 points from seven matches but has a lower net run rate of 2.45 against Maniz Azad's superior 3.70.

Failing to post a big total on the board, Al Waad scored 118 for 7, Muthumurugan Muniyasamy top-scoring with 37. Left-arm spinner Adnan Ul Haq was the most impressive bowler, taking 2 for 15 from four overs, while Adnan Ahamad claimed 2 for 25.

Maniz Azad took 15 overs to surpass the total, scoring 122 for 5 thanks to solid 39 by Mohsin Ansari and 31 by Shoaib Mohammed.

HASAN, KALEEMULLAH SHINE FOR ALPHA

Superb 84 by Hasan M and Kaleemullah's brilliant 3 for

23 were the highlights of Arm Alpha's emphatic 122-run victory against Renaissance in a Premier Division 50-over League clash at OC Turf 1 in Amerat on Saturday.

Hasan's top knock was instrumental in Alpha reaching 203 all out in 49 overs from being 74 for 5 inside the first 24 overs. Young Ubaid Ullah lent him good support by scoring 36 in an 86-run sixth wicket stand with him. Youngster Yash Mehta made a huge impression with the ball, taking 6 wickets for 36.

Renaissance had no clue against the seaming deliveries of Kaleemullah, Bilal Khan (2 for 21) and Ahmed Fayyaz Butt (2 for 32) before being dismissed for a meagre 81 in its sixth loss out of eight games so far. Alpha is now fourth on the table with four wins from nine games.

ANIL POWERS JUMBO

In another C Division match, Anil Anwar's superb 79 not out helped Jumbo Electronics to an exciting 5-wicket win over OCT



Maniz Azad International team.

Al Amerat at OAC 3 ground in Seeb.

Said Haider (46) was the main scorer in OCT Al Amerat's 152

for 6 which Jumbo Electronics chased down in the 19th over thanks to brilliant batting by Anil. Said Haider took 2 for 30.

BRIEF SCORES PREMIER DIVISION

Arm Alpha 203 all out in 49 overs (Hasan M. 84 - 5x4, 2x6, Ubaid Ullah 36 - 1x4, 1x6, Yash Mehta 6-36, Muhammed Bilal 2-48) bt Renaissance

81 all out in 25 overs (Rafi Ullah 26 - 1x4, 2x6, Kaleemullah 3-23, Ahmad Fayyaz 2-32, Bilal Khan 2-21) by 122 runs.

C DIVISION

Al Waad Trad & Contracting Enterprises 118 for 7 in 20 overs (Muthumurugan Muniyasamy 37 - 2x4, 1x6, Adnan Ul Haq 2-15, Adnan Ahamad 2-25) lost to Maniz Azad International 122 for 5 in 15 overs (Mohsin Ansari 39 - 6x4, 1x6, Shoaib Mohammed 31 - 3x4, 1x6) by 5 wickets.

OCT Al Amerat 152 for 6 in 19 overs (Said Haidar 46 - 3x4, 1x6, Tanveer Rana 2-26) lost to Jumbo Electronics 155 for 5 in 18.3 overs (Anil Anwar 79 - 11x4, Chandra Mouli 24 - 5x4, Said Haidar 2-30) by 5 wickets.

D DIVISION

OCT Al Mabela 159 for 7 in 20 overs (Zafarullah al Balushi 50 - 6x4, 2x6, Farooq Hussain 26 - 1x4, Mushir Nazir 3-35, Imran Khan 2-21) bt Safara International 145 for 8 in 20 overs (Shameel Mohamed 38 - 4x4, Adeel Anwar 34 - 2x4, 1x6, Muhammed Nadim 3-33, Arif Al Balushi 2-24) by 14 runs.

Vanderlande 182 for 5 in 20 overs (Barathwaj Vinayagam 75 - 8x4, Prasanth Reddy 39 - 5x4, Gopakumar Gopalakrishnan 2-33) bt Pittspot 136 for 9 in 20.1 overs (Mohazin Moosa 31 - 3x4, Amardeen Shamsudeen 4-41, Muhammed Muzaiyen 2-28) by 46 runs.

Djokovic answers fitness doubts with top victory



MELBOURNE: Reigning champion Novak Djokovic came through a tough examination of his fitness as the top seed beat Canadian powerhouse Milos Raonic 7-6(4) 4-6 6-1 6-4 on Sunday to reach the Australian Open quarterfinals.

Djokovic, who injured a side muscle during a five-set win over Taylor Fritz on Friday and suggested he might not be able to continue, showed hints of discomfort on the way to becoming the second male player to reach 300 Grand Slam match wins.

Fourteenth seed Raonic had never previously taken a set off Djokovic in three previous Grand Slam meetings so when he snatched the second set a surprise looked possible.

But Djokovic, bidding for a record-extending ninth title in Melbourne, responded by raising his level and improving his record over Raonic to 12-0.

The Serb will face Germany's Alexander Zverev for a place in the semifinals.

After the drama of Friday when Djokovic said he had sustained a "tear" and could not move, this was a relatively routine day at the office for the world number one who has been on painkillers for 48 hours.

"It was good enough to compete, to play, I wouldn't be

Australian Open results

Men's singles (4th rd)

1-Novak Djokovic bt Milos Raonic 7-6 (7-4), 4-6, 6-1, 6-4; Alexander Zverev bt Dusan Lajovic 6-4, 7-6 (7-5), 6-3; 18-Grigor Dimitrov bt Dominic Thiem 6-4, 6-4, 6-0; Aslan Karatsev bt Felix Auger-Aliassime 3-6, 1-6, 6-3, 6-3, 6-4.

Women's singles (4th rd)

Hsieh Su-wei bt Marketa Vondrousova 6-4, 6-2; 3-Naomi Osaka bt Garbine Muguruza 4-6, 6-4, 7-5; Serena Williams bt Aryna Sabalenka 6-4, 2-6, 6-4; Simona Halep bt Iga Swiatek 3-6, 6-1, 6-4

was a cloud of doubt whether I would play but it's a Grand Slam and I gave everything to have a chance."

