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ESTABLISHED IN 1981

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VOL. 39 NO. 208 | PAGES 20

HM DECREE APPOINTS HEAD OF OIA

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik issued two Royal decrees on Monday.

Article (1) of Royal Decree No 62/2020 appoints Abdulsalam bin Mohammed bin Abdullah al Murshdi as a Head of the Oman Investment Authority, with the rank of a Minister.

Article (2) says that this decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and



be enforced from its date of issue.

Royal Decree No 63/2020 ratifies agreement between the Sultanate of Oman and

the Slovak Republic on avoidance of double taxation and prevention of income tax evasion, signed in Muscat on March 25, 2018.

Article (1) ratifies the above-mentioned agreement in accordance with the attached version.

Article (2) says that this decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and takes effect from its date of issue. — **ONA**

HM congratulates Jordan king

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of congratulations to King Abdullah II Ibn al-Hussein of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan on the anniversary of his ascension to the throne. His Majesty the Sultan expressed his sincere congratulations and best wishes of good health, happiness and a long life to King Abdullah, praying to the Almighty Allah to help him achieve more progress and prosperity for the brotherly people of Jordan.

Expats away from Oman can renew visa online

KABEER YOUSUF

MUSCAT: Expatriate employees, who are away due to airport shutdown, can renew their visas online, according to a source at the Royal Oman Police (ROP).

“Whoever has a work permit and is stranded outside the country due to coronavirus shutdown can apply for renewal online. We have already extended all visit and express visas free of cost until June 15”, the source told the *Observer*.

However, the source said that failure to renew the employment visas and resident card will attract fines.

“Most of the visas can be renewed online. But if the system doesn't accept the request, it's implied that there are some issues and the same cannot be renewed”, the source said.

Once the expiry is over, it would attract fines which would amount to RO 10 for processing, RO 20 for emigration and RO 10 for residence card.

Fines against the non-renewal of the resident card would be calculated on a monthly basis.

TRANSPORT SECTOR CAN WEATHER CRISIS

PLAN TO REOPEN AIRPORTS SUBMITTED TO SUPREME COMMITTEE

NO NEW PROJECTS IN TRANSPORT SECTOR; FOCUS TO FINISH EXISTING WORKS

PUSH ON BUILDING FUTURE LEADERS AS WELL AS RECRUITING AND EMPOWERING OMANIS IN THE SECTOR

ZAINAB AL NASSRI

MUSCAT: Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Futaisi, Minister of Transport, said that the government of the Sultanate, under the leadership of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, is sustaining the development of infrastructure that contribute to economic and social growth.

Replying to questions at a virtual press conference on Monday, Dr Al Futaisi said that



aviation is one of the most affected sectors due to COVID-19 and the Public Authority of Civil Aviation (PACA) has submitted a plan to the Supreme Committee with specific dates to open air traffic.

TURN TO P2

TURN TO P2

Transport sector can weather crisis: Minister

FROM PAGE 1

Dr Al Futaisi said that the Ministry of Transport and the Public Authority for Civil Aviation will work in cooperation with the Oman Aviation Group and departments to devise an efficient plan to resume flights. The goal, the minister said, is not only to restart and sustain the aviation sector, but also to reschedule aviation routes.

Shedding light on the national transport strategy 2020, Dr Al Futaisi said his ministry modified its projects in the light of coronavirus pandemic and the collapse of international oil prices. The minister said there won't be new projects and the focus now was on completing some of the existing projects.

The ministry plans to increase efforts in empowering the private sector by privatising some of the existing businesses in government-owned transport companies. The most important example of this are Thamrait-Salalah (trucks only) road, Al Maabela-Bidbid bypass, airport city, development of Burj Al Sahwa station,



digital platform for the port community, logistics solutions for exporting rocks from Manji and Al Shwemaya, granting a second licence for airport Taxi services, development of a transport platform (Naql), Asyad Express and all the plots under the supervision of the Ministry of Transport.

The national strategy includes the development of free zones. The number of investment projects in free zones in the Sultanate stood at 120 with an investment of RO 3.7 billion in 2019.

Dr Al Futaisi said, "The plan this year will focus on building future leaders as well as recruiting and

empowering Omanis in the sector. In addition, the plan will focus on strengthening the role of SMEs, promoting entrepreneurship in the logistics sector and supporting it to serve transport, aviation and logistics sectors".

The past years focused on two phases of growth and development. Now the focus will be to improve efficiency of logistics sector by facilitating faster clearance for goods through seaports and airports in line with the global standards.

"These efforts have positioned Oman in the top ranks in the region. The time taken to clear the goods reached 21 minutes

in sea ports and 24 minutes in airports. The inspection rate decreased to 2.5 per cent, while advance clearance to 22 per cent. This was achieved through electronic systems like Bayan".

The minister added that new initiatives have been launched to facilitate trade. Goods are cleared 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. "This logistical progress reflects the level of cooperation between various government bodies starting with the ministry and the General Directorate of Customs as well as the various ministries concerned with permits and inspections", he said.

Expats away from Oman can renew visa online

FROM PAGE 1

For renewal, the fee is RO 300 for two years. This is divided by 24 months with RO 12.5 each month and the fine for delay is RO 10 per month. Hence, one month fine would be RO 22.500. However the labour card fee will be separate.

Asked about visas already issued prior to the closure but couldn't arrive and get the visa stamped due to the lockdown, the source added that those who have secured visas earlier have to apply afresh for a new visa.

OCEAN DAY MARKED WITH FOCUS ON PROTECTION PLAN

MUSCAT: The world marks on June 8 every year the World Oceans Day, with the aim of reminding everyone of the importance of the oceans' role in our daily life.

The Sultanate is ranked 35th globally in terms of fish production, by virtue of its distinctive location overlooking the Indian Ocean. It is ranked 10th in terms of fish production among the countries overlooking the Indian Ocean.

Accordingly, the Sultanate has become a major and active member in the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA).

The association



comprises 22 countries, including the Sultanate. It was established on 7 March 1997 as per an initiative of the late President of South Africa Nelson Mandela.

It is a government organisation that aims at promoting regional economic, political and scientific cooperation and sustainable development within the Indian Ocean region.

Oceans contain more than 200,000 species, but the actual numbers may be in millions and thus it is the world's largest source of protein. About 3 billion people depend on it as a major source of protein for them. More than 200 million people work directly or indirectly in fisheries.

The Indian Ocean is considered the third largest ocean in the world. It carries half the containers of the world, third of the bulk cargo movement, two thirds of oil shipments, and about a third of tuna fish production. Therefore, it is the lifeblood of international trade and economic development. — **ONA**

Omani researchers analyse COVID-19 gene sequencing

MUSCAT: A team of researchers from the Central Public Health Laboratories of the Ministry of Health (MoH) and from Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) has got the initial results of analysing the full-genome sequencing of coronavirus (COVID-19). The analysis has been included in the global data of the virus strains of each country in the world to understand how the virus is spread and the differences of its mutation.

Forty-nine viral strains have been analysed from the first diagnosed cases in the Sultanate. The analysis of this full-genome sequencing helps to study the epidemiological situation and how the disease spreads in the Sultanate.

It enables the public health workers to know the required interventions to control and curb the spread of the epidemic, as well as determines the gene mutation that may increase the severity of the disease.

Moreover, the analysis helps to identify the accuracy of genetic tests per strain, which assists in determining possible



Dr Samira al Mahrouqi

treatments and vaccines by conducting more scientific research and in-depth studies.

The researchers observed that there is genetic diversity in the strains dispersed in the Sultanate, which is expected due to the multiple sources of the virus.

It has been proved that the virus entered the Sultanate from many countries and the genotype, which was detected during the first months, was multi strains derived from the



Dr Fahad al Zadjali

main strain (B) and belongs to subcategories O, V, L, S, G, RG, and HG. With the spread of the disease, it has been observed the sovereignty of certain strains like G and GH, particularly GR, which is responsible for the local transmission.

The research team includes Dr Samira al Mahrouqi, Medical Laboratories Specialist in the MoH Central Public Health Laboratories, and Dr Fahad bin Mahmoud al Zadjali, SQU Assistant Dean of Scientific Research, as

the main researchers of the project along with a group of Omani technicians and doctors specialised in microbiology and infectious diseases from MoH and SQU.

Analysing the initial results is the first phase of this project, which will be followed by a series of in-depth research, the results of which will be revealed subsequently. The study will cover the genetic strains, the clinical situation of the disease and its association with travel and death.

SQU Medical Research Center and the Research Council fund this joint research. The MoH Central Public Health Laboratories is the reference centre for diagnosing COVID-19 cases, which was adopted by the WHO as a reference laboratory for the Middle East countries for COVID-19 tests.

The laboratories of the SQU and the Sultan Qaboos University Hospital have up-to-date diagnostic techniques in gene sequencing reinforced with Omani qualified cadres specialised in this field.

— ONA





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Observer

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MINISTRY
SIGNS
RO 6M
USUFRUCT
PACTS

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Regional Municipalities and Water Resources on Monday signed three usufruct agreements for investment in sites owned by the ministry. The total value of the investment contracts stands at RO 6



million and the projects will be implemented in Al Maabela Industrial area in Muscat Governorate, Wilayat of Nakhl in South Al Batinah Governorate and the Wilayat of Al Buraimi in Al Buriami Governorate.

