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COMMERCIAL BANKS POST 6 PER CENT DECLINE IN 2019 PROFITS



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MESSI BEATS PELE GOAL RECORD AT SINGLE CLUB



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LONELY CHRISTMAS IN SANTA'S HOMELAND AS TOURISTS STAY AWAY



HM thanked by Emir of Kuwait

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has received a cable of thanks from Shaikh Nawaf Al Ahmed Al Jaber al Sabah, Emir of Kuwait, in reply to His Majesty's condolences cable on the death of Shaikh Nasser Sabah Al Ahmed Al Jaber al Sabah. In his cable, Shaikh Nawaf expressed his thanks and appreciation for His Majesty the Sultan's sincere condolences and sympathy, praying to the Almighty Allah to rest the departed's soul in peace in paradise and protect His Majesty against all harms. – ONA

MUSCAT

MAJLIS SESSION ON DEC 28, 29

Shaikh Ahmed bin Mohammed al Nadabi, Secretary-General of Majlis AshShura said that Majlis AshShura will hold the 4th and 5th regular sessions of its second annual sitting on December 28 and 29. He said that the Majlis will discuss the action plans of its standing committees of the sitting. The Majlis will also listen during the next two sessions to ministerial responses on a set of oversight tools presented by members of the Majlis. These responses will cover developmental topics of concern to governorates of the Sultanate, as well as projects being executed and the level of their achievement. DETAILS ON P2

16,000 APPLY FOR SUBSIDY

The National Subsidy System (NSS) has resolved some technical glitches that prevented the registration of family members who have no civil number, and allowed registration via the birth certificates for citizens under 18 years. The NSS continued receiving applications for electricity and water subsidies from citizens seeking to benefit from a 33 per cent subsidy designated to limited-income citizens. As of Wednesday, nearly 16,000 citizens have applied to the system to receive the government subsidy. DETAILS ON P2

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INSIDE



UK CORONAVIRUS VARIANT LIKELY FOUND IN HK



WRISTWATCH REPAIRMAN IS A TIMELESS TREASURE

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THE HIDDEN FOREST



Located in the heart of Muscat, Qurum Nature Reserve, a mangrove forest which protects the mangrove trees and the migratory seabirds was opened early this week for visitors. Qurum Nature Reserve is opened for kayaking trips. DETAILS ON P20

Private sector told to rectify expatriate workers' status

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 23

The Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) has urged private sector institutions to take advantage of the Ministry of Labour's decision to allow a grace period to correct the conditions of the non-Omani workforce working with them. The ministry has announced that employers will get a grace period to correct the status of their expatriate employees between December 6 and January 6, as part of the efforts to regulate the labour market. The decision allows modifying the professions of expat workforce from the banned sectors to other professions or vice versa and permitting the amendment of occupations at

The decision comes at an important stage when private sector companies seek to restructure their operations

REDHA BIN JUMA AL SALEH
OCCI Chairman

different professional levels in accordance with the requirements of the profession. The decision allows amending the wages of the expat workforce according to the approved job contract.

Permission to transfer non-Omani manpower services from one employer to another according to the controls and prescribed actions. Redha bin Juma al Saleh, OCCI Chairman, said in a statement earlier that the decision comes at an important stage in which private sector companies seek to restructure their operations to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 crisis. Al Saleh said, "The decision of the Ministry of Labour comes in line with the decisions of the Supreme Committee to help developing new business models and transform as per the changes taking place both locally and globally. It is important for businesses to employ more technology and restructure their activities accordingly."

FREEZING TEMPERATURES



A pedestrian walks along a street during snowfall in Kyiv, Ukraine, on Wednesday. – Reuters

OMAN SEES BELOW 100 NEW CASES

VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

For the first time in over eight months, Oman reported less than 100 new cases of COVID-19, the Ministry of Health statistics revealed on Wednesday. The ministry reported 93 new cases, bringing the total number of cases registered to 128,236. According to the Observer analysis, Oman reported 100 and more cases in a single day for the first time on April 13. The ministry reported one COVID-19-related death, taking the total death toll to 1,491. The total recovery cases reached 120,178, which is 93.7 per cent of the total cases reported so far. Eight people were hospitalised during the past 24 hours, taking the total number of inpatients in hospitals to 77, including 36 in Intensive Care Units (ICUs).

NEW PATIENTS

According to the ministry, there are 6,567 patients of the virus in the country of which 77 are in hospitals, including 36 in ICUs. Eight new patients were admitted to hospitals on Wednesday, compared to 4 on Tuesday. Meanwhile, the ministry launched a vaccination awareness programme for nurses in Muscat at a workshop. The vaccination will be launched in the country from Sunday. Participants identified the vaccine's target groups and locations for receiving the vaccine, which includes frontline workers who provide basic services, pa-

SURVEY ON COVID-19 VACCINE

The National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI), in cooperation with the Directorate-General for Disease Surveillance and Control at the Ministry of Health, is carrying out an opinion poll from December 15-31 on a sample of 3,000 Omani and non-Omani (18 years and over) in all parts of the Sultanate. The survey aims to measure public awareness on COVID-19 vaccine, as well as the attitudes and practices related to the vaccine. The poll also aims to identify the individual's view on the safety of the vaccine, their belief on its capability to protect them from infection, their opinion on whether it is necessary to take the vaccine for those with a history of infection, side effects of the vaccine, and the number of doses needed. – ONA

tients with chronic diseases, elderly and immuno-compromised. At a virtual press conference, WHO said it has been closely working with all countries on the new virus strain and will give recommendations if necessary, said regional director, WHO. WHO officials said, "Cases have increased among youth due to increased mobility following the opening of borders and educational institutions. They mostly have mild or no symptoms." On travel bans by countries, WHO said it has not recommended any action.

Hopes for Brexit trade deal rise as talks enter 'final stages'

BRUSSELS: Britain and the European Union are close to clinching a Brexit trade deal, diplomats said on Wednesday and, while it could still be days away, it appears that the estranged allies will avoid a turbulent economic rupture on New Year's Day. There was no official confirmation from either side that a deal was about to be struck. A source at the EU's executive, the



European Union's chief Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier in Brussels, Belgium. – Reuters

Commission, said talks were still underway, though now in their "final stages", and one EU official urged caution, saying: "It could still go either way." A British government source was also cautious, saying: "Negotiations are ongoing." However, three diplomatic sources in the bloc said that member states had started to prepare their procedure to implement any deal. — AFP

Thiqat to encourage local talents get into OIA entities

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 23

Oman Investment Authority (OIA) has launched a new platform, Thiqat, to enable talents with high competencies, experiences, and capabilities to apply for board memberships in the entities affiliated with the OIA.

The platform is designed to support OIA's commitment to corporate governance values and active community engagement.

Thiqat will provide an integrated database by promoting public engagement and attracting qualified individuals to participate in these companies' decision-making, especially those with distinguished expertise and competencies.

Applicants can apply through the platform by submitting their CVs, qualifications, experience certificates, and other supporting documents to enable the Authority to select the best representatives to act as board members.

The platform will further serve the long-term purpose of building up a talent pool to represent the Authority in the future. Members of these boards will have a critical role in the more significant national



economic development social welfare of local communities. All applicants are expected to have a strong sense of responsibility that enables them to perform their duties to the fullest.

Nasser bin Suleiman al Harthy, Acting Vice-President, Operations, said, "The Thiqat platform came to consolidate the role the Authority plays in order to employ the noble directives of His Majesty the Sultan to strengthen the governance of state-owned enterprises, as well as to expand the circle of community engagement in order to achieve this." "This platform is considered a natural sequence of what the Authority has started since Royal Decree No 61/2020 by launching the Rawabet programme. It aims

to establish a general framework for governing the state-owned enterprises and create a platform that aligns the policies and regulations of these companies with OIA policies, to unify and align them with Oman Vision 2040, especially concerning economic diversification." Board members will play a supervisory role over the business, formulate the vision and strategy, and address business-related risks by utilising their unmatched experiences and knowledge.

The board members of these companies are expected to follow the best professional practices and demonstrate the highest leadership skills, efficiency, and integrity. In addition to their duties to their companies, shareholders,

The Thiqat platform came to consolidate the role the Authority plays in order to employ the noble directives of His Majesty the Sultan to strengthen the governance of state-owned enterprises, as well as to expand the circle of community engagement

NASSER AL HARTHY
OIA official

regulatory bodies, legislators, and other related parties, the directors are collectively responsible for implementing long-term strategies and overall success.

Qualified individuals who meet the conditions for candidacy to board memberships in the OIA affiliated entities can log in to the Thiqat platform on OIA's official website and submit their applications directly.

16,000 nationals apply for power, water subsidy

ZAKARIA FIKRI
MUSCAT, DEC 23

The National Subsidy System (NSS) has resolved some technical glitches that prevented the registration of family members who have no civil number, and allowed registration via the birth certificates for citizens under 18 years.

The National Subsidy System continued receiving applications for electricity and water subsidies from citizens seeking to benefit from a 33 per cent subsidy designated to limited-income citizens.

As of Wednesday, nearly 16,000 citizens have applied to the system to receive the government subsidy.

The electricity and water subsidy applies to citizens who have valid electricity and water accounts for residential buildings provided that they meet certain conditions regarding the number of family members and the gross household monthly income.

The NSS targets to support Oman nationals and enables them to benefit from the government subsidy. It is considered a major enabler for eligible citizens to avail of subsidies designed to alleviate the impact of the liberalization of public utility tariffs such as



electricity and water. The government subsidy goes to citizens who meet the eligibility criteria set by the government.

Meanwhile, electricity and water companies witnessed a heavy rush with subscribers seeking to clear their arrears in preparation for the new bills of January 2021 after the reorientation of the government subsidy on electricity and water.

The NSS also applies for fuel subsidy with almost 359,000 nationals currently receiving the subsidy after meeting the eligibility conditions set by the government. The fuel subsidy is designated to nationals who own a vehicle or a fishing boat and whose total monthly income does not exceed RO 950.

Shura session on Dec 28 and 29

MUSCAT: Shaikh Ahmed bin Mohammed al Nadabi, Secretary-General of Majlis Ash'shura, said Shura will hold on sessions on December 28 and 29.

He added that Shura will discuss the action plans of its standing committees of the 2nd annual sitting (2020-2021) of the 9th term (2019-2023).

Those action plans were prepared by the Legislative and Legal Committee, the Economic and Financial Committee, the Health and Environment Committee, the Education and



Scientific Research Committee, the Services and Social Development Committee, the

Youth and Human Resources Committee, the Food and Water Security Committee, and the Media and Culture Committee.

Shaikh Ahmed said Shura will also listen during the next two sessions to some ministerial responses on a set of oversight tools presented by members of Majlis Ash'shura.

These responses will touch on developmental topics of concern to governorates of the Sultanate, as well as projects being executed and the level of their achievement. — ONA

Churches to reopen; entry through online registration

SAMUEL KUTTY
@samkuttyvp

Amid strict COVID-19 protocols, churches in Oman will receive their members, for the first time after the breakout of the pandemic, to celebrate Christmas.

Speaking to the *Observer*, parish priests at different churches said community members intending to attend the services should register online to ensure entry.

"Believers coming to the church should comply with the COVID-19 protocol. Entry will be strictly limited to those who register online," said Fr Raul Ramos, Parish Priest at Saints Peter and Paul Catholic Church in Ruwi.

Permission to open the churches from December 22 was granted by the Ministry of

Auqaf and Religious Affairs last week with instruction of strict adherence to the precautionary measures announced by the Supreme Committee tackling the coronavirus situation.

A special online link created in the Sts Peter and Paul Catholic Church website allows parishioners to register their details. However, children below 12 years and the elderly above 65 years will not be allowed to enter.

"Please arrive at least 30 minutes early for verification of your registration and completion of safety measures prescribed by the authorities. A minimum distance of 1.5 metre is mandatory between individuals," says a circular uploaded on its website.

Father P O Mathai, parish priest at Mar Gregorios Maha Edavaka, said that a total of 100 persons who have registered

online would be allowed to participate in the holy mass to be celebrated on December 25 morning.

"The participants should adhere to the precautionary measures as instructed by the Supreme Committee," he said.

However, the Christmas eve services will be held virtual for the members with the participation of only the priest and altar assistants, he said.

While wishing a blessed Christmas to all, Fr Mathai said: "the birth of Jesus is Christmas and may God bless all."

Father Mathew K, parish priest at Marthoma Church, Ruwi said that the Christmas services will be held with the virtual participation of the members.

"No decision has yet been taken by the church for Christmas gathering at the parish," he said.



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■ NETS REMOVED FROM CORAL REEFS



A campaign to remove nets stuck in the coral reefs of Daymaniyat Nature Reserve concluded in Al Batinah South governorate. The Environment Authority said: "In support of the efforts made to protect coral reefs, which are considered important habitats in the Sea of Oman, a campaign to remove nets stuck in the coral reefs of the Daymaniyat Islands Nature Reserve concluded on Tuesday." It was implemented by the Environment Department in the Governorate of South Al Batinah in coordination with the Marine Environment Preservation Department of the Authority.

Don't abandon vehicles: Municipality

STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT, DEC 23

Muscat Municipality has warned of the growing trend of owners abandoning their vehicles in public and private parking lots and open spaces that pose both environmental and security risks.

