



THURSDAY, 11 FEBRUARY 2021

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HIS MAJESTY SULTAN HAITHAM BIN TARIK HAS SENT A CONGRATULATORY CABLE TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE UAE, SHEIKH KHALIFA BIN ZAYED AL NAHYAN, ON THE SUCCESS OF THE HOPE PROBE ENTERING MARS ORBIT.

'Oman voice of reason, wisdom in the region'

Muscat - Mevlut Cavusoglu, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey, lauded the Oman's foreign policy and its efforts in coming up with solutions for the regional conflicts. He described the sultanate as a voice of reason and wisdom in the region.

At a joint press conference held in the Foreign Ministry on Wednesday with Sayyid Badr Hamad al Busaidi, Foreign Minister, Cavusoglu said that his country supports the sultanate's endeavours to maintain security and stability in the region.

He expressed his country's keenness to promote relations between the two countries in various political, economic and commercial areas. He pointed out that the talks between the two sides reviewed the regional developments after the recent GCC Summit. "Turkey is a strategic partner of the GCC and it is ready to work closely with the sultanate and the rest of the Gulf countries on regional issues," Cavusoglu said.

He also added that the talks touched on the Palestinian cause and developments in Libya, Syria and Yemen.

On his turn, Sayyid Badr said



that the session of talks was fruitful as it touched on bilateral relations and means of enhancing these in the fields of economy, tourism and culture.

He added that the session covered regional and interna-

tional issues of common concern, affirming that there is a great rapprochement in views between the two countries on different issues.

The session was attended by Ayse Sozen Usluer, Turkish Am-

bassador to the sultanate, and officials from both sides.

Sayyid Fahd receives minister

Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmoud al Said, Deputy Prime Minister

Turkey is a strategic partner of the GCC and it is ready to work closely with the sultanate and the rest of the Gulf countries on regional issues

MEVLUT CAVUSOGLU

for the Council of Ministers, received Cavusoglu on Wednesday.

After Sayyid Fahd welcomed the guest and his accompanying delegation, the growing relations between the two friendly countries and means of promoting cooperation between them were reviewed in economic and trade fields, in addition to encouraging joint ventures. Current regional and international issues and developments were also reviewed.

The Turkish minister conveyed greetings of the leadership of Turkey to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik.

ONA

Institutional quarantine for all arrivals; parks and beaches closed

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Supreme Committee in charge of dealing with COVID-19 issued a set of new measures on Wednesday to stem the spread of the disease.

The committee decided to continue to close all land borders of the sultanate until further notice except for the passage of trucks. It, however, gave ten days to citizens who want to use land borders to return to the country. The period ends at 12 noon on February 21.

'Individuals will not be permitted after that until the land ports are reopened. All citizens who cross land ports to return to the sultanate are required to undergo institutional health isolation upon arrival at their own expense, in addition to following the remaining approved procedures imposed on all those arriving in the sultanate from abroad,' it stated.

The committee also decided to impose compulsory institutional health isolation for all arrivals whether through land, sea or airports, the cost of which will be borne by the individual. 'This is due to the lack of commitment of many to the home health iso-

NEW MEASURES

► Night lockdown in North Sharqiyah

► Shops, restaurants, gyms to operate at 50% capacity

lation and violation of procedures that have been approved,' the committee stated.

The committee closed all commercial activities in North Sharqiyah governorate from 7pm to 6am starting from the evening of February 12 for a period of 14 days. 'Gas stations, health institutions and pharmacies are exempted from the closure.'

It also decided to close beaches and public parks in all governorates, starting from February 11, for a period of two weeks. It stressed on stopping gatherings of all kinds in rest houses, farms, camps and other places. It further recommended avoiding gatherings of families in homes and other private places.

The committee ordered limited entry of visitors to shops, markets, restaurants, cafes, sheesha bars and gyms to 50 per cent of capacity starting from the morning of February 12 until further notice.

In new push for FDI, Oman targets 15 Asian countries

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Aiming to push for new foreign direct investment (FDI) into the sultanate, Oman has started direct dialogue with its ambassadors on deputation in various countries.

The first meeting in this regard was held with Omani ambassadors of 15 Asian countries on Wednesday by the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) virtually.

The meeting was held under the auspices of H E Asila bint Salim al Samsamiyah, Undersecretary for Investment Promotion in MoCIIP, in the presence of H E Shaikh Khalifa bin Ali al Harthy, Undersecretary for Diplomatic Affairs in the Foreign Ministry, representatives of the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ), and Oman In-



The MoCIIP's first FDI meeting held virtually with Omani ambassadors of 15 Asian countries in progress on Wednesday (Supplied photo)

vestment Authority.

The meeting focused on introducing the investment opportunities available in Oman in the various target sectors in order to enhance economic development.

H E Asila said, "The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion has prepared a set of policies to create an attractive climate for investors, and to develop exports in line with Oman Vision 2040. The vision is based on several basic factors, such as working to remove obstacles and all challenges faced

by investors, simplifying procedures and facilitating these through sector restructuring initiatives, and preparing a project that includes investment opportunities with government agencies in various sectors.

"The vision also includes focusing on the localisation of a number of industries in the sultanate, such as the transformational sectors, by bringing in more investments from countries to benefit from their advanced industrial expertise.

Continued on Page 02

Huthi attack on Saudi airport

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia - A civilian plane was engulfed in flames in an attack on Wednesday by Yemen's Huthi rebels on an airport in southern Saudi Arabia, the Riyadh-led coalition battling the fighters said.

'A cowardly criminal terrorist attack launched against Abha International Airport in Saudi Arabia by the Huthi militia,' state-run Al Ekhbariya television cited the coalition as

saying. 'A fire that engulfed a passenger plane due to the Huthi attack on Abha Airport is under control,' it added.

The coalition did not report any casualties, or say how the attack was carried out, but earlier in the day reported it had intercepted two 'booby trap' drones in the south. The incident was not immediately claimed by the Iran-backed Huthis.

The rebels appear to be

stepping up attacks on the kingdom as well as on Riyadh-backed Yemeni forces after the US moved last week to delist the Huthis as a terrorist group.

The Huthis have also resumed an offensive to seize the Yemeni government's last northern stronghold of Marib, according to a government source, with dozens of casualties on both sides.

AFP

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RO 145

RO 230

RO 150

RO 100

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RO 95

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CR NO - 1622358

First Arab mission to Mars accomplished

Excitement in the sultanate as the UAE's 'Hope' probe successfully enters the Red Planet's orbit

Shaddad al Musalmi
Muscat

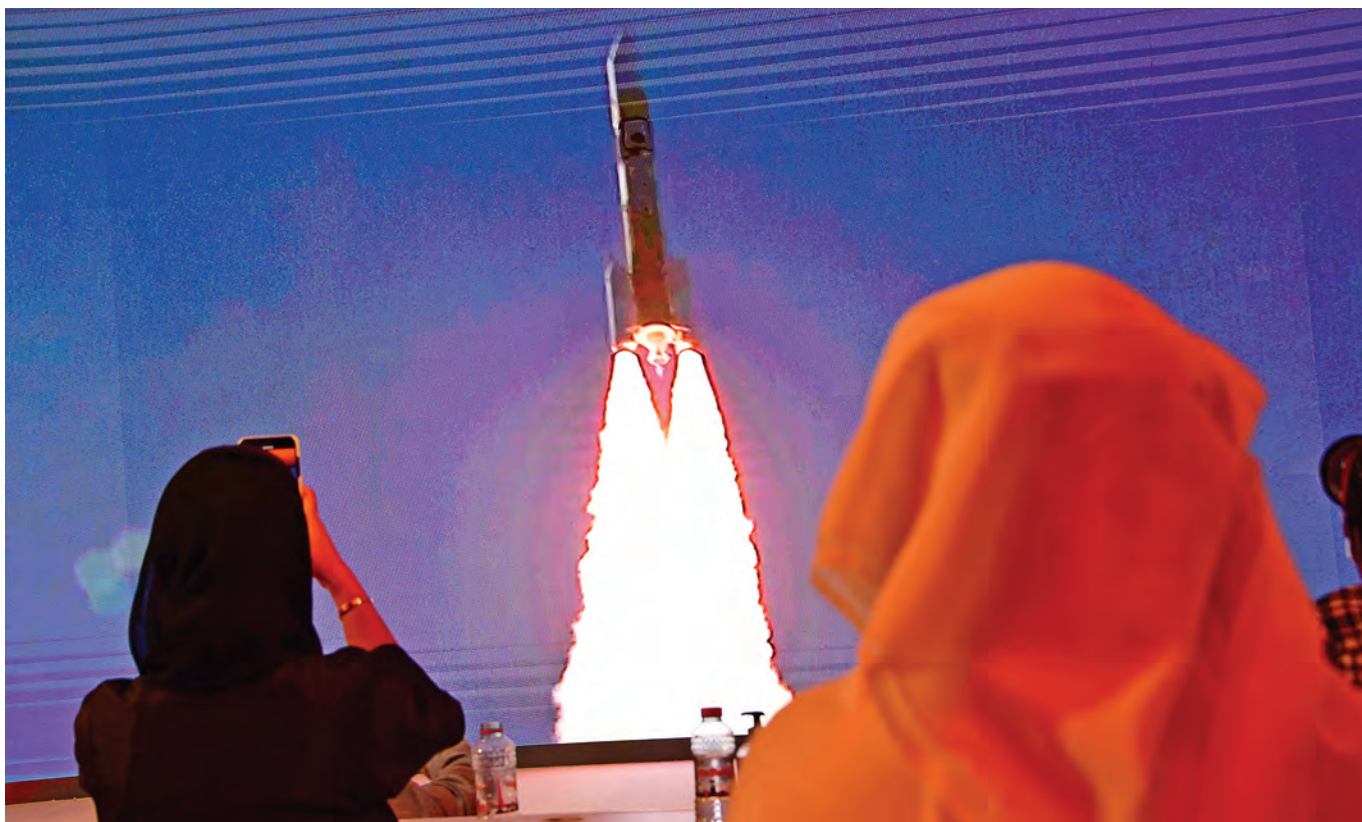
As the UAE made history on Tuesday evening becoming the first Arab nation, and the fifth in the world, to reach Mars after the 'Hope' probe successfully entered the Red Planet's orbit, the excitement was palpable in Oman too. Experts and astronomy enthusiasts said the probe's findings will benefit similar missions that Oman may have in the future as data will be readily available.

The Hope probe is the first of three exploration missions to arrive on the Red Planet in February. China and the US are leading ambitious projects to Mars, scheduled for arrival on February 10 and February 18 respectively. Hope's arrival in Mars, after travelling 493mn km in seven months, will now transition to the Science Orbit phase - transmitting its first image of Mars back to Earth within just one week.

According to Dr Alaa Ibrahim, associate professor of space astrophysics in the Department of Physics at Sultan Qaboos University, the Hope probe will be the first to provide a clear picture of the Martian atmosphere that we currently know very little about. "This mission will be beneficial and a catalyst to multiple sectors - from space and astronomy to education and industry," he said.

SQU students used to observe Mars through ground-based telescopes. But with the Hope mission in orbit around the Red Planet, Dr Ibrahim plans to engage students by allowing them a close look at the Red Planet once the mission's data become available.

He said that Oman and other Arab nations will benefit from the mission. "This project and similar space endeavours stimulate innovative and competitive knowledge-based economies. In addition to putting the UAE on the map of space exploration, the



SQU students used to observe Mars with ground-based telescopes. With the UAE's 'Hope' mission in orbit around the Red Planet, Dr Alaa Ibrahim plans to engage students by allowing them a close look at the Red Planet once the mission's data become available (Supplied photos)

findings of the Hope mission will benefit the research and education communities in Oman as its data will be readily accessible, assisting scientists to better understand planet Mars," Dr Ibrahim said.

"The Hope probe will transi-

tion to the Science phase in the next few days and weeks, and capture and transmit its first images and observations of the Red Planet. The mission is expected to collect new data not currently available from any other Mars mission, and these will be shared

with academic and scientific institutions around the world. This is great news for Oman too," he added.

Dr Ibrahim believes that the successful arrival of the mission on Mars shows that Arab nations are capable of conceiving

major and challenging milestones. "It conveys the ambition and motivation of the people of the region in overcoming the challenges and realising their dreams," he said.

Abdulwahab al Busaidi, head of observatory at Oman Astro-



This mission to Mars by UAE is a great achievement. This is a celebration and victory both for UAE and the Arab world

ABDULWAHAB AL BUSAIDI



This mission will be beneficial and a catalyst to multiple sectors - from space and astronomy to education and industry

DR ALAA IBRAHIM

nomical Society, said, "This mission to Mars by UAE is a great achievement. This is a celebration and victory both for the UAE and the Arab world. It has reached its target of orbiting Mars.

"But we in Oman need to have

our own preparations to land on Mars. An experiment was carried out in 2018 in Dhofar by the European Space Agency. We congratulate the UAE for their achievement. We look forward for more such missions to the space from the Arab world because discovering space is very important. The UAE is our neighbour; the mission will help us realise our own status and challenges in this planet. Space exploration is indeed a great duty that we need to explore."

On Tuesday evening, UAE President Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed al Nahyan congratulated his citizens and residents and the people of the wider region for the success of the Hope probe in arriving on Mars in the first-ever Arab interplanetary mission marking the Arab world's entry in the global race of space exploration.

"This historic achievement would not have been possible without the persistence and determination to implement the idea that emerged at the end of 2013 by H H Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of UAE and Ruler of Dubai, who followed it up closely until its success," he said.

The probe overcame the most critical part of its mission, the Mars Orbital Insertion that involved reversing and firing its six Delta V thrusters to rapidly reduce its speed from 121,000kmph to 18,000kmph. During the 27-minute critical phase, contact with the probe was kept to a minimum.

The team restored communication with the probe on its first day in Mars, to ensure its systems remained intact after the perilous phase it had just passed.

For the next three-four weeks, daily contact will be scheduled between the probe and the team back on Earth, enabling a quick turn-around of command sequence uploads and telemetry receipt.

@shadadm

SAYYID THEYAZIN RECEIVES CHINESE ENVOY



H H Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth, received in his office on Wednesday, H E Li Lingbing, Ambassador of the People's Republic of China to the sultanate. The meeting reviewed the relations binding the two friendly countries. It also touched on several topics of common concern. The meeting discussed aspects of existing cooperation in the fields of culture, sports and youth, and means of developing these to serve the two countries (ONA)

Illegal tailoring stopped in Muttrah



Our Correspondent
Muscat

Muscat Municipality raided a house in Greater Muttrah on Wednesday.

"The municipal team in Greater Muttrah raided a house in the wilayat which was used by expatriate workers for sewing activities without obtaining a municipal licence. Such activities contravene the provisions of Ad-

ministrative Resolution No 55/2017," the municipality said in a statement.

Health campaign in Bausher

The municipality launched a campaign reiterating the need for owners of commercial activities to adhere to all preventive and precautionary health measures in the wilayat of Bausher.

In new push for FDI, Oman targets 15 Asian nations

Continued from Page 01

"Additionally, the vision includes establishing joint investments, opening markets for the development of exports and pushing them to global markets. The sectors in focus for foreign investment include food security and health," H E Asila said.

"The sultanate also seeks to focus on enhancing investments in the information technology sector, and upgrading the sultanate's industries to expand into markets that are more acceptable and absorbing of exports, such as the Asian markets, which are one of the most promising markets for Omani exports," H E Asila added.

She informed that the volume of FDI until the end of the first quarter of 2020 was RO14.213bn, a growth of six per cent over the same period in 2019. "The sultanate will improve and develop the services provided to investors through the Investment Services Centre, and ensure that the work is completed as soon as possible."

She thanked the Foreign Ministry for its support and the investment promotion department of MoCIP for achieving its objectives of bringing foreign capital and increasing Omani exports.

Real estate deals decreased by 11.4% in 2020 to reach RO2.45bn: NCSI

Muscat - The total value of property transactions in the sultanate until the end of December 2020 decreased by 11.4 per cent to reach RO2.45bn from RO2.77bn for the same period in 2019, as indicated by statistics issued by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

Revenue generated from real estate transactions also fell as the government collected RO71.1mn as fees until the end of December 2020, which is a drop of 13.6 per cent compared to the same period in 2019.

The number of plots issued until the end of December 2020

was 204,484, which is a decrease of 3.2 per cent, until the end of December 2019 when 211,191 plots were issued.

Of the total traded value until the end of December 2020, RO925.7mn worth of transactions accounted for sales contracts, while RO1.46bn trans-

actions were for mortgage deals.

As many as 66,835 sales contracts were executed until the end of December 2020, against 56,887 contracts during the same period in 2019. However, the total number of mortgage contracts fell by 7.2 per cent to reach 14,864 contracts against

16,017 contracts in 2019.

NCSI data reveals a significant increase in traded value of exchange (barter) contracts - 196.1 per cent - at the end of December 2020 accounting for RO69mn, against RO23.3mn posted in the same period in 2019. The number of barter con-

tracts witnessed an increase of 28.3 per cent to 2,106, compared to 1,641 contracts in 2019.

The number of plots allocated to GCC citizens fell by 54.6 per cent to reach 397 plots compared to 875 plots during the same period in 2019, the data showed.

120m deep cave found in Dhofar's Jebel Samhan



Our Correspondent
Muscat

A group of speleologists has discovered a new cave in Jebel Samhan in Dhofar governorate, adding to the number of caves discovered in the sultanate in the past five years.