Djokovic failed to convert break points at 3-3 and 4-4 in the opening set and there was one moment of alarm when he was forced wide on the forehand side and struggled to put on the brakes, hurdling a court-side advertising board.

CLINICAL FASHION

He won the tiebreak in clinical fashion, though, and when Raonic needed treatment on his right ankle early in the second set Djokovic appeared to be well in command.

Instead, Raonic began to play some of his best tennis and secured the first service break of the match at 2-2 with a powerful forehand winner.

That proved enough for Raonic to bag the second set but his victory hopes were soon receding as Djokovic began to swing freely and accelerated through the third set.

The elastic-limbed Djokovic occasionally looked tentative when moving out wide on the forehand side and was stretched in the fourth set but he broke Raonic's serve at 4-4 when his opponent netted a backhand and clinched victory a game later to reach the quarterfinals in Melbourne for the 12th time. — **Reuters**

standing here talking if I wasn't in sufficient condition to get on the court and give myself a chance to win a match," Djokovic told Eurosport.

"It's not ideal, I've felt better that's for sure. Didn't have much preparation and didn't hit a tennis ball since two nights ago. There

Rampant City march on after thumping Spurs

ANDY JALIL

MANCHESTER: After yet another brilliant performance which took them to 16 consecutive wins in all competitions and 9 in the league, Manchester City remain clear at the top of the Premier League with a resounding 3-0 win over Tottenham Hotspur.

Speaking about the win, City manager Pep Guardiola said: "It was well deserved. The way we wanted to play, the approach, was there. Tottenham have a special quality, they don't need anything to create chances, this is down to their quality. But we have a special way to play, this is how we are going to play, but we must be patient, patient, patient."

He added: "We are so happy with the victory and the three points. The first five minutes they were better, then the first time we arrive we score, which sometimes happens, and we went on to control the game, so yes well deserved."

Spurs missed an early chance to take the lead when a lovely curling free-kick by Harry Kane struck the angle of the cross bar and post. But soon after, in the 23rd minute, City opened the scoring with a penalty when Ilkay Gundogan was trod on by Pierre-Emile Hojbjerg as he stretched to challenge. After a discussion as to who would take the spot kick as City have missed several chances to convert penalties, Rodri stepped up for it and nearly failed as Hugo Lloris got a hand to the ball as it went in.

City were in full control in the second half and five minutes into the restart they were two



Manchester City's Raheem Sterling shoots at goal as Tottenham Hotspur's Japhet Tanganga attempts to block. — **Reuters**



Manchester City's Ilkay Gundogan celebrates scoring their second goal. — **Reuters**

up. Raheem Sterling opened the Tottenham defence with a perfect pass to Gundogan who had run into the box and the midfielder sent a low shot past Lloris who had again managed to get a hand to the ball on its way in.

A quarter of an hour later City

put the game beyond the London side with Gundogan scoring his second and the best of the game. The assist for it came from the goalkeeper Ederson, who looked up and found Gundogan and sent an astonishing 80-yard shot to the German who ran behind the Spurs backline. He superbly brought the ball down with his first touch then beat Davison Sanchez, leaving him on the ground, as he clipped the ball into the far corner for his 11th goal in 12 league games and 13 in all competitions this season.

For Spurs it was their fourth defeat in five matches putting pressure on the manager Jose Mourinho whose excuse for the defeat was tiredness, blaming the midweek defeat against Everton in the FA Cup. He said: "A fresh team against a tired team. I am very happy with my players attitude because they played for two hours just a few days ago. They showed great dignity because at 3-0 a team that is not united would have given up."

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20

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Oman’s fiscal balance plan will help drive consolidation: IMF

KEY REFORMS: Key revenue generating measures enshrined in the Plan include the introduction of Value Added Tax (VAT) in 2021, plans for a personal income tax on high-income earners, and expansion of the excise tax base

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 14

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has hailed reform measures outlined by the Omani government to help bolster revenues, on the one hand, and curb public expenditure, on the other — initiatives that are key reinforcing fiscal sustainability and alleviating financial pressures, it said.

In a statement marking the conclusion of a virtual mission to the Sultanate last month, the global body welcomed the Medium Term Fiscal Balance Plan unveiled by the government last year.

Key revenue generating measures enshrined in the Plan include the introduction of Value Added Tax (VAT)



in 2021, plans for a personal income tax on high-income earners, and expansion of the excise tax base.

Measures to curb expenditure include efforts to contain the wage bill via civil service reforms, targeting energy subsidies to the most vulnerable, streamlining capital expenditure, and broad-based improvements in expenditure efficiency.

“These policies would also help mitigate structural weaknesses in public finances, notably heavy reliance on hydrocarbon revenue and

rigidities in expenditure,” the Washington DC-headquartered institution stated.

It noted however the need for active outreach to build broad support to the proposed measures in order to ensure the successful implementation of the plan. Oman’s 2021 Budget, the Fund noted, also contributes to “significant fiscal consolidation”.

It said: “The budget envisages reducing the deficit (excluding oil condensate revenue and oil and gas related expenditure hived off to Energy Development Oman —

“These policies would also help mitigate structural weaknesses in public finances, notably heavy reliance on hydrocarbon revenue and rigidities in expenditure

IMF

EDO) by about 6 percentage points of GDP to 7.5 per cent.

The launching of the VAT in April 2021, expansion of the excise tax base, and improvements in tax administration are expected to strengthen non-hydrocarbon revenue.”

On the expenditure side, civil service reform (including obligatory retirement scheme for long serving employees and lower salaries for new hires) and a 5 per cent cut of other expenditure are envisaged, it noted, adding that gross financing need is projected at 14.5 per cent of GDP, with the bulk of the financing expected to come from external sources.

Vale Oman reports 17.5 per cent slump in output last year

TURNAROUND ANTICIPATED: Reduced supplies of feed from Brazilian iron ore mines, compounded by pandemic impacts, to blame

CONRAD PRABHU
[@conradprabhu](#)

Vale Oman Pelletizing Company, the Omani-Brazilian joint venture behind the world-scale pelletising plant and stockyard at Sohar Port, has reported a 17.5 per cent slump in output last year, attributable largely to reduced raw material supplies from its Brazilian mines, among other pandemic-related constraints.