The municipality officials have been making field visits to monitor abandoned vehicles, especially near tourist attractions, main streets, workshops, warehouses, and open parking spaces.

"Leaving behind neglected cars deprives some individuals of their right to use public parking, which is considered an infringement of the public right, and it also hinders the flow of traffic at the entrances and exits of some residential neighbourhoods," the



municipality said.

When these vehicles are left abandoned for long periods, they become a haven for insects and rodents, and dust and debris accumulate around them. Apart from being used for anti-social activities, neglected vehicles can cause accidental fires for their

exposure to the sun for long periods, it added.

According to Municipal Decree 171/2018 on neglected vehicles in public places in the Governorate of Muscat, on the receipt of complaints from citizens and residents, the vehicle's location is verified, warning sticker is pasted

for 14 days. The vehicle's seizure period is up to 90 days and then it is displayed among the vehicles reserved for public auction. A total of 2,589 neglected vehicles were registered at Seeb until November 30.

An administrative fine is imposed when the owner comes to the municipality to collect the seized vehicle – RO 200 for cars, buses (15) passengers or less, and bicycles; RO 400 for trucks and buses designed to transport over 15 passengers, locomotives, trailers, tractors, and equipment, and RO 1,000 for vehicles to transport dangerous materials.

A fine of RO 5 is imposed on the owner of the neglected vehicle for each day if he is late in receiving the neglected vehicle from the site.

Health insurance to bring in jobs and investment

MUSCAT: The Health Insurance Team discussed during its 11th meeting, chaired by Ahmed Ali al Maamari, Vice-President for Insurance Sector, the key developments in the preparation for the implementation of the compulsory health insurance scheme for the employees of the private sector and visitors (Dhamani).

Members of the team representing the concerned entities took part in the meeting.

The meeting reviewed the execution of works and projects relevant to the implementation of the scheme.

Al Maamari opened the meeting with a review of the development of the project. He commended the efforts exerted to build and execute the Dhamani electronic platform, which will link insurance companies, private health institutions and TPAs, in addition to linking the regulators, such as the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Labour and the Royal Oman Police, as well as Shifa system of the Ministry of Health to create a unified medical record for exchange of patients' information between the two systems.

The Chairman of the Health Insurance Work Team commended the efforts of the concerned entities for their cooperation in enhancing the readiness of the project and integration of the roles to finalise the accompanying projects. He added the Dhamani scheme is one of the leading projects in the Sultanate and would contribute to achieving the national priorities of Oman Vision 2040.

It would be an economic and social addition to the country to enhance the partnership between the public and private sectors, in addition to its role in promoting the work environment in the private sector through adding employment benefits and



providing healthcare for the employees of the private sector, and furnishing safe health environment for the visitors by providing treatment services according to new financing options that would alleviate the burden on the general budget of the state. This effort would reflect positively on the quality of the health services provided by the Government to the citizens.

Al Maamari expressed optimism that the regulation of health insurance products and implementation of Dhamani would contribute to attracting global healthcare institutions to invest in the health sector in Oman and expanding private healthcare in various governorates and wilayats of the Sultanate, as well as providing employment opportunities in the insurance and health sectors for graduates.

The meeting also reviewed the key works accompanying the scheme, such as the prices of treatment services in the private health sector, the standards of quality of the services of private health institutions and the standards and requirement to curb fraud, overpricing and abuse of the health benefits, such as prescribing unnecessary medicines in the private health institutions.

The meeting was held within the context of the joint work between the entities concerned with the implementation of health insurance for the employees of the private sector and visitors. — ONA

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Sidab trek the best kept secret

TEXT & PHOTOS BY
YAHYA AL SALMANI

Sidab, which is located a few kilometres from Al Alam Palace in Muscat, attracts dozens of tourists who enjoy climbing, swimming and fishing. Through a mountain pass, tourists can trek through the twisting mountain paths to rocky shores that extend for nearly 3 km. The trek combines the best of Muscat's stunning coastline, beaches and mountains! It is especially remarkable for how remote it feels while being almost adjacent to the Al Alam Palace.

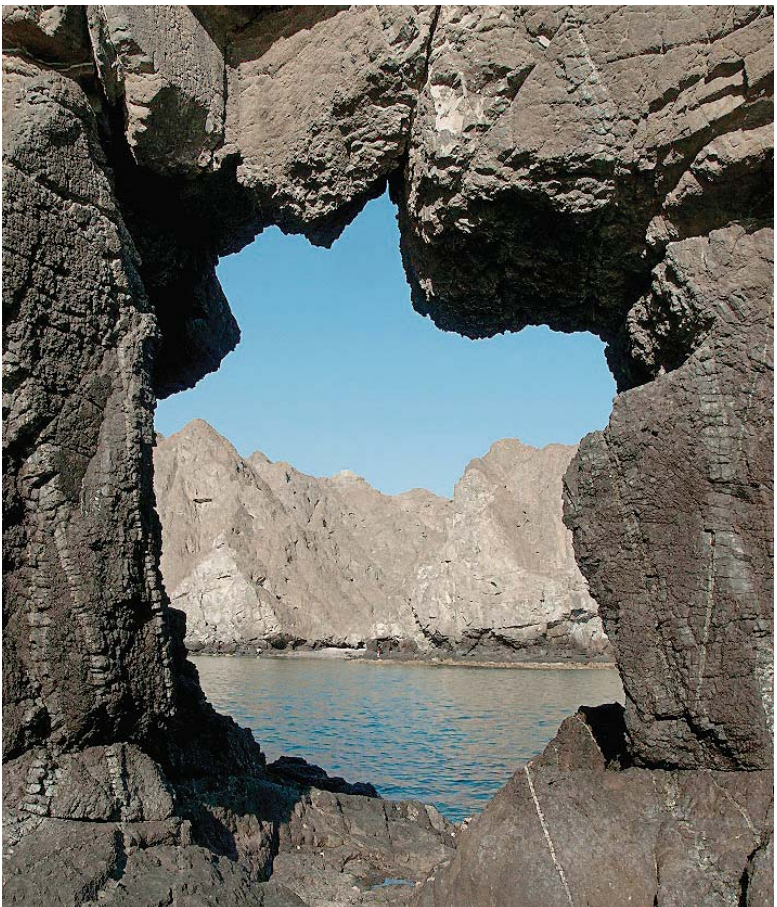
The trek goes through a couple of rugged mountain passes that are quite steep and on really loose and sharp rocks, so it is not suitable for everyone unless they are quite comfortable being outdoors and scrambling up & down steep slopes.

This route provides its visitors

with an opportunity to take photographs when the sun begins to gradually appear in the morning or set in the evening. Those who follow this path will see a number of tombs including the grave of Shaikh Jaber. This cemetery contains graves dating back to the eighteenth century AD. This cemetery contained the remains of a number of Commonwealth soldiers who fought in the First World War.

Among the most prominent of those buried in the cemetery was the missionary doctor Sharon, the father of Dr Thomas, who was buried in the cemetery in 1913. The latter was also buried in the cemetery as well as Dr Morris French, a surgeon at Thomas Hospital, who was buried in 1967.

The trekkers can also stop to take a deep breath and soak in stunning views of old Muscat and beautiful rock formations.



Innovation, digitalisation to drive Oman's Vision 2040

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 23

Innovation and digitalisation will play a huge role in achieving the objectives of Oman's Vision 2040, while a favourable environment is a key to attracting talent for a knowledge-based society, speakers at the 11th edition of OER Business Summit 2020, a flagship event by the Sultanate's premium business magazine, affirmed.

HE Talal bin Sulaiman al Rahbi, Vice-Chairman of The Implementation Follow Up Unit of Oman Vision 2040 was the chief guest at the Summit, which was held under the auspices of HE Shaikh Salim bin Mustahail al Mashani at Sheraton Oman.

In his keynote address, His Highness Dr Adham bin Turki al Said, Assistant Professor of Economics at the College of Economics and Political Science in Sultan Qaboos University, CEO and Co-founder of The Firm for Business and Economic Consulting, stressed that achieving the strategic directions and goals of Oman Vision 2040 is not the



responsibility of the government alone, the private sector will have a key role to play in realising it. Vision 2040, he says also envisions the share of non-oil activities to grow significantly. Innovation and digitalisation are critical to achieving the objectives of Vision 2040. Overall,

productivity has declined over the decade in Oman. The capacity to innovate is still weak and the country is still not doing enough for digitalisation, he says. One of the key elements of the Vision 2040 statement is to 'create wealth through economic diversification and private sector partnership.'

In this backdrop, he says, the private sector should take up more responsible roles in catalysing growth. The target set for 2040 is very ambitious and it is essential to work together to reach there, he avers. Under the topic "Vision 2040: Charting a roadmap to Blessed

Renaissance 2.0," the Summit deliberated in detail the national economic priorities outlined in the vision document such as economic diversification and fiscal sustainability, enabling the private sector to drive a competitive economy that is integrated with the world economy and to create

a dynamic labour market that is attractive to talent and responsive to demographic, economic, knowledge and technical changes. The Summit also dwelt with challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The keynote address was followed by a fireside chat with His Highness Sayyid Tarik bin Shabib al Said, Chairman, Renaissance Village Duqm (RSVD) and Director, Renaissance Services, who shared insights on driving sustainability, efficiency, innovation and also the expansion plans in RSVD. This was followed by an incisive presentation by Shahid Rasool, Deputy CEO, OMINVEST, on "Economic and Business Competitiveness beyond the COVID Era," where he dwelt on the rapidly changing economic and business landscape, COVID implications, technology trends, global macroeconomy and major businesses across key sectors. The presentation also addressed the long-term strategic issues and enablers (Oman Vision 2040), and also, immediate issues facing Omani/GCC businesses.

■ CMYF BLOOD CAMP GETS GOOD RESPONSE



Chiru Mega Youth Force (CMYF), a voluntary organisation, conducted a blood donation camp last Friday. The camp held at Bausher Blood Bank, received good response as many volunteers turned up to donate blood. CMYF founder-president Ramdas Chandaka thanked all those who came forward for this humanitarian cause.

OMSB hosts online event for research

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC, 23

The Oman Medical Specialty Board organised the Scientific Research Activity on Wednesday. The event was held virtually for the first time this year due to the exceptional COVID-19 circumstances.

The Oman Medical Specialty Board gives special attention to continue the scientific research process by organising a scientific research event annually.

Under the current circumstances, the activity was organised remotely through the National E-learning Platform for Health (Tabyan). Forty-six research papers were competed this year. They were divided between research presentations and research posters prepared by resident physicians of the board from all specialised training programmes.

Dr Khalid bin Humaid al Rasadi, Director of the Medical Research Centre at Sultan Qaboos University, opened the event with a speech reviewing the most important challenges and opportunities being faced by the scientific researchers during the pandemic.

This activity aims to raise community awareness of medical content and promote areas of specialised research. Eighteen research papers got competed this year, in addition to research posters which were divided into two groups, each containing 14 research posters.

The jury for the activity came from various hospitals, and research and scientific centres in the Sultanate.

The resident physicians in the board compete annually to provide the best scientific research that achieves development in investigation and scientific research skills.

This competition also provides them with the opportunity to publish their medical research in scientific journals.

A competition for scientific research and posters at the level of the specialised training programme in the board takes place prior to the activity every year. In this competition doctors from different academic years participate and the first winning research from each programme, qualifies to have the opportunity to compete in the Scientific Research Activity. The board selects the four best research presentations, and selects the three best research posters presented in both groups to win.

At the end of the event, the results of the scientific research competition were announced for the winners in research presentations and research posters.

GCC Statistics Day today

MUSCAT: Represented by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI), the Sultanate will on Thursday join other GCC states in celebrating Gulf Statistics Day, which falls on December 24 every year.

The GCC Statistics Day, marked this year under the slogan “Smart Data: the Future of Official Statistics” reaffirms the significant role of statistics in developmental planning in member states. Statistics provide decision-makers and planners with credible information reflecting day-to-day realities.

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq's endorsement of the outcome of Electronic Census 2020 paves the way for national projects in statistics spheres. Based on statistics, this year's census upgrades the experience of the census from conventional fieldwork to register-based enumeration, a thousand-fold time-saving experience. — ONA

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NSS/2020/8	CALL FOR A CONTRACT AGREEMENT FOR THE SUPPLY OF CONTRACT RESOURCES FOR ORACLE UTILITIES & RELATED APPLICATIONS	31 Dec 2020	24 Jan. 2021	100/-

Terms and conditions:

- Bids shall be submitted in a single envelope and sealed with red wax, addressed to the “Chairman of the Internal Tender Committee”, and must write on the envelope the tender name & number.
- 3 separate envelopes shall be included inside the single sealed envelope, and each of these 3 envelopes must be marked with a tenderer name & tender no. as per the below:
 - Commercial Proposal
 - Technical Proposal
 - Bid Bond
- Bids should be dropped in the tender box at NSS reception before 1.00 pm, time of the Sultanate, on Sunday, 24 Jan. 2021.
- Each bid should be accompanied with a temporary insurance, in the form of a bank guarantee or a cheque certified from one of the banks operating in the Sultanate, covering (1%) of the total bid value and valid for a period of (90) days from the last date for submission of offers, addressed to the “Chairman of the Internal Tender Committee”. Tenders that do not include the required temporary insurance will not be considered.
- NSS is not obliged to accept the lowest or any other bid
- Registration of the bidders to be done through the company Tender website (www.nama.om).
- Interested party to deposit Tender Fee (Non-Refundable) on: Account Name: Nama Shared Services, Bank Muscat: 0423-048027270-017 Corporate Branch (Bidder name and Tender Number to be clearly mentioned). Tender Documents will be received by email.
- The deposit at the last day of purchasing should be before 12.00pm
- In the event of receipt of the tender document on behalf of another company, the interested purchasers in the above tender document should provide details of the person's name and the company details.