The cave was discovered as part of the pioneering efforts of the Omani Caves Exploration Team (OCET) which, in last five years, has explored and documented more than hundred caves in the sultanate.

Jebel Samhan is one of the major mountain ranges of Dhofar, whose highest peak reaches 2,100m. Jebel Samhan has many levels that are traversed by deep and narrow mountain passes, some of which are up to a thousand feet deep.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, Dr Mohammed al Kindi, a geolo-



We use geological maps to discover these caves. Our teams calculate the age of cave deposits and the level of water in some of the ponds. The whole process is scientific

DR MOHAMMED AL KINDI

gist and one of the team members, said, "The cave has a fresh water pond and wonderful rock formations. But to go down and explore the cave, one needs to be very cautious of this exhausting and risky adventure because of the multiple vertical slopes and the presence of slippery surfaces in many parts of the cave."

The cave is about 120m deep. "Going down is treacherous and need expert hands to use the ropes," he added.

The cave offers a quiet ambience for many illusive birds such as owls to make it their habitat.

"There is enough room inside the cave where bats fly undisturbed," Dr Kindi said, while the lake inside the cave "is deep and its fresh water makes swimming experiences pleasant."

Talking about the team's goals, he said it aims to explore caves in the sultanate and document them.

"We use geological maps to discover these caves. Our teams calculate the age of cave deposits and the level of water in some of the ponds. The whole process is scientific."

About the group's future initiatives, Dr Kindi said they are in

the process of publishing a book soon on their research work.

"Our team took five years to register over 101 caves from different governorates of the sultanate and we are planning to document them in a book form. We have added this new discovery to our book.

"The book, which is being brought out both in English and Arabic, will help in marketing these caves among adventure tourists," Dr Kindi said, adding that "cave tourism is a big industry in many parts of the world as adventurers love to explore such caves".

Pact signed to set up museum corner at Muscat airport

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Passengers at Muscat International Airport will soon get a glimpse of Oman's history and culture through the airport's own museum.

The National Museum and Oman Airports signed an agreement on Wednesday to showcase the museum's collections at the Muscat International Airport.

The agreement was signed at the National Museum by Jamal bin Hassan al Mousawi, secretary general, National Museum, and Sheikh Aimen bin Ahmed al Hosni, CEO of Oman Airports.

Commenting on the agreement, Mousawi said, "This agreement is aimed at strengthening joint cooperation in the cultural field in accordance with the goals set by the National Museum which include reaffirming noble Omani values, raising public awareness and promoting a sense of belonging for citizens, residents and tourists alike towards Oman - its history, heritage and culture.

"This agreement entails lending of museum collections for a museum set up at Muscat International Airport, through which we strive to infuse Muscat International Airport with a unique cultural experience."



(Supplied photo)

The pact entails lending of museum collections through which we strive to infuse Muscat airport with a unique cultural experience

JAMAL AL MOUSAWI

Sheikh Hosni said, "We are pleased to have signed this agreement with the National Museum, which is in line with our mission to uncover the magnificence of Oman - its cultural potential and its time-honoured heritage to all visitors and travellers through Muscat Interna-

tional Airport owing to its touristic and cultural significance in the sultanate.

"This agreement will add more value to the airport's terminal, as this museum corner will showcase artefacts and reflect Oman's historical and sociological realities discovered through an outstanding travel experience that we aspire to offer through the sultanate's airports."

By collaborating with Oman Airports, the National Museum seeks to enrich travellers' experience by offering cultural spaces that highlights the three expanses of Muscat International Airport, which represent the sea, oases, and desert. The set up will display some of the museum's finest collections in proportion to these elements either as graphic works, as well as open displays.

Advisory Board of GCC Supreme Council chooses new head



Muscat - The Advisory Board of the GCC Supreme Council on Wednesday chose Sheikh Dr Maryam Hussein al Khalifa as the chairperson of the board succeeding the current head Hamad Abdul Rahman al Madfa.

Held via video conferencing, the first meeting of the 24th session discussed decisions of tasking the Advisory Board of the

GCC Supreme Council to study three topics pertaining to maximising the benefit of GCC states from the Silk Road (Belt and Road Initiative), matters related to the GCC human capital and enhancing economic sustainability, in addition to combining efforts of the GCC states to upgrade their rankings within global competitiveness

reports.

The board also reviewed appropriate visions so as to be raised to the GCC leaders to be approved and referred to the respective committees for implementation.

Dr Nayef Falah al Hajraf, GCC secretary general also took part in the meeting.

ONA



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Clouds bring mercury down, but no rains

Our Correspondent
Muscat

With cloudy skies, temperatures dropped by a few degrees on Wednesday and it is likely to remain so on Thursday too.

The presence of an upper air trough over Saudi Arabia and Yemen is causing changes in weather conditions, according to the Met department.

"This phenomenon is the reason for high and medium clouds in the sultanate and the drop in temperature," an official from the Met said.

"This is a normal phenome-



non. There is no forecast for any rains though."

On Thursday, the skies will be partly cloudy over most of the sultanate with chance of late night to early morning low level clouds or fog patches over Buraimi, Dhahirah, South Sharqiyah and Al Wusta governorates. Friday will witness clear skies with chance of late night to early morning low level clouds or fog patches over parts of Buraimi, Dhahirah, South Sharqiyah and Al Wusta and Oman Sea coasts.

The sea waves will be moderate to rough along the Musandam governorate coasts.



Dhofar Municipality to form team to monitor street vendors, cafes

Our Correspondent
Muscat

As part of Dhofar Municipality's efforts to monitor the activities of street vendors and mobile cafes, its chairman Dr Ahmed bin Mohsen al Ghassani has issued a decision to form a team.

As per a statement issued by

the municipality, the team will also look to provide the operators of the mobile cafes with alternative sites.

'According to the local decision No 1/ 2020, the street vendors and owners of mobile cafes must obtain a licence from the concerned authorities,' the municipality stated.

18 women arrested for immoral acts: ROP

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Royal Oman Police (ROP) arrested 18 expat women of different nationalities on charges of committing immoral acts and violating public morals on Wednesday in South Batinah.

ROP said, 'South Batinah Governorate Police Command arrested 18 expat women on

charges of engaging in acts contrary to public morals. The accused have been arrested and steps had been taken to refer them to the judicial authorities.'

ROP has been stepping up its efforts to crackdown on illegal activities, specially those concerned with violating public morals. Police had arrested 63 women in Muscat and four in Dakhliyah earlier this month.

HOTLINES

24-hour pharmacies	99254940 (Emergency)
Scientific Pharmacy: Qurm	Emirates Medical Center:
24566601, Ruwi 24702850	24604540
Muscat Pharmacy: Ruwi	KIMS Oman Hospital:
24702542, Salalah 23291635	24760105
Al Hashar Pharmacy: Ruwi	Lama Polyclinic: CBD
24783334	24799077, 24788881,
	24788577, 24707566,
	24799655, Al Khuwayr
Hospitals and Clinics	24478817, 24478818,
Al Hayat International	Sohar 26751128
Hospital, Al Ghubra-	Muscat Eye Laser Centre:
22004000, 94267068 /	24691414
97049520	Muscat Private Hospital:
94442000 (Emergency)	24583600
Al Raffah Hospital: Muscat -	Health4All Medical Centre:
24618900/1/2/3	24486005, 24483009
Sohar - 26704639/49/50	Dr Maurice al Asfour
Apollo Hospital Muscat,	Specialised medical
Hamriya: 24787766,	centre - 24560673/74
24782666, 24787780	Lifeline Hospital, Sohar -
Abeer Hospital, Ruwi, Muscat	26651111
24770800, 90999335,	Lifeline Hospital, Salalah-
90999334 (Emergency)	23212340
Starcare Hospital: 24557200	Muscat Municipality:
Emergency number: 24558333	80077222
Dr Harub's Clinic:	
24563217, 2456381,	

Chairman's Report

Dear Shareholders,

On behalf of the Board of Directors (the Board) of Sembcorp Salalah Power & Water Company ("SSPWC" or "the Company"), I am pleased to present the audited financial statements for the year ended 31 December 2020.

Financial Results

Despite a challenging year faced by the global economy, I am delighted to report that the Company has delivered a second consecutive year of record net profit of RO 18.3 million for the year 2020, registering a 22% increase from RO 15.0 million in 2019. Operating profit has also increased to RO 33.8 million in 2020 compared to RO 31.3 million the year before. The increase in net profit was due mainly to Cyclone Mekunu insurance claim settlement, disciplined cost control and management, as well as lower finance costs. The Company has a strong balance sheet, ending the year with net assets of RO 109.3 million.

As the world continues to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic, the Board and the Management has undertaken all necessary precautions to protect our people, assets and operations. We are heartened to report that our efforts has enabled our business to continue without disruptions.

I invite you to refer to the Management Discussion and Analysis Report section of the Annual Report for more information regarding the Company's financial results

Dividends

Following a record performance this year, the Board is pleased to recommend a final dividend of Baizas 1.8 per share for 2020. Together with the interim dividend of Baizas 6.4 per share distributed in November 2020, the total dividend for the year 2020 amounts to Baizas 8.2 per share.

The Company follows a reasonable dividend payout policy, subject to debt repayments, working capital and operational expenditure requirements. The amount of annual dividends and the determination whether to pay dividends in any year may be affected by a number of other factors, including the Company's business prospects, financial performance, free cash availability, covenants under the Financing Documents and the outlook for the power and water sector.

Operations

The Company is a key power and water producer in the Dhofar region. We expect to remain as one of the key power and water producers to meet the demands of the region. We continue to strive for the highest level of plant availability and reliability, which is critical to the ongoing success of the Company. In 2020, the reliability of the power and water plant was 99.87% and 99.73% respectively, comparable to 99.96% and 99.93% in 2019. The power plant load factor decreased from 46.57% in 2019 to 38.46% in 2020, mainly due to the decrease in electricity demand in the region due to COVID-19 impact. Water plant load factor remained high at 99.97% as compared to 99.40% in 2019. However, due to the take or pay commercial arrangement that we have with Oman Power & Water Procurement Company (OPWP), the plant load factor does not have a significant impact on the profitability of the Company.

In spite of the exceptional challenges in 2020, the Company was able to continue with normal operations and planned maintenance of the plant. In addition, the Company has also implemented various plant improvement initiatives.

Going forward

The commitment to safe and reliable operations will remain the Company's top priority. At the same time, the Company will remain focused on maximising shareholder returns through a continued watch on the financial and operational performance of the Company.

Health, Safety & the Environment (HSE)

The health and safety of our people as well as protecting the environment we live in remain critical to our business. We aim to achieve world-class health and safety performance in our daily operations and our management team is committed to continuous improvement on this front.

The Company has undertaken various measures to mitigate the impact of the global pandemic on our people and operations. A handful of COVID-19 cases were reported in our company but we are pleased to report that all the affected employees have since fully recovered. Due to the measures taken to effectively contain the spread of the virus, there was no significant impact on our operations.

I am also pleased to report that there were no lost time incidents (LTI) and zero incidents of environmental non-compliance in 2020.

Last year, the Company embarked on a Behaviour-Based Safety (BBS) programme to nurture a proactive culture where health and safety is everyone's responsibility. To foster greater ownership of safety practices in our company, employees are encouraged to conduct regular BBS observations for the purpose of affirming positive safety behaviour as well as to take corrective actions. This initiative is now well embedded throughout our organisation, setting us on track to achieve our desired HSE culture.

Caring for the Environment and Communities

The Company recognises the importance of being a good corporate citizen in the conduct of our business activities and is committed to caring for the environment and making a positive impact in the community that we operate in. We continuously improve our waste management system and reduce carbon emissions by managing our auxiliary power consumption. The Company follows a consistent approach for charitable contributions and community investments that bring positive benefits to the local communities. Last year, the Company contributed RO 29,931 worth of ventilator to support the Ministry of Health in combating the pandemic. In addition, the Company disbursed RO 29,823 for corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities to improve the public infrastructure and to promote education, health and environmental awareness in the Mirbat municipality and nearby communities.

Corporate Governance

The Board believes that a business built on the principles of good governance is key to our long-term success. Our Company is in compliance with the Code of Corporate Governance issued by the Oman Capital Market Authority. More details can be found in the Corporate Governance Section of this report.

On Record

As the Chairman of the Board, I would like to thank my fellow directors, our shareholders, our client (OPWP), regulators (the Authority for Public Services Regulation, previously known as Authority for Electricity Regulation, and Capital Market Authority), and our partners (the Environment Authority, previously known as Ministry of Environment and Climate Affairs),

the Ministry of Energy and Minerals (previously known as Ministry of Oil and Gas), the Oman Electricity Transmission Company, Dhofar Directorate General of Water, OQ Company (previously known as Oman Gas Company) and other governmental and non-governmental bodies) for their guidance and support. I also thank all our employees and contractors for their dedication and commitment to the Company.

Finally, on behalf of the Board of Directors and our people, I would like to extend our deep appreciation and gratitude to His Majesty Sultan Haitham Bin Tarik Al Said's wise leadership and his continued support and encouragement to the private sector. We look forward to continue supporting His Majesty's government and remain committed to our mission to supply quality and reliable power and water of the highest standards to the Dhofar region.

Tan Cheng Guan

Chairman of the Board

Statement of profit and loss and other comprehensive income for the year ended 31 December		
	2020 RO	2019 RO
Revenue from contracts with customers	71,881,527	73,892,472
Cost of sales	(39,111,913)	(41,975,933)
Gross profit	32,769,614	31,916,539
Administrative and general expenses	(715,216)	(709,717)
Other income	1,735,529	132,407
Profit before interest and tax	33,789,927	31,339,229
Finance income	254,292	464,850
Finance costs	(12,569,185)	(14,198,505)
Profit before income tax	21,475,034	17,605,574
Income tax expense	(3,152,759)	(2,556,760)
Profit after tax for the year	18,322,275	15,048,814
Other comprehensive income		
Fair value of cash flow hedge adjustments - gross	(6,247,674)	(4,956,568)
Reclassification to profit or loss - gross	4,124,176	2,610,481
Deferred tax asset on change in fair value of cash flow hedge	318,524	351,913
Total comprehensive income for the year	16,517,301	13,054,640
Earnings per share:		
Basic earnings per share	0.019	0.016

Statement of financial position as at 31 December		
	2020 RO	2019 RO
Assets		
Non-current assets		
Property, plant and equipment	270,072,326	280,336,106
Right of use assets	701,515	728,496
Intangible assets	26,584	3,535
Total non-current assets	270,800,425	281,068,137
Current assets		
Inventory	5,667,627	5,369,059
Trade and other receivables	24,565,231	20,781,057
Bank deposits	20,676,336	18,925,080
Cash and cash equivalents	521,251	4,420,424
Total current assets	51,430,445	49,495,620
Total assets	322,230,870	330,563,757
Equity and Liabilities		
Equity		
Share capital	95,457,195	95,457,195
Legal reserve	11,030,441	9,198,213
Retained earnings	14,574,602	6,771,159
Shareholders' funds	121,062,238	111,426,567
Hedging reserve	(11,810,831)	(10,005,857)
Net equity	109,251,407	101,420,710
Liabilities		
Non-current liabilities		
Long term loans	126,719,435	151,161,095
Long term lease liability	491,616	461,616
Asset retirement obligation	688,084	646,228
Deferred tax liability	21,801,198	20,363,759
Derivative financial instruments	10,392,475	9,360,421
Total non-current liabilities	160,092,808	181,993,119
Current liabilities		
Current portion of long term loans	25,154,721	24,759,473
Current portion of derivative financial instruments	3,502,619	2,411,175
Trade and other payables	22,832,519	19,979,280
Current tax payable	1,396,796	
Total current liabilities	52,886,655	47,149,928
Total liabilities	212,979,463	229,143,047
Total equity and liabilities	322,230,870	330,563,757
Net assets per share	0.127	0.117

Sembcorp Salalah Power & Water Company SAOG P.O. Box 299, Jawharat Al Shatti, Postal Code 134, Sultanate of Oman, Tel: +968 2323 8510 (467), Fax: +968 2323 8512, www.sembcorpssalah.com.om

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MARKET WATCH

MSM30	3,559.73
BSE Sensex	51,309.39

FOREX RATES
(RO1 equals)

Indian Rs	189.33
Pakistani Rs	415.98
Bangladeshi Taka	220.38
Philippine Peso	124.98
Sri Lankan Rs	511.73

*Rates as on February 10
Source: xe.com

BRIEFS

Boeing cancellations continue to outpace new orders

Boeing said that it has again suffered more cancellations than new orders for aircraft in January as the pandemic continues to weigh on airlines. The aerospace giant said it delivered 26 planes to its customers, mainly of the 737 Max, after commercial flights of the aircraft resumed following the 20-month grounding in the wake of two deadly crashes.

While aircraft rental company Atlas Air Worldwide pledged to purchase four 747-8F cargo planes last month, the manufacturer said six orders were cancelled.

In 2020, the company notched just 184 orders and 655 cancellations or changes, including 641 of the 737 Max.

'Russian growth insufficient to match advanced economies'

Russia has weathered the coronavirus pandemic better than other countries but its economic growth is too slow to catch up with advanced economies, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said. 'Russia entered the COVID-19 crisis with low growth but strong policy frameworks and significant buffers,' an IMF report said.