Production of direct reduction iron (DRI) pellets — the feedstock for steel mills in the Gulf and Middle East — dropped to 7.625 million tonnes in 2020 versus 9.245 million tonnes in 2019. Output during the fourth quarter of 2020 fell 27.3 per cent to 1.748



million tonnes, down from 2.404 million tonnes in Q4 2019.

Commenting on its performance, Rio de Janeiro-headquartered Vale, one of the largest mining companies in the world, said that while supplies of iron ore feedstock from its mines in Brazil were partially restored in 2020, after the halt in operations during the previous year, the outbreak of Covid-19 posed new challenges.

“Although the pandemic-

related impacts and measures reduced productivity in all businesses and postponed, in 2020, the start-up of two new iron ore assets, Vale remains confident to achieve 400 million tonnes per year (mtpy) by the end of 2022,” it stated in a report of its Q4 2020 and Year 2020 performance.

Set up with an investment of around \$2 billion in 2011, Vale Oman’s giant pelletising plant at Sohar Port features two pelletising trains each with a

capacity to produce 4.5 million tonnes per annum of direct reduction pellets (DRI).

Iron ore for the plant is shipped in from Vale’s Brazilian mines by Very Large Ore Carriers (VLOCs) of a capacity of around 400,000 metric tonnes.

The Valemax vessels use a 1.4km long deep water jetty at Sohar to discharge their feedstock, while smaller bulk carriers ship the DRI pellets to markets around the Gulf and Middle East.

Sohar also serves as a major distribution centre for the Brazilian miner in the Middle East. Vale’s Sohar Industrial Complex features a massive stockyard with a capacity to handle around 40 million tonnes of raw iron ore to supply steel plants across the Middle East, North Africa and Asia, including India.

Vale Oman is 70 per cent owned by Vale SA, with OQ — the Omani government’s integrated energy flagship — holding the balance 30 per cent.

Global wins contracts worth RO 13.8 million

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 14

Global Chemicals and Maintenance Systems LLC has been awarded contracts totalling RO 13.8 million in value from the Public Authority for Water (Diam) for the operation and maintenance of Diam’s network and different assets in Al Dhahirah Governorate and Seeb Wilayat (Muscat Governorate).

The contracts, which are valid for five years, are a reflection of Diam’s trust in Global’s capabilities and quality of services, the company said.

Thanking Diam for the contracts, Global pledged to make all efforts to ensure their smooth and successful implementation to the full satisfaction of all stakeholders.

Established in 1963, Global



Chemicals & Maintenance Systems LLC became a member of Al Barami Group of Companies in 1976 and is a 100 per cent Omani company.

Global has been associated with the Power & Desalination sector for nearly four decades. The company is managed by a team of professionals with several years of in-depth experience in these fields who strongly believe in providing top quality services.



SOHAR Port and Freezone invites Tenderers in the following Tender

NO	Tender Ref	Tender Title	Tender Fee OMR
1	SIPC 2021/033	Marketing and Communication services for SOHAR Port & Freezone	RO 250/-

Tenderers can request to receive the electronic tender documents from 9:00 am on Monday 15/02/2021 until 4:00 pm on Thursday 25/02/2021. Tenderers to follow the below procedures and steps to obtain the electronic tender documents:

Step 1: Interested Tenderers should remit the stated tender fees as per the below bank details:

Account Name	Sohar Industrial Port Co
Account Number	3101-007970-500
Bank Name	Oman Arab bank SAOC – Main Br
SWIT	OMABOMRUXXX

Note: Bank transfers is the only mode of payment accepted

Step 2: Tenderers to send the following documents:
A request for the electronic tender documents
Scanned bank transfer
The firm’s commercial registration documents
All shall be communicated to the following e-mail address:
sipc.procurement@soharportandfreezone.com

Step 3: Tenderers will receive the electronic tender documents
Due to the COVID-19 situation, the below procedure is still valid as of today for the submission of the bids. If the current situation remains until the date of submission, tenderers will receive a circular with clear steps and procedures on the submission protocol.

The Technical and Commercial proposals must be in separate, sealed envelopes marked “Technical and Commercial” addressed to:
SOHAR Port and Freezone
Secretary of Tender committee
Tender Reference No. **2020/0219**
Tender Name
The exterior of the sealed envelope shall not reveal the identity of the tenderer
The sealed tender envelope should be deposited in the tender box at the reception desk of SOHAR Port Administration Building **before 4:00pm on Monday, 11/03/2021**
SOHAR reserves the right to accept or reject any tender without assigning any reasons
All SMES are requested to provide their Green Card along with the required documents
For any clarification regarding the tenders please send an e-mail to:
sipc.procurement@soharportandfreezone.com
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Oil rally slows as fundamentals play catch-up

OLE S HANSEN

Crude oil's longest winning streak in two years continues despite emerging signs of the rally beginning to show signs of overheating.

The cost of a barrel of crude has now risen by an impressive 64 per cent since early November when vaccine news helped turn the focus towards the recovery while President Biden's stimulus plans have helped turbocharged inflation expectations, and with that demand for hedges through commodities.

In addition, the rise by nearly one-quarter since January 4, when Saudi Arabia announced its unilateral production cut for February and March, has increasingly removed barrels from the market, thereby creating the tightest conditions in more than a year. While billions of people around the world remain impacted by lockdowns and lower mobility, Asian demand, led by China, has been strong.

WTI crude oil has returned to the old consolidation area between \$50 and \$65, an area that supported rising US oil production to 13 million b/d before collapsing to the current 11 million.



The US Energy Information Administration in their latest Short-term Energy Outlook wrote: "Although oil-directed drilling has increased in the United States in recent months, the number of active drilling rigs remains lower than year-ago levels. EIA expects production from newly drilled wells will be more than offset by declining production rates at existing wells in the first half of 2021".

As a result they see no pick up in US oil production from the current 11 million b/d in 2021. For 2022 they see oil production only rise to 11.5 million b/d, a level that would leave plenty of room for Opec+ to increase production and attract market share as global demand starts to

recover.