Al Muzn Mall

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شركة النماء للدواجن ش م ع م A' Namaa Poultry Co. S.A.O.C

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4	Chick feed paper
5	Feed paper trolley
6	Bedding litter spreader
7	Cleaning pressure machine
8	Chick supplementary drinker
9	Detergents and disinfectants which used in poultry industry
10	Veterinary medicines. (vaccination sprayers)
11	Poultry vaccines
12	Disinfection Gates
13	Plastic products (i.e.: boxes - plastic packages of size 5 to 100 liters - bags for packing feed with capacity of 50 kg)
14	Uni forms with A'Namaa Poultry CO. logo.
15	PPE including the Disposables
16	Laboratory benches
17	Laboratory devices, instruments & diagnostic materials
18	Knife Sterilizer (Water bath Knife sterilizer or Ozone Knife Sterilizer)
19	Crate Washer (500 crate/hour)
20	Pallet washer (50 pallets/hour)
21	Digital Weighing scale (Bench type, Readability: 1 gram - 1,500 grams)
22	Digital Weighing scale (Floor type, up to 1000 kilograms)
23	ATP Testing Machine (ATP Swabs test + Devices)
24	Meat Thermometer
25	Pressure Washer pressure: 20 bars
26	Poultry house Litter conveyor
27	Plastic Crates and Plastic Pallets

Companies wishing to participate in this Pre-Qualification to submit officially the following documents:

- The company Profile.
- Financial statement for the latest 6 months
- A list of after-sales services and available technical support.
- Presenting the agency certificates or official Letter from the Manufacturer company in case the supplier is the agent of one of the specialized international companies.
- A list of clients for the last five years.
- The Product certificates (i.e., GMP, Free sale, etc.)
- The documents, should be sent to info@anamaa.com with Subject Suppliers **Pre-Qualification - A'Namaa Poultry CO.**
- Deadline to send the applications is on **31st of December 2020** at 4:00 pm.

A'Namaa Poultry reserves the right to accept or reject any of the prequalification requests without giving any reasons. Qualified manufacturers and suppliers will be notified after the pre-qualification process in accordance with the company's standards.

For inquiries or further clarification please contact the company via
Email: info@anamaa.com OR Phone (96822504480)

SULTANATE OF OMAN MINISTRY OF DEFENCE ENGINEERING SERVICES Announcement

Ministry of Defence invites Contractors specialized in the under mentioned works and registered with the Govt. Tender Board and Ministry of Defence to participate in the following tender.

Tender No	Tender Name	Contractors Grade	Last date to obtain Tender	Tender Submission Date	Tender Price (RO)
010/2020	Electrical Work Maziona	Category "B" Electrical Works in DCRP	31 Dec. 2020	26 Jan. 2021	800/-

- Tender Documents (Electronic Tender Document) can be obtained from the Tender office, Gate No: 14, Muaskar Al Murtafa'a after payment of the tender fee indicated above.
- The Payment should be made electronically by using SMART CARD, VISA CARD and VISA ELECTRON. Sunday to Thursday (0900 – 1300 Hours).
- The Bid to be accompanied by Tender Bond in the value of (1%) of the bid value in the form of a Bank Guarantee or Certified Cheque issued by a local bank and addressed to HE the Chairman of the Tender Committee.
- Bids are to be submitted in sealed envelopes addressed to HE the Chairman of Tender Committee and marked with Tender Number and Name. Name of Bidder or any other marks should not be printed on the envelopes.
- Bids to be deposited in the Tender office at Gate No: 14 Muaskar Al Murtafa'a before 1300 hours on the assigned day for submission of the Tender.
- We would like to draw your attention to the importance of adherence to the submission date, request and any queries related should not be submitted to MODES fourteen days prior to submission of offer.
 - You are requested to submit the following items within your tender submission, failure to submit the required information may result a disqualification of your offer without any further notification.
 - Percentage of Omanisation within the company supported by an authenticated certificate from the Ministry of Manpower (Updated Copy).
 - Detailed priced breakdown to be specified as per scope and drawings.
 - Site visit confirmation.
 - Full set of stamped drawings.
 - All addendums and circulars.
 - List of sub-contractors/suppliers and their acceptance letter to this project.
 - List of current and executed projects.
 - Valid Registration Certificates from Tender Board.
 - Financial Statement for the last Three years.
 - Grade (B) certificate from DCRP.

Muscat Municipality Announcement No. 61/2020

Companies specialized in the field and registered with **Tender Board**, may obtain tender documents for the website through the following link:

(<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>)

against non-refundable fees as mentioned below starting from the date of this announcement and until the end of deadline stipulated below.

Tender No.	E- Tender No.	Description of Tender	Tender Fee	Last date to collect the tender	Tender return date	Grade
PRE/20/126	2020/MM/ QS-66	Demolishing of Buildings at different locations at Qurriyat (Part 2)	Rial 26	06/01/2021	07/01/2021	First

Tender Conditions:-

- Bidders shall submit their offers electronically accompanied with an electronic copy of abond issued by any local bank in Oman addressed to Muscat municipality. The bond shall be (1%) of the tender value valid for ninety (90) days starting from the date of bids submission.Any tenders which do not meet the required bond shall not be accepted.
- Original Tender Bonds are to be placed in the Tender Box at Muscat Municipality HQ, Third Floor.
- For any inquiries regarding tenders, please visit e-tendering website: (<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>).
- For technical support of e-tendering system please send an email to (etenderhd@ita.gov.om) or call (+96824166670).

Israel heads to polls again amid pandemic and PM’s legal woes

TEL AVIV: Israel faces new political turmoil and a fourth election in less than two years after veteran Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s fractured ruling coalition failed to pass a budget bill early on Wednesday.

His unhappy power-sharing deal with his former election rival, Defence Minister and Alternate PM Benny Gantz, struck in April, had been inching towards collapse for weeks, poisoned by mutual acrimony and mistrust.

It came to an end at midnight, forcing yet another unwanted election, on March 23, as Israel struggles with the COVID-19 epidemic and economic crisis, and as Netanyahu faces a string of hearings in his corruption trial.

In the looming election battle, Netanyahu is likely to tout his main diplomatic achievements, a series of US-brokered normalisation deals with Arab states, but without the support of his close ally, US President Donald Trump, who will be replaced by Joe Biden on January 20.

The Knesset legislature was dissolved when the coalition headed by Netanyahu’s right-wing Likud and Gantz’s centrist Blue and White party missed a midnight deadline to pass a 2020 budget.

It marked the messy breakup of the troubled political marriage between the men who had faced off in three inconclusive elections,



Benny Gantz and Benjamin Netanyahu

in April and September 2019 and March 2020.

DEEP DIVISIONS

Given Israel’s deep political divisions and the splintered electorate, it remains doubtful any single bloc or party will win a solid majority sufficient to form a stable government next time around.

“Israel’s ongoing political crisis will continue as long as Netanyahu remains prime minister and a government cannot be formed without him,” said Yohanan Plesner, head of the Israel Democracy Institute.

The coalition between Netanyahu, the long-dominant figure of Israeli politics, and Gantz had looked doomed for some time, said former lawmaker Haim Ramon, who advised Blue

and White in last ditch mediation efforts.

“I told them... that if they didn’t depend on one another and learn to work together they would find themselves hanged alongside each other,” he was quoted as saying by the *Maariv* daily.

BUDGET BATTLE

Gantz has said he never trusted Netanyahu but wanted to spare Israelis a fourth election, especially amid the pandemic.

Their three-year coalition deal had stipulated that Netanyahu serve as premier for the first 18 months, with Gantz taking over in November 2021.

The latest crisis came after Gantz demanded the government pass a budget covering both 2020 and 2021, arguing that Israel needed stability, and Netanyahu

“Israel’s ongoing political crisis will continue as long as Netanyahu remains prime minister and a government cannot be formed without him

YOHANAN PLESNER

Head of Israel Democracy Institute

refused to endorse a 2021 budget.

That, his critics said, was a political tactic designed to keep the coalition unstable and make it easier for Netanyahu to sink the government before he had to yield power to Gantz.

On Sunday, Blue and White said it had an agreement with Likud on a bill to buy more time to pass the budget, but the Knesset rejected that bill on Tuesday.

Lawmakers from Likud and Blue and White both voted against the coalition proposal.

Gantz, currently in precautionary coronavirus quarantine, was unable to vote.

Political commentators have said Netanyahu always planned to force an election before vacating the premier’s office for Gantz, but that he would have preferred the vote to be held in June or later. — AFP

US-Israeli delegation signs deals in Morocco



Director-General of Israel’s Population and Immigration Agency Shlomo Mor-Yosef (L) and Minister Delegate to Morocco’s Minister for Foreign Affairs Mohcine Jazouli sign an agreement at the Royal Palace in Rabat on Tuesday. — AFP

RABAT: A US-Israeli delegation signed agreements with Morocco in Rabat on Tuesday, cementing a Washington-sponsored normalisation of relations between the Jewish state and the North African country.

The visiting delegation, led by Jared Kushner — son-in-law and adviser to outgoing US President Donald Trump — and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s security adviser, Meir Ben Shabbat, arrived in Rabat from Tel Aviv on the first direct commercial flight between Israel and Morocco.

Less than two weeks ago, Morocco became the third Arab state this year, after the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, to normalise ties with Israel under US-brokered deals, while Sudan has pledged to follow suit.

The US-Israeli delegation met King Mohammed VI at the royal palace, before the signing of a tripartite declaration lauding Trump’s December 10 decision to recognise Morocco’s

“sovereignty” over the disputed region of Western Sahara, widely read as a quid pro quo for Rabat’s simultaneous pledge to restore ties with Israel.

Tuesday’s declaration included a commitment to “immediately resume full official contacts between Israeli and Moroccan counterparts”, with all parties agreeing to “fully implement” their sides of the bargain before the end of January.

Appearing alongside Morocco’s Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita, Kushner said at an evening press conference that the visit had been “enormously productive so far”.

Both Kushner and Ben Shabbat were received at the airport by Moroccan officials, albeit in a low key welcome far from the pomp of the delegation’s departure from Israel.

Alongside the tripartite declaration, four bilateral deals were signed on Tuesday between Israel and Morocco. — AFP

Hamas allays fears on leaked Christmas memo in Gaza

GAZA: A leaked Hamas memo showing Gaza’s ruling group wanted to curb Christmas celebrations among Gaza’s Muslim majority has upset the enclave’s tiny Christian community in the run-up to the holiday.

The ministry of religious affairs document, dated on December 15, called for “activities by the directorate of preaching and spiritual guidance to limit interaction with Christmas”.

The leak went public last weekend, upsetting Palestinian Christians. “We set an example for the world in not having any sectarian problems, therefore, we were very upset,” said Samer Tarazi, a Christian journalist in Gaza.

He said Christians just wanted life to continue “as normal”.

Jerusalem’s Greek Orthodox Archbishop, Atallah Hanna, called the memo “inflammatory”, but said it “will not harm our unity and good relations”.

Hamas said the reaction was exaggerated and that it only wanted to ensure Muslims marked Christian holidays in accordance with Islamic law. “There was never any intention to offend Christians or limit their ability to celebrate and perform their religious rituals,” said Bassem Naim, a Hamas official.

The ministry, which is tasked with running Gaza’s mosques and looking after Muslim and Christian affairs in the coastal strip, quickly released a statement saying Christians “have the right to hold their religious celebrations and they can’t be offended or be restricted”.

The statement added: “Just as Muslims are commanded to avoid violations of (Islamic law) on Muslim holidays, it is all the more reason for them to avoid (such violations) during the holidays of others.”

It is rare for religious tensions in Gaza to spill over into the public domain. While around 1 per cent of the population of the Palestinian Territories as a whole are Christian, the percentage is small in Gaza, where there are around 1,000 mostly Greek Orthodox Christians.

The Christian community was already upset that celebrations will be limited because of the coronavirus pandemic. Gaza Christians cannot make their usual Christmas trips to Bethlehem this year due to COVID-19 travel curbs. — Reuters



Palestinian women pose for a picture in front of a Christmas tree at the ‘Maldive Gaza’ cafe on a beach in Gaza City. — Reuters

SHORT TAKES

ANKARA

Journalist gets 27 years in absentia for espionage

Turkish journalist Can Dunder was sentenced in absentia to 27 years and six months in prison for espionage and aiding an armed terrorist organisation, his lawyers said on Wednesday. Dunder, the former editor-in-chief of Turkish daily newspaper *Cumhuriyet*, and a colleague, Erdem Gul, were both sentenced in 2016 to five years in prison for publishing a video purporting to show Turkish intelligence trucking weapons into Syria. They were later released pending ap-



peal.