No avenues to cool off this summer

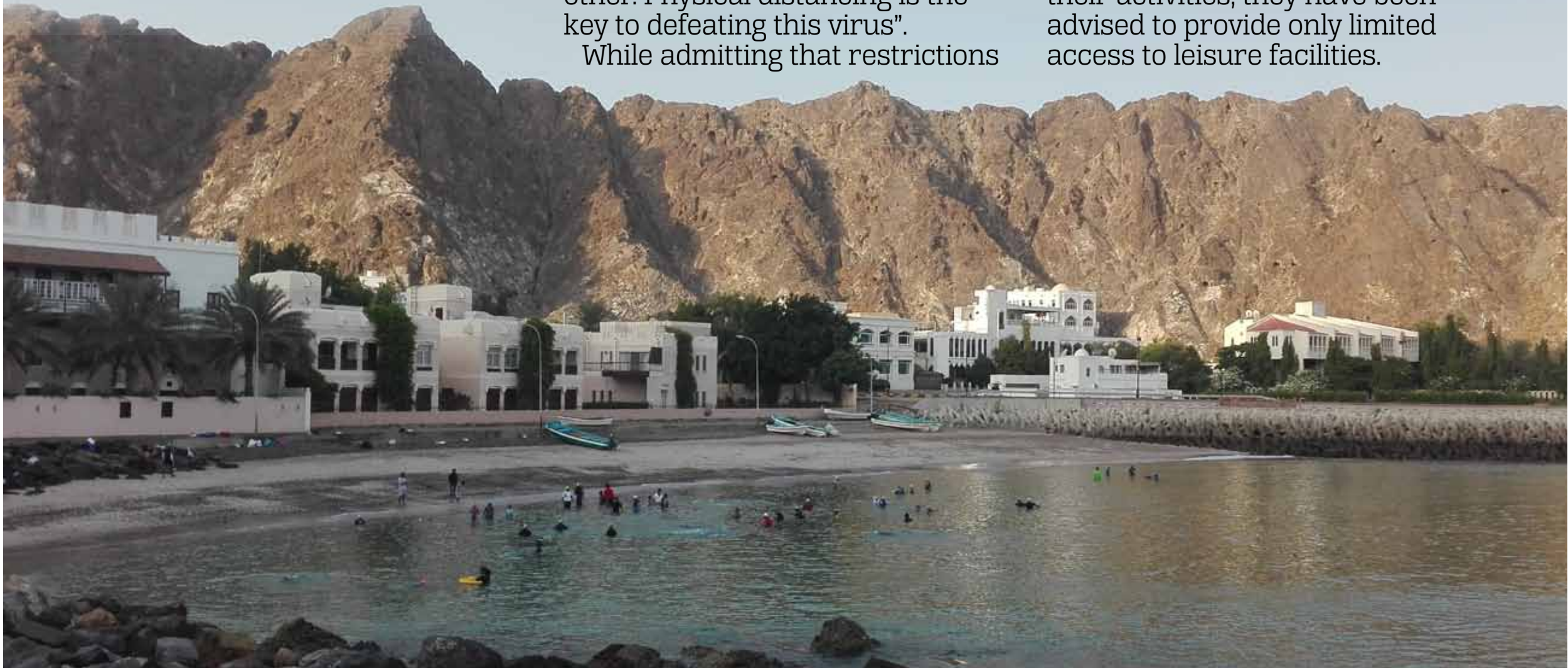
SAMUEL KUTTY

MUSCAT: As summer peaks, in normal circumstances, demand for outdoor recreation skyrockets with people crowding at beaches, parks and other public places. But chances for a carefree summer evening at any of these spots look unlikely in the Sultanate as the authorities have not given the green signal to reopen them due to the novel coronavirus pandemic. Although the Supreme Committee tasked with tackling the COVID-19 situation has eased several lockdown measures, it is yet to decide on the opening of any leisure facilities that attract people en masse. On the contrary, the Ministry of Health has advised both citizens and residents to refrain from visiting beaches or parks to avoid getting infected with COVID-19. Echoing the same sentiments, an official at Muscat Municipality

CHANCES FOR A CAREFREE SUMMER EVENING AT BEACHES, PARKS AND OTHER PUBLIC PLACES LOOK UNLIKELY IN THE SULTANATE AS THE AUTHORITIES HAVE NOT GIVEN THE GREEN SIGNAL TO REOPEN THEM DUE TO THE PANDEMIC

said that all the measures including closures have been motivated by sincere public health concerns. "Open beaches are crowd pullers. Who is going to say at the entry point of the beach or a park to send people one by one? So, I don't think it is a viable option now to allow entry", said the official. The closure is aimed at preventing people from congregating and thus protecting their health, he said, adding, "I don't think people would stay far enough at these places just because we are human. It's time to protect each other. Physical distancing is the key to defeating this virus". While admitting that restrictions

are the right answer to keep people from gathering, Quasim al Lawati, a banker said, "letting people enjoy a natural resource to cool off the summer should be considered". Al Lawati, who normally takes his annual leave during summer and flies abroad with his family, said the coronavirus has spoilt all his summer plans. "Our children are getting sick from staying at home. Social distancing is not going to end in June, July or August. Even if we escaped getting sick from the coronavirus, we are all sick of staying at home, practising social distancing and wearing masks", he said. According to him, opening of local tourism spots will help people escape the summer heat and the boredom of staying at home. "It is now June and still I do not know where we might be able to go on holiday this summer", Al Lawati said. Even as the Ministry of Tourism allowed hotels to open some of their activities, they have been advised to provide only limited access to leisure facilities.



96 tourism projects to open in 2020-21

VINOD NAIR

MUSCAT: A total of 3.5 million visitors arrived in the Sultanate as of December 2019, an increase of 8.2 per cent compared to 2018, said the Ministry of Tourism on Monday.

The number of projects expected to be opened during the current financial 2020-2021 is 96, it said.

The preliminary approvals have been issued for 71 hotels -



three five-star hotels, including 2 in Muscat and one in Dhofar Governorate, seven four-star hotels - four in Muscat Governorate, two in Al Batinah South and one in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate.

The number of hotel establishments by the end of 2019 was 492, compared to 412 in 2018, an increase of 19.4 per cent, and the number of hotel rooms by the end of 2019 increased to 25,408 rooms compared to 22,182 rooms in 2018, an increase of 14.5 per cent.

604 new COVID-19 cases, 6 deaths reported

STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Health (MoH) on Monday announced 604 new positive cases of COVID-19 in the Sultanate, including 340 Omanis and 260 residents, which brought the total number of positive cases in the country to 17,486, including 81 deaths.

According to the MoH, a total of 2,697 people were tested on Monday.

Six deaths due to COVID-19 were reported on Monday, taking the total toll to 81 from 75.

The ministry pointed out that 3,793 cases have recovered, an increase of 342 from Sunday.

A total of 25 people were admitted to hospitals on Monday, taking the number of people in hospitals to 283, including 75 in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU).

Of the death cases, 44 of the victims were in the age group 15-19 and 51 of them were residents.

The first death was that of a 72-year old a citizen reported on March 31, followed by another citizen on April 4.

GCC health officials review steps against virus

MUSCAT: Under-Secretaries of the GCC health ministries held their sixth meeting through video conferencing, on Monday. The meeting was held on a decision taken at an emergency meeting of the GCC ministers of health, convened at the beginning of March to review the developments of the COVID-19 outbreak. The Sultanate was represented at the meeting by Dr Mohammed bin Saif al Hosni, Under-Secretary for Health Affairs at the Ministry of Health.

URGENTLY REQUIRED
for GENETCO Engineering Projects Division

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Should have Degree in Electrical Engineering with Minimum 5 Years Experience in Industrial & Construction Field.

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• Engineer - HVAC
• Engineer – Mechanical
• Engineer - Project Coordinator

Should have Degree in Mechanical Engineering with Minimum 5 Years Experience in Construction Field.

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Degree in Mechanical engineering discipline. Professional engineer with a broad QA experience in Design, Construction and Project Management - MEP.

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MUSCAT FINANCE
Enabling Dreams

Muscat Finance (SAOG)

Directors' Report

Dear Shareholders,

On behalf of the Board of Directors of Muscat Finance (SAOG), I am pleased to present the report for the period ended Mar 31, 2020.

Business Results

The Company recorded net profit of RO 439K for the period ended Mar 31, 2020 against RO 370K net profit for the corresponding period in the previous year. However, there was an adverse judgement issued by the Supreme Court in one of the legal cases.

While the company has submitted its review petition in Supreme Court against the judgment, the Company's Management and Board of Directors have decided to fully absorb the loss related to this adverse judgment in the financial statement of Mar 2020. As a result, the company has declared a net loss of RO 1,380K for March 2020.

Loans and advances stand at RO 138.39 million as against RO 151.91 million in the same period last year.

The financial results are summarized below:

Amount in RO '000			
PARTICULARS	YTD 31 st Mar 2020	YTD 31 st Mar 2019	% change
Net Investment in Finance Debtors	138,388	151,913	(9%)
Net Operating Income	3,017	3,442	(12%)
Operating Expenses	853	858	(1%)
Operating Profit	955	1,386	(31%)
Expenses on loss of Litigation (including provision)	(2,021)	-	
Net Loss after tax	(1,380)	370	(473%)

Human Resources and Omanisation

The Omanisation ratio at 87.9% for the period ended Mar 31, 2020, continues to be above the 80% requirement of the Central Bank of Oman.