The International Energy Administration in their February Oil Market Report (OMR) said the rebalancing of the oil markets remains fragile during the early parts of 2021 with lockdowns and reduced mobility weighing heavily on the near-term recovery in oil demand.

But the prospect of tighter markets ahead due to increased economic activity and a pledge from Opec+ to hasten the drawdown of surplus inventories remain the overriding market focus. They forecast global oil demand will recover by 5.4 million barrels/day to average 96.4 million barrels/day in 2021. With Opec+ currently withholding around 7 million

WTI crude oil has returned to the old consolidation area between \$50 and \$65, an area that supported rising US oil production to 13 million b/d before collapsing to the current 11 million

barrels/day, the recent price upgrades from analysts are based on discipline in rolling back production curbs and a muted non-Opec production response to higher prices.

Supporting the energy market in general and crude oil in particular is the rising backwardation or roll yield. The tightening supply outlook has led to a relative stronger rally at the front of the curve meaning that WTI and Brent are effectively yielding 8.6 per cent and 7.7 per cent respectively on an annual basis for investors who keep rolling their long positions from one month to the next.

Given current strong fundamentals as Opec+ maintain tight supply, a roll yield of this

magnitude, continues to lure speculators into the sector.

Not least considering the reduced threat of a sudden jump from other producers, example being those in the US, who are focusing more on bringing down debt and deliver value to shareholders instead of embarking on low profit production growth.

This development further strengthen oil as one the current favorites, together with copper, platinum and gold, as the go-to commodities from macro-orientated funds looking for reflation hedges

The combination of tightening fundamentals, reflation hedge demand and not least an unchallenged momentum, have led hedge funds to increase their combined net-long in WTI and Brent crude oil to 699k lots and within a few thousand lots from the previous two peaks in 2019 and 2020.

While potentially signalling a risk of a short-term pullback, given current RSI's at overbought levels, it is worth keeping in mind that the net-long peaked at close to 1.1 million lots back in 2018.

[The writer is Head of Commodity Strategy, Saxo Bank]

Datamount, IFS sign partnership agreement

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 14

IFS, the global enterprise applications company, and rapidly growing data centre and enterprise cloud service provider Datamount have entered into a strategic channel partnership to serve joint customers in Oman and the Middle East.

Since 2018, Datamount has been enabling and guiding customers on their digital transformation journeys. Working with some of the most reputable brands in Oman, Datamount's extensive market

and industry knowledge have allowed them to rapidly grow over the past few years.

One of the key factors in the decision to establish the partnership between IFS and Datamount was their shared passion for providing products and services tailored for the specific industry needs of their customers.

"IFS has a proven track record in its focus sectors, including manufacturing, energy and utilities, and aerospace and defense", said AbdulHakeem Amur al Muslahi, CEO of Datamount.

Occidental Oman sponsors cybersecurity awareness drive

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 14

Occidental Oman has signed an agreement with the Oman Information Technology Society (OITC), whereby the company will sponsor the Cybersecurity Awareness Programme, a national campaign to spread awareness on cybercrimes and their dangers. The initiative is organised and managed by OITC, a non-profit organisation operating under the umbrella of the Ministry of Social Development.

The programme is designed to fill awareness gaps in Oman



in order to combat and reduce the numbers of cybercrimes nationwide. The programme has launched with digital awareness material such as videos and infographics, primarily on social media platforms. The Programme also has planned virtual awareness workshops

and seminars that would guide individuals on steps to follow in case of cybercrime occurrences, and venues to seek support.

"We are excited to support this national campaign to combat cybercrime, and hope that this program raises awareness throughout the Sultanate on the importance of using technology and virtual networks wisely. We are also hopeful that the campaign will result in long-term educational benefit for our local communities with regards to safe online practices", said Stephen Kelly, President and General Manager at Occidental Oman.

Duty of Care: Why it's vital for travel uncertainty



Emma Shakespeare

Business travel has come to a halt during the Covid-19 pandemic, as stay-at-home restrictions have required companies to hold more virtual meetings.

While the outbreak is not yet over, experts have started to project a rebound for corporate travel. As travel begins to resume, the prospect of taking a business trip has become a daunting task for many travellers whose main worry remains to stay safe.

While the duty of care has always been high on corporate agendas for many travel managers, the crisis has put it squarely at the top, forcing them to rethink the way they support travellers away from the office environment.

Our extraordinary times hit business travel harder than anything anyone has ever



experienced before. But out of adversity comes opportunity. The pandemic has been the catalyst for introducing robust duty of care and safety measures into businesses' corporate travel programmes, which will ultimately benefit their travelling employees' wellbeing in the long-term. So, as companies begin to plot the course ahead, businesses

need to re-look at their current travel practices and evaluate how they can meet their duty of care obligations for their employees and customers.

From disparate bookings to flight delays, a business trip had the potential of being complicated even before our 2020 health and safety challenges. Employees have never been keen to deal with any

added stress and want to feel safe while doing their jobs. Since safety has become a moving target, businesses now need to adapt and to move with it — which means they also need to change.

A recent survey commissioned by SAP Concur found that 96 per cent of business travellers identified at least one measure they consider to be critical for their company to implement when travel resumes, and 18 per cent say they'll look for a new role, inside or outside the company, that does not require travel if measures aren't implemented. Despite that, travellers ranked "excitement" second when asked about feelings on a return to travel, showing there is still appetite for travelling — if it's done safely.

As a result, businesses need to look at new tools and practices they can implement to help navigate the 'new normal' of travel. First, businesses should consider referencing the latest public health and safety advisories, travel

provider cancellation policies and new travel guidelines from their local governments.

Additionally, there are new features in the TripIt Pro app available to travellers which allow them to access Neighbourhood Safety Scores — which surfaces safety scores from 1 to 100 for neighbourhoods around the world, representing low to high risk. Whether travelling for business or leisure, such technology can help raise safety awareness that's granular to the neighbourhood a person is visiting.