Now a resident of Germany, he had faced up to 35 years in jail for allegedly supporting terrorism and military or political espionage. — Reuters

CAIRO

New Year celebrations called off to curb virus cases

Egypt has called off all New Year’s celebrations in order to stem rising coronavirus cases in the country, Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouli said on Wednesday. “There will be no New Year’s celebrations or gatherings as part of the precautionary measures taken to confront the coronavirus,” the premier said.

Egypt’s daily novel coronavirus caseload has been increasing steadily in recent weeks, and the Arab world’s most populous country has officially recorded



more than 127,000 cases, including over 7,100 deaths. While the official recovery rate remains high, limited testing of the population has stoked fears that cases are going undetected. — AFP

PARIS

France to probe family of late Yemen president

French financial investigators have launched a preliminary inquiry in connection with property acquired by the family of late Yemen president Ali Abdallah Saleh, they said on Tuesday. The prosecutor’s office confirmed a report that first appeared in the French daily *Liberation* and said it was probing possible embezzlement and suspected “ill gotten gains”.

The newspaper said Saleh’s family had purchased apartments in Paris near the Champs



Elysees and Arc de Triomphe. Ahmed Ali Abdallah Saleh, the late president’s eldest son, was cited as being part of a property company created for the transactions. — AFP

In brief

■ MONTREAL



HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST FOUND DEAD IN CANADA

A Pakistani human rights activist who had fled to Canada has been found dead in Toronto, Canadian police said on Tuesday. Karima Mehrab, who was also known as Karima Baloch, had escaped to Canada in 2015 after the Pakistani government accused her of terrorism, according to CBC. "It is currently being investigated as a non-criminal death and there are not believed to be any suspicious circumstances," Toronto police said in a statement.

Amnesty International described her death as "deeply shocking" and called on police to conduct a full investigation.

"The perpetrators must be brought to justice without recourse to the death penalty," the rights group said on Twitter. Mehrab, 37, had defended human rights in Pakistan and campaigned for autonomy for Baluchistan. — AFP

■ ISLAMABAD



PERMISSION FOR FIRST TEMPLE IN PAKISTANI CAPITAL

Pakistani authorities have cleared the way for construction of the capital's first Hindu temple, but without state money, a decision seen as an attempt to assuage concerns from some religious circles. "The authorities have granted permission to build the temple, but the government will not finance the construction," Pritam Das, a leader of Islamabad's Hindu community, said on Wednesday.

In June, Prime Minister Imran Khan had announced around half a million dollars for the construction of the temple, a community hall and crematorium, but some clerics in the country had objected at the move. The Capital Development Authority (CDA) halted construction of the boundary wall at the site of the Shri Krishan Mandir. — dpa

■ HONG KONG

MEDIA TYCOON GETS BAIL IN NATIONAL SECURITY CASE



A Hong Kong court granted HK\$10 million (\$1.3 million) bail on Wednesday to media tycoon Jimmy Lai, the highest profile pro-democracy activist charged under the city's new national security law on suspicion of colluding with foreign forces. An immediate appeal by the prosecution was then denied on the same day. He was arrested in August when about 200 police officers raided the newsroom of his *Apple Daily* tabloid. Lai, 73, who had been in custody since December 3, is also charged with fraud related to the lease of a building that houses *Apple Daily*.

Authorities in Hong Kong and Beijing say the law is necessary to plug gaping holes in national security defences exposed by months of sometimes violent anti-government and anti-China protests that rocked the global financial hub last year. — Reuters

UK virus variant likely found in Hong Kong

HONG KONG: A new variant of the novel coronavirus that is spreading rapidly in Britain appears to have infected two students who returned to Hong Kong from the UK, Hong Kong's Department of Health said on Wednesday, as the city secured 22.5 million doses of COVID-19 vaccine.

Virus samples from the two students, who returned to the Asian financial hub in December, appeared to match the British variant of the coronavirus, Dr Chuang Shuk-kwan, head of the communicable disease branch of the Centre for Health Protection, an agency under the Department of Health, told a daily press briefing.

More analysis needed to be done to verify the samples, she said. Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam, at a separate news briefing on Wednesday, said the government had secured 7.5 million doses of the Oxford-



Hong Kong's Chief Executive Carrie Lam (C) speaks at a press conference on Wednesday, to announce the third advance purchase agreement with AstraZeneca for 7.5 million shots of COVID-19 vaccines. — AFP

AstraZeneca vaccine and was looking for a fourth source to ensure adequate supply for the city's 7.5 million residents.

CURFEW IN INDIAN CITIES

India's Karnataka state, home to the nation's vibrant technology hub, has imposed a night curfew

in a bid to stave off the new fast-spreading coronavirus strain sweeping Britain.

Mumbai, imposed a similar curfew on Tuesday.

INDONESIA CASES UP

Indonesian President Joko Widodo may struggle to convince some that his cabinet shakeup amid a deteriorating coronavirus crisis means a shift in strategy in fighting one of Asia's most stubborn COVID-19 epidemics. Jokowi, as the president is popularly known, on Wednesday inaugurated six new ministers, the most notable being his replacement of embattled health minister Terawan Agus Putranto with former banker Budi Gunadi Sadikin.

Terawan was heavily criticised for his handling of the coronavirus. The country has recorded more than 685,600 cases and 20,400 deaths, Southeast Asia's highest caseload. — Agencies

■ FARMERS CONTINUE PROTEST



Farmers rest in tents on a blocked highway during a protest against the Indian government's recent agricultural reforms in Ghazipur, along the Delhi-Uttar Pradesh state border, on Wednesday. — AFP

Elephant Santas spread virus info among kids

BANGKOK: Christmas and Thailand's love of elephants combined on Wednesday when four of the giant creatures dressed as Santa turned up at a school just outside Bangkok, complete with huge coronavirus masks.

Excited children from Jirasat Wittaya School in Ayutthaya, an hour's drive from the capital, sang Christmas carols and lined up to have their photos taken with the animals in the annual tradition.

The elephants, Sri Mongkon, 14, Sri Raya, 6, Peter, 15, and King Kaew, 18, used their trunks to carry baskets of face masks to the youngsters and motorists outside the school.

English and science teacher Brett Baxter said the event brought a special kind of Christmas spirit coupled with a flavour of Thailand.

"It's fantastic for the children. It mixes two cultures together. It's not just about Santa Claus... the culture of Thailand is based around elephants," he said.

Ayutthaya, the former capital of Siam, the country now known as Thailand, is consid-



Students receive face masks from an elephant dressed as Santa Claus at a school in Ayutthaya, on Wednesday. — Reuters

ered the birthplace of the kingdom's Catholic community.

European Catholic missionaries built a church on the banks of the Chao Phraya River three centuries ago.

Ittipan Paolamai, the manager of Ayutthaya's elephant palace, where the animals are cared for, said the school visit had been held for 17 years.

"This year due to the pandemic as well as the recent outbreak, we used this opportunity to raise public awareness about the spread of COVID-19," he said.

Thailand, a country of 70

million people, has registered more than 5,700 coronavirus infections and in the past week there has been a spike of more than 1,000 cases linked to an outbreak at a Thai seafood market.

But not everyone feels the Christmas school visit is a healthy tradition.

Jan Schmidt-Burbach, a wildlife veterinarian and adviser for World Animal Protection, said bringing elephants to a school "for these kinds of public stunts is quite questionable and not acceptable". — AFP

Priest, nun get life term in 28-year-old murder case



Thomas Kottoor and Sephy were sentenced to life for the murder of Abhaya.

NEW DELHI: A priest and a nun were sentenced to life imprisonment on Wednesday for the murder of a young nun in the Indian state of Kerala, 28 years after her body was found in a well in a convent compound. Thomas Kottoor and Sephy were sentenced to life for the 1992 murder of then 21-year-old nun Abhaya, legal reporting website Bar and Bench reported.

All three were members of the Knanaya Catholic Church based in Kottayam. Sister Abhaya's body was found on March 27, 1992. Initially labelled as suicide by police, the Sister Abhaya case has seen several twists and turns during almost three decades. These include re-investigations, allegations of evidence tampering, witnesses turning hostile and a petty thief becoming the key to convicting the accused. A local court on Tuesday convicted Kottoor and Sephy for murder and destruction of evidence. Kottoor was also charged with trespassing. A third accused individual - Jose Poothrakkayil, also a priest - was acquitted in 2018.

The court has also imposed a fine of 650,000 rupees on Kottoor and 500,000 rupees on Sephy. The convicts are expected to appeal against the decision in a higher court. Abhaya was an undergraduate student at a

The case took decades to even reach trial and influential coteries including powerful people in the church tried to change its course

JOMON
PUTHENPURACKAL
Rights activist

convent school run by the church where Kottoor, who was also then secretary to the bishop, took classes. Sephy was in charge of the hostel where Abhaya resided.

The court accepted the Central Bureau of Investigation's (CBI) case that Kottoor and Sephy had murdered the young woman after she inadvertently saw intimate exchanges between them inside the convent premises.

"The case took decades to even reach trial and influential coteries including powerful people in the church tried to change its course," said rights activist Jomon Puthenpurackal. Puthenpurackal is a founder of the Abhaya Action Council formed days after the young nun's murder. — dpa



Ministry of Finance

Tender Announcement No. (6 /2020)

The Ministry of Finance has the pleasure to invite interested companies to quote for the following tender:

Tender Title	Document Fee	Purchase Document Deadline	Submission Deadline
GOVERNMENT PROPERTIES INSURANCE 2021/2022	RO 125	Tuesday 5/1/2021	10:00 A.M Wednesday 3/2/2021

All Insurance companies who wish to bid are kindly requested to register through E-tendering system of The General Secretariat of the Tender Board, and obtain a valid registration certificate. To obtain the tender document and specifications, companies must pay the fees online through safe E-payment gateway in the following link <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>.

The bids must be submitted online via <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>, in addition to hard copies. E-tendering system will not accept any bid submitted after the deadline (Wednesday 3/2/2021).

All companies must attach a copy of the bank guarantee or certified cheque issued by a any bank in the Sultanate Of Oman. The value of the cheque must not be less than (1%) of the bidding price, and must be valid for (90) days from the date of the bid submission. The original bank guarantee must be submitted along with a hard copy of the quotation duly signed and stamped in red waxed sealed envelope addressed to the Secretary of the Internal Tender Committee/ Financial Affairs Department/Ministry of Finance. The name and the number of the Tender should be written on the back side of the envelope.

For further queries or technical support, please contact us via telephone No. 24166670, or E-mail: etenderhd@mtc.gov.om.

Internal Tender Committee

Stranded truckers fume as they wait to leave Britain after COVID-19 blockade

DOVER, England: Furious truck drivers scuffled with police and sounded their horns in protest around the English port of Dover as a partial blockade by France designed to contain a highly infectious coronavirus variant has stranded thousands before Christmas. Paris and London agreed late on Tuesday that drivers carrying a negative test result could board ferries for Calais from Wednesday after much of the world shut its borders to Britain to contain the new mutated variant.

A British minister said the military would start testing drivers but he warned that it would take time to clear the backlog, hammering Britain's most important trade route for food just days before it leaves the European Union's orbit. Huge queues of trucks have been stacked on a motorway towards the Eurotunnel Channel Tunnel and Dover in the southeast county of Kent, while others have been parked on the former nearby airport at Manston.

With no sign of traffic to the European mainland resuming and confusion over how to get a coronavirus test, TV footage showed drivers honking their truck horns and flashing lights in unison in protest. As tempers flared in Dover, there were brief

Drivers testing negative can head to France

Minister says will take time to clear backlog

Road Haulage Association says system not ready

scuffles between a small number of police officers and drivers, many who do not speak English and are angry that they will not be able to get home to their families before Christmas.

"This is not how it should work. We have no information, the people need to be fetching information," Mekki Coskun from Dortmund in Germany said. "No information ... they get worried."

Police said there had been disturbances in Dover and Manston "involving individuals hoping to cross the Channel" and one arrest had been made.

The Road Haulage Association, which estimated there were up to 10,000 trucks being held up in Kent, said the situation was chaos as the testing system was not yet



An aerial view shows lines of freight lorries and heavy goods vehicles parked on the tarmac at Manston Airport near Ramsgate, southeast England on Tuesday. — AFP

ready.

"The border is still closed, the testing regime isn't happening yet, you've got truckers very angry and we're starting to see a breakdown in law and order in a small way among very frustrated guys who want to get back by Christmas,"

Rod McKenzie, managing director of policy for the RHA, said. Normally between 7,500-8,500 trucks travel via the port every day but volumes have reached more than 10,000 recently.

Some of the extra traffic was a result of Christmas demand,

but many were in the country to deliver goods to companies who are stockpiling parts before Britain finally leaves the EU on December 31, a move that is expected to cause further disruption in January when a full customs border comes into force. — Reuters

Britain announces South Africa travel curbs

LONDON: Britain on Wednesday introduced restrictions on travel from South Africa over the spread of another new variant of coronavirus, UK Health Minister Matt Hancock said. The restrictions, which applied with immediate effect, were introduced following the discovery of two cases of the virus strain in Britain.

"This new variant is highly concerning, because it is yet more transmissible, and it appears to have mutated further than the new variant that has been discovered in the UK," Hancock said, referring to a strain of the virus discovered in Britain which has also been found to be more contagious.