Business outlook for 2020

Due to COVID 19 situation and reduction in Oil prices, the economic recovery is going to be a long drawn process. The outlook for 2020 is therefore challenging but your company would continue to be on the lookout for quality lending opportunities in this challenging operating environment.

A strong focus will continue on recovery of non-performing loans.

Acknowledgement

On behalf of the Board, I would like to offer our best wishes and unfaltering loyalty and obedience to His Majesty Sultan Haitham Bin Tariq as he takes forward the legacy of Late His Majesty Sultan Qaboos Bin Said, whose Leadership and Vision provide the foundation for the economic, political and social progress of the Sultanate of Oman. I would also like to thank His Majesty's Government, the Central Bank of Oman, the Capital Market Authority, Ministry of Commerce and Industry and other Regulatory Authorities for their continued support and guidance.

The Board would like to thank all our customers for their continued patronage and support, to our local and overseas bankers for their active co-operation, and to all the shareholders for the confidence reposed in its Board.

On Behalf of the Board of Directors

Faisal Mohamed Al Youssef
Chairman

Unaudited Financials for the Quarter ended March 2020

STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL POSITION
AT 31st March 2020

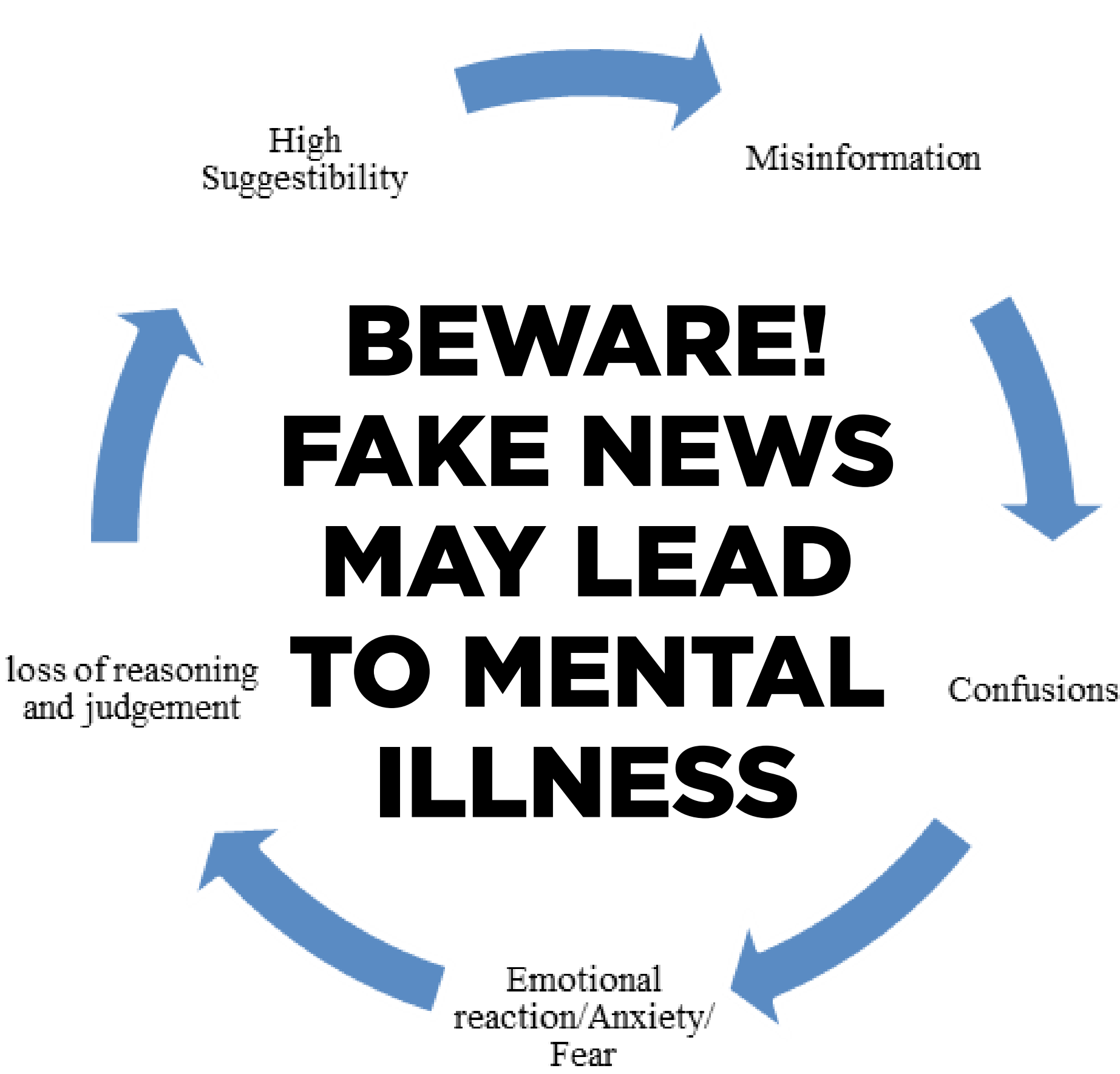
	2020 RO ' 000	2019 RO ' 000
Assets		
Debtors arising from financing activities	138,388	151,913
Cash & Bank balances	1,807	1,689
Other assets	1,128	1,047
	141,323	154,649
Liabilities		
Bank borrowings, Bonds & Corp. Deposit	92,548	103,110
Creditors & other liabilities	9,859	11,412
	102,407	114,522
Net Assets	38,916	40,127
Shareholders' funds		
Share capital	30,715	30,715
Legal reserve	6,960	6,916
Cumulative changes in fair value	143	35
Special Reserve	801	801
Impairment Reserve	6,145	977
Retained Profits	(5,848)	683
	38,916	40,127

Statement of Comprehensive Income
for the Quarter ended 31st March 2020

	2020 RO ' 000	2019 RO ' 000
Lease and Interest income	2,874	3,291
Interest expense	(1,209)	(1,198)
Net interest income	1,665	2,093
Other Income	143	151
Operating Expenses	(853)	(858)
Provision for Impairment	(439)	(951)
Profit/(Loss) before income tax & Expense on loss of litigation	516	435
Expenses on loss of Litigation (includes provision)	(2,021)	
Profit before income tax	(1,505)	435
Tax expense	125	(65)
Profit/Loss for the period	(1,380)	370
Other Comprehensive Income for the period		
Other Comprehensive Income/(Expense)	0	0
Impairment reserve	0	0
Total Comprehensive income for the period	(1,380)	370

NOTE :- The complete accounts will be sent by mail to any shareholder or other interested party who requests them, in either Arabic or English, within 7 days of such request addressed to:

Chief Executive Officer
Muscat Finance (SAOG)
P.O.Box 108, PC 112 Sultanate of Oman



KAUSHALENDRA SINGH

SALALAH: Social media is a boon and bane at the same time. This debatable issue has many implications, but one aspect which is not discussed widely is “psychological impact of fake news on common people”.

Clinical psychologists call it ‘infodemic’, which means ‘an excessive amount of information concerning a problem, to an extent that it is difficult for the receiver to judge what is right and what is wrong’.

The psychological cost of infodemic, according to Dr Sidra Afzal, Clinical Psychologist (**pictured**), is “unimaginably far reaching”.

“Infodemic has a vicious cycle and we need to understand its structural significance. Infodemic leads to confusion and confused individuals are the ablest hosts of developing fear and anxiety. The loss of reasoning and judgement sets in. Once this operation of anxiety and fear



begins, it leads to the high suggestibility among individuals. The mental filter which is completely corrupted under the influence of vicious cycle begins allowing the free flow of misinformation at micro and macro levels”. said Dr Sidra Afzal in an interview with the Observer.

She cited some examples of misinformation doing the round during COVID-19 pandemic. “Disinfectant poisoning as the treatment of COVID-19; illness is as mild as seasonal flu; self-medication based on home remedies in place of seek-

ing medical advice; believing the racial origins of virus; Nano-chip; 5G and whole lot of other conspiracy theories have gained popularity due to this”.

Being an expert in the field, she said with conviction that the everyday increase in the number of conformists to these ill-founded beliefs is leading towards massive incidence of depression, anxiety, paranoia, disruptive mood dysregulation and obsessive compulsive disorders. The unfortunate are those individuals who are experiencing the precipitating versions of their pre-existing psychiatric ailments owing to conflicting information around the current pandemic.

She put stress on looking for right media to get right information. “The news (the fact stated as it is) and the ‘opinews’ (opinions on news) have varying psychological impacts owing to their different nature. In current times most of us are viewing and getting influenced by ‘opinews’ from all media outlets”.

IN BRIEF

ROP attends Arab council meeting

MUSCAT: Royal Oman Police (ROP), represented by the Directorate of Legal Affairs, took part in a meeting of the General Secretariat of the Council of Arab Interior Ministers which was held on Monday through video conferencing.

The meeting discussed the implications of the COVID-19 outbreak on the work of the Council of Arab Interior Ministers and the suitable ways for implementing the programmes set by the Council's General Secretariat.

ROP was represented at the meeting by Lieutenant Colonel Khalifa bin Hamid al Farei, head of conference department.

Man held for drifting

MUSCAT: A man has been arrested in the Governorate of North Al Sharqiyah on charges of drifting and causing public nuisance.