It also provides the latest Covid-19 information for all destinations that travellers visit. This includes current infection rates, quarantine rules upon arrival, testing requirements, and other information passengers need to know before visiting the area, helping them to stay as informed as possible.

(The author is MENA South Director at SAP Concur)

PRESS RELEASE

AHLIBANK LAUNCHES IMTIYAZ BANKING SERVICES TO SUIT MODERN LIFESTYLES



Determined to cater to the ever-changing lifestyles of today's consumer, ahlibank has launched the new Imtiyaz account, targeted at customers seeking a unique banking experience. This new account aims to deliver enhanced banking services, providing a package of specially curated offers designed to suit their modern lifestyles.

Keeping pace with the requirements of their modern life, the bank's Imtiyaz customers can enjoy a range of exclusive benefits and offers including dedicated prize draws under Wafra sprize scheme, and branded debit and credit cards with discounts at a wide range of merchants. In addition to that, Imtiyaz customers have the opportunity to get the best prices on insurance products, and reduced interest rates on all types of loans.

Imtiyaz also offers its customers who transfer their salary to ahlibank a 5pc cashback of their salary amount, a credit card which is free for the first year, and a one free night stay with complimentary breakfast at a 5-star hotel.

All ahlibank's customers with monthly salaries of RO 1,000 or above or with savings deposits of RO 10,000 or more, can avail the services provided by Imtiyaz banking, which is available to Omanis and non-Omanis. They can also participate in Imtiyaz draws under the bank's popular Wafra prize scheme, and win amazing prizes by maintaining an average balance of at least RO 10,000 in the account. In addition, Imtiyaz account holders are also eligible to enter other prize draws provided that the eligibility criteria for each draw are met.

DODGE DURANGO SRT HELLCAT ORDERS FULL 2021 PRODUCTION RUN ALLOCATED



The new 2021 Dodge Durango SRT Hellcat goes fast, both literally and figuratively. After opening for orders in November, Durango SRT Hellcat production is officially sold out. Although Dodge has closed new customer orders, a small number of dealer-allocated units will be available for a limited time. Dodge will build a total of 2,000, 2021 Durango SRT Hellcats.

"The 2021 Durango Hellcat is only a single model-year run, ensuring that it will be a very special, sought-after performance SUV for years to come", said Tim Kuniskis, Dodge Brand and Interim Chrysler Brand Chief Executive Officer — Stellantis. "Based on anticipated demand, all dealer allocations have already been reserved, but there is still some time to secure an unsold dealer order."

US recovery on track, but jobs growth needs time

WASHINGTON: The US economy is expected to reach pre-Covid-19 levels within a year as President Joe Biden's planned fiscal package helps boost economic activity, but it's likely to take over a year for unemployment to fall to early 2020 levels, a Reuters poll showed.

After a pandemic-led 2020, confidence in this year's recovery has soared with the growth outlook upgraded in the February 8-11 poll of nearly 120 economists, driven by the proposed \$1.9 trillion fiscal stimulus package.

Over 90 per cent, or 51 of 56 economists in response to an additional question said the US economy would reach pre-Covid-19 levels within a year, including 23 respondents expecting it within six months. "Optimism towards the economic recovery has raised expectations for future growth and inflation.

The success of the vaccine deployment and its efficacy will be huge in determining whether the economic forecasts become reality", said Beata Caranci, chief economist at TD Bank Group.

"Over the last few months,



People walk past the New York Stock Exchange in Wall Street, New York. — Reuters

the changes to the forecast have favored a more rapid economic recovery. For the sake of the economy, we hope it continues to surpass our expectations."

The US economy, which recovered at an annualised pace of 33.4 per cent in the third quarter

from a record slump of 31.4 per cent in the second quarter, grew 4.0 per cent in the fourth quarter, the poll found.

While the economy was forecast to slow and grow 2.8 per cent this quarter, it was better than 2.3 per cent predicted in January.

The economy was then expected to accelerate and grow 6.0 per cent, 6.3 per cent and 4.6 per cent in the next three quarters, an upgrade from 4.3 per cent, 5.1 per cent and 4.0 per cent predicted for those periods last month.

For the full year, growth was forecast to average 4.7 per cent in 2021 and 3.5 per cent next year, an upgrade from 4.0 per cent and 3.3 per cent expected previously.

"While there are obvious risks that virus mutations deliver setbacks or problems arise with the vaccination programme, we think the positives outweigh the negative risks", said James Knightley, chief international economist at ING.

"Consequently 5 per cent growth looks achievable this year and this is before we consider the potential boost from President Biden's Build Back Better infrastructure and energy plan."

Still, all but one of 54 economists with a view said it would take more than a year for the US unemployment rate to reach pre-Covid-19 levels. That includes 33 economists who expected it to take more than two years.

"The recovery in jobs may take a little more time due to uncertainty over potential structural changes in the economy — home working meaning less people in major cities and perhaps less need for

bars, restaurants, retail workers as a result", said ING's Knightley.

"Conversely, maybe more workers are needed outside of these areas. Getting a good understanding will take time."

Apart from the downside economic risks from the virus, relations with trading partners was expected to play a major role, with China particularly in focus.

The US president and his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, held their first telephone call as leaders this week, with Biden saying a free and open Indo-Pacific was a priority and Xi warning confrontation would be a "disaster" for both nations.

When asked what would happen to US-China trade relations this year, nearly 90 per cent or 46 of 52 economists said they would stay the same. Only six respondents said they would improve; none expected them to worsen. "The US and China will remain locked in global trade and technology competition over the near term despite the change in administration", said Scott Anderson, chief economist at Bank of the West. — Reuters

German railway to see \$1.7 bn investment

BERLIN: German rail operator Deutsche Bahn plans to invest more than \$1.7 billion (1.4 billion euros) in the expansion of stabling facilities and plants for operational maintenance in Germany in the coming years.

"Quality is made in the infrastructure and in the factories", Berthold Huber, a member of the management board, said.

"First of all, we want to invest in more and in new vehicles. But then we also need significantly more maintenance capacity", he said.

At a total of 11 locations in Germany and Switzerland, capacities are to be expanded for so-called light maintenance.