The health minister said that all individuals in the UK who had contracted the variant originating in South Africa had been placed in quarantine as well as their close contacts. In addition to the travel restrictions, Hancock said the government was also asking anyone who has been in close contact with someone who had been in South Africa in the last two weeks to quarantine.

"They must restrict all contact with any other person whatsoever," he said. — AFP

Three French cops shot dead by violence suspect

SAINT-JUST: Three police officers were killed and a fourth wounded in central France on Wednesday when a man opened fire as they responded to a domestic violence call, the deadliest attack in years on French security forces outside of terrorism incidents.

The suspect, a 48-year-old man known to authorities for child custody disputes, was "discovered dead" several hours after fleeing the home in an isolated hamlet near Saint-Just, a village of some 160 people south of Clermont-Ferrand, Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin said in a tweet.

"This is one of the most tragic events in the history" of France's Gendarmes force, which often ensures law enforcement in rural areas, Darmanin said after arriving at the scene.

He gave no further details on how the man died, though

a ministry source told AFP the suspect "was found dead in his vehicle, apparently a suicide."

Identified by officials as Frederik L., he opened fire at two officers who arrived at the house shortly after midnight after being alerted to a reported domestic assault.

One was killed immediately and the other shot in the thigh before the man set fire to the house, where a woman had climbed onto the roof.

Police reinforcements and firefighters were rushed to the scene, and all roads leading to the house were blocked off, according to the prosecutor's office in Clermont-Ferrand.

Two further police who were trying to determine if rescue officers could reach their shot colleagues were then fired on and killed by the suspect, who had barricaded himself in the house.

— AFP

Trump pardons two linked to Russia probe, Blackwater guards, others

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump granted pardons on Tuesday to two people linked to a probe into alleged collusion between his campaign and Russia along with a list of others as time ticks away on his remaining weeks in office.

The moves drew even further controversy and came as the outgoing Republican continues to refuse to concede defeat to Democrat Joe Biden in the November election.

They add to pardons already issued to political allies of Trump, due to leave office on January 20.

The White House said in a statement that Trump had granted full pardons to 15 people and commuted all or part of the sentences for five others.

A full pardon was given to George Papadopoulos, a former Trump campaign adviser



George Papadopoulos

who admitted lying to federal investigators about his contacts with Russians.

Papadopoulos was a member of Trump's foreign policy advisory panel when he ran for president in 2016.

He pleaded guilty in October 2017 to lying to the FBI about contacts with a professor who promised to connect him to senior Russian officials.

He cooperated with investigators led by Robert



Alex van der Zwaan

Mueller, the special prosecutor who conducted a two-year probe into alleged collusion between the Trump campaign and Russia.

Papadopoulos spent 12 days in jail after his guilty plea.

"Today's pardon helps correct the wrong that Mueller's team inflicted on so many people," the White House statement said.

Another full pardon was granted to Alex van der Zwaan, a Dutch lawyer who was also convicted in connection with

Mueller's probe.

Full pardons were also granted to four Blackwater security guards convicted over the 2007 killing of Iraqis.

The four guards for the Blackwater security firm convicted over the 2007 shootings included Nicholas Slatten, who had been sentenced to life.

They were convicted of opening fire in Baghdad's crowded Nisur Square on September 16, 2007, in a bloody episode that caused an international scandal and heightened resentment of the American presence.

The shooting left at least 14 Iraqi civilians dead and 17 wounded while perpetuating the image of US security contractors run amok.

The Blackwater guards said they acted in self-defence in response to insurgent fire. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

OTTAWA

Canada okays Moderna as second vaccine

Canada has approved the COVID-19 vaccine developed by American biotech firm Moderna, the health department announced on Wednesday, two weeks after authorising immunisations with the Pfizer/BioNTech shot. The decision makes Canada the second country to greenlight the Moderna vaccine, after the US. "Health Canada... has determined that the Moderna vaccine meets the department's stringent safety, efficacy and quality requirements," it said in a statement. "The differ-



ent storage and handling requirements of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine mean that it can be distributed to isolated and remote communities, including the territories." — AFP

SYDNEY

COVID-19 restrictions eased for Christmas

Sydney on Wednesday eased lockdown restrictions for Christmas after Australia's largest city reported a second day of new coronavirus cases in the single digits. Amid a record testing and tracing effort, just eight new cases were recorded in the past 24 hours, prompting authorities to announce all residents could have at least some visitors during the festive period. "Everybody has had a very difficult year," said state Premier Gladys Berejiklian, announcing the "modest" three-



day easing of restrictions. Most Sydneysiders would be allowed to invite 10 adults to their homes, with that number limited to five in the neighbourhoods at the epicentre of the outbreak. — AFP

LUCERNE

Woman, 90, first to get jab in Switzerland

A 90-year-old woman in the canton of Lucerne on Wednesday became the first person in Switzerland to be vaccinated against the new coronavirus, as the Swiss military distributed the first instalment of 107,000 COVID-19 shots around the country. Lucerne and the rural canton of Appenzell Innerrhoden were first among Switzerland's 26 cantons to begin inoculations after regulators approved the vaccine from Pfizer and German



partner BioNTech on Saturday. Initial vaccine doses will go to cantons to inoculate vulnerable people, including those aged over 75 and people with medical conditions. — Reuters

A dialogue about trust...

If there is anything that took front stage this 2020, besides the coronavirus, it is the lies, misinformation, and disinformation running in all sectors of the media. From the politicisation of the pandemic to everything else, including our personal lives.

Skepticism about news may be a natural consequence of increasingly pluralistic media environments. In a time when people have difficulties in discerning what is real and what is fake, online platforms are becoming the dominant source of information while bringing challenges to media trust.

Trust is the social foundation for relationships, and that is not different with journalism. Like in life, trust is rooted in beliefs about integrity, reliance and professionalism; in journalism, it affects everything, from sourcing to the impact of reporting.

It is fair to say that segments of the public, including journalists and researchers, hold different beliefs about how journalism works, or, conflicting interpretations about what they expect from it. Journalism has a clear purpose: to inform, to help to understand, however, how the fundamental of good journalism works is not clear.

In a recently published report, the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism mentioned that trust in the news has eroded worldwide. Are you surprised?



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THE BIG
EXPLOSION OF
DISINFORMATION
IS AN OUTCOME
OF THE
TECHNOLOGY
REVOLUTION

A better understanding of different sources of news, or the reasons why journalists use some sources of information and not others, is necessary. Transparency would be the answer, perhaps. Some audiences do want to know more about topics, including who are the journalists behind the news. It helps the public to be part of the civil society, to understand decisions, and changes. On the other hand, withholding information, partially or not, can open chances for speculation.

Social platforms are shaping how people learn about news and influencing how they engage with the news. People no longer follow media organisations; they follow individuals in social media; they follow those with whom they share the same ideas and interests. People trust their digital friends more than politicians, leaders and official news organisations.

Apparently, we have not abandoned the 18th Century school of gossips, rumours and hoaxes — we have just been armoured with extraordinary tools in communication technologies. We have embraced a more sophisticated ‘modes of communication’. You call it propaganda, information manipulation, misleading information, fake news, or pure lies. It is a process of distraction, and with people’s span of attention getting shorter, disinformation finds a fertile space to grow — besides, it is

cheaper and more efficient.

Fake news, rumours and misinformation are part of human character; it has been used in history and in propaganda — against enemies, or in favour of the allies. Politicians, informers, advertisers and storytellers are masters at putting words together for different purposes. Certain narratives can be more acceptable than others can because they are emotionally attractive and bonding — exactly what happens in social media: ‘I trust my friend!’ Then, it is not something new — but revamped by the digital revolution. The big explosion of disinformation is an outcome of the technology revolution, and consequently social media bonding.

In other words, trust is not to be lost. Like in any relationship, trust can be elusive and once it is lost, it is hard to regain it. People will continue finding their own community on social platforms; misinformation will not go away, and those who are confused or bored with the lack of proper, transparent and balanced information will look for alternatives.

Knowing the tricks used since the 6th Century AD will not change how we perceive rumours and fake news today, but it is a window to the past, and, an insight for better communication in the future

Let’s hope 2021 will be a better year, including for journalism.

SHRINKING OFFICES

How Sweden aims to plug housing gap

SIMON JOHNSON

Sweden may have too many shops and offices after the pandemic. It doesn’t have enough homes. It spies an opportunity.

A seismic shift towards online shopping and working from home has been painful for many businesses, but has given the Nordic nation the chance to address an intractable social and economic ill: a chronic housing shortage. The government is now examining whether empty commercial real estate in the wake of COVID-19 could be converted to help plug a shortfall of around 140,000 homes.

The plans are one example of how countries are looking ahead to rebuild, in a new reality spawned by a pandemic that has exacted a huge human and economic toll and reshaped behaviour. The housing market has long been the Achilles’ heel of the Swedish economy.

Complex regulations make construction costs among Europe’s highest. Mortgage tax relief, zero property tax and a highly regulated rental market have driven up prices for homebuyers and sent household debt levels through the roof, with the central bank regularly warning of a risk to economic stability.

Boosting the pace of conversions from commercial to residential property could help ease the pressure, a drive that could potentially be replicated in other countries with housing shortages in some areas, including Britain and the Netherlands.

Sweden’s National Board of Housing, a state agency, has been tasked with simplifying the country’s complex building rules to help the property conversion plans and will report to government officials at the end of February.

“The corona pandemic has meant that all the more sectors are considering making distance and work-at-home solutions permanent, which may mean that there are properties... that can instead be used for housing,” Deputy Finance Minister Per Bolund said.

Repurposing real estate is nothing new — think of New York’s Meatpacking District which went from a residential area in the 1800s to an industrial hub a century later and back again to a chic residential and shopping area over the last 20 years.

But the pandemic has given fresh impetus to the idea.

Around a fifth of Sweden’s 5 million workers are likely to stay at home after the pandemic eases, according to a study by the European Institute for Behavioural Analysis and the universities of Gothenburg and Lund, meaning many companies will need smaller offices.

“We are not going to go back to the situation we had before the pandemic, so it is not sensible to rent as big an office space as we had originally intended,” said Helen Stoye, the Deputy Director-General of Sweden’s Statistics Office, which recently signed a deal for new premises.

The new office will have 200 fewer desks and its total area will be 7,900 square metres, down from almost 15,000 currently. Stoye acknowledged her organisation — like many others — had previously frowned on working from home.

“But during the pandemic we have seen that working from home functions really, really well,” she added.

— Reuters

HISTORIC STREETS

Wristwatch repairman is a timeless treasure

SALAM FARAJ
AND HABIB HAJ SALEM

Youssef Abdelkarim’s storefront on one of Baghdad’s most historic streets is a time capsule — literally. Thousands of wristwatches fill the tiny shop, where three generations have repaired Iraq’s oldest timepieces.

The dusty display window on Rasheed Street features a single row of classic watches in their felt boxes right at the front, with a mountain of haphazardly piled pieces behind it and others hanging from hooks overhead.

Inside, there are watches in plastic buckets on the floor, packed in cardboard boxes on shelves and stuffed into suitcases. In a far corner, behind an old wooden desk, 52-year-old Abdelkarim is hunched over an antique piece.

“Every watch has its own personality. I try to preserve it as much as I can, as if it were my own child,” he said, squinting through black, thick-framed glasses.

Abdelkarim began fixing watches at the age of 11, after the death of his paternal grandfather, who opened the store in the 1940s. His grandfather had already passed the trade onto his own son, who began to teach Youssef.

He has repaired expensive Swiss models, including 10,000-euro Patek Philippes, and what Abdelkarim calls “the poor man’s watch” — a Sigma. And he suspects he even fixed a piece that belonged to Iraq’s Saddam Hussein.

“It was a rare watch brought to me by the presidential palace, with Saddam’s signature on the back,” he recalled.

It cost 400 Iraqi dinars to repair — more than \$1,000 in the 1980s but less than a dollar today. Indeed, much has changed since then.

People swapped their analog



Watch repairman Youssef Abdelkarim presents an antique Omega pocket-watch at his workshop in Baghdad. — AFP

THE DUSTY DISPLAY
WINDOW ON
RASHEED STREET
FEATURES A SINGLE
ROW OF CLASSIC
WATCHES

wristwatches for digital models, then dropped them altogether for smart phones.

But Abdelkarim insists an original timepiece isn’t a thing of the past, telling AFP with a wink: “A man’s elegance begins with his watch. And his shoes.”

That may be right: his shop is still packed with customers of all ages and styles, including former ministers in sleek suits, collectors looking for vintage classics and younger Iraqis bringing newer pieces for him to fix.

“Everyone finds what they need here,” he said proudly.

With his eyesight starting to falter, he fixes just five pieces a day now, compared to the 1980s when he sold and fixed hundreds every day.

At the time, Rasheed Street was bustling with business during the day and the top place to be seen at night.

Abdelkarim still remembers the famed theatres, movie halls and coffee shops: “They never closed!”

His shop was competing with dozens of other repair stores then, but they started to shutter in the 1990s, when crippling international sanctions left many households struggling to feed themselves.