But it added that several factors, including low oil prices and sanctions, led to 'lackluster growth' that was 'insufficient' to match advanced economies.

Toyota says Q3 net profit soared

Toyota said that its net profit soared 50 per cent in the third quarter and upgraded its full-year forecasts as the global auto industry gradually recovers from the coronavirus pandemic.

The world's top carmaker said it made 838.7bn yen (US\$8bn) in the three months to December, compared with 559.3bn yen a year earlier, and revised up full-year forecasts for the second straight quarter.

Net profit was at 1.9tn yen for the fiscal year to March, compared with its earlier estimate of 1.42tn yen.

Sales are now seen at 26.5tn yen, compared with the 26tn yen previously forecast.

OETC raises \$600mn via international bond sale

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman Electricity Transmission Company (OETC), a member of Nama Group, successfully floated a US\$600mn bonds issue in the international bonds market. The ten-year bonds, which pay an interest rate of 5.8 per cent per annum, will mature in February 2031.

This is the first government-related entity bonds issuance out of Oman since 2018 and it marks OETC's return to the international bonds markets after a brief hiatus of about four years, the company said in a statement on Wednesday.

It said the bond offering benefited from improving investor sentiments towards Oman, further highlighting the strategic importance of Nama Holding, its affiliate firms, partners in international money markets and investors.

Building on the stellar marketing efforts and thanks to its strategic diversification operations to woo the investors, Nama Group successfully engaged investors on the OETC bond transaction, paving the way for the State Grid International Development (SGID) to become a 49 per cent stakeholder in OETC.

OETC said the investors from across Asia, Europe and Ameri-



cas showed keenness to participate in its international bond offering, making up over 83 per

cent of the order-book. 'The well-diversified allocation of orders across these regions is a testimony to the strength of OETC's credit profile, as well as excellent teamwork that Debt Management Office at the Ministry of Finance, Nama Hold-

The proceeds from this US\$600mn international placement will be used to refinance some of the existing loans and fund OETC's capital expenditure programme

ing, OETC and SGID put together.' The proceeds from this successful US\$600mn international placement will be used to refinance some of the existing loans (including the shareholders loan extended to OETC by Nama Group and SGID) and to fund OETC's capital expenditure programme thereby allowing the

company to deliver on its infrastructure development plans.

OETC is authorised to undertake all regulated activities of electricity transmission and dispatch in northern Oman and Dhofar at voltages of 400kV, 220kV and 132kV. One of the major OETC capital expenditure programmes is the execution of the first phase of the 400kV North-South Interconnector project.

The extension of the Main Interconnected System will significantly boost the supply of fuel and electricity in the sultanate and bring about improvement to loads across various power systems, enabling them to deliver renewable energy to new project areas, share spinning reserves and achieve a reduction in cost of operation.

Moreover, the bond proceeds will support OETC to execute a 400kV project for the connection of a 1,000MW solar power plant at the Wilayat of Manah in Governorate of Dakhiliyah by 2024 and 2025. Such major investments will enable OETC to meet the growth in demand and connect committed and future resources.

OETC's bond transaction was anchored by global emerging market bond funds which continue to look for high quality assets.



Galfar secures RO68mn deals from Diam

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Galfar Engineering and Contracting Company has been awarded contracts worth RO68mn in total by the Public Authority for Water (Diam).

"We are pleased to inform our esteemed shareholders that Galfar has been awarded contracts for the total value of RO68mn for the operation and maintenance of various Diam networks and facilities in the sultanate's governorates," Hamoud Rashid al Tobi, chief executive officer of Galfar Engineering and Contracting Company, said in a disclosure to the Muscat Securities Market.

Galfar shares jumped by 6 per cent at the MSM on Wednesday.

Diam, the regulator for the water sector in Oman, is a direct water service provider, responsible for supplying potable water to all homes and businesses in the sultanate except in the Dho-

far governorate.

Galfar said these new contracts from Diam are valid for five years from commencement date which is expected in April or May 2021.

"We expect these contracts to be important in underpinning the company's revenues and in boosting its endeavours for expansion of its activities. The company would like to extend its sincere appreciation to Diam for their valuable confidence on Galfar towards the award of these contracts," Tobi added.

Galfar, as per its recently announced initial unaudited financial results, posted a consolidated net loss of RO21.84mn for the year ended December 31, 2020 compared to a net loss of RO6.29mn reported in the previous year. The company's total revenues for the year 2020 dropped to RO209.81mn as against RO248.8mn recorded in 2019.

CBO says bank lending increases 3.3%, deposits up 2.9% in 2020

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Total outstanding credit extended by Oman's banking sector grew by 3.3 per cent to RO26.7bn at the end of December 2020 compared to a year ago period, according to the latest figures released by the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) on Wednesday.

Bank credit growth remained slow during the last year in the sultanate amid the economic slowdown caused by the coronavirus pandemic and weak oil prices. Total bank credit to the private sector showed a relatively moderate growth of 1.1 per cent at RO22.9bn in December 2020 compared to the same month a year ago, the CBO data showed.

The shares of non-financial corporate sector and the household sector (mainly under personal loans) in the total private sector credit stood at 46.5 per cent and 45 per cent, respectively, at end-December 2020. The share of financial corpora-



tions was 5.1 per cent and other sectors received the remaining 3.4 per cent of the total private sector credit as at end-December 2020.

The data issued by the central bank showed that the total deposits held with Oman's banking system reached RO24.3bn at the end of December 2020, increasing by 2.9 per cent from December 2019.

Of the total banking sector deposits, total private sector

deposits increased by 10.5 per cent to RO16.8bn in December last year compared to a year ago.

In terms of sector-wise composition of private sector deposits, the households deposits represented 51 per cent of the total, followed by non-financial corporations at 32.3 per cent, financial corporations at 14.3 per cent and other sectors at 2.4 per cent of total private sector deposits.

Bank Muscat to refinance PDO's employee housing loan portfolio

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Bank Muscat has signed a sub-participation facility agreement with Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) to refinance or monetise the existing and future portfolio of home loans that PDO provides to its employees under a housing loan scheme.

This unique financing structure provides an efficient option for PDO to monetise the receivables of this portfolio to generate cash flow for operations and investments, Bank Muscat said in a press statement.

Sheikh Waleed K al Hashar, chief executive officer of Bank Muscat, said, "We are happy to strengthen the cooperation between the bank and PDO, the leading oil and gas producer in the sultanate. Under this agreement, while PDO continues to provide its employees housing loans as part of its employee value proposition, it will monetise or refinance the portfolio through the sub-participation facility provided by Bank Muscat."



While PDO will continue to operationally administer the loans and cater to the needs of its employees under its relevant staff policies, the participation facility will enable it to release working capital tied up in staff loans, Hashar said.

He added that Bank Muscat collaborated with PDO to create an innovative structured solution to meet the objectives of this financing.

"This shows Bank Muscat's commitment to satisfy the needs of its clients and comes as a translation of the bank's vision of 'To serve you better, every

day'," Hashar said.

Hashar thanked the executive management of PDO for their confidence in the services and facilities of Bank Muscat that led to the successful closure of this landmark and bespoke transaction. He also thanked the Central Bank of Oman for their constant support to the bank and the regulatory guidance provided for the transaction.

Bank Muscat offers Baituna home finance that makes the dream of owning a home come true. The attractive features of Baituna home finance include a tenure up to 25 years.

Saudi, Oman most exposed to diminishing fiscal uplift from SWF buffers: Moody's

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The impact of the coronavirus pandemic on oil demand and prices has significantly increased gross funding requirements for sovereigns across the GCC, which will be partly funded by drawing down sovereign wealth fund (SWF) assets, Moody's Investors Service said in a report on Wednesday.

The increased drawdowns on SWF assets, Moody's said, will lead to substantial erosion of these buffers in Saudi Arabia and Oman, reducing the uplift to fiscal strength from SWFs.

"The stock of SWF assets in Qatar and Abu Dhabi remains more than ample to cover decades of fiscal deficits at current levels. However, for Oman and Saudi Arabia, which possess a more modest stock of SWF assets, significant drawdowns will lead to substantial erosion of their SWF buffers over the medium term, reducing the uplift to fiscal strength derived from these assets, and increasing external vulnerability risks in Oman," Moody's said.

Moody's expects oil prices to remain below their pre-coronavirus path, due to long-lasting reductions in oil demand in sec-

tors like aviation. 'Markedly lower hydrocarbon revenues will translate into persistently higher budget deficits - despite some adjustments to expenditure and non-oil revenue measures - leading to higher financing requirements.'

In Kuwait, very large fiscal deficits have largely depleted the liquid portion of the smaller General Reserve Fund, increasing liquidity risks in the absence of a debt law despite the large stock of assets held in the Future Generations Fund, which are currently ringfenced from the general budget, the agency said.

"While the recovery in equity

market valuations last year reversed the paper losses facing GCC sovereign wealth funds, lower oil prices will keep transfers flowing out of most SWFs on a net basis," said Thaddeus Best, a Moody's analyst and the report's co-author.

While the governments are drawing more heavily on their SWF buffers, lower oil prices will significantly reduce the flow of assets to GCC SWFs, which are almost entirely derived from excess hydrocarbon revenue.

Moody's, however, added that the reserve adequacy remains more than ample to support most GCC currency pegs.

SITUATION VACANT - MALE NURSE

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- **License:** valid MO H license / passed Prometric with 60% and completed dataflow.
- PDO familiarization will have added advantages and Excellent communication in English
- Able to work in Remote/Desert Area
- Ability to provide training in first aid and basic CPR to personnel at the worksite.
- Attractive salary with great leave benefits

Please send the CV to the enclosed Email ID:
msunnyreddy@gmail.com

MSM index sluggish in thin trading

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The benchmark index of the Muscat Securities Market (MSM) fell 0.18 per cent to close at 3,559.74 points on Wednesday.

Trading activity deteriorated from the previous session as turnover declined 25.21 per cent to RO1.53mn and volumes fell 31.82 per cent to 11.72mn shares.

While Industrial index rose 0.22 per cent, Financial and Services indices fell 0.33 per cent and 0.21 per cent, respectively. The MSM Shariah index closed down by 0.24 per cent at 534.49 points.

Market breadth remained negative as six companies closed up, while 15 companies closed down. The rest 30 traded stocks closed flat for the day.

Top gainers were Galfar Engineering & Contracting (6 per cent), National Finance (4 per cent), Oman & Emirates In-

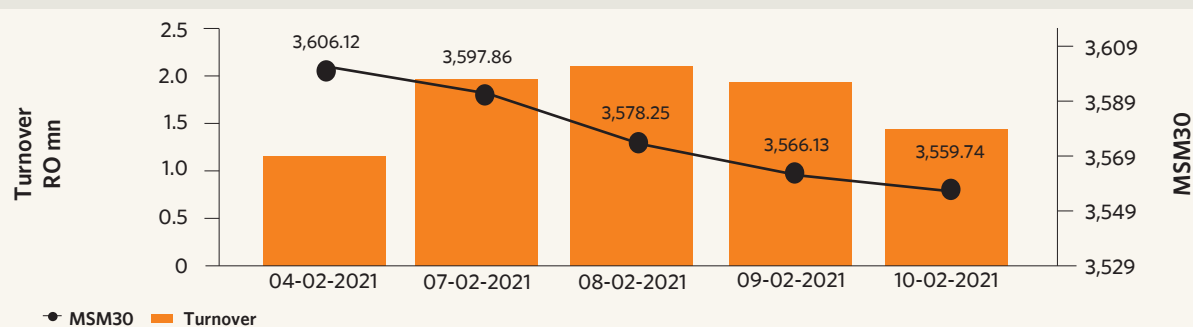


vestment Holding (2.38 per cent) and Ahli Bank (1.96 per cent).

Top losers were Muscat Finance (-7.9

per cent), Aman Real Estate (-6.86 per cent), United Finance (-5.0 per cent) and Al Sharqia Investment (-2.67 per cent).

MSM INDEX AND TURNOVER OF FIVE TRADING DAYS



BioNTech starts vaccine production at new German site, eyes to boost supply

Berlin, Germany - German COVID-19 vaccine maker BioNTech said on Wednesday it has started production at its new facility in Marburg, expected to significantly boost the EU's vaccine supply.

"We have started the first step of vaccine production in our production facility in Marburg," the company said in a statement.

The factory, whose launch was fast-tracked by German authorities, will produce mRNA, the active ingredient in BioNTech's vaccine developed with US pharmaceutical giant Pfizer.

It will then be purified and concentrated before being transported to a 'production partner' to be finished.

The European Medicines Agency will carry out quality checks in February or March.

"The first vaccines produced at the Marburg site are expected



The new manufacturing site of German company BioNTech for the production of vaccines is pictured in Marburg, central Germany (AFP)

to be delivered at the beginning of April," BioNTech said.

The main European factory for producing the vaccine is Pfizer's plant in Puurs, Belgium.

Once fully operational, the new Marburg site in Hesse state will be one of the largest mRNA

production facilities in Europe, with an annual production capacity of up to 750mn vaccine doses. BioNTech plans to produce up to 250mn doses there in the first half of 2021.

"We continue to work with Pfizer on a series of measures to

meet global demand," said the firm, confirming its goal of delivering two billion doses in 2021.

BioNTech bought the Marburg plant from Swiss pharma giant Novartis last year to ramp up vaccine production, and retained the 300 employees already working there.

BioNTech had announced in mid-January that it would have to delay shipments of the jabs to the EU due to necessary modifications at the Puurs factory, sparking ire across the bloc.

But the company said in early February it would meet its contractual commitments for the first quarter and pledged to send up to 75mn extra doses to the bloc in the spring.

The EU has ordered a total of 600mn doses of BioNTech and Pfizer's so-called Comirnaty vaccine.

AFP

Biden presses for 'big' stimulus in meet

New York, United States - US President Joe Biden met on Tuesday with a handful of top CEOs, hammering home the need to 'move big' on his US\$1.9tn stimulus bill while receiving input on a proposal to raise the minimum wage.

"We're approaching this issue to see if we can find some common ground," Biden said ahead of a White House meeting.

Biden said he was 'optimistic' bipartisan compromise was possible before the gathering that included Walmart CEO Doug McMillon and JPMorgan Chase CEO Jamie Dimon.

Other attendees included Treasury secretary Janet Yellen



US President Joe Biden (centre) sits alongside US Vice President Kamala Harris (second from left) as he holds a meeting with business leaders in the Oval Office of the White House in Washington, DC on Tuesday (AFP)

and the chief executives from clothing chain Gap and hardware and timber chain Lowe's.

Biden's plan includes addi-

tional stimulus payments to households, new aid for restaurants and other small businesses, expanded unemployment bene-

fits and additional funds for vaccine distribution.

So far, congressional Republicans have criticised the plan as too costly and particularly scorned proposals to raise the federal minimum wage to US\$15 an hour from US\$7.25 and provide US\$350bn in funds for state and local governments.

The Chamber of Commerce, which was represented at the gathering by outgoing CEO Tom Donohue, has called for a bipartisan pandemic relief package, warning that a Democratic-only proposal could risk progress on priorities, such as infrastructure spending and climate change.

AFP

EU to delay application of post-Brexit trade deal

Brussels, Belgium - The European Commission presented a proposal to member states to extend until April the application of a post-Brexit trade deal with the UK, sources said.

The provisional application of this treaty, concluded late last year, began in January and was

to have ended at the end of this month, giving the European parliament time to study and ratify it.

But the EU 'needs more time for the translation of documents' in all the official languages, a commission spokesman told AFP.

A European source said the proposal for an extension had been sent to members for approval and would then be put to a joint UK-EU council looking into the post-Brexit treaty.

European lawmakers began studying the 1,250-page text in the middle of last month.

Britain's Brexit negotiator David Frost confirmed on Tuesday that London has been informed of the proposal to extend the deadline.

"It's a little disappointing given that we did discuss this only a month ago," he said.

AFP

Qatar Petroleum to construct world's largest LNG project

Doha, Qatar - Qatar Petroleum announced recently its decision to build the first phase of the North Field East (NFE) project, in what the company said was the world's largest liquefied natural gas (LNG) project ever in terms of capacity.

Qatar, the world's largest LNG supplier, aims to expand its LNG production from the North Field, which is the world's single largest non-associated offshore natural gas field.

The project will also raise the country's LNG production capacity from 77mn tonnes annually to 110mn tonnes.

In addition to LNG, the project will produce condensate, LPG, ethane, sulphur and helium.

The contract covers the construction of four giant LNG production lines with a capacity of 8mn tonnes per year each, in addition to gas processing facilities, natural gas liquids recovery, and helium extraction and refining facilities in Ras Laffan Industrial City, Qatar's main site for LNG and gas-to-liquid production.

It is expected to start production in the fourth quarter of 2025 and its total production plans to reach about 1.4mn barrels of oil equivalent per day.

The announcement came during the signing ceremony of the main engineering, procurement and construction contract



for the project's onshore facilities between Qatar Petroleum and an alliance including Japan's Chiyoda Corporation and Technip Energies, with the attendance of the Minister of State for Energy Affairs and the president and CEO of Qatar Petroleum, Saad Sherida al Kaabi, and CEO of Chiyoda Corporation, and the president of Technip Energies.

Speaking at the signing ceremony, Kaabi said the project represents a milestone in Qatar Petroleum's journey in sustainable strategic growth.