The Police Command of North Al Sharqiyah said that legal action was taken against the offender and warned against drifting which endangers the lives of road users and disturbs the public comfort.

Britain starts quarantine for arrivals

LONDON: Britain introduced a two-week quarantine on Monday for most people arriving from abroad to try to limit the spread of the coronavirus, sparking condemnation from the ailing aviation sector, which claims it could cost tens of thousands of jobs.

British residents and overseas visitors will have to comply with the 14-day self-isolation rules or face a £1,000 (\$1,250) fine or prosecution.

Critics question why Britain, which has been hardest hit by COVID-19 in Europe and is only gradually easing a lockdown, is inflicting more pain on hotels and airlines by reducing travel from countries with fewer virus cases.

British Airways and budget carriers EasyJet and Ryanair have launched joint legal proceedings against the government over what they called a “disproportionate and unfair” step.

Ryanair boss Michael O’Leary told Sky News television on Monday the plan was “useless” and unenforceable, and said it would “devastate thousands of jobs in British tourism”.

The chief executive of London’s Heathrow, John Holland-Kaye, told the City AM newspaper it could lead to the loss of potentially 25,000 jobs at his airport — a third of staff.

But Health Secretary Matt Hancock said the new rules made sense because “the proportion of infections that come from abroad increases” as Britain’s own caseload drops. Exemptions are being made in several cases — including for lorry drivers, “essential” healthcare workers and people travelling from Ireland who have been there for at least two weeks.

At London’s Heathrow Airport, where only two of the five terminals are operating due to reduced travel, the quarantine got a mixed reception.

“It’s a good idea,” said Sandy Banks, 45, returning to Britain with her three children from Jamaica via the United States. “Other countries are doing it.”

But a 52-year-old Dutch lawyer living in London, who wished to remain anonymous, called it a “political thing”. — **AFP**



Asked about Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's reaction upon hearing the news, she replied: “I did a little dance” with baby daughter Neve.

NEW ZEALAND COVID-19 FREE

WELLINGTON: New Zealand lifted all domestic coronavirus restrictions on Monday after its final COVID-19 patient was given the all clear, with Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern revealing she danced around her living room when told about the milestone.

While strict border controls will remain in place, Ardern said restrictions such as social distancing and limits on public gatherings were no longer needed.

“We are confident we have eliminated transmission of the virus in New Zealand for now,” she said in a televised address, saying Kiwis had “united in unprecedented ways to crush the virus”.

The South Pacific nation, with a population of five million, has had 1,154 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 22 deaths. There have been no new infections for 17 days and, until Monday, just one active case for more than a week.

“

The sacrifices made by New Zealanders, including a drastic seven-week lockdown that helped curb infection rates, had been rewarded now that there were no active cases in the country.

JACINDA ARDERN,
PRIME MINISTER

Details of the final patient were not released for privacy reasons but it is believed to be a woman aged in her 50s who was linked to a cluster at an Auckland nursing home.

Ardern said the sacrifices made by New Zealanders, including a drastic seven-week lockdown that helped curb infection rates, had been rewarded

now that there were no active cases in the country.

Asked about her reaction upon hearing the news, she replied: “I did a little dance” with baby daughter Neve.

“She was caught a little by surprise but she joined in, having absolutely no idea why I was dancing around the lounge.”

New Zealand’s move down to Level 1, the lowest rating on its four-tier virus response system, means nightclubs can operate without dance floor restrictions and theatres will reopen.

It also means sporting events can proceed with crowds in the stands, a change New Zealand Rugby (NZR) said offered its Super Rugby Aotearoa competition the opportunity to achieve a world first when it kicks off this weekend.

On a broader level, Ardern said easing restrictions would help New Zealand’s economy. — **AFP**

WORLD

Global virus cases top 7m

Brazil has the world's third-highest death toll at more than 36,000

Lockdowns averted 3m deaths in 11 nations

PARIS: Lockdowns prevented around 3.1 million deaths in 11 European countries, according to a new modelling study published on Monday, as most nations tiptoe out of the strict measures to halt the spread of the new coronavirus.

Research by Imperial College London, whose scientists are advising the British government on the virus, found that restrictions such as stay-at-home orders had worked to bring the epidemic under control.

Using European Centre of Disease Control data on deaths in 11 nations in the period up to May 4, they compared the number of observed deaths in the countries against those predicted by their model if no restrictions had been imposed.

They estimated that approximately 3.1 million deaths had been averted by the policies.

The authors said that since interventions such as restrictions on public events and school closures were imposed in quick succession, it is difficult to tease out the effect of each one separately. — **AFP**



A supporter of President Jair Bolsonaro wears a face mask with Bolsonaro's image during a demonstration at Copacabana beach in Rio de Janeiro on Monday. — **AFP**

PARIS: European countries experimented with further lifting coronavirus restrictions Monday even as global cases topped seven million and deaths mounted in Latin America.

The number of COVID-19 fatalities has now passed 403,000 worldwide since the disease emerged in China last year before sweeping the globe, subjecting billions to some form of lockdown and paralysing economies.

But even the hardest-hit countries are lurching back to a new kind of normal, with bars and restaurants coming back to life and travel restrictions lifted from London to Brussels to Moscow. But in some places, it was far from business as usual.

Governments around the world are cautiously peeling back punishing lockdown measures to resuscitate

economies while trying to avoid a resurgence of infections.

Moscow said on Monday it would ease border restrictions and lift lockdown measures in the Russian capital from Tuesday, while Ireland said it would permit gatherings of six people and allow citizens to travel up to 20 kilometres (12 miles) from home, an extension from the previous five-kilometre limit.

In Brussels, thirsty patrons lined up in the early morning for a cold beverage at L'Union, eager to drink in a pub again after three months of closures — much to the relief of manager Bart Lemmens.

But across the Atlantic, countries were gearing up for the worst as the outbreak escalated in Latin America, the new virus hotspot, with Brazil, Mexico and Peru particularly hard hit. — **AFP**

Congo reports 12 new Ebola cases

KINSHASA: Up to 12 people have been found infected with Ebola in a new outbreak of the deadly disease in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the World Health Organization (WHO) said on Monday.

A week ago, authorities reported six infections in the northwestern city of Mbandaka, saying they appeared to be separate from another outbreak of the virus that has raged in the east since 2018.

There have now been nine confirmed cases and three probable cases of the disease in and around Mbandaka, the WHO said. Six of those people have died, it added.

The city sits on the Congo River, close to the border with the Republic of Congo.

Genetic sequencing of the virus by Congo's biomedical research laboratory showed the new outbreak is likely to have started as a "spillover event", a transmission from an infected animal, according to research published on virological.org, a molecular evolution and epidemiology forum. — **AFP**

Few want toppled slave trader statue back

LONDON: British politicians on Monday condemned the destruction of a statue to a leading slave trader during an anti-racism protest, but a leading heritage body said there was no need to reinstate it.

Demonstrators pulled down the 18-foot (5.5-metre) bronze monument to Edward Colston in the southwest English city of Bristol and threw it into the

harbour on Sunday.

The protest was one of many across Britain in recent days in response to the death of George Floyd, an unarmed black man, at the hands of police in the United States.

Most marches were peaceful but there were flashes of violence, including in London, where the statue of World War II leader Winston Churchill in

Parliament Square was defaced.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson condemned the clashes as "a betrayal of the cause they purport to serve".

Home Secretary Priti Patel said the toppling of the Bristol statue was "utterly disgraceful" and one of her ministers, Kit Malthouse, said criminal damage charges should be brought.

Keir Starmer, the leader of the main opposition Labour party, said it was "completely wrong" to pull down the statue in that way.

But he said that in view of Colston's role as a top official in the Royal African Company in the late 17th century, it should have been removed "a long time ago" and put in a museum.

— **AFP**



A Palestinian man works at a shop in the Wadi al-Joz neighbourhood, in occupied east Jerusalem. — AFP

Palestinians fear expulsion

HIBA ASLAN

Palestinian business owners in occupied east Jerusalem are worried they will be forced to shut up shop by Israeli authorities over plans to build a vast high tech hub in their neighbourhood. The main thoroughfare through the Wadi al Joz area, close to Jerusalem's Old City, is lined by mechanic workshops and usually hums with the sound of car horns. But business owners are facing an uncertain future, with fears that more than 200 premises could be forced to close including garages and popular restaurants. Fathi al-Kurd, whose workshop opened in 1966, is worried that he and his two sons will not be offered another location. The Jerusalem municipality aims to create a "new high tech centre" that would "reduce social gaps and economic inequality in east Jerusalem," according to city hall. The \$600-million project has allo-

cated 250,000 square metres of land for the technology park. A further 50,000 square metres has been earmarked for other businesses, and the same amount for hotels. Several Palestinian families own land in the industrial zone of east Jerusalem, including Naif al Kiswani who says they will inevitably be drawn into the Israeli project. Kiswani confirmed that talks about the redevelopment were underway with Israeli officials, with a meeting planned soon between Palestinian landowners and Jerusalem's deputy mayor. Concerns over the redevelopment come as businesses are gradually reopening, after measures to tackle the novel coronavirus brought the city to a standstill. Wearing a face mask at the garage where he works, Khalil al Hawash said the project aims to "empty the city of Palestinians". Standing in front of a sign for the garage in both Arabic and Hebrew, he wanted to know whether there would be compensation or help to relocate elsewhere. — AFP