Then, the US-led invasion of 2003 toppled Saddam and opened a Pandora’s box of sectarian violence, including car bombs on Rasheed Street. Abdelkarim moved to live in a safer neighbourhood but still walked to the family store to keep it open. — AFP

sport

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OMAN SAIL SAILORS GEAR UP FOR TOKYO OLYMPICS QUALIFIER EVENT

49er Olympic teams resume intense training



We have been building towards the 2020 Olympic Games for four years and now have to assess where our sailors' level currently is and ensure they are ready for the final qualification event

RASHID AL KINDI

Director,
Oman Sailing



MUSCAT: Oman Sail's 49er Olympic teams have resumed training and begun an intensive training programme to regain their physical fitness, sharpness on the water and sense of teamwork in preparations for the Asian 49er Championships qualifier event ahead of Tokyo 2021 Olympic Games.

Rashid al Kindi, Oman Sail Director of Sailing, said, "The training camps are essential to the preparation of our 49er teams ahead of a busy schedule. We have been building towards the 2020 Olympic Games for four years and now have to assess where our sailors' level currently is and ensure they are ready for

the final qualification event. The suspension of training due to COVID-19 has affected us all in many ways but we are now so close to achieving Oman Sail's goal of competing and winning a medal in sailing for our country. We have to do everything we can to ensure our sailors arrive at the competition in optimal

condition."

The team was recently visited by Sayyid Khalid bin Hamad al Busaidy, Oman Olympic Committee Chairman, to show his support and give them a confidence boost during training.

Hashim al Rashdi, Oman Sail's 49er coach, said, "The enforced break in our preparations was not

ideal, but the training camps will be a return to the normal training routine and get our sailors back into the habit of competing and improving. We are grateful to the support from the Oman Olympic Committee and Oman Sail and we are all looking forward to getting back out onto the water."

Taking part in the training are

four of Oman's most promising 49er sailors, Musab al Hadi, Waleed al Kindi, Abdul Rahman al Mashari and Ahmed al Hasni. Training is focussed on sailing skill, physical training in the gym and mental strength to reach their peak level of performance in time for the Olympic qualifier event.



England cricketers exempt from UK travel ban

The England team will be allowed to fly to Sri Lanka despite flights from Britain being suspended because of a new coronavirus strain, the Island's cricket authorities said on Wednesday. England are due to arrive in Sri Lanka on January 3 for two Tests — played without spectators — in Galle starting on January 14.



Pakistan bowling coach Younis granted leave

Pakistan's bowling coach Waqar Younis is set for a family reunion following a six-month hiatus after the PCB granted him leave to fly to see them in Lahore after the first test against New Zealand. Younis, whose family is usually based in Sydney, has been travelling with Pakistan since they toured England in June.



CLIPPERS stun LAKERS in opener

NBA RESULTS

LA Clippers bt LA Lakers **116-109**
Brooklyn bt Golden State **125-99**

LOS ANGELES: The Los Angeles Lakers sure didn't have long to savour their 17th NBA title.

Little more than two months after the Lakers locked up the 2020 crown with a Finals win over the Miami Heat, they were back to the grind in a 116-109 loss to the Los Angeles Clippers on the opening night of the 2020-21 campaign on Tuesday.

Paul George led the Clippers, less than two weeks after signing a four-year contract extension worth a reported \$226 million.

George scored 26 of his 33 points in the second half as the Clippers kept the Lakers at bay.

"I got into a good rhythm making plays for the team," George said. "That's how I catch

fire — I let the game come to me. I took the shots when they were available."

Kawhi Leonard added 26 points for the Clippers, who are out to expunge the memory of their agonizing Western Conference semifinals loss to the Denver Nuggets, who trailed 3-1 in the series but won in seven games.

LeBron James led the Lakers with 22 points. Anthony Davis added 18 and German point guard Dennis Schroder — a new addition — scored 14 points with 12 rebounds and eight assists.

RING CEREMONY

The night at Staples Center started with the Lakers receiving their diamond and amethyst championship rings.

There were no fans in attendance, but family members — and some frontline healthcare workers who are Lakers fans — delivered heartfelt recorded messages of congratulations to the team prior to the game.

But they were on the back foot early, trailing from start to finish in a game the Clippers led by as many as 22 points in the first quarter.

"The game comes quick, and you've got to get focused," Lakers coach Frank Vogel said of shifting gears after the ring ceremony.

The Lakers cut the deficit to 56-54 at halftime, and Schroder's jump shot knotted it at 75-75 with 5:04 left in the third.

But the Clippers clamped

down defensively and pulled away again.

"It's just weird in all facets," said James, who turned an ankle in the fourth quarter, about the overriding feeling of the day.

"Celebrating an historic moment with our franchise and having to do it without our family and friends and our fans, it's just a weird day to say the least.

He added of the result: "It's game one, it's the first test for us. We've literally been together for nine days as a full group."

The game was one of two on the opening-day slate, which also featured Kevin Durant's long-awaited Brooklyn Nets debut.

It didn't disappoint, the two-time NBA Finals MVP teaming

seamlessly with Kyrie Irving in a 125-99 blowout over the Golden State Warriors.

Durant hadn't played since suffering a devastating torn Achilles tendon playing for the Warriors against Toronto in game five of the championship series on June 10, 2019.

He was still recovering from surgery when he bolted for the Nets as a free agent and sat out all of the pandemic-disrupted 2019-20 campaign.

Irving scored 26 points with four rebounds and four assists. Durant added 22 points with five rebounds and three assists and all of the Nets starters sat out the fourth quarter with the game well in hand. — AFP

Warner, Abbott ruled out of Boxing Day India Test



SYDNEY: Star Australian batsman David Warner will miss the Boxing Day Test against India after failing to shake off the groin injury that kept him out of the opening fixture, Cricket Australia said on Wednesday.

The governing body said Warner and paceman Sean Abbott had also been excluded from the Australian team's bio-secure bubble in Melbourne as a precaution due to a COVID-19 outbreak in their hometown Sydney.

"While neither player has been in a specific hotspot as outlined by NSW Health, Cricket Australia's bio-security protocols do not allow them to rejoin the squad in time for the Boxing Day Test," it said.

The second Test against India starts at the Melbourne Cricket Ground on December 26 and the teams have been training in bio-secure bubbles.

Warner and Abbott flew to Melbourne on Saturday hoping to avoid quarantine issues arising from the Sydney COVID-19 outbreak.

But the team's COVID-19 protocols prevented them from joining the squad in time for the Test, and Cricket Australia said Warner would not have recovered from in time anyway.

Warner limped out of Australia's second one-day international against the tourists last month in agony after suffering the injury. — AFP

MCCC, BSC and Sam Royals seal superb victories

MUSCAT: Muscat Cricket Coaching Centre (MCCC) rode on brilliant all-round performance by Adeel Abbas to thrash India School Muscat (ISM) by 6 wickets in a Junior League 50-over Under-19 game at OC Turf 2 in Al Amerat on Monday.

MCCC bowled superbly to dismiss ISM for a disappointing 105, Swastik SM and Jeel Tanna taking three wicket each while Adeel grabbed two.

Adeel led the way with a patient 44 as MCCC sealed victory in the 30th over, scoring 107 for 4. Sameer Mohammed batted well too for his unbeaten 29.

In another Under-19 match, Boshier Sports Centre (BSC) came up trumps in a low-scoring contest against Indian School Wadi Kabir (ISWK) at the same

venue on Friday.

ISWK failed to post an imposing total on the board, folding up for a dismal 86 in 25 overs despite Amanpreet Singh Sirah's valiant 44. Aashish Vallappil was the pick of BSC bowlers, taking 3 for 6 while Sanjaya Ravindra and Muzahir Raza took two wickets each.

BSC's chase wasn't smooth either but it managed to seal the win in the 26th over, scoring 87 for 6 thanks to Vrishab Gladwin's vital 22. Amanpreet impressed with the ball too, taking 3 for 22.

In a Senior League T20 E Division match on Friday, Kochomon Abraham's 5 for 34 and Shahas Venmadathiyil's splendid 82 steered Sam Royal to a thrilling 3-wicket win over OCT Al Hail B at Muscat Municipality ground 4.



Adeel Abbas, Sameer Mohammed, Jeel Tanna and Swastik SM of MCCC U-19 team.

Salman Murad's superb 106 not out was the highlight of OCT Al Hail's total of 167 for 6 which could have been much bigger if Abraham had an ordinary day with the ball.

Royals rode on Venmadathiyil's brilliant knock to secure a nail-biting victory in the last over, scoring 170 for 7. Salman Murad was the pick of Al Hail bowlers, taking 3 for 19.

BRIEF SCORES

JUNIOR LEAGUE U-19

ISM 105 all out in 30.5 overs (Aditya Gurumukhi 26 - 3x4, Arjun Suresh 20 - 1x4. Swastik SM 3-36, Jeel Tanna 3-37, Adeel Abbas 2-15) **lost to MCCC 107 for 4 in 29.2 overs** (Adeel Abbas 44 - 4x4, Sameer Mohammed 29 not out - 4x4. Shivakumar Shridevi 2-37) by 6 wickets.

ISWK 86 all out in 25 overs (Amanpreet Singh Sirah 44 - 7x4. Aashish Vallappil 3-06, Sanjaya Ravindra 2-03, Muzahir Raza 2-06) **lost to Boshier Sports Centre 87 for 6 in 25.2 overs** (Vrishab Gladwin 22. Amanpreet Singh Sirah 3-22) by 4 wickets.

SENIOR LEAGUE T20 E DIVISION

OCT Al Hail 'B' 167 for 6 in 20 overs (Salman Murad Al Balushi 106 - 11x4, 3x6, Kochumon Abraham 5-34) **lost to Sam Royals 170 for 7 in 19.5 overs** (Shahas Venmadathiyil 82 - 6x4, Shejeer Abdul Rahman 28 - 3x4, Salman Murad Al Balushi 3-19) by 3 wickets.

Aflag Group CT 127 all out in

18.2 overs (Farrukh Jamal 42 - 5x4, Mohammed Arif Khattak 27 - 2x4, 1x6, Asanka Deepal Polonnovita Arachchige 4-19, Ajay Kumar 3-30, Mohamed Farzan 2-29) **lost to Landmark Group 131 for 2 in 11.5 overs** (Mohamed Farzan 70 - 14x4, Zubair Ahmed 1-11) by 8 wickets.

F DIVISION

KCA Deutag 107 all out in 19.3 overs (Khalid Balushi 28 - 3x4, Prashant Rana 3-21, Prakash Chandra 2-18, Gajendran Thathapillai 2-23) **lost to Y Horizon 108 for 4 in 13.4 overs** (Jatin Patel 51 - 8x4, Irfan Ur Rahman 2-19, Khalid Balushi 2-25) by 6 wickets.

Team Coorg Muscat (TCM) 126 all out in 19.3 overs (Prabakaran Ranganathan 32 - 1x4, 1x6, Milind Bhujwala 31 - 4x4, Mohammed Amir Munir 4-14, Yasir Jamal 3-27, Muhammad Islam 2-22) **lost to Israr Ghala 127 for 3 in 15 overs** (Sagheer Muhammad 66 - 9x4, 2x6, Sohail Amjad 27 - 1x4, Sardar Ali Khan 1-8) by 7 wickets.



Messi passes Pele record

MADRID: Lionel Messi beat Pele’s record of goals for a single club when he scored his 644th for Barcelona in a 3-0 victory against Valladolid on Tuesday.

The Argentina forward scored Barca’s third goal when he collected Pedri’s backheel and struck the ball past goalkeeper Jordi Masip in the 65th minute.

“When I started playing football I never thought I would break any records. And even less the one I achieved today,” Messi posted on Instagram shortly after the game.

“I can only thank all those who helped me over the years, my team-mates, my family, my friends and all those who support me every day.”

Messi had equalled Pele on Saturday in a 2-2 draw with

SPANISH LA LIGA RESULTS	
On Tuesday:	
Real Valladolid 0	Barcelona 3 (Lenglet 21, Braithwaite 35, Messi 65)
Villarreal 1 (Yeremy 74)	Athletic Bilbao 1 (Williams 19)
Real Sociedad 0	Atletico Madrid 2 (Hermoso 49, Llorente 74)
Huesca 1 (Ontiveros 31-pen)	Levante 1 (Melero 53)
Elche 2 (Fidel 46, Carillo 78)	Osasuna 2 (Garcia 10, Brasanac 64)
Valencia 0	Sevilla 1 (Suso 81)

Valencia.

The two men scored at almost an equal rate for their clubs.

It was the 33-year-old Argentine’s 749th competitive match for Barca, meaning he has scored a goal every 1.16 games.

The Brazilian scored 643 goals in 757 matches with Santos, where he played between 1956 and 1974,

or one every 1.17 matches.

“Like you, I know what it’s like to love wearing the same shirt every day. Like you, I know that there is nothing better than the place we feel at home,” Pele wrote to Messi on Instagram after the Argentine tied the record.

“Congratulations on your historic record, Lionel. But above

all, congratulations on your beautiful career at Barcelona. Stories like ours, of loving the same club for so long, unfortunately will be increasingly rare in football. I admire you very much.”

Messi, a six-time Ballon d’Or winner, is by far the highest scorer in Barca history (Cesar Rodriguez is next on 230 goals), the highest scorer in the history of the Spanish league championship (451 goals, ahead of Cristiano Ronaldo’s 311), and the player who has won the most trophies with the Catalan club (34, including four Champions Leagues).