"The total cost of the project reaches about US\$28.7bn, which makes it one of the largest investments in the energy industry over the past few years, in addition to being the largest and most competitive LNG project ever," he said.

The project carries special importance because it comes at a time when the world is suffering

from COVID-19 and its negative consequences on the world's economies, confirming Qatar's commitment to providing the world with clean energy, he added.

"The investment contains a number of environmental components that support our strong commitment to achieving the highest environmental standards and providing reliable solutions in the transition to low-carbon energy, since the carbon dioxide collection and injection system is one of the most important environmental elements of the project," Kaabi explained.

In line with the low-carbon energy aim, the project includes a system to recover the gas evaporated during shipment, which will reduce greenhouse gas emissions by nearly 1mn tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent annually.

Anadolu Agency

NYSE threatens to abandon New York if trading is taxed

New York, US - Is the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE) about to leave New York city?

The exchange's president Stacey Cunningham warned that the unthinkable was possible, saying the hallowed financial institution on Wall Street could flee if the state imposes a tax on stock trades.

"While New York has remained a centre of gravity for the financial industry, many employees of 'Wall Street' firms are migrating to Florida, Texas and other states with hospitable tax policies," Cunningham wrote in a column published in *The Wall Street Journal*.

She praised a 1981 decision by New York state to stop collecting a tax on stock trades, but warned, "If lawmakers opt to reinstate that tax, the NYSE may need to follow the lead of those relocating firms. Some of our customers are already asking about our willingness to relo-



cate."

Senior New York state legislators have signaled interest in enacting a tax on stock sales to address a dire budget shortfall amid the coronavirus downturn.

However, officials from the administration of New York governor Andrew Cuomo have signaled they oppose such a measure.

Cunningham last week co-signed a letter from some 25 securities industry leaders criticizing taxes on stock trades.

In her op-ed, Cunningham pointed to examples in history of how taxes on stock trading imposed by France and Sweden drove business to London.

"The securities industry should stay in the Big Apple where it belongs," Cunningham wrote.

"But if New York is to remain the financial capital of the world, it needs to avoid the folly of this tax and show that it truly understands how market forces work."

AFP

WTO eyes appointing first woman chief next week

Geneva, Switzerland - After nearly six months without a captain, the World Trade Organization (WTO) looks set to appoint Nigeria's Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala as its first female and first African leader next week.

The global trade body announced on Tuesday that it would hold a special meeting of its general council on February 15 'to consider the appointment of the next WTO director-general'.

The announcement comes after US President Joe Biden's administration last week offered its 'strong support' to Okonjo-Iweala, marking yet another



Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala

sharp split from his predecessor Donald Trump, who had blocked her nomination for months.

With no further obstacles in her path, Okonjo-Iweala is expected to quickly be tapped for the director-general post at Monday's meeting.

It remains unclear if she will be asked to take the reins immediately or if her term would start at a later date. Once she does, she will have her hands full.

Twice Nigeria's finance minister and its first woman foreign minister, 66 year old Okonjo-Iweala is seen as a trailblazer in her country.

A development economist by training with degrees from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard, she also spent a quarter of a century at the World Bank, rising to be managing director and running for the top role in 2012.

AFP

Love is in the air at Al Bustan Palace hotel

Love is in the air at Al Bustan Palace, a Ritz-Carlton Hotel, as the iconic resort welcomes guests to celebrate the special person in their life with a variety of Valentine's Day experiences throughout the month of February. From decadent afternoon tea under the majestic Atrium dome, an intimate candlelit dinner by the shore, a romantic getaway, to a sunset helicopter ride, every magical moment has been accounted for and no detail overlooked. For those who choose to stay a little longer, an exclusive set menu can be enjoyed in the privacy of their own room.

Situated amongst 200 acres of lush gardens, alongside the incomparable coast of Oman and the Al Hajar Mountains, a stay at Al Bustan Palace, a Ritz-Carlton Hotel is as timeless as love itself. Nabil bin Abdul Wahab al Zadjali, general manager at Al Bustan Palace, a Ritz-Carlton Hotel, said, "With picturesque spots in every corner, world-class amenities, and a culinary team that perfects each dish, our award-winning resort was made for romance.



We look forward to welcoming our guests, whether they come for dinner or make time for a

getaway, we have everything needed to kindle the romance and create wonderful memories

that will last forever." Set the tone for a night of true opulence at Beach Pavilion

Bar & Grill. Savour a special five-course set menu featuring the freshest seafood expertly

prepared, enjoyed right at the water's edge. Vegetarians are also catered

for with an extraordinary set menu highlighting the finest local and seasonal ingredients. Or dinner at the heart of the hotel. Al Khiran Kitchen is setting the scene for a delectable three-course menu in a relaxed atmosphere, overlooking the resort's stunning gardens and pool. Guests can spoil a loved one any day, with Valentine's Afternoon Tea at the Atrium Lobby Lounge, available for the entire month of February. The sophisticated lounge is the essence of elegance and charm, perfect for an afternoon spent indulging in love-themed treats and sweets.

Guests can also take advantage of a special Valentine's in-room set menu, dining in the ultimate privacy and comfort along with a helicopter ride to enjoy Oman's sunset in the air. Whether staying for a meal or a romantic escape, Al Bustan Palace, a Ritz-Carlton Hotel provides couples with a beautiful setting for creating love-filled memories.

For reservations, email Restaurant.reservation.albustanpalace@ritzcarlton.com or call +968 2476 4444.

Kalyan Jewellers launches special edition to celebrate Valentine's Day

Gearing up for the season of love, Kalyan Jewellers announced the launch of its special limited-edition jewellery line, crafted to win hearts this Valentine's Day. The collection comprises of exquisitely crafted jewellery - laser cut pendants studded with diamonds and rubies on delicate chains to form symbols of love. Keeping in sync with the fashion trends of 2021, the collection introduces a wide range of finely crafted exquisite jewellery with refreshing designs crafted in 18K gold.

The special Valentine's Day edition encompasses hand-crafted jewellery pieces put together with a perfect blend of rose gold and diamond studded pendants and bracelets with a hint of rubies on some designs. The limited edition offers pocket-friendly, lightweight jewellery



pieces that patrons can gift their loved ones, to express their affection this Valentine's Day.

To make this season more jubilant, Kalyan Jewellers has announced a social media contest for customers who shop for over RO50 to get a chance to win a memorable staycation. This special offer is valid across the jewellery brand's showrooms in Oman till February 20.

Kalyan's Four Level Assurance Certification on gold jew-

ellery is a special initiative to continue enhancing the brand's commitment towards offering the very best to its loyalists.

While jewellery retailed at Kalyan Jewellers goes through multiple purity tests and are all BIS hallmarked, the 4-level product certificate promises customers assures purity, identifies exchange and buy-back terms and provides a detailed product description. Also, it ensures free lifetime maintenance of orna-

ments at any of the brand's showrooms.

Kalyan Jewellers offers a wide array of intricate jewellery designs in contemporary and traditional motifs including earrings, bangles and necklaces. The company offers its patrons, Muhurat, the bridal jewellery line curated from across India along with exclusive sections featuring Kalyan's popular house brands such as Tejasvi - Polki jewellery, Mudhra - antique jewellery, Nimah - gold-studded with semi-precious stones, Glo - diamonds jewellery, Ziah - diamond jewellery, Anokhi - uncut diamonds-studded, Apoorva - diamonds jewellery (illusion setting collection), Antara - Diamonds jewellery (light weight, prong setting) and Hera - daily wear diamonds and Rang - precious studded jewellery.

Gulf Air resumes its direct operations to Sri Lanka

Gulf Air, the national carrier of the Kingdom of Bahrain, announced that it will resume its direct operations to and from Colombo's Bandaranaike International Airport with two weekly flights starting from February 15 on its new Airbus A320neo aircraft.

Gulf Air has been operating direct flights between the Kingdom of Bahrain and Sri Lanka since 1981 and it is one of the airline's main destinations in the Indian Sub-continent region. The airline currently flies to and from Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Kuwait, Riyadh, Jeddah, Dammam, Medina, Muscat, Cairo, Amman, Casablanca, London, Paris, Frankfurt, Athens, Bangkok, Manila, Dhaka and several destinations in India and Pakistan.

Being one of the few airlines that never stopped flying in



2020, Gulf Air continuously works closely with the government authorities across its network to resume operations as demand for travel grows.

Gulf Air boasts a flexible and agile network by immediately adapting to government guide-

lines and civil aviation directives and has been responsive to continuous changes and updates.

Updates are constantly added on gulfair.com/covid19 including travel advice, network and new health and safety procedures.

Valentine's Day specials at Radisson hotels across Oman

Valentine's Day is almost here and Radisson Hotel Group, Oman, will be marking it in style. From Muscat to Sohar and Duqm, Radisson Hotels invite guests to relax and enjoy the most romantic day of the year with themed dining, stay packages and more.

Plan a special weekend or day at one of Radisson's properties across Oman to experience refined multi-course menus, special packages, and offerings created just for two.

Hormuz Grand Muscat

Breathtaking romantic setting overlooking the waterside at OMNY with a specially crafted set menu dinner for two and music at RO22 net per person. Or experience an exclusive extraordinary evening of love and delicacies from Oman and India at The Straits Restaurant at RO19 net per person - all combined with impeccable Radisson Collection hospitality.

Valentine's Escape

Celebrate love where timeless romance and luxury blends in with the oasis of Muscat. Offer



inclusive of one night stay, set menu or buffet dinner and breakfast for two adults. Prices starting from RO55 net for two. For reservations, call 99697743.

Radisson Blu Muscat

Treat your loved one to a candlelit dinner buffet by the pool whilst enjoying music and a romantic ambience all evening long. Price starts from RO14 per person. Offer valid on February 14. For reservations, call 97235800

Park Inn by Radisson, Muscat

Dine under the stars at Sama Terraza rooftop lounge with your dearest and enjoy a romantic dinner buffet with a glass of selected drink for only RO28 per

couple with music to serenade you all evening with love songs. Offer valid on February 14. For reservations, call 2450 7888

Radisson Blu Sohar

Enjoy a romantic candlelight dinner buffet for two at Al Zafaran restaurant with a stunning sea view for only RO20. Or surprise your partner this Valentine's Day with a pleasant staycation in a spacious room and enjoy a specially crafted candlelit dinner with ocean view and breakfast. RO65 for two adults. For reservations, call 26640000

Park Inn Duqm

A four course set menu including a selected drink at RO17 per person. For reservations, call 22085700

KR Eshraqa holds leadership workshop at SQU

With an intention to foster national expertise as part of the objectives outlined in the Oman Vision 2040, Eshraqa, Khimji Ramdas' Social Development Arm, organised a 'Leadership Beyond Role' workshop for Sultan Qaboos University deans, and deputy deans at their main campus recently.

This unique programme on leadership development was conceptualised by mentors from Eshraqa on the invite of Sayyid Dr Fahad bin al Julanda al Said, Vice Chancellor of Sultan Qaboos University (SQU).

The one-day 'Leadership Beyond Role' workshop integrated the leadership spectrum by making participants work on two of the world-renowned case studies used by some of the best management education institutions like Harvard.

During the first case study, which was an extremely advanced simulation of the famous Mount Everest story of 1996, the participants experienced challenging situations in which they took fitting and unfitting decisions as a team and as individuals. During the process, the participants experienced conflict between individual and team goals, and thereby developed a



sound understanding of group dynamics, decision making and problem solving. Through the second case study participants got acquainted with the transformational spectrum of leadership which had more of 'leadership from below approach' through the 2008 tragic Taj Hotel incident.

The workshop was concluded with a comprehensive discussion by the participants on the similarities of the challenges between the two real life case scenarios. They deliberated on group dynamics, decision making, problem solving, team building, customer-centric leadership, value driven organisational structure and employee empowerment.

In his concluding remarks, Sayyid Dr Fahad thanked Eshraqa for putting up a valuable programme. He highlighted the key learning points of the programme and also expressed his desire to collaborate with Eshraqa for more human capital initiatives at SQU.

Nailesh Khimji, director, KR Group, Responsible for CSR Affairs (Eshraqa) said, "Leadership development is one of the crucial components of Oman Vision 2040. For us, the key to success of the workshop we conducted is to ensure that the objectives and the outcomes are aligned with goals of this vision. Oman under the visionary leadership of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin

Tarik is building a productive and diversified economy based on the objectives set out for the future and it is our duty to contribute towards a positive progress story. The Eshraqa initiative works towards the social progress of the nation and this workshop reaffirmed our commitment to Oman's goals."

Nadeem Ahmed, general manager, Training and Consultancy, Khimji Ramdas Group said, "Leadership is the ability of an individual to lead, influence or guide another individual, group or organisation towards achieving a shared goal or vision. We are delighted that we received a positive response to the workshop."

Ba Ban at W Muscat rings in Lunar New Year

W Muscat is preparing an Ox-traordinary programme to ring in the Lunar New Year with glitz and glamour at Ba Ban. In true W spirit, the hotel is taking 2021 by the horns with an electrifying menu of China’s finest dishes and is inviting guests to join in the celebrations from February 11 to 13.

“We are very excited to be celebrating our first Chines New Year with the year of the Ox. It is a year marked with strength to move forward, with optimism to take what life serves us and with determination to rise. This is also how we at W Muscat choose to live the year,” said Gerald Chevasson, general manager of W Muscat.

“A staple in our events calendar moving forward, we plan to bring our bold and eclectic style to this Lunar New Year and set the standard for what’s to come from us in the future.”

Opened in 2020, the Shanghai inspired restaurant has become ‘THE’ hot spot for those looking to enjoy Chinese cuisine with a modern flair. Firing-up the



works for the year of the Ox, the team of talented Chinese culinary experts have put together mouth-watering dishes to top Ba Ban’s all-time favourites including Omani Lobster and Abalone Wonton, Braised Peking Duck and Shitake Rolls, Roasted Aromatic Cantonese Duck in Soyaplum Sauce and Banana-Custard

Beignets for a sweet-sweet ending. W Muscat’s top mixologists have also raised to the occasion with an exclusive Ox-Year cocktail.

Guests are invited to make their reservations for the Chinese New Year from February 11 to 13 by calling Ba Ban on 22120000.

Entering a sophisticated world that marries the glamour of Paris with the vibrancy of Shanghai, they are guaranteed a delicious culinary adventure.

For more information on what’s happening at W Muscat, visit www.wmuscat.com or get social with W Muscat on Instagram @babanwmuscat.

Valentine’s Day: OPPO marks love for technology

There are several reasons to celebrate Valentine’s Day, from romance and admiration, to friendship and love. This Valentine’s Day does not need to be only about love for people; it is a great opportunity to celebrate everything that one is grateful for. Global technology leader, OPPO, celebrates a love that is shared by millions around the world - love for technology.

OPPO stays close to its customers and is inspired by their passions. Offering a wide range of smart devices including smartphones, wireless headphones and a smart watch, OPPO is listening to its customers every day and has a deep understanding of their love for technology.

Consumers in Oman spend a substantial amount of time during the day on their smartphones, compared to other countries in the world. OPPO shares reasons why consumers love their smartphones so much: ►Smartphones give people more time for themselves. Every smartphone is equipped with a host of apps, planners and schedulers to help organise consumers’ lives and give them



5G that started in 2020 was timely especially as the global pandemic forced people to stay indoors and connect with the outside world only through digital channels. OPPO launched no less than three 5G phones in 2020, delivering unprecedented clarity in video calls to loved ones, easy access to office networks and uninterrupted conference calls and work meetings. The OPPO Reno4 Pro 5G comes with a large 4,000mAh battery that delivers a full day of use.

►Smartphones help people look smarter. Everyone likes to make a good impression. Consumers love smartphones that make them look good in front of their peers. OPPO Reno4 series is packed with Artificial Intelligence features that make users look smarter. The Reno4 Pro’s AI Color Portrait photography and videography feature, for example, turns an amateur into a pro photographer. It is able to detect and highlight a person in vibrant color, while turning the background into black and white. The Reno4’s Smart AirControl allows users to scroll up and down within apps and answer calls with a suave swiping motion of the hand.



Rolls-Royce Spirit of Ecstasy still flying high

Rolls-Royce Motor Cars celebrates the 110th anniversary of the Spirit of Ecstasy – its official emblem. The intellectual property of the design was registered in February 1911, establishing a defining feature of the Rolls-Royce brand and one of the most famous, iconic and desirable symbols of luxury in the world. Almost unaltered throughout her long and storied life, the Spirit of Ecstasy graces the bonnet of every Rolls-Royce motor car built at the Home of Rolls-Royce, Goodwood.

Her design was taken from a bronze statuette, entitled the ‘Whisper’, created by sculptor and illustrator Charles Sykes for

his employer, motoring pioneer and Rolls-Royce early-adopter Lord Montagu of Beaulieu. The company’s foundational connection between the automotive and art worlds continues today with MUSE, The Rolls-Royce Art Programme, a lead protagonist in the world of moving-image art.

The first Spirit of Ecstasy figurines stood a statuesque seven inches (c. 18cm) tall. Today, she is a more petite three and 3/4 inches (9.5cm). She is kept safely out of sight within a special housing in the bonnet until the engine starts, when she takes the stage smoothly and gracefully by a precisely engineered mechanism known as ‘the rise’.