Life's like an examination



Lakshmi Kothaneth
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Expect the unexpected. When we study for exams how much time do we focus to achieve a good score in comparison to actually understanding the subject? We even think of the psychology of the teacher and narrow it down to potential questions he/she might ask in the exam. Now when it comes to life we do not somehow think of all the potential situations we might have to cross in life. Parents rather guard their offspring and give them pleasant and beautiful memories to look back on. It was not quite so in the past in many cultures. Children grew up seeing reality and often got firsthand experience to face life and its challenges from a very young age. The hands-on experience was an education of its own. Lifestyle changed with development of the society and so did the challenges. So when we think of teachers setting our question papers we do not know how our life's test are being arranged. Some say it is one's karma, result of your actions and many others say it is one's destiny. Some parents worry constantly foreseeing where their chil-

dren's life could be leading. At times they have to watch helplessly other times they intervene. If we did not perform fairly well as up to our satisfaction, do we get another chance? The truth is no one can get us back in track unless we want it ourselves. It is desire that leads to motivation. It is important to exist and enjoy the moment for what it is, but it is equally important to manoeuvre the twists and turns of life. There would be times when we have to take the lead and then there would be reasons to step back and be led. We need not be masters of everything but we do require being master of our mind. If we were to let our mind go on its own path it would be busy floating with day dreams, sinking in negativity leading to depression – all of which takes us away from reality losing touch with positivity and opportunity. Going through this period of pandemic, our challenges are not to move into the fear zone or the comfort zone where we become relaxed and overlook the guidelines to protect oneself from Covid-19. This too shall pass and the answer is in the strength of the mind.

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this page are solely those of the authors and do not reflect the opinion of the *Observer*.

FEATURES

EMERGING
FROM THE
BUBBLE:Oman's
tourism and
hospitality
prospects

RAY PETERSEN

The world, in the slow and uncertain manner in which a newborn lamb takes its first steps, is gradually beginning its emergence from the restrictions of COVID-19, and with that emergence, the tourism and hospitality industries will be reflecting hard on the last 6 months with more than a little trepidation, to see what can be saved from the carnage.

Here in Oman, it would appear, pragmatically at first, as if the cruise ship tourist phenomenon will be the most severely affected, and therefore much of the capital, no pun intended, investment in modifications to the Port of Muscat to accommodate these behemoths, could be difficult to recoup. However, catering to these floating cities for the wealthy and elderly has always proven a marginal earner, as the citizens of Venice have found during recent years, to their consternation.

The new Muscat International Airport, on the other hand, should still prove a wise investment, as though the travel industry can expect rationalizations among the airlines not 'bailed out' by their governments, passengers and freight will still have to be moved. Much will depend upon how the passenger's air travel experience is managed, with the International Air Travel Association (IATA) now having to come up with new protocols for travelers, with check-in, baggage-drop, and boarding procedures being as important as the flight itself.

The hotel industry here in Oman should be able to adapt relatively quickly, although older, one- and two-star establishments will find it difficult to retain any semblance of a clientele. Newer, more up-market establishments should, however, find it little more expensive than normal refurbishments to upgrade registrations and security, with dining options probably the most challenging issue to be faced, yet not insurmountable. Certainly, the greatest challenge will be in cleaning and rotating rooms, which will require a rethink in the way of furnishings and fittings, with fewer touchpoints, and greater sophistication in the technological aspects of hotel rooms.

Then there is the tourism experience, with greater emphasis on activity tourism in recent years driving significant global change, and this is where Oman can move quickly and embrace the 'new reality,' of tourism. It would appear that tourist experiences based on experiences, as opposed to activities will be the holy grail, to take tourists from their hotels to see new things, to experience, for example; Jebel Shams, Jebel Akdhar, the Aflaj, mosques, mausoleums, historic places, museums, date palms, and the numerous old towns and cities. Let them experience the camels, donkeys, dolphins, turtles, and whales in family groups, not herded and forced together. Let them look and learn!

It requires a different philosophy among tourism operators, and there will still be money to be made, so do not worry. This newborn lamb will soon be running around confidently, and, like that lamb, the Omani tourism industry is well placed to find its feet just as quickly.

INSTAGRAM TOP PICKS



Despite
snags,
Ethiopia
scales up
massive
tree-
planting
campaign



BRAVING A HEAVY downpour, hundreds of farmers spent a full day planting 20,000 acacia seedlings on a barren hillside outside the town of Buee in southern Ethiopia last year.

They were responding to a call last July from Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who wanted his countrymen to plant 200 million trees in a single day, shattering the world record.

But while the farmers had “great expectations”, they say that nearly a year later — as Ethiopia gears up to celebrate World Environment Day on Friday — the results in Buee are a disappointment.

Rainfall immediately washed away more than

one-third of the seedlings, and those that remain have struggled to grow out of hastily-dug holes filled with poor soil, said Ewnatu Kornen, a local environment official.

The farmers’ ordeal points to the potential pitfalls of mass-planting drives, which are central to Abiy’s “Green Legacy” campaign to promote ecotourism and transform Ethiopia into an environmentally-friendly economy.

Some 353 million seedlings — 153 million more than the initial goal — went into the ground nationwide during last year’s daylong mass-planting, according to official figures.

That’s a mere fraction of the four billion trees report-

edly planted during the entire 2019 rainy season, which in Ethiopia runs from June to September.

This year’s mass-planting has yet to be scheduled, but Abiy has declared Friday to be the launch of a push for five billion new trees to be planted this rainy season.

Outside Ethiopia, debate has swirled over the credibility of these eye-popping figures.

Yet local experts say there are more important questions: Has the planting been properly organised, and has there been enough follow-up to keep the trees alive?

“It’s not really about the numbers,” said Negash Teklu, head of a group of NGOs known as the

Population Health & Environment Ethiopia Consortium.

“It’s about the effectiveness of the tree-planting scheme.”

Belaynesh Zewdie, a forestry expert with the UN Development Programme in Buee, has seen firsthand how projects that lack community buy-in can go awry.

In the late 1980s, under the communist Derg regime, she was involved in a scheme to plant one million acacia trees in the northern Amhara region.

But the scheme was top-down and “forced”, she recalls, and once the regime fell in 1991 angry residents cleared the trees to plough the land. —AFP

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Tax Card system set for launch in Oman

CONRAD PRABHU

MUSCAT: Oman's newly revamped Tax Authority will shortly begin implementing the long-anticipated Tax Card system in the Sultanate.

It follows an Executive Decision by Sultan bin Salim al Habsi, Head of the Tax Authority, announcing that the Tax System will be introduced with effect from July 1, 2020.

Further guidelines about application procedures are expected to be released shortly, according to tax experts. The amended Income Tax Law promulgated by Royal Decree 9/2017 mandated the introduction of the Tax Card for all tax payers in

the Sultanate. A unique tax identification number on the card shall be cited on all contracts, invoices and official correspondence.

Key measure:

Head of Tax Authority issues decision for implementation of unique tax identification number system from next month

"The tax card number has to be mentioned on all contracts, invoices and correspondence of the tax payer," said a tax expert, citing the provisions of the Income Tax Law.

"Ministries, government bodies, and

state-owned enterprises are required to ensure that a copy of the tax card is obtained by them before dealing with any tax payer."

Furthermore, all documents relating to transactions by that person with the government entity should be accompanied by a copy of the tax card.

The government entity is obliged to notify the tax authority of the non-compliance of this provision within the time to be stipulated in the Executive Regulations, the tax expert noted, adding that failure to comply with the provisions relating to the tax card will result in the imposition of a fine up to RO 5,000.

Khazaen City's infrastructure works now 63 per cent complete

MUSCAT: Khazaen Economic City (Khazaen), being developed in Barka, South Batinah Governorate, is on track to complete the first infrastructure package of the city despite the challenges posed by the current COVID-19 pandemic.

The infrastructure works at site is progressing well according to the plan and reached about 63 per cent of the targeted works up to date. The first package of infrastructure work includes a 10km of asphalt road network, 15km of storm water channels, whereas 75 per cent of this stage has been already completed.

This package also includes a 21km of potable water network including the main water transmission line and storage tanks, of which, 8 km of water network has been laid down and implementation of the remaining scope progress as planned

As well, Khazaen's witnessed a very good response from investors willing to relocate or establish their new businesses within the City especially after the recent announcement of incentives package that included exemption from annual lease for the first year, 50 per cent waiver on annual lease for the second and third years, 50 per cent discount on service charges for a period of two years, and an exemption from registration and the land Krokkie fees.

The response, driven mainly by Khazaen's strategic location and linkage to multi-modal transport options among other privileges, underpins the investors and business community trust in Khazaen's future.