This involves maintenance in order to make the trains fit again for use the next day or within a few hours or to prepare new vehicles for initial operation.

Deutsche Bahn is investing the largest share, 400 million euros, in Nuremberg, Germany where a completely new maintenance plant is to be built by 2028.

The stabling facilities there will also be expanded at a cost of almost 20 million euros. — dpa

Tesla to set up factory unit in southern India

BENGALURU: Billionaire Elon Musk's Tesla Inc will set up an electric-car manufacturing unit in the southern Indian state of Karnataka.

"The US firm Tesla will be opening an electric car manufacturing unit in Karnataka", the state government said in a brief statement. The statement was part of a broader document outlining the highlights of India's budget to its people in the local language of Kannada.

Last month, the electric carmaker incorporated Tesla Motors India and Energy Private Limited with its



Tesla Model 3 vehicles are seen during a delivery event at its factory in Shanghai. — Reuters

registered office in the city of Bengaluru in Karnataka, a hub for global technology companies.

State Chief Minister B S Yediyurappa had then said in a tweet, which was subsequently deleted, that Tesla would start its operations in India with an R&D unit in Bengaluru. — Reuters

Daimler recalls 1.29 million US vehicles for software issue

WASHINGTON: Daimler AG's US unit Mercedes-Benz USA said it is recalling 1.29 million vehicles sold since 2016 because software may fail to communicate correct vehicle location in the event of a crash.

The recall covers 2016-2021 model year CLA-Class, GLA-Class, GLE-Class, GLS-Class, SLC-Class, A-Class, GT-Class, C-Class, E-Class, S-Class, CLS-Class, SL-Class, B-Class, GLB-Class, GLC-Class and G-Class vehicles, according to a filing with the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

The automaker plans to issue a software update that will be installed by dealers or over-the-air. Mercedes-Benz said it is neither



A new Mercedes-Benz S-Class is presented at the Daimler production plant in Sindelfingen near Stuttgart, Germany. — Reuters

aware of any case of material damage nor personal injury in connection with the issue.

The automaker said "a temporary collapse of the

communication module's power supply caused by a crash might lead to the vehicle's position during a potential emergency call being incorrect." — Reuters

City of London pays early price of hard Brexit

LONDON: Europe's financial capital is feeling the cold of Brexit but UK officials insist the City of London is suffering a temporary blip and is well-positioned to profit from new trading horizons.

For the first time last month, as Britain's withdrawal from the EU took full effect, London's financial district lost its European share trading crown to Amsterdam.

Researchers at IHS Markit attributed the decline to a "relatively hard Brexit", and the UK government's failure so far to persuade Brussels to grant full trading rights to City-based firms under a regime known as "equivalence".

London's daily trading volumes in other areas such as derivatives and foreign exchange still vastly outweigh its European neighbours, and Catherine McGuinness, policy chair at the City of London Corporation, played down the development.

"We've always known that



People wait at a bus stop with the City of London in the background. — Reuters

some EU-facing business would have to leave the City of London following Brexit, whatever the shape of the deal", she said.

"However, significantly fewer jobs have shifted from the City because of Brexit than was expected, and we remain very confident about the fundamental strengths of the City for the

future", McGuinness said.

London "continues to go from strength to strength" in emerging financial technology (fintech) and tech investment, as well as green finance, she added.

In January, according to the Financial Times, an average of 9.2 billion euros (\$11.2 billion) of shares were traded each day on

London's daily trading volumes in other areas such as derivatives and foreign exchange still vastly outweigh its European neighbours

Euronext Amsterdam together with two other Dutch share markets.

That was more than four times their December figure, and overtook London's daily average of 8.6 billion euros, the newspaper said. A spokesman for the Dutch Financial Markets Authority said it was not a surprise. "We think it's a logical consequence because we already had a strong trading standing with the Euronext Amsterdam", he added.

Financial services were largely omitted from the last-minute Brexit trade deal agreed between

London and Brussels in late December.

So from January 1, Britain's financial sector lost access to the EU's single market and its European "passport", a means for UK financial products and services to be sold in the EU.

Both sides are instead working to carve out an "equivalence" regime under which each would recognise the other's financial regulation, and so far Brussels has approved only two areas of trading out of dozens that the City needs. Anish Puaar, an analyst at Rosenblatt Securities, said London's relative decline was "symbolic in the post-Brexit era".

"But beyond that the impact is pretty minimal", he said. Puaar said fund managers will "probably not" care in apportioning assets but the greater danger is for a fragmentation of markets in Europe, which would make trading more inefficient and drive up costs.

— AFP

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features



Empowering Young Omani Women

Baida al Zadjali exhibits the diversity and determination of the current generation of movers and shakers in the Sultanate's business sector making her one of the country's multi-faceted Omani jewel. Here's how she is pushing boundaries in every sector she's being a part of... **P18**

INSIDE STORIES

HUMAN INTEREST



PARIS OPERA TO SEEK OUT NEW TALENT IN DIVERSITY DRIVE

The Paris Opera vowed an overhaul of its recruiting practices on Monday as it launched a drive towards greater diversity in the heart of its elite ballet company, orchestra and dance school... **Story on Page 20**

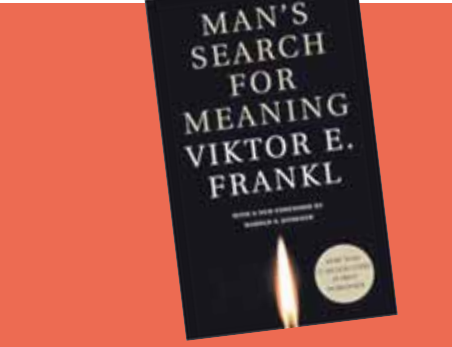
LOCAL SCENE



"THE SONGS OF THE SUN" SHINES ON THE DETAILS OF LIFE

The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth is organising a virtual art exhibition titled (Songs of the Sun) for the Omani artist Musa Omar today, Monday, February 15th... **Story on Page 19**

READ



MAN'S SEARCH FOR MEANING

BY VIKTOR FRANKL

Viktor is chronicling his experiences as a prisoner in Nazi concentration camps during World War II, and describing his psychotherapeutic method, which involved identifying a purpose in life to feel positive about, and then immersively imagining that outcome.