Atos and Flytxt boost Ooredoo’s customer engagement plans

Atos and Flytxt collaborate to drive analytics-led customer engagement for Ooredoo in Oman. Ooredoo is one of the leading telecommunications operators serving over 3mn satisfied customers across the sultanate.

Atos and Flytxt implemented a unique Customer Value Management (CVM) solution supporting Ooredoo’s vision to accelerate its digital agenda with data analytics, cognitive computing, deep learning, and intelligent automation to enhance digital engagement and better address its customers through targeted omnichannel marketing.

In particular, Atos delivered a real-time data-driven intelligence, advanced statistical techniques, and machine learning algorithms implementing an Enterprise Information Fabric(EIF), which empowers Ooredoo Oman’s Loyalty Management System,providing marketers with contextual customer intelligence to drive personalised customer engagement across traditional and digital touchpoints through



intelligent digital marketing campaigns. Flytxt provides its intelligent marketing automation platform NEON-dX to perform multi-channel campaign execution, digital, personalised, and contextual engagement in real-time, allowing Ooredoo’ marketing teams to quickly and efficiently plan and execute up-sell, cross-sell, and retention campaigns.

The solution helps Ooredoo with real-time digital campaigning based on new types of data sources, real-time analytics, visibility on customer subscriber churners, insight on consumption patterns of high valued prepaid customers to help lower the cost of management. The solu-

tion met the set objectives to improve and enhance customer experience and boost revenues.

Atos and Flytxt solution will help marketers gain deeper and actionable customer insights and contextual recommendations like the next best offer from various data sources to have more effective decisions and actions while engaging with customers.

“By partnering with Atos and Flytxt, we accelerated our digital transformation by implementing big data and real-time analytics. Enhancing customer value and experience is a priority for us, as well as creating new revenue streams,” said Jaffer al Khaboori, director - Strategy & Transformation at Ooredoo in Oman.

Oakley unveils its new MSK3 mask

Established in 1976, Oakley has always been a driving force in product design for sports performance products worldwide. Favoured by world-class athletes competing at the highest level possible, Oakley has always been at the forefront of performance innovation.

This year, Oakley has unveiled an unparalleled mask design with the MSK3. Designed with seal, filtration, fit and eyewear integration in mind, the mask is designed to work seamlessly with your eyewear and fit snugly on your face. With its unique design, MSK3 helps to reduce eyewear crash and lens fogging, to ensure its wearer is comfortable all day long.

The newly launched MSK3 is designed to work seamlessly with your eyewear and fit snugly on the face with an integrated seal and filtration system that has two high-performance filter options for added breathability. The disposable filter has over 95 per cent filtration efficiency of particles down to size of 0.3 mi-



crons, with another reusable filter provides protection against air pollutant and dust particles. Special Thermoform parts provide space between your mouth and mask for increased breathability and comfort.

Adjustable straps help you get your perfect fit, as a result of an ergonomic design. MSK3 is available in a “one size fits most” adults size, with replacement high-performance filters and reusable filters also available for purchase.

Oakley MSK3 is available at Oakley Stores and select retailers.

Celebrate love at The Chedi Muscat this Valentine’s Day

Perched between majestic Al Hajar Mountains and serene waters of the Gulf of Oman, everything except romance of the present moment is sure to fade away at The Chedi Muscat. Indulge in a romantic time with your other half as The Chedi Muscat prepares a variety of unique and intimate experiences for couples, this Valentine’s Day.

Valentine’s Dinner at the Long Pool
Nothing says romance better than a dinner date with your loved one to celebrate this special day. Rekindle the spark with an indulgent five-course premium dinner at The Chedi’s Long Pool as a gourmet evening with candle lights awaits. Guests can enjoy an unparalleled view of The Long Pool’s shimmering water and gaze out to the Gulf of Oman.

From the moment they arrive,

their senses will be enveloped in romance as they sit under a canopy of stars and listen to the local singer Ghazi Al Balushi’s string of melodies.

The five-course premium set dinner includes a wide choice of Japanese fusion dishes, including Sesame Crusted Salmon Nigiri, Foigras Nigiri with plum and yakitori glaze, Tuna Tataki, Wagyu Gyoza or Miso Marinated Black Cod with asparagus & fennel with garlic yuzu.

Date: February 14
Price: RO55/per couple

Valentine’s Dinner at the Beach Restaurant
For a truly idyllic experience, dine along the private beach where a creative seafood menu is accompanied by a sublime panorama of the Gulf of Oman. A team of talented chefs will provide a varied choice of culinary delights in a three-course



seafood dinner.

All this is served in a unique ambience featuring warm low lighting, rich wooden décor, and impeccable service on the expansive waterfront patio of The Beach Restaurant.

Reignite the spark with this beautiful setup to remember the night, long after Valentine’s Day is over.

Date: February 14
Price: RO45/per couple
From this February, guests

can escape to a luxury oasis in the heart of Muscat.

The Chedi Muscat offers an exclusive opportunity to celebrate love in a spectacular style with enchanting dining possibilities and pampering spa

treatments.

Nothing says romance better than dining under the stars. Guests can indulge in the ultimate love celebration with a romantic dinner by the sea, surrounded by a

charming panorama of the Gulf of Oman.

To top off this perfect romantic escape, couples can treat themselves to a 60-minute Ancient Balinese massage at The Chedi Spa.

This traditional Balinese-style massage includes Balinese palming, stretching, effleurage and pressure point techniques to relieve tension, improve blood flow, ease stress and calm the mind.

In the morning, couples can enjoy alfresco breakfast at The Restaurant and lounge by the pools the whole day with a guaranteed late checkout.

Price: starting from RO105/per couple

This offer is available every weekend starting from February 11.

For more information or reservation please call +968 245 24401 or email reservation@chedimuscat.com

QUICK TAKES

Qatar Minister meets Saudi envoy

A Qatari minister met the newly-arrived Saudi envoy to Doha on Wednesday, Qatar said in a statement, as the neighbours continue to restore ties abruptly cut in 2017. ‘Qatar’s Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Sultan bin Saad al Muraikhi met on Wednesday with Acting Charge d’affaires of the Embassy of the sisterly Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Ali Saad Ali al Qahtani in Qatar,’ Doha said in its statement on Wednesday. ‘During the meeting, they reviewed bilateral cooperation and relations... in addition to issues of common interest’. The announcement comes after flights between Qatar and Saudi were restored on January 11, shortly after the reopening of the land border between the neighbours.

Iraq’s Sadr appeals for early election

Populist Shiite cleric Moqtada Sadr said on Wednesday he backed early elections overseen by the UN, in a rare press conference outside his home in the Iraqi shrine city of Najaf. The elections were initially set for June, nearly a year ahead of schedule, but have since been pushed back to October. Appearing in a surgical mask and traditional clerical robes, Sadr warned against further delays. “Delaying the elections would be a disaster for Iraq,” said Sadr, warning that rival parties would try to rig the vote. “I don’t want fraud. That’s why I’m asking for UN intervention and supervision,” he said.

Two killed in Kabul blasts

At least two people, including a local police chief, were killed after multiple bomb blasts rocked the Afghan capital early on Wednesday, officials said. Police spokesman Ferdaws Faramarz told reporters that two people were killed and another wounded in their vehicle by a bomb in downtown Kabul. Minutes earlier, another blast targeting a vehicle in the same district wounded four people, Faramarz added. A third blast targeted a police vehicle in Paghman district on the outskirts of Kabul. No group has so far claimed responsibility for the attacks.

Twitter, India row escalates

Twitter said on Wednesday it had blocked some accounts in India over comments on mass farmers’ protests in New Delhi, but the social media giant refused to shut down others despite the threat of criminal action by the government. Indian officials last week demanded that Twitter block hundreds of users that have tweeted on demonstrations against proposed new agriculture laws, saying they were a ‘grave threat to public order’. Twitter initially complied by blocking a number of accounts but unblocked them several hours later, prompting threats of ‘penal action’ from the government. ‘In keeping with our principles of defending protected speech and freedom of expression, we have not taken any action on accounts that consist of news media entities, journalists, activists, and politicians’, Twitter said.

UN Security Council fails to agree on joint declaration on Syria

United Nations - The UN Security Council on Tuesday failed to agree on a joint declaration on war-torn Syria, capping a day of negotiations in which the organisation’s special envoy to the country called to jump-start the deadlocked peace process.

Russia, Syria’s main ally, repeatedly blocked negotiations on the matter, diplomats said, although Moscow did not respond to a request for comment as to why.

The conflict in Syria, which broke out after the brutal suppression of anti-government protests in 2011, has killed more than 380,000 people and displaced millions.

Endless rounds of UN-backed peace talks in the decade since have failed to stem the bloodshed and in recent years have been largely overtaken by parallel negotiations led by Russia and Turkey.

“The current divisions in the international community need to be bridged,” Geir Pedersen, the UN special envoy for Syria, told journalists earlier in the day following a Security Council video-



This file photo shows a child among women leaving after their release from the Kurdish-run al-Hol camp which holds suspected relatives of Islamic State (IS) group fighters, in Hasakeh governorate in northeastern Syria, on January 28 this year (AFP)

conference.

Pedersen said that without ‘constructive international diplomacy’ on Syria, it was unlikely that ‘any track - constitutional

track or any other - will really move forward’.

Diplomats said the failure to agree a declaration was due to Russia, which had made de-

mands unacceptable to Western nations.

“The Russians are asking too much,” a diplomat said on condition of anonymity.

The council’s monthly meeting on Syria is usually public, but officials kept the session private after a meeting of the Syrian Constitutional Committee in

Geneva last month ended with no progress.

Estonia’s UN envoy Sven Jurgenson lamented the lack of progress.

“The aim was not to create a debating club, but to give Syrian people a way out from a ten year long conflict,” he said, according to a copy of his speech that was released after the meeting.

“It is clear to everyone that the Syrian Government has just taken advantage of these meetings to delay any real reconciliation.”

The committee was created in 2019 to modify Syria’s 2012 constitution, which directs the organisation of elections under UN supervision.

“Session five of the Constitutional Committee was a missed opportunity and disappointment,” Pedersen said of the January meeting, which included the Syrian regime, the opposition and civil society. “There is a lack of trust and confidence and a lack of will to compromise - and a lack of political space to compromise too,” he added.

AFP

Pakistan commutes death sentences of 2

Lahore, Pakistan - Two mentally disabled prisoners on death row had their sentences commuted by Pakistan’s Supreme Court on Wednesday in what activists called a landmark judgment on mental illness.

The court ordered Kanizan Bibi and Imdad Ali to be transferred to a mental health facility, and asked for the case of a third inmate facing execution to be reviewed. It also called for the establishment of a medical board to vet inmates for mental illness in capital cases.

The court also appeared to take a stronger line against the execution of inmates deemed mentally disabled in the future.

“We hold that if a condemned prisoner, due to mental illness, is found to be unable to comprehend the rationale and reason behind his/her punishment, then carrying out the death sentence will not meet the ends of justice,” said Pakistan’s Supreme Court.

The decision was hailed by legal activists who have been lobbying the courts for years to address the issue.

“We hope the guidelines... will

permeate to all levels of the judiciary and prison staff so that mental illnesses can be detected and treated instead of being ignored and denied,” said Ali Haider Habib, spokesman for the Justice Project Pakistan (JPP), a legal nonprofit organisation representing the three inmates.

Bibi was 16 and a housemaid when she was sentenced to death in 1991 after being found guilty of murdering a wealthy woman and her five children.

Her family long claimed that she was brutally tortured and forced to confess, and she has not spoken in years due to severe mental health issues.

Ali, meanwhile, was sentenced to death for the murder of a religious cleric in 2002, but diagnosed with schizophrenia while in prison in 2012.

Human rights organisations have long called on Pakistan to reinstate a moratorium on the death penalty.

The ban was lifted after the Army Public School massacre by the Taliban in Peshawar in 2014 that killed 151 people.

AFP

Myanmar army tightens grip as anti-coup protests enter 5th day

Yangon, Myanmar - Tens of thousands of people took to the streets of Myanmar’s biggest city for a fifth consecutive day on Wednesday, defying a ban on protests as the military moved to tighten its grip on the country.

Crowds swarmed through Yangon demanding the release of Aung San Suu Kyi, facing down police a day after officers dispersed crowds elsewhere with tear gas and rubber bullets, and ramped up their harassment of the ousted leader’s party.

The sudden escalation of force against the demonstrations sweeping the country since last week’s coup prompted a fresh chorus of international condemnation after officers fired live rounds at one rally in the capital Naypyidaw.

Two people were critically wounded in the incident - including one woman who was shot in the head. Images depicting her in the moments after she was shot were by Wednesday appearing on a huge protest banner and had been widely shared online alongside expressions of grief and fury.



Protesters take part in a demonstration against the military coup, in Yangon on Wednesday (AFP)

“They can shoot a young woman but they can’t steal the hope and resolve of a determined people,” UN special rapporteur Tom Andrews said on Wednesday.

Massive crowds returned to the streets of Yangon on Wednesday, where the day before they had faced off against a

phalanx of riot police near Suu Kyi’s residence.

Though there were no reported clashes with authorities in the commercial hub on Tuesday, university student Khin Nyein Wai said she was still afraid.

“I still came out as I do not like the military dictatorship,” she told AFP. “This is for our future.”

More politicians from Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy were detained on Tuesday along with 30 others - including a journalist from local broadcaster DVB - at a protest in Mandalay, the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners monitoring group said.

AFP

Anger as hopes fade for Indian workers after disaster

New Delhi, India - Dozens of angry and desperate relatives of about 30 people trapped in a tunnel since a glacier disaster in India jostled with police on Wednesday as hopes faded that they would be found alive.

More than 170 people were still missing after a barrage of water and debris hurtled down a valley with terrifying speed and power on Sunday morning, sweeping away bridges and roads and hitting two hydroelectric plants.

Thirty-two bodies have been found so far, officials said on Wednesday. It may take days for more bodies to be recovered from under the tonnes of rocks and other debris and a thick soup of grey mud.

The main focus of the massive rescue operation, under way day and night since Sunday, is a tunnel near a severely damaged hydroelectric plant that was under



Rescue teams outside the entrance of a tunnel in Chamoli district on Wednesday where dozens are still feared to be trapped following a flash flood thought to have been caused when a glacier broke off three days ago (AFP)

construction at Tapovan in Uttarakhand state.

Workers there have been battling through hundreds of tonnes

of sludge, boulders and other obstacles to try and reach between 25 and 35 people who rescuers hope are still alive in air pockets.

“As time passes, the chances of finding them are reducing. But miracles do happen,” Piyooosh Rautela, a senior state disaster

relief official, told AFP.

“Man, machinery, we are all working round the clock. But the amount of debris is so much that it’s going to take a while to remove all that,” he said.

Outside there were medical teams on standby with oxygen cylinders and stretchers, as well as increasingly desperate and enraged relatives.

There have been no signs that their loved ones are still alive.

“This entire rescue operation is a joke,” Sanjay Pant, whose 24 year old electrical engineer brother Abhishek was in the tunnel, told AFP.

“We are not living in the 18th century where just one bulldozer can be used to clear tonnes of slush. Where is our technology, where are our machines?”

“Authorities are not showing any urgency to rescue those trapped. Another day and we will have to give up hope,” said San-

tosh Yadav, whose brother-in-law Sanjay was also in the tunnel.

“They cannot survive too long in the tunnel even if they are alive now. There is no air, water or food inside and it is freezing cold inside the tunnel. Only God can save them.”

Sandeep Nautiyal, one of the bulldozer drivers trying to dig their way to the missing men, said the task was extremely challenging. “The more we remove the slush, the more appears. Every corner of the tunnel is filled with rocks, slush and debris,” he told AFP. “We can only hope that they have found a corner inside the tunnel to survive. But that seems unlikely.”

Twenty-five of the bodies recovered so far were yet to be identified. Many of the victims are poor workers from other parts of India hundreds of kilometres away.

AFP

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Vaccine production must catch up to science: EU chief

Brussels, Belgium - Europe's race to manufacture COVID-19 vaccines must accelerate to catch up to scientific breakthroughs and outpace emerging variants, European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen said on Wednesday.

"We underestimated the difficulty related to mass production. Normally, it takes five to ten years to produce a new vaccine. We did it in ten months. This is a huge scientific success, and we should be rightly proud - but in a way, science has outstripped industry," she told the European Parliament.

In her first public admission to Europeans - outside of some select media interviews - von der Leyen said her Commission had made missteps in procuring vaccines on behalf all EU countries.

But she defended the overall strategy.

"We were late to authorise. We were too optimistic when it came to massive production. And perhaps we were too confident that what we ordered would actually be delivered on time," she said.

But to have allowed Europe's wealthiest countries to grab vaccines for themselves and leave others in the cold 'would have been, I think, the end of our community', she said.

'We got it right'

There were lessons to be learnt, von der Leyen said, and her Commission would do so.

They included getting more data shared between clinics in



President Ursula Von Der Leyen takes part in a debate on the EU's vaccine strategy at the European Parliament, in Brussels on Wednesday (AFP)

We were too optimistic when it came to massive production. And perhaps we were too confident that what we ordered would actually be delivered on time

URSULA VON DER LEYEN

EU countries, improving regulations to allow the European Medicines Agency to move faster in authorising vaccines, and especially to clear industrial bottlenecks to vaccine production.