OCCI: PROPOSAL FOR ‘DISASTER FUND’ A LONG-AWAITED STEP

CONRAD PRABHU

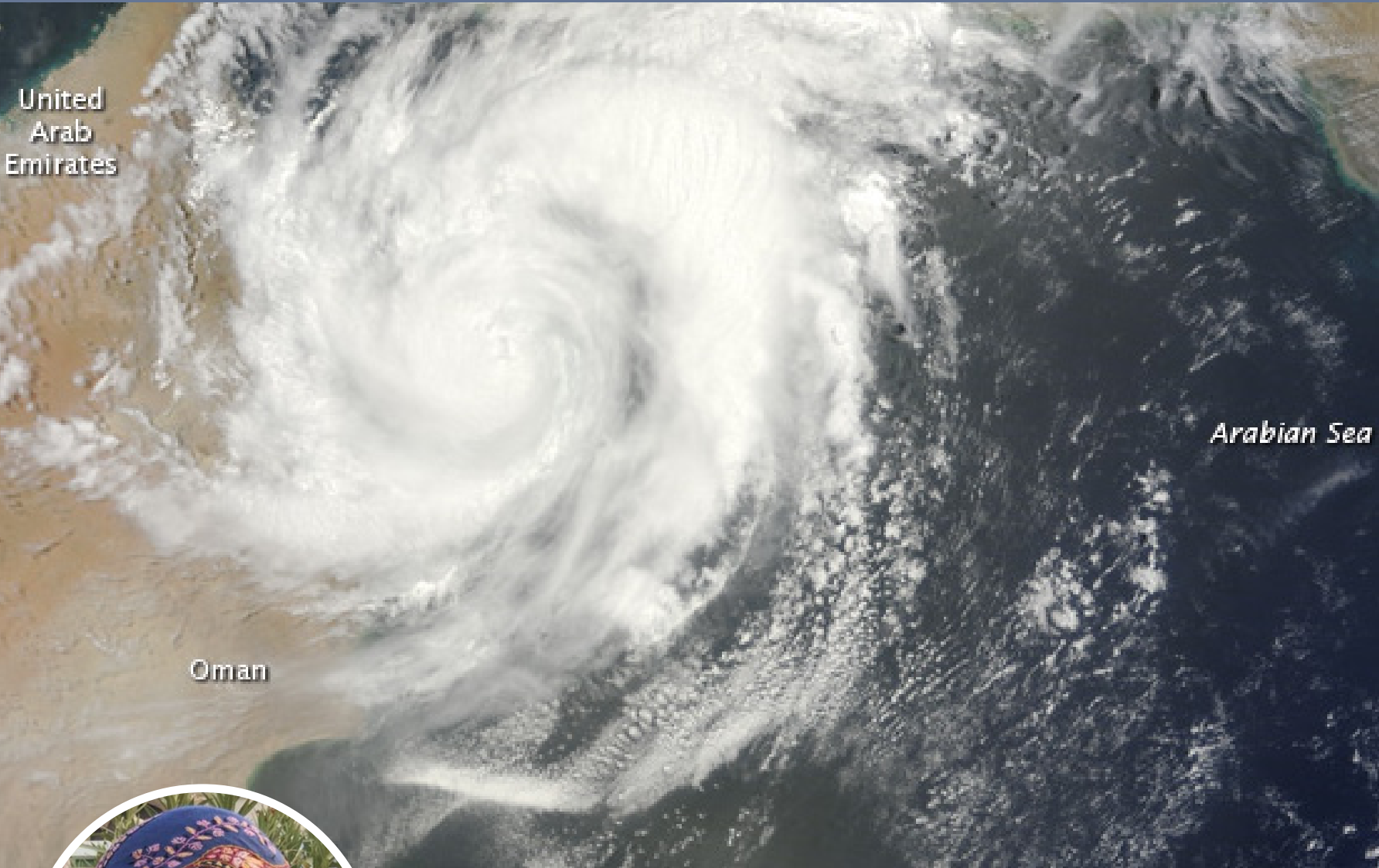
MUSCAT: Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) has welcomed last week’s announcement by the Capital Market Authority (CMA) pertaining to the establishment of a special ‘Catastrophe Fund’ to compensate individuals, homeowners and businesses for damages caused by natural calamities and adverse weather events.

In a statement, Shaikh Abdullah Salim al Salmi, Executive President – CMA, said the Authority – which also regulates the insurance sector in the Sultanate – is weighing plans for an exclusive pool of funds to help settle claims arising out of natural disasters.

The announcement came on the anniversary of Tropical Cyclone Gonu which had swept over the Sultanate in June 2007 causing widespread disaster to infrastructure, businesses and homes. Dozens of lives were lost as well. This event caused more than one billion dollars in losses.

Responding to the announcement, Murtadha bin Mohammed Jawad Ibrahim al Jamalani (pictured), Chairman – OCCI’s Finance and Insurance Committee, said: “We welcome the long outstanding project for establishing a Fund to compensate the victims of natural catastrophes. In fact, the Chamber has long advocated for a Disaster Fund ever since Tropical Cyclone Gonu hit the Sultanate in 2007. The CMA has now finally responded positively to our call.”

Speaking to the Observer, Al Jamalani said the specific mechanisms of operating the proposed fund will hopefully be presented by CMA representatives at



“

We have our own ideas about how a Natural Catastrophe Fund is operated and managed, its scope and coverage, and how it should be funded in the first place. But we would like to hear from the regulator first about its vision for the fund.

MURTADHA BIN MOHAMMED JAWAD IBRAHIM AL JAMALANI,
Chairman – OCCI’s Finance and Insurance Committee

the next meeting of OCCI’s specialised Finance & Insurance Sectors Committee.

“We have our own ideas about how a Natural Catastrophe Fund is oper-

WELCOME STEP:
THE CHAMBER HAS LONG ADVOCATED FOR THE CONSTITUTION OF A SPECIAL FUND FOR NATURAL CATASTROPHES IN THE WAKE OF TROPICAL CYCLONE GONU, WHICH HIT OMAN IN JUNE 2007.

ated and managed, its scope and coverage, and how it should be funded in the first place. But we would like to hear from the regulator first about its vision for the fund.”

A conference call hosted by OCCI’s Finance and Insurance Committee last week also reviewed the CMA’s recent decision to mandate insurance firms to shoulder the testing and treatment costs of insured policyholders afflicted with the novel coronavirus causing COVID-19. Senior representatives of the Oman Insurance Association were in attendance at the virtual meeting and briefed the members about the CMA circular to insurance companies in this regard.

“We agreed to work with the CMA in resolving certain technicalities arising out of its directive to insurers to cover COVID-19 treatment costs. For example, insurance firms would

welcome some regulatory guidance on how COVID-19 claims can be settled when the medical policies do not specifically offer any coverage against the coronavirus.

As COVID-19 claim settlements are not part of the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) obligations of insurers, some clarity is required with regard to the category of reserves under which this expense falls under. We hope both sides – the regulator on the other hand, and the insurance industry, on the other, can work amicably in resolving these issues.”

Al Jamalani stressed however the insurance sector’s robust commitment to supporting the Omani government’s national endeavour in containing the pandemic, as well as mitigating the cost burden on the Ministry of Health and the public health sector.

BUSINESS

OCTAL BOOSTS PET EXPORTS TO SUPPORT FOOD SUPPLY CHAIN

MUSCAT: Oman-based packaging manufacturer Octal has produced and shipped 247,000 MT of PET sheet and resin to various destinations around the world during this time of the COVID-19 pandemic from February till May 2020. Responding to food and beverage packaging requirements, the company registered an impressive 15 per cent increase in PET volumes compared to the same period last year.

Successfully maneuvering through and mitigating supply-chain challenges presented by the current circumstances, Octal has deployed its substantial capacity for operational flexibility and reliability ensuring essential food supplies remain available to consumers.

Octal's Chief Executive Officer, Nicholas Barakat, said, "Octal has redefined manufacturing and has become a major part of the global supply chain for food packaging.

As essential businesses shift to more sustainable approaches, we recognize our role in providing innovative solutions in advanced material science, and stepping-up to meet that demand. Especially during these times of crisis, we witness how vital our stringent manufacturing protocols are to sup-



porting global food security. This responsibility has guided our growth to date, and will continue to do so now and into the future."

Octal is steadily and successfully expanding its presence into wider geographical markets, including Latin America and Asia, as the global demand for PET continues to surge. Bolstered by its sustainability features, PET or polyethylene terephthalate, the most recycled of plastics has witnessed a global call-to-action during COVID-19 with single-use packaging helping prevent

virus transmission.

Barakat added, "We realise the vitality of the PET manufacturing industry for the continuity and security of the food supply chain.

Octal's proprietary DPET Sheet has the ability to adapt to more demanding performance requirements, providing a strong base on which to develop new products that offer ease of use and product protection technology for our customers and the industry at large."

Octal, which last year secured \$625m in financial backing, continues to po-

sition itself for strong and rapid growth as it evolves through its fourth development phase since 2019.

In addition to recording an impressive 26 per cent increase in profitability, Octal also reported an 8 per cent year-on-year increase in sales across its main segments, sheet and resin, as well as a production milestone confirming its strongest two weeks of production in April 2020 since the start of operations.

Future ambitions see the company striving for a 20 per cent reduction in the development cycle of new products, while building its dedicated recycling platform, and a proprietary platform to integrate its PET resin capacity within five years.

Octal has deployed its substantial capacity for operational flexibility and reliability ensuring essential food supplies remain available to consumers.

Webinar discusses key Oman tax developments



MUSCAT: KPMG in Oman presented a webinar on key tax developments in

the Sultanate, including the new Tax Authority structure, indirect tax measures and international tax reforms recently implemented by Oman.

The webinar was attended by key stakeholders from local, regional and international business communities.

Ashok Hariharan, Partner and Head of Tax, discussed Oman's challenging budgetary position, measures being taken by the government to support the economy and emerging Tax Authority practices.