ENTERTAINMENT



'LOVE STORY' STARS HONOURED ON HOLLYWOOD'S WALK OF FAME

Actors Ali MacGraw and Ryan O'Neal, who starred as the ill-fated young couple in the 1970 romantic drama "Love Story," were honoured just ahead of Valentine's Day on Friday with stars on Hollywood's Walk of Fame.

MOVIES



BERLIN FILM FESTIVAL TO SPOTLIGHT PANDEMIC-ERA MOVIES

Berlin's international film festival next month will feature 15 movies made under the pandemic in competition for its Golden Bear top prize, organisers said on Thursday. Directors including Emmy winner Maria Schrader ("Unorthodox"), German-Spanish actor Daniel Brühl ("Rush") and French director Celine Sciamma ("Portrait of a Lady on Fire") will be premiering new work at the event, which will take place online because of Germany's partial lockdown.



Empowering Young Omani Women: The Multi-faceted Baida al Zadjali

BY RAY PETERSEN

The brilliant jeweller Marcel Tolkowsky set the gold standard a century ago, identifying the perfect cut to have 58 facets or faces. Omani Engineering and Project Manager Baida al Zadjali exemplifies both the brilliant jeweller and his remarkable gemological masterpiece.

Tolkowsky was not just a craftsman, but he had to be a mathematician, engineer, geologist, designer, physicist, artist, and much more to determine that a diamond needed 58 perfectly proportioned facets to display the "fire, brilliance and scintillation of the diamond."

Al Zadjali too is a woman of many facets as she champions her 'cause celebre,' the development of young Omani women, their personal and professional enrichment, to take advantage of the opportunities presenting themselves in the workplace.

Much has been chronicled of this remarkable young Omani, a woman of diversity who appreciates diversity in all its myriad of forms. Whether as a determined desert adventurer trekking the Empty Quarter, as the immaculately coiffured Project Manager in the 'man's world' of a construction site, as a competitive triathlete, swimming, cycling, and running determinedly to the finish, and recently appointed the first Arab woman to be elected on the World Triathlon Women's Committee, she is pushing boundaries too in sports administration's global scene. Her 'soft side' also intense in her charitable intentions, her love of music, poetry, opera, art, and

culture. A devout pet-lover with nineteen different pets, she fundraises, participates in a community trap-neuter-release programme, and feeds many others.

So where has this intensity, this mélange come from, after all, Al Zadjali is just another daughter of the Sultanate, born like so many others in Khoula Hospital, one of two sisters in an extended family of five siblings. Her father's appointment in the diplomatic service took the family to the United Kingdom for a time and a short international educational experience, before returning to complete her basic education in Qurum. Stellar assessment results saw the scholar and academic emerge, and she studied across the universities of Bath, Bristol, and Leeds in the UK to achieve a Bachelor's in Engineering, a 2:1, and a Master's with Distinction, in Engineering Project Management.

Like all students in the UK, Al Zadjali worked throughout the latter stages of her studies, in marketing, promotions, and later data entry for the Leeds City Council, before securing Junior Project Management assignments in Birmingham before returning to Oman where project management stints with Tebodin, Atkins, Omran, Iskan and Muscat Bay. "These whetted my appetite, and my first business was selling PPE as Riyam Muscat, and then I joined forces with my sister Noor, to start Meezah Project Management Consultancy in Construction and Cultural Projects, and that is where we are today," she explained.

"I love what I do," she said, "Being the boss doesn't detract from being a woman and it is

more about asserting yourself, if you need to, and staying authentic to who you are. I learn skills, gain knowledge, and develop existentially. No matter what anyone, man or woman decides to do, we should do our best, always challenge ourselves. Then whether we are taken seriously is not a question of gender, but excellence. The best of any society comes from bringing women and men together as equals, to achieve balanced objectives."

"I am flattered to be a 'role model' for young Omanis, and especially young Omani women. I was so lucky that my parents shaped my life, and I grew up not seeing colour, nationality, or gender, I just see people. This diversity shaped my personality as a young child and again as a young adult where I learnt discipline, independence, and a Richard Branson inspired innovative attitude and managed to enhance that with all that is beautiful and good in our culture to hopefully be the best version of myself that I could be. I feel most fortunate to have had that opportunity," she reflected.

This young entrepreneur then is a clarion call that being a young Omani woman is not at all about denial, but about seizing opportunities which may only be on offer for a moment, and that is true in every global environment, however, the Omani woman is a delicate creature, often placed on a pedestal within the family, community, and social environments. The onus is on us as individuals, to be aware of, to claim those moments, to seize those opportunities, and to become, in a touch of irony, masters of their own destiny.



Al Zadjali too is a woman of many facets as she champions her 'cause celebre,' the development of young Omani women, their personal and professional enrichment, to take advantage of the opportunities presenting themselves in the workplace.

This young Omani jewel, the many-faceted diamond that is Baida al Zadjali, exhibits the diversity and determination of the current generation of movers and shakers in the Sultanate's business sector. Women, strong, articulate, intelligent, distinctly feminine women, yet with an urgency that speaks to their determination to not be constrained by societal norms and cultural attitudes to women in the workplace, inspiring thousands of other young Omani women just like them, to be all they can be.