"Industry must adapt to the pace of science," she said, noting that vaccines can contain as

many as 400 ingredients and manufacturing involve as many as 100 companies.

A vaccine production task force under internal market commissioner Thierry Breton was charged with that mission, she said.

"We're dealing with completely new mRNA vaccines

never manufactured at scale before," she said.

"One of the current bottlenecks is, for example, linked to synthetic molecules... we need more coordination on the supply of key ingredients."

Von der Leyen warned that European scientists do not yet know if the vaccines will be effective against new mutant strains of the virus that are emerging.

"But we do know these variants will continue to emerge. And we do know that we need to anticipate and prepare immediately," she warned.

She also said deeply regretted an aborted bid by the Com-

mission last month to try to restrict vaccines being transported into Britain's territory of Northern Ireland as part of a bitter row with Anglo-Swedish pharmaceutical company AstraZeneca, which has failed to deliver vaccine doses it promised to the EU.

But she stressed that 'in the end, we got it right' and a hastily set-up EU vaccine export control scheme would not 'restrict companies that are honouring their contracts with the European Union' and vaccines to most of the bloc's neighbours would be unhindered.

AFP



This file photo shows Britain's Prince Charles, Prince of Wales and his wife Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall (AFP)

Britain's Prince Charles gets jab

London, UK - Queen Elizabeth II's eldest son and heir Prince Charles, who contracted COVID-19 last year, has received a first vaccine dose, his office said on Wednesday.

The 72 year old Prince of Wales and his wife Camilla (73) both received the shot as health authorities urged those over the age of 70 to get a jab.

Britain, which was the first Western nation to roll out COVID jabs in the general population, is banking on its biggest ever vaccination programme as a way out of a contagion that has killed more than 113,000 people.

Some 12.5mn people have so far been inoculated using either the Pfizer/BioNTech or Oxford/AstraZeneca shots.

Prime Minister Boris John-

son's government has set a target to vaccinate the most vulnerable and at-risk groups by February 15. Over-70s are the last cohort in that group of 15mn people to be vaccinated under the plan.

The Queen (94) and her 99 year old husband, Prince Philip received their COVID vaccine last month.

The unusual move to publicise the inoculations - royal officials rarely comment on private health matters concerning the head of state - came as those over 80 were given the vaccine.

The state-run National Health Service meanwhile on Wednesday released an advert starring pop icon Elton John and the Oscar-winning actor Michael Caine urging the public to get vaccinated.

Russia's caseload passes four million

Moscow, Russia - Russia officially surpassed 4mn coronavirus infections on Wednesday, days after the country dramatically revised upwards its fatality rate, cementing its place as one of the world's worst-hit nations.

A government tally showed infections had reached 4,012,710, which is the fourth-highest rate globally after the United States, India and Brazil.

But Russia has come under fire for its official virus statistics and the government's stated death toll of 78,134 in particular has been undermined by recent mortality data.

Figures published by statistics agency Rosstat on Monday showed more than 162,000 virus-related deaths

last year, more than double the number reported by the government's task force so far.

Russia has frequently come under fire for downplaying the impact of the pandemic and only counting fatalities where coronavirus was found to be the primary cause of death after an autopsy.

The country had been battered recently by a second wave of infections but has held back on reimposing lockdowns like other European countries and instead relied on a nationwide vaccine rollout.

Russia said Wednesday that 2.2mn people in the country had been administered the jab since vaccinations began in January.

AFP

Argentina approves Indian-made vaccine

Lima, Peru - Argentina has approved the emergency use of the Indian-made Covishield vaccine, the government announced.

The Covishield vaccine is essentially the same as the British developed AstraZeneca/Oxford vaccine that previously received approval in late December.

Argentina has also approved the use of the Russian Sputnik V vaccine, having already received 820,000 doses.

It began its immunisation programme on December 29 and has so far only used the



This file photo shows a health worker receiving a dose of the Sputnik V vaccine at a makeshift centre, in Buenos Aires on February 2 (AFP)

Sputnik V vaccine. Argentina has recorded just under 2mn cases and over 49,000 deaths from COVID-19 among its 44mn population. In neighbouring Chile, the

ministry of health reported on Tuesday that it had vaccinated more than one million people against the coronavirus, six days after launching a mass-vaccination campaign for the elderly.

Peru has also signed a deal to purchase 14mn AstraZeneca/Oxford vaccines, as it on Tuesday began its immunisation programme just two days after receiving 300,000 vaccine doses from state-owned Chinese company Sinopharm.

It is also purchasing 13.2mn Covax jabs.

The country has been hard

hit by a second wave of the coronavirus pandemic sweeping Latin America.

It has recorded around 1.2mn cases and more than 42,000 deaths from COVID-19 among its population of 33mn.

Hospitals are overrun with almost 13,800 COVID patients while they have also reported a lack of oxygen to treat those with breathing problems.

Health care workers at several hospitals in the capital Lima were the first to receive the vaccine on Tuesday morning.

AFP

The WHO's China mission: Five questions still unanswered

Wuhan, China - The World Health Organization expert mission to China ended this week after nearly a month. Here are five things we still don't know about the virus' origin:

The animal source

Experts said tests were done on tens of thousands of samples from wild, farmed and domestic animals across China - but none of them contained the SARS-CoV-2 virus that causes COVID-19. However, Dutch virologist and WHO team member Marion Koopmans said that species more susceptible to the virus - including bamboo rats, badgers and rabbits - were sold at Wuhan's Huanan market, the site of an early virus cluster, and could be an entry point for trace-back investigations.

British zoologist Daszak also said after the briefing that new bat viruses discovered in Thai-

land and Cambodia, 'shifts our focus to Southeast Asia'. "I think one day we'll find that (reservoir), it might take some time... but it will be out there without a doubt," he told reporters.

Raw data

Concern has been expressed about the scientists' access to data in China, amid accusations that Beijing downplayed the initial severity of the outbreak in Wuhan in late 2019.

Danish epidemiologist and team member Thea Kolsen Fischer said after the briefing that the WHO team were not given raw data, but instead relied on earlier analysis by Chinese scientists. In most cases, she said, it would be usual for outsiders to get access to 'aggregated data'.

WHO team members said they were granted full access to the sites and individuals they requested to visit.



WHO team member Peter Ben Embarek (centre) and other members of the group arrive at Tianhe International Airport to leave Wuhan in China's central Hubei province on Wednesday (AFP)

Cold chain transmission

Beijing has repeatedly floated the theory that the virus was brought to China through packaging on cold chain products like frozen seafood, linking these to recent domestic outbreaks.

WHO emergencies chief Mike Ryan had previously said that there is 'no evidence that food or the food chain is participating in transmission'.

But in China the WHO mission appeared to give some weight to the theory.

The head of the Chinese side of the mission, Liang Wannian, said the virus can travel long distances on the surface of cold chain products, and environmental samples from Huanan market - which sold frozen wild animals and seafood - showed

'widespread contamination' of the virus. But WHO team lead Peter Ben Embarek cautioned that it is still unclear whether the virus can transmit to humans from contaminated cold chain surfaces.

Origin outside China?

Beijing has repeatedly called for the WHO to launch an origin tracing mission in the US, and foreign ministry officials have drawn attention to conspiracy theories about virus leaks from an American military germ research lab.

Eager to deflect international criticism over its initial handling of the outbreak, China has also amplified studies suggesting some COVID-19 cases emerged in Italy and other countries in late 2019.

But in releasing the report's conclusions, Koopmans said

these studies 'do not provide full evidence of earlier circulation' outside China in early December. However, she conceded that experts 'should really go and search for evidence of earlier circulation'.

What next?

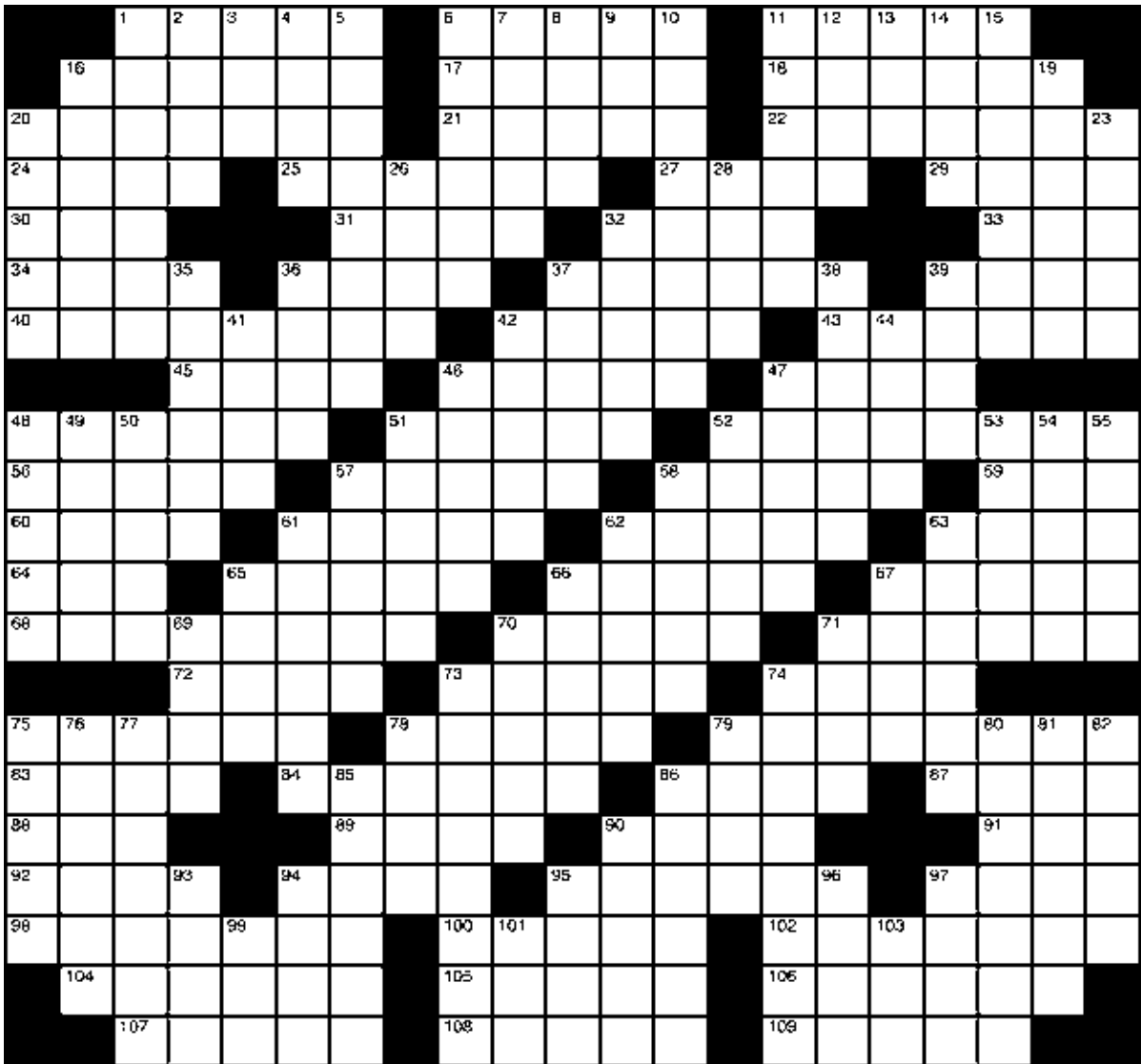
Koopmans said farms supplying wild animals to Wuhan's Huanan market deserve further research.

In addition to sampling more wild animal reservoirs - especially bats - in and outside China, Ben Embarek suggested re-testing samples using 'new approaches' to blood tests and looking for more early cases that went undetected in Wuhan in December 2019.

China, meanwhile, is keen that the next stage of the virus origin investigation takes place in another country.

AFP

DAILY CROSSWORD



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ACROSS

- 1 At all ____
6 Right-to-receive certificate
11 Step
16 Large drawing room
17 Suppress
18 Social groups
20 Genus of trees
21 Useful
22 Survivors
24 Baking compartment
25 Overstrain
27 ____ of Evil
29 Open lesion
30 Russian peasant commune
31 Undeified
32 Employed
33 Churchill sign
34 Puffed
36 Rich source
37 Small upright piano
39 Malt beverage
40 Lees
42 Kind of pool
43 Terminates prematurely
45 Chinese dynasty
46 Boy's catapult
47 FBI agent
48 Specimen

- 51 Burn with steam
52 City in Minnesota
56 Nimble
57 Intone
58 Warble
59 N.T. book, for short
60 Measuring stick
61 Center of things
62 Hackneyed
63 Italian lake
64 Wrath
65 City in Vermont
66 Small songbirds
67 City in Italy
68 Made dim
70 Render stable
71 Unruffled
72 Goals
73 Pigeon species
74 Soft mineral
75 Crystalline mineral
78 Levees
79 SRO patron
83 Gasp
84 Number on clockface
86 Burn
87 Noble Italian family
88 Miss Claire
89 Eponymous ancestor of the Hebrews
90 Riding whip

- 91 Sailor
92 Frog genus
94 Horse provender
95 Biblical king of Damascus
97 Underdone
98 Redactors
100 Cone-shaped domicile
102 Connected by blood
104 Bring into harmony
105 Atelier item
106 Figures of speech
107 Writer Richard ____
108 Attire
109 Irish poet
DOWN
1 Provided food
2 Pearl Buck
heroine
3 Costa del ____
4 Surpasses
5 Breaking suddenly
6 The face of a cube
7 Charming little one?
8 Check
9 Noxious
10 Gratifying
11 Walk with long steps
12 Very: Fr.

- 13 Trouble
14 Wading bird
15 Regain
16 English statesman George ____
19 Della ____
20 Toothed instruments
23 Prophets
26 Litter's smallest
28 Stranger: Gk.
32 Set on end
35 Nun's head cover
36 Word on the Wall
37 Marsh bird
38 Mexican dish
39 Beethoven's birthplace
41 Distance measure
42 Slope
44 To lade
46 Frighten
47 Coarse hominy
48 Tasty
49 Greek marketplace
50 Certain race horse
51 Fragment
52 Pickle
53 French school
54 Style of type
55 Sluggard
57 Roman goddess
58 Lock of hair
61 Treat

- 62 Attempts
63 Ring
65 Nota ____
66 Interlaced
67 Dissolve
69 English county
70 Card game
71 River to the Moselle
73 Stripped
74 Early Boston event
75 Steeple
76 Dish with soaked bread crumbs
77 Silliness
78 Obligation
79 A ____ in the dark
80 Landed properties
81 Gazes
82 Biblical name
85 Certain contracts
86 Baskets for anglers
90 Algonquian speakers
93 ____ boy!
94 French river
95 Church part
96 Withered
97 Engrossed
99 Umpire's call
101 Sense organ
103 Mauna ____

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE



ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

Now's your time to shine. The universe thinks you're ready to take flight towards the goals you've been pining after. The new moon in Aquarius arrives, developing a new narrative around your long-term ambitions and reviewing your circle of friends. The month ahead sees you fine tuning your goals and gearing up to go after them fearlessly, with the support of a few trusted allies!



LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

Thursday's cosmic landscape is loaded with potential. One of the most important lunations of the year arrives for you, bringing with it the promise of new horizons on the romantic front. The new moon emerges in your opposite sign of Aquarius, bringing with it the potential to form new relationships, break down old ones, or bring something totally new to the table in your current one.



SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

Your mind is a cup that the universe just continues to keep pouring into! It's all too easy for you to feel overstimulated. Today's new moon in Aquarius offers you the chance to formulate your thoughts and tell your story. The coming weeks are likely to see you caught up in a barrage of messages, so prepare to use your voice and mind in a new capacity.



TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

You're ready for the next step. So much energy has been gathering around your career and reputation—have you been picking up on the messages concerning your next step? Today's new moon in Aquarius is one of the strongest of the year for you, as you're given the chance to develop new stories in the month ahead around your ambitions, destiny, and sense of purpose.



VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

You're built with a natural understanding of what's efficient and what isn't. Put this superpower to good use, as the new moon emerges in intelligent Aquarius. This new moon prompts fresh developments in the month ahead concerning your current job landscape and any pressing health matters. Use this time to sync back up with yourself and get back into action work-wise.



CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

Thursday's skies bring the promise of potential. The new moon emerges in Aquarius, promising new developments concerning your skills, resources, and talents. Now's the time to focus on honing your skills behind closed doors, for in a few months time you'll be ready to go on stage with them. The month ahead also sees your putting more focus onto your finances.



GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

To stop learning would be to stop breathing for you. The universe has been trying to clear out your mental closet all month—by helping you notice what old philosophies or ideas stand in your way of growth. Today's new moon in Aquarius ushers in a brand-new story in the month around what you believe, as you're given the chance to take in new concepts and widen your horizons.



LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

The universe is putting you in the spotlight this month. The last few weeks have seen you exploring old feelings around taking centre stage with your abilities, while also updating your romantic life. Today's new moon in Aquarius offers new opportunities in the month ahead around following a creative passion, enhancing your sex life, and leaning into the things that bring you joy.



AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

One of the most important lunations of the year arrives at your doorstep. After weeks of sorting through different elements of your identity, it's time to make a stand in the world around who it is you're now becoming. The new moon emerges in your sign, creating a brand-new story around your individuality. Who is it you wish to become in the year ahead? Now is the time to decide!



CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

The universe has been testing your ability to be true to yourself. Have you been noticing that in your relationships? Today's new moon in Aquarius prompts a brand-new story to be explored in the month ahead around relationship intimacy, emotional vulnerability, and therapeutic activities. Be willing to trek into the dark and dismantle whatever heart-centred roadblocks lie ahead.



SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

This hasn't been the easiest couple of weeks for you. You've had to deal head on with the more trying emotional elements of your past in a way that would daunt most others. Today's new moon in Aquarius offers you the chance to begin rebuilding the foundations beneath your feet, as it brings new developments in the month ahead around family, home, and reconciliation.



PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

You've been hard to reach. The universe has encouraged you to make this inwardly focused move, as you've needed to face the worn-out parts of your personality that are in need of release. Today's new moon in Aquarius offers you the chance to develop a deeper connection to your spirituality, rest, and recuperation in the month ahead, in whatever form that takes for you.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

1. The significance of peace is denoted by which of the following symbol?

- a. Olive branch
b. Green light
c. Lotus
d. Red flag

2. The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, awards the Nobel Prize in

- a. physics
b. economics
c. chemistry
d. both (a) and (c)

3. The prize winning title of Arundhati Roy for Booker's Prize in 1997 was

- a. Amsterdam
b. The God of Small Things
c. Disgrace
d. Last Orders

Answers: 1: a 2: b 3: d

KIDS COLOURING



DO YOU SUDOKU?

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

5		6	2	8				
	4			5		8	6	
	3	8		1				5
8	6		5					
		4	8	7	9	6		
				6		5	3	
2			6		1	9		
9	7		2			6		
		9	5	7			8	

BOGGLER

A	O	E	O
T	O	S	U
O	B	N	L
Y	R	B	S

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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

8	3	2	7	5	6	9	1	4
4	9	5	1	8	2	3	7	6
7	6	1	3	9	4	5	8	2
3	5	8	9	4	1	6	2	7
2	1	9	6	7	8	4	5	3
6	7	2	4	3	5	9	1	8
5	2	4	6	1	7	8	9	3
9	8	7	5	6	3	2	4	1
1	4	3	8	2	9	7	6	5

DAILY CROSSWORD ANSWERS (FEBRUARY 10)

ACROSS	DOWN	ACROSS	DOWN
1. At all	1. Provided	1. Provided	1. Provided
2. Pearl	2. Pearl	2. Pearl	2. Pearl
3. Costa	3. Costa	3. Costa	3. Costa
4. Surpass	4. Surpass	4. Surpass	4. Surpass
5. Break	5. Break	5. Break	5. Break
6. Face	6. Face	6. Face	6. Face
7. Charm	7. Charm	7. Charm	7. Charm
8. Check	8. Check	8. Check	8. Check
9. Nox	9. Nox	9. Nox	9. Nox
10. Grat	10. Grat	10. Grat	10. Grat
11. Walk	11. Walk	11. Walk	11. Walk
12. Very	12. Very	12. Very	12. Very

WORD BUILDER

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

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



MENTAL HEALTH

DEAL WITH DEPRESSION



The current situation during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is challenging for most. There are uncertainties in every aspect of life - jobs and careers, education and marital prospects. The future appears bleak and unclear.

Such situations can be fertile ground for the onset of depression. The fact is, depression itself can make everything feel more challenging than it really is. Simple tasks, such as socialising, attending work/school obligations, can appear Herculean if one is experiencing depression. However, there are some things one can do to cope with symptoms of depression and improve one's quality of life.

Verywellmind, an online portal certified by 'Health on the net', which provides up-to-date information and advice compiled by qualified writers, from physicians to mindfulness experts, suggest the following tips for dealing with depression:

Build a support network

Simply brooding or lamenting over a problem doesn't help in improving the situation or your state of mind. It is a good idea to build ties with friends or family and discuss your problem.

One also has the option of calling up local mental health helplines and seeking advice or joining mental health forums to draw insights from other people's sharing. There are many online forums in Oman that offer help and sup-

Depression doesn't just make you feel bad, it can also cause you to think more negatively. Changing those negative thoughts, however, can improve your mood

port - www.psychocovid19oman.com is one such psychological support service initiative done with the support of the National Youth Commission.

Reduce stress

Remember, stress is part and parcel of modern living and everyone is subject to some level of stress while trying to meet deadlines, deliver tasks, achieve targets or adjust to new situations/people/environments - so you are not alone. We cannot alleviate stress from our life but we can devise ways to reduce it or cope with it.

When under stress, the body produces more of a hormone called cortisol. In the short-term, this is a good thing because it helps you gear up to cope with whatever is caus-

ing the stress in your life. But in the long run, it can pose problems like depression. Hence, it is important to reduce stress using various techniques, from meditation to getting involved in extracurricular activities and new hobbies to keep your self busy and the mind diverted from the stress-causing factors.

Improve your sleep hygiene

Sleep and mood are intimately related. A 2014 study found that 80% of people with major depressive disorder experience sleep disturbances. But, you might feel like you just can't fall asleep. Or perhaps you struggle to get out of bed because you feel exhausted all the time. So, turn off electronics at least an hour before you go to bed. Use a dim light to read a book or engage in another relaxing activity. Doing work in bed, or even in your bedroom, can cause you to associate your bed with stress, rather than relaxation. So, reserve your bed only for sleep.

Improve your eating habits

Research continues to find clear links between diet and mental health. In fact, there have been so many studies that have shown improving nutrition can prevent and treat mental illness that nutritional psychiatry has become mainstream.

There are many brain-essential nutrients that can affect

depression. For example, a 2012 study found that zinc deficiency increases symptoms of depression. But before you make any major changes to your diet or begin taking vitamins or supplements, it is good to talk with your physician.

Stop negative thoughts

Depression doesn't just make you feel bad, it can also cause you to think more negatively. Changing those negative thoughts, however, can improve your mood. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy works to alter common patterns of negative thinking called cognitive distortions to eliminate depression. There are also many self-help books, apps, and online guides that can help you learn how to change your unhealthy thinking patterns.

Take charge of daily chores

Depression can make it difficult to complete household chores, such as doing the dishes or paying bills. But a pile of paperwork, the stack of dirty dishes, and floor covered in dirty clothes will only magnify your feelings of worthlessness. Hence, take control of your daily chores. Start small and work on one project at a time. Getting up and moving can help you start to feel better in yourself. But, seeing your progress in the home can be key to helping you feel better. Additionally, take up a fitness activity, to keep yourself active.

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Sales Executive with 8 years exp in Oman, looking for suitable job. I have Oman D/L & car. Indian, male NOC available. Contact 94261611

Indian, Male, Master Degree in Accounting, 15+ years of Experience in Oman, UAE &

India as Finance / Accounts Manager / Chief Accountant. Looking for a Job and have NOC on visit. Contact: 79007124 / 78039524. Email: kadercok@outlook.com

Looking for a driver Job in Muscat, has got 9 years experience. Contact 78944897

Graphic Designer, worked in india 3 years. Software used Photoshop, Coreldraw, Illustrator, Adob Flash, Deamweaver Contact 79687609

BIRTHDAY WISHES

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February 12

Dear Shreyas
Many Happy Returns
On Your Birthday
From:
Umang, Urjita and
Bharat

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ILIOTIBIAL BAND SYNDROME



Iliotibial band (ITB) syndrome is the second most common cause of pain in runners, accounting for nearly 10–12% of running-related issues. “IT band syndrome affects predominantly female runners and is associated with a tight IT band and weak hip abductors. So, strengthening and stretching the hip abductors can restore balance and prevent inflammation,” says **Dr Biswajit Dutta Baruah**, consultant orthopaedic surgeon, KIMS Oman hospital



DR BISWAJIT DUTTA BARUAH
Consultant orthopaedic surgeon, KIMS Oman Hospital

Arun was one of the top notch runners in our group. He was older than most of us, but that wouldn't stop him from zipping past us. It was not his day as he struggled to keep up pace with the group. “It's my IT band,” he muttered under his breath, shaking his head as he hobbled across the finish line.

Recreational running has been a popular form of exercise since the 1970's due to the potential health benefits and convenience, requiring one to pick up, at the most, a pair of shoes. Iliotibial band (ITB) syndrome is the second most common cause of pain in runners. It accounts for nearly 10-12% of running related issues. Most of the affected runners complain of pain around the outer aspect of their knee.

Friction theory

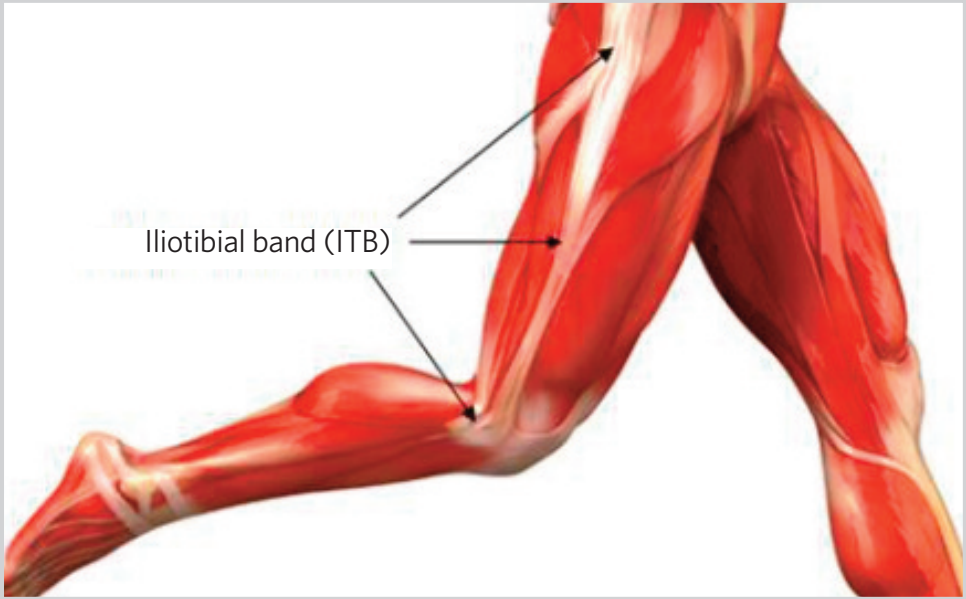
The IT band is a long fibrous sheet of tissue that runs along the outer aspect of the thigh. It adds to the stability of the knee, especially during activities like running or walking. James W Renne, from the US medical Corps, first described iliotibial band (ITB) syndrome in 1975 in the US Marine Corps recruits.

ITB syndrome at the knee is caused by friction between the iliotibial band and the lower prominent portion of the thigh bone (lateral femoral condyle - LFC). Repetitive irritation can lead to chronic inflammation and pain. It is common among those who involve in sports with predominantly lower limb activity, as in runners, cyclists, skaters and players of hockey, basketball and football.

The friction theory suggests that the pressure or compression of the IT band is maximum when the knee is bent to an angle of 30 degrees. This is the reason why patients feel the pain when the heel strikes the ground with the knee in a bent position.

There are others who believe that there is compression of the bursa - viscous fluid filled sac separating the IT band from the underlying thigh (femur) bone or fat pad leading to inflammation in that area. At times, the tight band of tissue may slip at the top end of the thigh bone, closer to the hip, causing an almost audible snap - referred to as snapping hip.

Pain when present can be very intense and sharp, preventing the runner from continuing his or her run. Pain can radiate upwards along the



outer aspect of the thigh or even down the leg towards the mid calf region. Though intense during a run, the pain is usually absent or minimal when the patient walks or keeps the knee straight when moving, again, re-appearing when the patient bends his knee while climbing stairs or inclines.

Diagnosis and treatment

An orthopaedic surgeon or a physiotherapist can diagnose the issue by examining the leg and performing the Ober's test, which is a physical test done at the clinic. An ultrasound examination of the area may help to confirm the diagnosis. X-rays are not helpful, as no bone is involved.

Initially, the physician may prescribe NSAIDs (pain medications) to counter the inflammation

at the side. Physical therapy in the form of Ultrasound massage or cryotherapy may also help relieve the inflammation.

Foam rolling is known to relieve pain and release adhesions at the site of inflammation. A foam roller is a light weight cylindrical tube lined with compressed foam that is used to gently massage over the affected area. The primary issue is tightness of the IT band, so stretching the IT band by specific exercises will be helpful in not only alleviating the symptoms but also preventing a recurrence.

A common finding in those with ITB syndrome is strong hip adductors - muscle groups that bring the leg across the midline and weak hip abductors - muscle groups that take the leg away from the midline. This is commonly seen in women who

have broader hips and narrow knees when compared to men. So strengthening the hip abductors and stretching the hip adductors can restore balance and prevent ITB inflammation.

Pain management

If pain is severe or does not respond to oral medicines, steroid shots can provide short-term relief. Obviously, the patient needs to avoid running or any other sport he or she is involved with. Most patients will have complete relief and be able to return to their sporting activity in 6-8 weeks.

Rarely, in a few patients, symptoms may worsen and may persist upto 6 months. In such patients, surgery may become necessary. This may involve removal of the bursa, cleaning up of the inflamed tissue or release of the tight fascial tissue.

Rehabilitation is necessary before the runner can return to his/her activities. The recommended programme would involve running on alternate days on flat surfaces initially. Focusing on fast-paced running and avoiding downhill running is critical. At 3-4 weeks, the runner can increase distance and frequency of runs. With a gradual increase in activity, the runner may progress to doing hills if there is no recurrence of pain or clicking when running on flat surfaces.

In conclusion, IT band syndrome affects predominantly female runners and is associated with a tight IT band and weak hip abductors. Stretching of the IT band and strengthening of the hip abductors can help relieve pain. Ice therapy and foam rolling are helpful. A gradual return to activity will ensure that most patients have total relief of symptoms in 6 months.

Footnote

Arun worked with his physical trainer and used foam rolling. Very soon he got back in the lead, afresh and ready to hit the road. There was no looking back for him!



FOOTBALL ROUND-UP

QUICK RUN

Ethiopia's Tsegay breaks 1,500m indoor world record

Gudaf Tsegay broke the women's world record for the indoor 1,500m on Tuesday after posting a time of three minutes, 53.09 seconds during a meeting in Lievin, France. Ethiopian Tsegay beat by more than two seconds the previous record set by her compatriot Genzebe Dibaba in Karlsruhe in 2014. American Grant Holloway ran the second fastest time ever in the men's 60m hurdles, registering 7.32sec to leave him trailing only Colin Jackson's world record of 7.30sec from 1994. Getnet Wale of Ethiopia fell 0.08sec short of the men's 3,000m indoor world record, his time of 7min 24.98sec just shy of Daniel Komen's mark from 1998. Jakob Ingebrigtsen won the men's 1,500m in 3min 31.80, the fifth fastest indoor time in history and a new European record. Armand Duplantis won the men's pole vault with a best of 5.86m, the Swede unable to replicate his weekend form in Rouen when he soared to a season-leading 6.03m. Cuba's Juan Miguel Echevarria, the 2018 indoor world champion, recorded a world-leading jump of 8.25 in the men's long jump.

Australia set to tour Bangladesh later this year for T20Is

Australia are set to make a belated trip to Bangladesh later this year for their first tour since 2017. Not for the Tests originally scheduled as part of the World Test Championship (WTC), but instead for T20Is intended as warm-ups for the T20 World Cup meant to be hosted by India soon afterwards. ESPNcricinfo has confirmed discussions around the brief tour, which are the result of India hosting the global T20I event in 2021 while the 2020 edition, originally to have been hosted by Australia last year, was pushed out to 2022. According to the Future Tours Program, Bangladesh are also to host England for white-ball games ahead of the T20 World Cup, meaning the matches may well be arrayed as a triangular series. Agencies

JUVENTUS EDGE OUT INTER TO BOOK BERTH IN FINAL



Juventus' Cristiano Ronaldo (C) challenges Inter Milan's Nicolò Barella (L) and Milan Skriniar during the Italian Cup semifinal second-leg match (AFP)

ITALIAN CUP

Turin, Italy - Juventus are in the final of the Italian Cup after a goalless draw with rivals Inter Milan on Tuesday put them through 2-1 on aggregate.

Andrea Pirlo's side will face one of Napoli or Atalanta, who are locked at 0-0 ahead of Wednesday night's second-leg in Bergamo, in May's final in Rome after comfortably holding Inter in a disciplined display at the Allianz Stadium.

Inter barely troubled veteran

Juve goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon despite the return of Romelu Lukaku and Achraf Hakimi, while Cristiano Ronaldo was twice denied by fine Samir Handanovic saves at the other end.

Juve are unbeaten since losing 0-2 to Inter in Serie A last month as novice coach Pirlo drags his team into contention in league and cup after an uncertain start coaching the Italian champions.

They have conceded just once since that defeat, in the first-leg win at the San Siro last week, and

look in ominous form as they return to the title chase at the weekend. Juve sit seven points behind leaders AC Milan with a game in hand and a trip to troubled Napoli awaiting them on Saturday.

"It's a completely different feeling as a coach, we're really happy but we haven't done anything yet," said Pirlo to state broadcaster Rai.

"We were really good today, they basically didn't have a shot on goal. Handanovic was the

best player on the pitch," added the 41 year old, who won four league titles as a Juve player.

Antonio Conte, who led Pirlo to three of those Serie A crowns, will now have to concentrate entirely on overhauling Milan if he wants to win Inter their first trophy since 2011.