In addition, the discussion included perspectives on certain positive developments relating to 100 per cent foreign ownership of Omani entities and the new Public Private Partnership Law. The webinar also provided information about Oman's newly-established Tax Authority structure, which is an independent authority seeking to improve tax efficiency and establish

best practices.

Other members of the panel – Directors Aabha Lekhak, Rakesh Jain and Sandeep Kumar – touched upon implementation of VAT in Oman, its expected implementation date and other developments surrounding customs and excise tax.

The conversation extended to include local and international tax developments including tax return deadlines, payment deferrals, Common Reporting Standards and Multilateral Instruments. Such developments have the potential to support improved transparency and exchange of information exchange, as well as promoting a fair tax policy.

Overall, all speakers at the webinar noted that many of these developments will likely have an immediate and long-term impact among businesses operating in Oman.

Omantel wins top talent development award

MUSCAT: Omantel announced that the Human Resources Unit represented by the Learning and Development Department won the Best ATD Award 2020, an international award from the US based Association of Talent Development (ATD). ATD, which has been established in 1943, is one of the most prestigious, non-profit specialised organisations.

Omantel has been conferred this award alongside with a group of major well-known companies from different countries around the world.



Omantel has been one of the only three telecom companies that have been selected to receive this prestigious award.

The award has been conferred at an annual conference attended by more than 12,000 participants from different countries

of the world. The award recognizes the best "learning and development for individuals and talents" strategy. It also recognises the initiatives that prove successful and has impact on business growth and development.

Commenting on this achievement, Dr Ghalib bin Saif al Hosni (**pictured**), Chief People Officer at Omantel, said, "In Omantel, we have been working during the past years to enhance learning and development and embed as part of our organisational culture with a great focus on customer service

throughout all our business operations. Our L&D strategy was developed based on different academic patterns while taking into consideration best international experiences in this regard."

"Our employee development philosophy has evolved to go beyond the limits of training and learning in the training classes

To take efficiency to new levels, we complemented training courses with practical programmes that help each employee in applying what he learns in the real work environment.

Ahli Bank elects new Board of Directors



MUSCAT: Ahli Bank held its Extraordinary General Meeting and Annual Ordinary General Meeting via the electronic platform for general meetings on Muscat Clearing and Depository's website (www.mcd.gov.om) and elected its new Board of Directors.

The EGM approved the amendments to the Articles of Association of Ahli Bank SAOG to be in line with Commercial Companies Law promulgated by Royal Decree 18 / 2019.

The Annual Ordinary General Meeting (AGM) approved the Board of Directors Report for the financial year ended December 31, 2019, balance sheet and the profit and loss account for the financial year,

cash dividend distribution to the shareholders of an amount of 10 baizas per share in addition to approval of bonus shares of 5 per cent of the share capital (5 shares per 100 shares) to the shareholders as on March 29, 2020, resulting in an increase of the share capital of the Bank from (1,571,102,349) shares to (1,649,657,466) shares.

The meeting was presided over by Hamdan Ali Nasser al Hinai, Chairman of the Board.

The AGM also highlighted the Bank's donation of RO 1 million to the Ministry of Health - COVID-19 account this year.

Commenting on the meeting, Hamdan Ali Nasser al Hinai, Ahli Bank Chairman said, "Ahli Bank has continued its strong performance with its net profit rising by 7.7 per cent to RO 31.01 million as on December 31, 2019 compared to RO 28.79 million in December 2018, maintaining its steady pace of growth in profits. While the total operating income increased by 12.2 per cent to RO 69.75 million, the Bank's operating expenses increased to RO 27.65 million.

The steady increase is an indication that Ahli Bank has been able to sustain its growth momentum."



OAB NAMES 132 WINNERS OF APRIL DRAW

MUSCAT: Oman Arab Bank (OAB) has announced the 132 winners of its April monthly Hasaad Savings Scheme draw.

The winners included 95 winners of the monthly branch draws of RO 500 each, ten winners of RO 100 of the Children's Account draw, twenty RO 100 winners of the Youth Account draw, five winners of RO 500 of the Bank's Salary Transfer draw and two winners of the monthly Elite draw of RO 10,000.

Commenting on the April draw, Rashad al Shaikh, Acting Head of the Retail Banking Division at OAB said, "Despite the challenging situation we are in, which has had a huge impact on the local market, we have continued to see a surge in savings by all our valued customers, at every branch. We are proud to have played a part in instilling a savings culture.

It is important to preserve one's finances during this critical period and maintain a reserve in case of unforeseen emergencies. On behalf of OAB, I wish everyone the best of health and the strength to persevere together during these difficult times."

BUSINESS



Employees wearing protective face masks and face guards work on the automobile assembly line at the Kawasaki factory of Mitsubishi Fuso Truck and Bus Corp south of Tokyo. — Reuters

JAPAN BRACES FOR WORST POSTWAR ECONOMIC SLUMP

TOKYO: Japan's economy braced for its worst postwar slump even as first-quarter GDP contracted less than initially thought, as the coronavirus crisis slams the brakes on global growth and raises pressure on Tokyo to cushion the blow to business and consumers.

Banks are doing their bit to help as lending rose at the fastest annual pace on record in May, a sign companies were tapping loans to meet immediate funding needs to survive slumping sales from the pandemic.

While US and European policymakers have shifted from crisis-response to efforts to prop up growth, Japan is struggling to do so as it continues to focus on preventing a second wave of infection.

In an interview, economy minister Yasutoshi Nishimura said Japan should primarily focus on back-stopping faltering businesses, suggest-

ECONOMY MINISTER YASUTOSHI NISHIMURA SAID JAPAN SHOULD PRIMARILY FOCUS ON BACK-STOPPING FALTERING BUSINESSES, SUGGESTING THE CENTRAL BANK SHOULD AVOID PUSHING INTEREST RATES DEEPER INTO NEGATIVE TERRITORY

ing the central bank should avoid pushing interest rates deeper into negative territory.

"We're not at a stage yet where we want to stimulate consumption and encourage people to travel a lot. Efforts to stimulate consumption should wait a bit more," he said, when asked whether the Bank of Japan should take steps to boost demand, such as deepening negative interest rates.

The world's third-largest economy shrank an annualised 2.2 per cent in January-March, revised data showed on Monday, less than the 3.4 per cent contraction indicated in a preliminary reading, as capital expenditure fared better than expected. Analysts had tipped a 2.1 per cent contraction.

But few analysts were hopeful about the outlook for the year since capital spending data used to calculate the revised figures lacked enough responses — most struggling firms appear not to have participated in the survey — and will be updated in July.

On the whole, Monday's revised gross domestic product (GDP) estimate confirmed Japan had slipped into recession — defined as two straight quarters of contraction — for the first time in 4-1/2 years, even before lockdown steps to contain the virus was put in place in April. — Reuters

Oil markets see further gains after Opec+ extends production curbs

VIENNA: The US benchmark oil price traded above \$40 per barrel on Monday, the first time it has done so since March, after major oil producers agreed to stick to their current output restrictions for one more month.

While US brand West Texas Intermediate added around 2 per cent to reach \$40.44, European Brent oil climbed nearly 3 per cent to \$43.41.

The Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries in Vienna and a Russia-led group of aligned countries, known as Opec+, decided on Saturday to keep in place an output cut of 9.7 million barrels per day (bpd) until the end of July.

The group had first decided upon this reduction in April, to prop up prices that were under pressure from the coronavirus crisis and the ensuing drop in demand for transport fuel and oil-based chemicals.

While Opec+ have achieved their aim of reversing the price decline, analysts said on Monday that the current upward trend will not be sustainable.

Oil watchers at the Vienna consultancy JBC Energy pointed out that prices have been supported by massive oil imports into China, which could bring its buying down to normal levels soon as oil becomes more expensive. On the supply side, some Libyan oil fields are set to restart production soon, while Opec+ member Mexico opted out of Saturday's extension deal. — dpa



Pipelines are seen at the oil port of Brega, Libya. — Reuters

“

We are trying to identify people who had close contacts with Langerak” in cooperation with a local health centre, and “will continue to promptly carry out” COVID-19 tests on other top team players and staff who have not yet performed the tests..

**NAGOYA
GRAMPUS
STATEMENT**

AUSTRALIA GOALKEEPER

LANGERAK TESTS POSITIVE FOR COVID-19 IN JAPAN

TOKYO: Australia goal-keeper Mitchell Langerak has tested positive for coronavirus, his Japanese club Nagoya Grampus announced, becoming the second player infected at the J-League side.

The 31-year-old, who won the last of his eight caps for the Socceroos in 2017 but is usually back-up to first-choice goal-keeper Matt Ryan, is showing no symptoms of the virus, the club said.

Striker Mu Kanazaki

tested positive for the virus last week, prompting the club to investigate everyone who had come into close contact with him.

Players and staff were screened on Saturday with only Langerak's result returning positive out of 26 tests.