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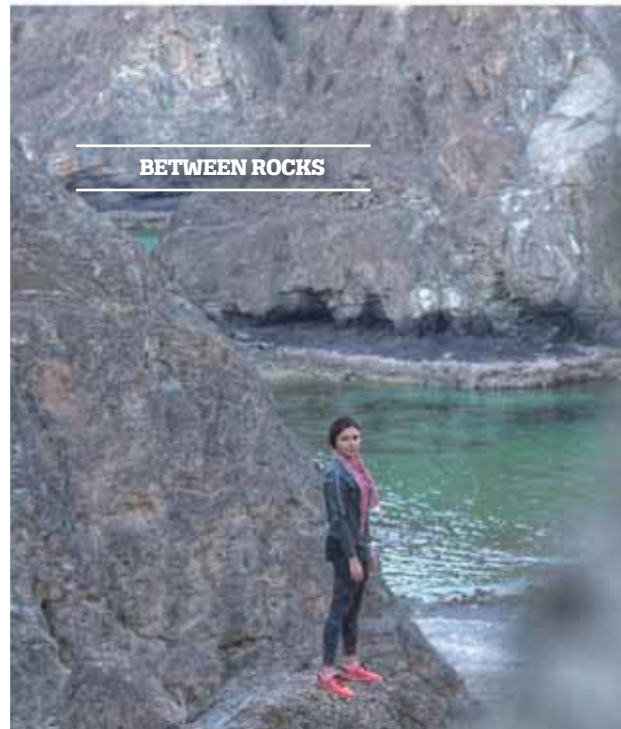
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LOCAL SCENE

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“The Songs of the Sun” shines on the details of life

The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth is organising a virtual art exhibition titled (Songs of the Sun) for the Omani artist Musa Omar today, Monday, February 15th.

The works of the artist will be displayed in a virtual hall via the electronic link that will be published on the Instagram platform of the Omani Society of Fine Arts: @osfagovoman.

The artist Musa Omar is considered as one of the most prominent Omani artists in the local, regional and international levels. He has many artistic contributions and has several solo and joint exhibitions, presenting artistic workshops. He has won many prizes at the local and international level, where he held more than fifteen solo art exhibitions in the Sultanate, Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Qatar, Abu Dhabi and Germany.

He also exhibited his works in many joint exhibitions in the Gulf states, Arab countries and countries of the world, and held various exhibitions in several European countries and the United States of America, Mexico, Turkey, Iraq, Pakistan, India, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Taiwan, Lebanon, Australia, South Korea, Egypt, Japan, Jordan, Syria, Bangladesh, China, Hungary and recently participated in many virtual exhibitions during Covid-19 pandemic in Egypt, Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

This exhibition includes 20 different artworks using acrylic colours with various materials and different sizes.

Artist Musa Omar expresses his personal exhibition saying, “The sun rises and life awakens in the arteries of the earth; a scene that is repeated every morning, where the light shines with into the details of the objects and elements ... I open the window and the colourful songs flow around the studio, which was not exhausted by the long journey that I took from the depth of the galaxy. Each one of these songs carries to me every morning a new artistic idea that pushes me to celebrate the universe and life.

In this new artistic experience - which I see emanating from the same sources as my previous experience, “Dream Shirt” – I see me captivated by the tremendous potential of a burlap material that I could employ in various contexts. From burlap strings, I will weave my songs of the sun, and from those strings, I will depict how objects and elements celebrate the warmth and colours of the sun.”

Speaking about the enormous experience of Musa, the artist Hamad al Jabri said, “Musa Omar is one of the Omani artists who have a prominent presence in artistic events and, whether at the local or the international levels, so we find him renewing his experience from one era to another, to find his Art way through the idea and its methods of performance. He works on different materials, especially burlap, acrylic colours, etc.

The form and content coalesce through the rich and open colour spaces in his works, intensifying symbolic language to suggest successive periods and it shows the human side and the intellectual and emotional conflicts in the vocabulary of the work of art that are interconnected with each other in a continuous formation that symbolises the permanence of life.





Paris Opera to seek out new talent in diversity drive

The Paris Opera vowed an overhaul of its recruiting practices on Monday as it launched a drive towards greater diversity in the heart of its elite ballet company, orchestra and dance school.

The issue has already sparked fierce debate in France with right-wingers accusing the Opera's new director-general Alexander Neef of bringing American-style culture wars into the cloistered world of its arts scene.

But with Black Lives Matter protests roiling France, and deepening debate over its colonial legacy, Neef remains unrepentant about the need for greater diversity, and in an online press conference on Monday, vowed a shake-up of the 350-year-old institution.

A new report by historian Pap Ndiaye and rights advocate Constance Riviere set out recommendations including

an active effort to send recruiters out into the world in search of new talent, rather than relying on dancers coming to them.

"The objective is not that the school recruits less talented students to meet diversity objectives, but to search for great students wherever they can be found," the authors said, calling for decentralised exams in towns across France and its overseas territories.

They said attention was needed on the sensitive question of "anatomical criteria" in the selection process — to move beyond "old and tenacious ideas" about black bodies as somehow ill-suited to classical dance.

It also touched on the tradition of "ballet blanc" (white ballet) — scenes in which dancers all appear in white tutus. Black dancers have at times been expressly excluded, despite Ndiaye pointing out there was never any reference to skin colour when they were origi-

nally designed.

NOT THE CONCLUSION

Paris Opera will appoint a dedicated "diversity and inclusion officer", Neef said, following the lead of New York's Metropolitan Opera which named its first person to that role last month.

A consulting body of experts from inside and outside the Opera will also look at what these issues mean for its repertoire.

In 2015, the Opera's ballet director Benjamin Millepied met resistance after he ended the use of blackface for "La Bayadere" and renamed its "Danse des Négrillons" ("The Dance of the Little Negroes") as "The Dance of the Children."

Neef himself made waves recently when he told *Le Monde* newspaper that "some works will no doubt disappear from the repertoire."

There was a typical outcry as politicians leapt on the suggestion that audience favour-

ites such as "Swan Lake" and "The Nutcracker" might face the chop, even though the Opera made it clear that there has "never been any question of dropping (Rudolph) Nureyev's works" — a point reiterated by Neef on Monday.

Far-right leader Marine Le Pen has nonetheless slammed what she called "anti-racism gone mad".

And *Le Monde's* editor-in-chief Michel Guerrin warned that France was "slowly going down the American road, consisting of the runaway self-censorship of artists and programmers in order to avoid trouble."

Neef said on Monday that there were no plans to "rewrite the librettos", but that broader change was vital.

"The Opera's engagement on diversity is necessary, more than ever," he said.

"This report is not the conclusion of a process, but the start. It is something that will live with us for years." — **AFP**