Second-placed Inter are two points behind their city rivals ahead of their league clash with in-form Lazio on Sunday, while Milan travel to lowly Spezia.

AFP

United reach FA Cup quarters, Burnley exit

London, UK - Ole Gunnar Solskjaer warned 'wasteful' Manchester United to be 'more clinical' after they edged into the FA Cup quarterfinals with a 1-0 win against West Ham on Tuesday.

Solskjaer's side were well below their best in a scrappy fifth round tie at freezing, snow-dusted Old Trafford.

But a fine finish from Scotland midfielder Scott McTominay ensured United advanced to the last eight for a seventh successive season.

United last won the FA Cup in 2016 and McTominay's third goal in three games kept them in the hunt to lift the trophy for the 13th time.

Amad Diallo was named on the United bench for the first

time since the 18 year old's January move from Atalanta as Solskjaer made six changes.

Cherries prevail

In Tuesday's other fifth-round tie, Burnley suffered a surprise exit as second tier Bournemouth won 2-0 at Turf Moor. Sean Dyche's side fell behind to Sam Surridge's first half goal and Junior Stanislas finished them off with a late penalty.

While the loss was embarrassing, it will be forgotten if Dyche ensures Burnley retain their English Premier League (EPL) status. Burnley are currently 17th in the EPL, sitting eight points clear of the relegation zone.

AFP



United's Scott McTominay (C) vies with West Ham's Declan Rice (L) during the English FA Cup fifth-round match on Tuesday (AFP)

Atletico vs Chelsea tie moved to Bucharest

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

London, UK - Atletico Madrid's home match against Chelsea in the Champions League last-16 has been moved from Spain to Bucharest as a result of coronavirus restrictions, UEFA confirmed on Wednesday.

The first-leg tie will be staged at the Arena Nationala in the Romanian capital.

Chelsea said in a statement on their website that the date of the match, February 23, and the kick-off time (2000 GMT) would remain the same. The second leg is scheduled to take place at Stamford Bridge in London on March 17.

In changes previously an-

nounced, Manchester City's first-leg of their Champions League tie against Borussia Mönchengladbach will be played in Budapest while Liverpool's match against RB Leipzig has also been relocated to Budapest.

There have also been changes in this season's Europa League as a result of virus rules. Arsenal and Manchester United have had the first legs of their last-32 matches moved.

The Gunners will take on Benfica in Rome, while United's meeting with Real Sociedad has been switched from San Sebastian to Turin.

AFP

Real triumph to move closer to Atletico

SPANISH LEAGUE

Madrid, Spain - A depleted Real Madrid moved to within five points of La Liga leaders Atletico Madrid on Tuesday by beating struggling Getafe 2-0.

Madrid were without nine first team players, prompting Zinedine Zidane to adopt a 3-5-2 formation which he admitted they had not practised, with Marcelo and the 20 year old Marvin Park as wing-backs.

Karim Benzema and Ferland Mendy scored the goals at Valdebebas, with Mendy's finish teed up by his fellow left-back Marcelo, who revelled in his new role. Madrid's victory puts them in sight of city rivals Atletico even if Diego Simeone's side have



Real Madrid's Ferland Mendy (C) celebrates after scoring against Getafe

played two games fewer. "We have to believe in ourselves, we have to fight," said Zidane. "There is a lot of the league left, a lot in front of us."

Atletico had slipped up for the first time in nine league matches on Monday, a 2-2 draw with Celta Vigo giving Real Madrid and Barcelona a ray of

hope in the title race.

And while the trophy remains very much in Atletico's hands, Madrid can only hope to increase the pressure by building some momentum themselves, especially with a Champions League tie against Atalanta around the corner.

"We played with too much respect, too much fear," said Getafe coach Jose Bordalas. "We have to change and rediscover our identity."

Zidane's long list of absentees includes Sergio Ramos, Eden Hazard, Eder Militao, Alvaro Odriozola, Lucas Vazquez, Fede Valverde, Dani Carvajal, Toni Kroos and Rodrygo.

AFP

Douglas OHI, Ideal International win

LOCAL CRICKET

Abhishek Rai struck 69 off 39 balls to power Douglas OHI to a four-wicket victory against Design Group Engineering Consultants in an Oman Cricket C Division T20 game at Al Amerat on Friday.

Batting first, Design Group posted 167 for four, thanks to Parvez Beg's unbeaten 98 off 59. Rai and Waman Jagannath's 28-ball 39 led OHI to win with one ball to spare.

In another C Division match, Deepak Bhandari's allround display steered Ideal International to a seven-wicket win over Jumbo Electronics.

Jumbo Electronics was restricted to 115 for seven with Bhandari picking two for ten. Ideal chased down the target in only 8.1 overs with major contributions from Salman Khan (43) and Bhandari (37).

BRIEF SCORES

C Division: Design Group Engineering Consultants 167-4



Rahul Chadha



Wajid Ali



Syed Arfan



Younus Murad

(Beg 98, Hemendra Chatrapal 37) lost to Douglas OHI 168-6 in 19.5 overs (Rai 69, Jagannath 39; Mohammed Altaf 3-30, Nishan Padma 2-31).

C Division: Jumbo Electronics 115-7 (Gireesh Nair 29; Bhandari 2-10) lost to Ideal International 117-3 in 8.1 overs (Khan 43, Bhandari 37; Chandra Mouli 2-30).

D Division (T20): Vanderlande 205-5 (Rahul Chadha 83, Barathwaj Vinayagam 54; Deepesh Unnikoru 2-44) beat Ideal Technology 186 in 19.4 overs (Harish Mohan 44, Amir 44; Chadha 3-23, Aasim

Mohammed 2-21, Irtaza 2-30).

D Division: Spanio-VDD 159-7 (Jeason Jacob 56, Ranjith Kumar 45; Younus Murad 4-26, Gokul Gopinath 2-36) lost to Al Jadidi Engineering and Contracting 160-4 in 19.2 overs (Syed Arfan 55, Sadhik Mohammed 33; Jacob 3-19).

D Division: Jotun Cricket Team 128-7 (Renju Radhakrishna 44; Fahad Hamsa 2-25, Aneesh Chaziyottil 2-28) lost to Pitspot 132-3 in 17.4 overs (Wajid Ali 65, Rajesh Periyannan 30).

E Division (T20): Ghantoot Group 166 in 19.5 overs (Vishal

Purshottambhai 48; Huzefa Sodawala 2-20, Mohammed Ghafoor 2-25, Yusuf Patanwala 2-28, Issam Othman 2-37) beat Sketch International 155-8 (Patanwala 43; Saravanan Manickam 3-27, Kirit Tandel 2-24).

E Division: Mazoon Up 190-8 (Feisal Babu 73, Mohammed Ali 32; Samir Faizu 2-11, Khalid Rahim 2-28) beat OCT Al Hail-B 114 in 18 overs (Ahmed Ghulam 30; Fahad Mohammed 4-12, Ashfakh Chaikinakath 3-17, Sheriff Mohammed 2-16).

F Division (T20): KCA Deutag 121-6 (Khalid al Balushi 31; Sifiyan Mohammed 3-16, Yasir Jamal 2-19) lost to Israr Ghala 122-3 in 13.4 overs (Ahmed Tahir 44; Haneef Mohammed 2-22).

F Division: BSI CT 136-7 (Usman Siddique 32; Mohammed Ali 2-21) lost to ACT Cricworld 137-9 in 19.5 overs (Mohammed Ali 86; Saud Haroon 4-13, Druvin Shetty 3-15).

England's Root up to No 3 in ICC Test batting rankings

Dubai, UAE - England captain Joe Root's match-winning 218 in the first Test against India has taken him to No 3 in the ICC Test batting rankings, while India captain Virat Kohli has slipped to No 5.

Kohli, who returned from paternity break having missed the last three Tests against Australia, dropped points after making scores of 11 and 72 - the highest in India's second innings - in Chennai.

Australia's Marnus Labuschagne also slipped to No 4 as a result of Root's gain. Kane Williamson at No 1 and Steven Smith at No 2, however, retained their positions in the table.

With 883 rating points, Root is ahead of Kohli for the first time since November 2017, and is currently 36 points behind Williamson and eight behind Smith.

There were gains for England



England skipper Joe Root

in the bowling department as well, with James Anderson rising to the third spot from sixth - moving past Neil Wagner Josh Hazlewood and Tim Southee.

Stuart Broad, who was not in England's playing XI in Chennai, is only four rating points ahead of him at No 2 in the chart, which is led by Australia's Pat Cummins.

Meanwhile Rishabh Pant, who

made an 88-ball 91 in the first innings, became the first full-time wicketkeeper from India to reach 700 rating points among batsmen, retaining his 13th position.

Following West Indies' historic win in the first Test against Bangladesh in Chattogram, Kyle Mayers, who made 210 not out on debut in the fourth-innings chase, recorded the highest-ever rating points - 448 - for a West Indies batter on debut and entered the table at 70th spot.

Pakistan's 2-0 sweep over South Africa at home saw Hasan Ali - who picked up ten wickets in Rawalpindi - go up 21 places to No 23.

Among Pakistan batters, Mohammad Rizwan, who was also named Player of the Series, moved up 19 places to a career-best 16th place after his scores of 26 and 115.

Cricinfo

DJOKOVIC, HALEP SURVIVE

Melbourne, Australia - Eight-time champion Novak Djokovic was made to sweat at the Australian Open on Wednesday as Serena Williams made serene progress in her bid for a record-equalling 24th Grand Slam title.

Women's favourite Naomi Osaka also charged through but fellow major winners Stan Wawrinka, Bianca Andreescu and Petra Kvitova were all second-round casualties.

Among the late matches, Aussie crowd-pleaser Nick Kyrgios served underarm, smashed a racquet and rowed with the chair umpire before coming from behind to beat France's Ugo Humbert 5-7, 6-4, 3-6, 7-6 (7-2), 6-4.

Earlier, Djokovic was given a stern examination by American Frances Tiafoe and dropped his first set of the tournament before recovering to win 6-3, 6-7 (3-7), 7-6 (7-2), 6-3. "I was fortunate to get through the third set today, it was anybody's game," said the defending champion.

The top seed looked in control after taking the first set, but lightning-quick Tiafoe, who reached the quarterfinals two years ago, refused to go away.

The American bounced back to take a close second set but imploded as tensions rose in the fourth, receiving a code violation for an audible obscenity as Djokovic took charge.

Dream result

Djokovic avoided the fate of 2014 winner Wawrinka, who blew three match points in the fifth-set tie-breaker of his four-hour epic with Marton Fucsovics, who won 7-5, 6-1, 4-6, 2-6, 7-6 (11-9).

"I hesitated a little bit when I had the match point and I lost it," said the 35 year old Swiss, a three-time Grand Slam winner.

Osaka, whose three Grand Slam titles include the 2019 Australian crown, had no such trouble in her evening match against France's Caroline Garcia - despite fearing defeat after a bad dream. "Last night I had a dream that I lost this match, and I really didn't feel good about it," she said after the 6-2, 6-3 win.

Second seed Simona Halep survived a scare when she reeled off five third-set games in a row



Serbia's Novak Djokovic returns a shot to American Frances Tiafoe during their men's singles second-round match in Melbourne on Wednesday



Simona Halep in action during her match against Ajla Tomljanovic

to avoid defeat by Australia's Ajla Tomljanovic, winning 4-6, 6-4, 7-5.

Serena, 39, scored a 6-3, 6-0 win past 99th-ranked Serbian Nina Stojanovic. She hit 27 winners in her 101st Australian Open match while again sporting her unique, one-legged catsuit inspired by track legend Florence 'Flo-Jo' Griffith Joyner. "I'm here to have fun and it's great to be playing in front of a crowd," said Serena.

'Lost for words'

A socially distanced John Cain Arena was rocking for the Kyrgios match, where the unseeded home favourite denied Humbert what seemed like a certain win to set up a clash with US Open champion Dominic Thiem.

"Honestly, I don't know how I did that," said Kyrgios after the unlikely 5-7, 6-4, 3-6, 7-6 (7-2), 6-4 victory. "I don't even know what to say, I'm lost for words. That is one of the craziest matches I've ever played."

German sixth seed Alexander Zverev went through in less compelling fashion, grinding past

America's Maxime Cressy 7-5, 6-4, 7-5.

Serena's elder sister Venus, 40, was among the casualties on day three when she painfully rolled her ankle in the first set against Sara Errani before hobbling through a 6-1, 6-0 defeat.

And Andreescu, the 2019 US Open champion who missed the entire 2020 season with a knee injury, saw her comeback come to an abrupt end 6-3, 6-2 against Taiwan's Hsieh Su-wei.

Elsewhere Kvitova, the former Wimbledon champion and Melbourne runner-up in 2019, committed 44 unforced errors in her 4-6, 6-1, 1-6 defeat to Romania's Sorana Cirstea.

However Thiem, runner-up to Djokovic last year, was all smiles as he beat Germany's Dominik Koepfer 6-4, 6-0, 6-2. Eighth seed Diego Schwartzmann of Argentina beat France's Alexandre Muller 6-2, 6-0, 6-3, while Canada's Milos Raonic won 6-7 (1-7), 6-1, 6-1, 6-4 against Frenchman Corentin Moutet.

AFP

OTHER SEEDED PLAYER RESULTS (x denotes seeding)

MEN'S SINGLES SECOND ROUND:

Taylor Fritz (x27) beat Reilly Opelka 4-6, 7-6 (8-6), 6-7 (4-7), 7-6 (7-5), 6-2; Milos Raonic (x14) beat Corentin Moutet 6-7 (1-7), 6-1, 6-1, 6-4; Dusan Lajovic (x23) beat Alexander Bublik 6-4, 7-6 (7-4), 4-6, 6-3; Adrian Mannarino (x32) beat Miomir Kecmanovic 6-1, 6-2, 6-4; Grigor Dimitrov (x18) beat Alex Bolt 7-6 (7-1), 6-1, 6-2; Pablo Carreno-Busta (x15) beat Jiri Vesely 6-3, 7-6 (7-3), 2-6, 6-4; Denis Shapovalov (x11) beat Bernard Tomic 6-1, 6-3, 6-2; Felix Auger-Aliassime (x20) beat James Duckworth 6-4, 6-1, 6-2.

WOMEN'S SINGLES SECOND ROUND:

Garbine Muguruza (x14) beat Liudmila Samsonova 6-3, 6-1; Ons Jabeur (x27) beat Anna Karolina Schmiedlova 6-3, 6-2; Aryna Sabalenka (x7) beat Darya Kasatkina 7-6 (7-5), 6-3; Iga Swiatek (x15) beat Camila Giorgi 6-2, 6-4; Fiona Ferro beat Elena Rybakina (x17) 6-4, 6-4; Veronika Kudermetova (x32) beat Varvara Gracheva 5-7, 6-2, 6-2.

From depression to Grand Slam, Rebecca's inspirational return

Melbourne, Australia - A proud Rebecca Marino hoped her Grand Slam comeback had provided 'inspiration' after the Canadian's return to the big stage ended on Wednesday at the Australian Open.

Playing her first Slam in eight years, the Canadian fell to Marketa Vondrousova of the Czech Republic 6-1, 7-5 in the second round, but merely making it to Melbourne Park struck a chord for many.

Marino was ranked 38 a decade ago before retiring in 2013 due to depression, which was compounded by cruel attacks on social media.

During retirement, she studied English literature and took up rowing before getting the itch to play tennis again.

The world No 315 returned to the tour in 2017 but it was a long slog before qualifying for this year's Australian Open, where she beat Australian



Canada's Rebecca Marino in action against Marketa Vondrousova

Kimberly Birrell in straight sets in the first round.

"I'm proud how far I've come and excited to see how I can push things in the future," she said.

"Knowing I can go toe-to-toe with a player of her (Vondrousova) calibre is big. I'm happy to be back."

The 30 year old's success in Melbourne has roused excitement many miles away.

"I've tried to stay away from

social media but I'm aware that there is a little buzz back home," she said.

"If I can provide inspiration for some people then that's amazing."

Marino vowed not to 'rest on her laurels'.

"It's been quite the journey starting from scratch but I want to learn from the experience and stay rooted in the present," she said.

AFP

Murray begins his season with victory in Italy

Biella, Italy - Five-time Australian Open finalist Andy Murray began his season on Tuesday with a 6-7 (3-7), 6-2, 6-3 victory over Germany's Maximilian Marterer in the second-tier Challenger event at Biella in northern Italy.

Instead of competing with his peers 16,000km away in Melbourne, Murray received a wildcard into the indoor tournament after a positive COVID-19 test left him unable to travel to Australia for the year's first Grand Slam. The event in the foothills of the Italian Alps carries a modest overall purse of just under US\$54,000 compared to the US\$2.1mn on offer to the winner at Melbourne Park.

Three-time major winner Murray, now ranked 124 after battling a pelvic injury which had compromised his attempts to rebuild his career after hip surgery, only played seven official matches in 2020. The former world No 1, who had initially been given an Australian Open wildcard, was furious at missing the



Andy Murray

Slam and believes he became infected with COVID-19 at the National Tennis Centre in London.

Murray, 33, revealed he was 'pretty ill' and had passed the virus onto his wife Kim and their three young children.

The former Wimbledon and US Open champion said he was convinced he picked up the virus at the National Tennis Centre, raising questions about Covid protocols at a facility where most of Britain's elite tennis players trained during the pandemic.

AFP

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