“We are trying to identify people who had close contacts with Langerak” in cooperation with a local health centre, and “will continue to promptly

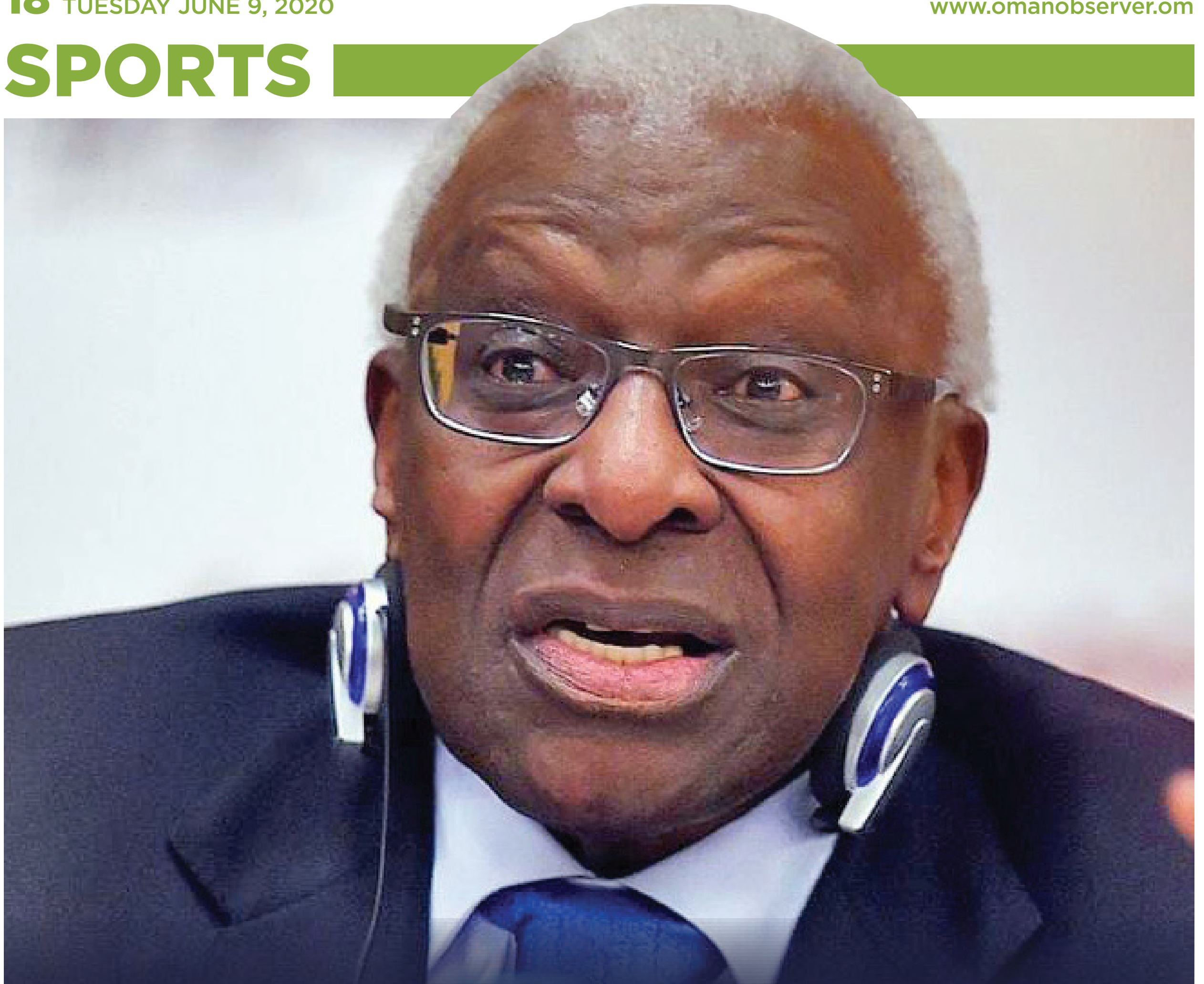
carry out” COVID-19 tests on other top team players and staff who have not yet performed the tests, the club said.

Professional football in Japan will resume in early July without spectators after a four-month suspension due to the coronavirus outbreak.

Langerak's last appearance for the Socceroos was as a substitute in a 5-0 friendly win over Oman in December 2018. — **AFP**



SPORTS



Ex-athletics chief Diack's corruption trial starts

NEW YORK: Lamine Diack, the former head of athletics' world governing body, went on trial in France on Monday facing a potential 10-year prison sentence on charges of accepting millions of dollars to cover up Russian doping tests.

The 87-year-old Senegalese, who was in charge of the International Association of Athletics Federations, now renamed World Athletics, between 1999 and 2015, arrived at Paris court at 9:30 am (07:30 GMT).

Diack is charged with "giving and receiving bribes", "breach of trust" and "organised money laundering".

"I have very poor hearing... A very complicated state of health... But I'm here,"

Diack said.

The prosecution alleges that Diack obtained \$1.5 million of Russian funds to help back Macky Sall's campaign for the 2012 Senegal presidential election -- which he won -- in exchange for the IAAF's anti-doping arm covering up or delaying offences by 23 Russians.

The aim, prosecutors will say, was to allow the Russian athletes to compete in the 2012 London Olympics and the 2013 World Athletics Championships in Moscow.

The trial, following a four-year investigation by the French Financial Prosecutor's Office, was originally scheduled to start on January 13 but was delayed to examine new evidence.

The charges carry not

"I have very poor hearing...
A very complicated state of health... But I'm here."

Lamine Diack,
former world athletics chief

only a maximum sentence of 10 years' prison but also a heavy fine.

Also appearing in court is Habib Cisse, Diack's former legal advisor, who is suspected of having acted as an intermediary between the then-IAAF and Russian athletics authorities and having received hundreds of thousands of dollars.

The former IAAF anti-doping chief Gabriel Dolle will also be there, accused of "receiving bribes" amounting to 190,000 euros. Both he and Cisse are French.

SON'S 'CENTRAL ROLE'
Missing from the trial, however, will be Diack's son Papa Massata Diack, who handled lucrative contracts for the IAAF.

— AFP

SPORTS



Oman basketball’s focus will be on juniors and domestic set-up

ADIL AL BALUSHI

MUSCAT: Dr Farid Khamis al Zadjali, Chairman of Oman Basketball Association (OBA), said that the association's strategy was focused on development of the junior teams and improvement of the domestic personnel for better development of the sport in the future.

Al Zadjali explained to *Oman Daily Observer* that the strategy also featured enhancement of the domestic top-tier league as well as the other local competitions.

"We are keen a lot to develop our human capital including coaches, players, admin staff, referees through providing the necessary tools of professional training and practical camps. The strategy which we are currently implementing has achieved milestones

and goals and we are looking forward to register more success in the near future", he said.

The board of OBA had appointed the Bosnian coach Mladen Ostojic as head coach of the junior teams in January to lead the national team in the next edition of the GCC Championship.

"With reference to the appointment of the experienced Bosnian coach Ostojic, our aim from this agreement was that the coach will lead the team in the upcoming edition of the GCC Cup Championship which was supposed to be held in Bahrain in August but postponed due to COVID-19 pandemic. Due to all the basketball events postponed to the next year with unconfirmed dates yet, we have explained to the coach the current

situation and then the board decided to end our agreement with the coach.

However, we can renew the contract with the coach if the tournaments and championships schedules are defined and fixed", the OBA chief added.

Commenting on his intention to apply at the chairman's position in the next election, he responded: "I am ready to support any qualified candidate for the chairmanship position if he has a full vision and plan to develop the strategy of basketball in the Sultanate. I will apply for the chairman position only in one case only if there are no competent personnel and without detailed mission on the future of the sport. Then, I believe to continue with the previous built work" he explained

Al Zadjali, who completed



the eighth year in his position as chairman of OBA, affirmed that he achieved different accomplishments during his period at the top of the board.

"I am proud of the national junior team display at the GCC championship. We have many international referees who officiated many top games at high level tournaments and championships including Ahmed al Balushi and Fatma al Harthi in Basketball 3*3. We are proud of Younis al Zadjali who is the licensed lecturer from the International Federation. I am happy with the top domestic coaches including Kadhim al Balushi, Mohammed al Oaini and others. Definitely, we have many weaknesses as well which require a lot of work and hard work to overcome", Dr Farid concluded.

SPORTS

'STOKES DOES NOT NEED EXTRA CAPTAINCY PRESSURE'

LONDON: Kevin Pietersen does not think Ben Stokes should captain England if Joe Root is forced to miss a game against the West Indies because it would heap too much pressure on the all-rounder.

Root's wife is due to give birth in July, meaning he risks missing one of the three behind-closed-doors Tests against the Caribbean side next month.

Root has backed vice-captain Stokes to do a good job in his absence, but former England skipper Pietersen is wary about the all-rounder assuming even more responsibility.

Pietersen, who said he "hated" the responsibility of being captain of England for a brief spell, would prefer wicket-keeper-batsman Jos Buttler to take over.

"Do I want to see Ben Stokes change from who he is and the current player he is? Probably not. Jos Buttler would be my guy," he told talkSPORT.

"The entertainers and the guys that have to carry the mantle in the team sometimes aren't the best captains and sometimes struggle with the extra added pressure".

Pietersen said the captaincy changed how players were viewed in the dressing room.

"I struggled with it, I absolutely hated it and I was rubbish," he said. "You have to change and I couldn't command the respect of the dressing room".

England begin their summer of cricket, which has been badly affected by the coronavirus pandemic, on July 8 with the first

Test against the West Indies.

Further international matches against Pakistan, Australia and Ireland are all pencilled in, but they are all likely to be played in empty stadiums.

"I would rather be in the broadcaster chair than in the players' chair because entertainers like atmosphere and you are going to have to build your own atmosphere and dig as deep as you can to try your best and perform in front of a whisper", Pietersen said. — **AFP**