“I see Messi happy. He is working hard, and he is a very important part of our attacking game,” said Koeman after the win.

Pele claims to have scored more than a thousand goals, counting

“
Congratulations on your historic record, Lionel. But above all, congratulations on your beautiful career at Barcelona. Stories like ours, of loving the same club for so long, unfortunately will be increasingly rare in football. I admire you very much
PELE
Brazilian legend

all the matches he played, official and unofficial.

But in competitive matches Pele appears to be second to Austrian and Czechoslovakian striker Josef Bican, who football historians have calculated scored 805 goals between 1931 and 1955 playing for half a dozen clubs and three national teams.

Pele, with between 757 and 767 goals in competitive matches over his career, which also include 92 Brazil internationals and two seasons with the New York Cosmos, is ahead of Messi with 714 for club and country and the more travelled Cristiano Ronaldo (754). Pele still holds the record for most international goals by a South American with 77 for Brazil but Messi has 71 for Argentina. — **AFP**

Trippier banned for 10 weeks over betting rules breach

LONDON: Atletico Madrid and England right back Kieran Trippier has been suspended for 10 weeks and fined £70,000 (\$94,052.00) following a breach of betting rules, the Football Association said on Wednesday.

Trippier denied seven alleged breaches of FA Rule E8(1)(b), but four were found proven during a personal hearing.

Rule E8(1)(b) states that a participant must not provide to any person, any information relating to football which the participant has obtained by virtue of his or

her position within the game and which is not publicly available at that time.

The FA did not clarify what the breach entailed but said it had occurred in July 2019, around the time Trippier joined Atletico Madrid for a reported £20 million (\$26.91 million) from Tottenham Hotspur.

“The independent regulatory commission’s written reasons for its decisions and the associated sanction will be published in due course,” the FA said in a statement.

“The suspension, which includes



all football and football-related activity, is effective worldwide from today (Wednesday) following an application to Fifa.”

Trippier has been one of the standout performers for Diego Simeone’s Atletico side, playing every minute of their La Liga and Champions League games this season. The 30-year-old will now miss at least 13 games for the La Liga leaders in all competitions, including their Champions League last-16 first leg tie at home to Chelsea on February 23.

Trippier’s ban comes around

nine months after former England striker Daniel Sturridge was punished for a breach of the FA’s gambling rules.

He was initially handed a six-week ban, four of them suspended, and fined £75,000 after being found guilty of providing his brother with information on a potential move from Liverpool to Sevilla in 2018.

After the FA appealed against the decision on the grounds that it was too lenient, an independent appeal board increased the ban to four months and doubled the fine. — **Reuters**

business

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Commercial banks post 6 per cent decline in 2019 profits

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 23

Commercial banks in the Sultanate posted a six per cent decline in profits during 2019 on the back of a number of factors – growth in interest expenses, narrowing interest rate spread, and an uptick in non-performing loans, according to the Central Bank of Oman (CBO).

Net profit after provisions and taxes dipped to RO 396.2 million in 2019, down from RO 413.3 million, the regulator said in its 2019 Annual Report. Interest income, however, climbed higher to RO 1.413 billion up from RO 1.321 billion in 2018.

Commenting on the impact of the downturn on the banking sector, the Central Bank noted: “Commercial banks in the Sultanate managed to cope well with the slowdown in economic activities during 2019 and persisted to maintain healthy position. The slowdown had an adverse effect on both deposit and credit growth which moderated further compared to the previous few years.”

Profits of conventional banks shrank by 6 per cent in 2019 with a deceleration in the growth of net interest income, the apex bank noted. Despite interest income increasing by a strong 8.7 per cent, net interest income witnessed lower increase on the back of higher rise in interest expenses which increased by 13.7 per cent during 2019.

“The narrowing interest rate spread, especially on foreign currency lending, adversely affected the profitability of banks during 2019. Nevertheless, net interest income increased by 4.8 per cent and accounted for

most of the banks’ income with other sources such as foreign exchange earnings and fees and commissions dropping considerably during the year. The efficiency gains, evident in lower increase in operating expenses and administrative costs, also helped banks in maintaining net profitability,” the Bank pointed out.

However, the provisions for non-performing assets that increased by 33.3 per cent, reflecting an uptick in non-performing loans, also dragged down net profits.

Despite the impact on bottom-

lines, banks maintained an adequate level of capital, liquidity buffers, and stable funding, according to the Central Bank.

The capital adequacy ratio (CAR) stood higher at 18.5 per cent as on end-2019 compared to 17.9 per cent a year ago and mandated at 13.5 per cent (11.0 per cent plus the 2.5 per cent capital conservation buffer), while Core Equity Tier 1 (CET1) stood at 14.7 per cent during this period.

Liquidity indicators, viz liquidity coverage ratio (LCR) and net stable funding ratio (NSFR), stood at 220.1 per cent and 116.3 per cent, respectively, at the end of 2019, indicating adequate liquidity buffers and stable funding, it said.

Furthermore, the banks were also able to maintain the quality of their assets with a low delinquency rate. Gross non-performing loans (NPLs) inched up to 3.5 per cent in December 2019 from 2.7 per cent in December 2018. During this period, net NPLs also inched up to 1.4 per cent from 1.0 per cent. The share of restructured loans to total loans also increased to 3.8 per cent from 2.3 per cent, it added.

No Brexit trade deal yet as serious issues remain, says British minister

European Union's chief Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier speaks with Ambassador Michael Claus, Permanent Representative of Germany to the EU, during a meeting of the Committee of the Permanent Representatives of the Governments of the Member States to the European Union (COREPER) in Brussels. – Reuters

LONDON/BRUSSELS: The United Kingdom and the European Union have still not clinched a Brexit trade deal to avoid a turbulent split in just eight days time because of serious disagreements about competition and fishing, a British minister said on Wednesday.

The United Kingdom casts off into the unknown on December 31 after a stormy 48-year liaison with the Franco-German led project which sought to bind the ruined nations of post-World War Two Europe into a global power.

Since formally exiting the EU on January 31, the United Kingdom has been negotiating a free trade deal with the bloc in an attempt to ease its exit from the single market and customs union at the end of this year.

Thus far, no deal has been done and both sides have given an exhausting array of conflicting signals that

indicate, variously, that a deal is imminent, that talks have far to go and that a disorderly no-trade deal exit could be on the cards.

“I’m still reasonably optimistic but there’s no news to report to you this morning,” British Housing Secretary Robert Jenrick told Sky News amid speculation in London that a deal could be announced on Wednesday.

“There’s still the same serious areas of disagreement whether that’s on fisheries or the level playing field,” he said. “But at the moment there isn’t sufficient progress. It isn’t a deal that the prime minister feels he can sign us up to.”

Ultimately, Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who is grappling with a deepening COVID-19 outbreak and a border crisis at Europe’s busiest truck port, will have to decide if the narrow deal on offer is worth signing up to. — Reuters

Cargo logjam deepens, delaying goods bound for retailers

LONDON: Amazon seller Bernie Thompson shifted half of his production out of China to reduce his business risks and still found himself in the crosshairs of logistical chaos besetting the movement of goods around the globe.

A surge in demand for furniture, exercise equipment and other goods for shoppers sheltering at home in a worsening COVID-19 pandemic has upended normal trade flows.

That has stranded empty cargo containers in the wrong places, spawning bottlenecks that now stretch from factories to seaports. Container ship operators ferry the majority of consumer goods, and transportation and trade sources warn that prolonged industry disruption could cause shortages and complicate the global economic recovery.

Thompson, founder of Washington-based Pluggable Technologies, sells work-from-

home staples like laptop docking stations. He diversified sourcing to be less reliant on a single country for manufacturing and less exposed to US tariffs on Chinese goods.

Things did not go as planned and now, like many other importers, he is concerned about keeping enough product in stock. “We’ve moved production out of China and moved ourselves right into a disadvantage,” said Thompson.

His new factory in Thailand

was first to suffer delays of about four weeks, in part because shipping companies routed empty containers to the top priority US-China trade lane.

Those logistical snags cascaded and now his remaining shipments from China — the world’s No. 1 manufacturer — are postponed by as much as three weeks. And he is not alone — US retailer Costco Wholesale Corp and Honda Motor Co Ltd in the United Kingdom have also suffered delays. — Reuters

Trump rejects COVID-19 relief bill, calling it ‘a disgrace’

WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump on Tuesday rejected a massive Covid economic relief package passed by Congress, branding it “a disgrace” in an act of political brinkmanship less than a month before he must leave office and when millions of Americans are suffering fallout from the pandemic.

Trump dropped the bombshell via a pre-recorded statement made in the White House and sent out on Twitter.

It came just a day after his Republicans and the Democrats finally agreed overwhelmingly to a \$900 billion bill meant to throw a lifeline to businesses and people struggling to keep heads above water.

In his address, Trump said he would refuse to accept the bill as it

is and demanded changes, notably a big increase in the proposed \$600 direct payments to less well-off Americans.

“I am asking Congress to amend this bill and increase the ridiculously low \$600 to \$2,000, or \$4,000 for a couple,” he said, referring to relief checks.

Tapping into his nationalist “America First” brand, Trump also castigated measures added onto the bill during complex negotiations that would provide funding for projects benefiting US partners abroad and other non-Covid related items like the environment.

“It really is a disgrace,” he said. “I’m also asking Congress to immediately get rid of the wasteful and unnecessary items from this legislation, and just send me a

suitable bill.”

Trump has not yet received the bill and he did not explicitly say

he would not sign. If he actually vetoed the package, Congress would almost certainly quickly

override that, given the bipartisan support.

In what is widely expected to be only a portion of a slew of presidential pardons and commutations issued in the dying days of the administration, the White House also announced late on Tuesday that 20 people had been selected.

They included two convicted in special counsel Robert Mueller’s Russia probe into Trump campaign ties to Moscow and four men convicted in connection with the mass killing of at least 14 Iraqi civilians.

The Covid package is wrapped into a \$2.3 trillion, almost 5,600-page “coronabus” bill that includes a so-called omnibus bill to fund the government for the coming year.

A congressional override of a

veto would mark an embarrassing defeat for Trump, who is spending his final weeks in office before the January 20 inauguration of Democrat Joe Biden by pursuing unprecedented attempts to try and get the election results overturned. However, until he has the bill on his desk he has no need to veto.

And Trump’s motives in picking the fight with Congress are intertwined with his extraordinary ongoing struggle to overturn the November 3 election. Despite courts across the country rejecting his baseless claims of fraud, he has enough allies on the right of the Republican party — and a devoted following among some voters — to keep trying to derail the traditionally smooth presidential transition. — AFP

Why E-Census 2020 is a vital national exercise

THERE are many facts that need to be pointed out about the E-Census 2020 covering the population, housing and establishments of the Sultanate.

The census is a significant statistical exercise that countries around the world undertake from time to time. The Sultanate has decided that the census should be conducted once every 10 years in order to evaluate and follow up on the country's economic and social development over a full decade.

The latest census project was approved by the government in May 2015 and will be

conducted in accordance with international frameworks and standards.

This huge exercise is the fourth in the series in the Sultanate, having been conducted in 1993.

This time around, the census will involve electronic methods and techniques, requiring only 74 staff as compared to the 6,600 personnel who took part in the 2010 census. This has significantly reduced the financial and administrative cost to the government.

The results of the current census will help to strengthen integration between the public and private sectors in the field of demographics, and the use of



HAIDER ALLAWATI
haiderdawood@hotmail.com

THE CENSUS PROVIDES A LOT OF OTHER INFORMATION FOR RESEARCHERS, STUDENTS, AND ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS TO CONDUCT MORE STUDIES ON MANY OTHER AREAS OF INTEREST

other economic and social data in survey projects and studies.

According to the last census results, the number of citizens in the Sultanate has not crossed 3 million today despite the passage of 50 years. The total population size was 4.471 million people (both citizens and expatriates), up from 2.773 million people in 2010, an increase of 61 per cent. The number of Omani families increased from 260,120 families in 2010 to 406,303 in 2020, an increase of 55 per cent.

This uptick led to the construction of many residential buildings in all governorates, in addition to the implementation of various

health, educational and social services projects to meet the growing needs of citizens.

The census will shed light on demographic, social and economic developments including the gender ratio – projected at 50.4 per cent Omani males compared to 49.6 per cent females, which was not different from the 2010 trend.

For expatriates, the ratio is expected to be 78 per cent males vs 22 per cent females in 2020, compared to 76 per cent and 24 per cent respectively in the 2010 Census. Omanis about 15 years and younger will account for 38 per cent of the total Omani population in the 2020 census.

With regard to housing, the data indicates that the number of buildings increased from 488,513 in 2010 to 755,722 buildings in 2020, an increase of 55 per cent.

The census provides a lot of other information for researchers, students, and academic institutions to conduct more studies on many other areas of interest. These results need further analysis before they are used in the planning of economic projects and programmes as part of the Oman 2040 strategy.

This will help achieve more sustainable development for citizens and achieve national goals and priorities.

Private equity key to post-crisis economic recovery

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 23

Alternative debt funds will be crucial to supporting funding gaps in Middle East markets – particularly for the small and medium-sized enterprises and mid-market enterprises, which represent a significant part of the region's non-oil economy.

This was a view of expert panellists during a recent ICAEW (the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales) webinar on fast tracking mergers and acquisitions (M&A) in the Middle East.

The panel of business leaders provided insight and shared

first-hand experiences and views on the future of private equity. Discussions centred on how corporate finance is shaping capital raising, driving transactions and supporting business transformation to help economies adapt during and beyond the coronavirus pandemic.

The panellists included David Petrie, ICAEW Head of Corporate Finance; Daniel Howlett, MENAT HSBC Bank Middle East Limited Regional Head of Commercial Banking; Hani Bishara, EY Middle East, MENA Reshaping Results leader, Head of Debt Advisory and Restructuring; David Stark,

Deloitte Middle East, Partner and Head of Restructuring Services; Andrew Tarbuck, Al Tamimi & Company, Partner Head of Capital Markets; and Elie Fakhoury, AlixPartners Middle East, Director, Turnaround & Restructuring Services.

Although the level of deal flow in 2020 has been similar to pre-crisis levels, the types of transactions and the reason for them have differed. According to the panellists, many companies have followed a “safety in pairs” joint venture model, rather than a more strategic, proactive approach of trying to find synergies and cost saving measures.

Ubhar Capital names new CEO

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 23

In line with its continuous strategy and vision to appoint as well as promote Omanis in management positions, Ubhar Capital SAOC (U Capital) — a subsidiary of Jabreen Capital — announced the appointment of Shaikh Abdulaziz bin Khalifa al Saadi as the CEO of the company. He replaces veteran investment banker Lo'ai Bataineh who will now be advising the board of directors of U Capital.

With experience of more than 19 years in the field of finance and investment, Shaikh Abdulaziz has extensive in-depth knowledge of the industry. Before joining Ubhar Capital, he was Deputy Director General for Operations



Abdulaziz Khalifa Al Saadi

in the Civil Services Pension Fund (CSPF), and supervised the Investment Department's management activities and internal audit function of the CSPF.

He has remained on the board of directors for various companies in the fields of real estate, investment, and banking. He was member of the board of Bank Nizwa, OMINVEST,

Jabreen Capital and Muscat National Development and Investment Company.

Commenting on his appointment, Anwar al Jabri, Chairman, Board of Directors, U Capital, and CEO of Jabreen Capital said, “We are pleased to have a visionary investment banker like Shaikh Abdulaziz bin Khalifa al Saadi join U Capital.

The appointment of Shaikh Abdulaziz as CEO emphasises U Capital's commitment to contribute to the national effort of promoting Omani talent. Since the establishment of the company, we have been committed to hiring Omanis and training and upskilling the competencies of our Omani colleagues.

Omantel Bags the EIPM Peter Kraljic Prize Award

The Award comes in recognition of Omantel Procurement & Contracts Division's Outstanding Performance during COVID-19 Pandemic

Muscat, 23 Dec 2020 — In another achievement that reinforces its leading position in the Omani market, Omantel Procurement and Contracts sector has bagged EIPM Peter Kraljic Excellence Prize Awards presented by the European Institute for Purchasing Management in “Transformation Leader in Turbulent times” category.

The EIPM-Peter Kraljic Prize Awards recognizes the excellence of Purchasing organisations that act as role models, delivering outstanding performance to their company and demonstrating high level of creativity, innovation and respect for the environment and society. This year prize are presented for three categories namely Master of Business Continuity, Transformation Leader in Turbulent Times Resilience & Visionary Leadership.

Commenting on this achievement, Yaqoub Mubarak Al Kayoumi, General Manager of Procurement and Contracts at Omantel said “We are proud to receive this prestigious Prize, which came in recognition of the achievement made during very difficult time of COVID 19 pandemic. Our performance has paid well for all stakeholders and contributed to enhancing the growth of our national economy”.

“The Prize Award focuses on how purchasing organisations have contributed to restoring the continuity of business activities, recovering high level of performance rapidly, regaining business advantage, supporting employees and society and delivered value to all stakeholders in a timely manner”, he added.

The Peter Kraljic Prize are among the most prestigious international Prize which are presented by the European Institute of Purchasing Management, an executive center dedicated to applied research, education and training in purchasing and supply chain management.

In this year edition, the Prize focused



on the outstanding practices and results achieved by the procurement and contracts function during the Covid 19 pandemic, through several pillars including the achievements and social initiatives undertaken by Omantel in 2020 and how the procurement and contracts sector supported these initiatives, CSR initiatives during COVID-19 to provide free benefits and services and the participation of procurement and contracts in processing these services. The Prize also assessed the procurement and contracts own initiatives in 2020 beyond regular operation and the challenges faced.

The Prize comes in recognition to Omantel efforts to deal with evolving challenges and its agility and ability to change. It also recognizes Omantel's employees ability to adapt to various circumstances using technological and digital advancements.



Omantel is the Sultanate's first and leading integrated telecommunications services provider, enabling the digital society to flourish, allowing new ways of doing business and delivering a world of information, news and entertainment. While seeking to get optimum customer satisfaction, Omantel plays a key social role to provide the required support and subsidy to all sectors of the Omani society.

PRESS RELEASE

AMINA AL FALAHI
RECEIVES CORPORATE
LEADERSHIP AWARD



Amina bint Nasser al Falahiyah, AGM and Head of Government Banking at BankDhofar, received the Corporate Leadership Award at *Al Mar'a* Magazine Excellence Awards 2020. The award recognises her efforts and successful leadership of the government banking sector at BankDhofar.

On receiving the award, Amina said: “The award recognises the crucial role played by Omani women in various sectors and positions. In the banking sector. Omani women have proven they are capable to handle various roles and assume higher management positions. I am grateful for the opportunities provided to me at BankDhofar, and this award will motivate me to persevere for further success and achievements.”

Amina has more than 39 years of experience in the banking sector. She has been at BankDhofar for more than 24 years, holding various positions and contributing to the growth of BankDhofar's operations. The awards ceremony was held at Sheraton Oman Hotel, under the patronage of Laila bint Ahmed al Najar, Minister of Social Development.



FORD SIGNATURE FACILITY LAUNCHED

Arabian Car Marketing Company, launched Ford Signature Facility in Oman digitally, the first-ever. The event offered viewers a glimpse of the first-of-its-kind Ford facility and exclusive reviews of the All-new Ford Explorer and the All-new Ford Taurus. The event encouraged customers to enjoy the benefits of digital technology, stay up-to-date with all the happenings at their favourite brand and get an opportunity to win 4 i-pad minis while staying safe and comfortable, wherever they are.

The event was showcased on all the Ford Oman social media pages on Facebook, Instagram and YouTube.

For over three decades, Ford Motor Company and Arabian Car Marketing Company's partnership has continually delighted customers in Oman with world-class products, service and parts. The Ford Signature Facility welcomes customers to a brand new experience in car purchasing.

BANK MUSCAT HOLDS
AL MAZYONA DRAW FOR
ASALAH, AL JAWHAR
CUSTOMERS

Bank Muscat held its Al Mazyna monthly draw for November 2020 recently. The bank rewarded its customers across Asalah Priority Banking and Al Jawhar Privilege Banking with over RO 375,000 in prizes.

The draw livestreamed across the bank's social media channels on Instagram, Twitter and YouTube. As many as 10 lucky Asalah Priority Banking customers were rewarded with RO 25,000 each while 25 Al Jawhar customers won RO 5,000 each.

Saleh bin Mohammed al Maini, Assistant General Manager, Muscat, congratulated all the winners of the monthly prize draws and said that the prizes would enable them to realise their dreams.

Taya Bait Sabeeha, Assistant General Manager, Interior Region, said that all bank customers have the opportunity to win valuable and exciting prizes.



Taya Bait Sabeeha



Saleh Al Maini



In brief

■ CHICAGO

AMERICAN AIRLINES
BEGINS RETURN
OF WORKERS

American Airlines is beginning the phased return of furloughed workers after Congress passed a massive COVID-19 aid package with \$15 billion in payroll support for airlines, its executives said in a staff memo.

"While pay and benefits will be restored right away, people will be asked to return to the operation in phases," CEO Doug Parker and President Robert Isom said in the memo, released by American.

Air passenger traffic is down by about 70 per cent versus a year ago as the coronavirus pandemic continues to wreak havoc on the travel industry.

— Reuters

■ MADRID

SPAIN'S UPPER HOUSE
APPROVES FIRST FULL-
YEAR BUDGET

Spain's upper house of parliament approved the minority government's 2021 budget in fast-track mode, meaning the country will have a new full-year spending plan for the first time since 2016.

The senate, which voted down amendments that would have required sending the bill back to congress, completed the budget approval process in just under three months.

The budget, aimed at supporting an economic recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic, includes record spending on health and social care and a rise in infrastructure investment. It will also help to enable the distribution of billions of euros of European Union rescue funds. — Reuters

■ PARIS

AIRBUS TO BE WORLD'S
LARGEST PLANEMAKER
FOR SECOND YEAR

Airbus is set to beat Boeing to be the world's largest jetmaker for the second year in a row, ending 2020 by resuming deliveries of its A380 superjumbo to Emirates, though its final deliveries are likely to have dropped 35 per cent from 2019 due to the pandemic.

There were no immediate reports on Tuesday of deliveries or production being disrupted by travel bans imposed by many countries on Britain, where Airbus makes wings.

No flights have been scheduled over the Christmas break of special Beluga transport planes, which carry aircraft sections under an exemption from most coronavirus travel restrictions. — Reuters

Asian markets bounce but
Trump throws stimulus grenade

HONG KONG: Asian markets mostly rose on Wednesday following two days of selling, while investors appeared initially unfussed after Donald Trump called a new stimulus package "a disgrace" and told US lawmakers to amend it.

Equities and oil prices have taken a hit recently as virus cases surged across the planet and a new more transmissible strain was reported in the UK, forcing governments to impose tight restrictions and lockdowns to contain the disease over the festive period. The worrying spike in infections has overshadowed the rollout of vaccines and news at the start of the week that Congress had finally hammered out an economic rescue package worth around \$900 billion.

"So much of the good news of the vaccine had been already digested and even the stimulus bill that people had largely anticipated," Joanne Feeney of Advisors Capital Management said on Bloomberg TV.

"So some of the flattening of the market just reflects how much has already been built into the market from those two good sources of news."

However, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Shanghai, Sydney, Seoul, Taipei and Jakarta were all in positive

THE OUTGOING
PRESIDENT
SLAMMED THE
PACKAGE AS NOT
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FOR AMERICAN
FAMILIES AND
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TO RETHINK IT,
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BEING HELD UP
UNTIL AFTER
CHRISTMAS

territory after recent losses, while Wellington extended gains. Singapore and Manila fell.

New York stock futures dropped, though, after Trump's outburst against this week's stimulus agreement.

The outgoing president slammed the package as not having enough for American families and told Congress to rethink it, raising the possibility it being held up until after Christmas.

"It really is a disgrace," he said in a video message posted on Twitter. "I am asking Congress to amend this bill and increase the ridiculously low \$600 to \$2,000, or \$4,000 for a couple," he said, referring to relief cheques being prepared.

Dutch exporters fear fruit will
rot if Brexit deal not done

ROTTERDAM: With the clock running down on negotiations over a Brexit trade deal, Dutch fruit and vegetable exporters fear that a failure to strike an agreement could lead to long customs queues and fresh produce rotting in trucks.

The Netherlands exported about 2 billion euros' (\$2.4 billion) worth of fruit and vegetables to Britain last year, and its port, Rotterdam, is the main hub for cargo passing from other EU member states to Britain.

If Britain crashes out of the EU without a trade deal, its imports of fresh produce will be subject to time-consuming health and

customs checks. "When our trucks are in the middle of these queues, that will be disastrous for our products because they are fresh and need to go quickly," logistics manager Daco Sol of the Dutch fruit and vegetables producers association said.

"Each delay will lower the price of the product. Every consumer wants to consume very fresh products."

A total of around 40 million tonnes of goods are shipped between the Netherlands and Britain every year via Rotterdam, Europe's largest seaport.

— Reuters

■ PLEA TO EXTEND BREXIT TRANSITION PERIOD



Pedestrians, some wearing a face mask or covering due to the COVID-19 pandemic, walks past Coronavirus information signs in Walthamstow in north east London. Britain's public health service urged Prime Minister Boris Johnson on Wednesday to extend the country's Brexit transition period or risk pushing hospitals already struggling with coronavirus 'over the edge' in the event of a no-deal departure from the EU single market. — AFP

Elderly 2.0: China looks to tap digital 'silver dollar'

CHENGDU: Li Changming just purchased a new Huawei smartphone and the 70-year-old retiree is still a bit puzzled by a high-tech device that China policymakers hope will help unlock spending by millions of older Chinese.

Undeterred, he's enrolled in a training session — sort of a "mobile phones 101" — that is part of China's plans to help its legions of pensioners keep up in a fast-developing digital economy.

"I don't understand all the functions yet but I want to learn," Li said, tapping gingerly at the screen.

"You're never too old to learn." He and his elderly classmates in the southwestern city of Chengdu sat and listened as an instructor expounded on the use of popular Chinese apps, navigation with map programmes and how to change phone settings.



A Chinese woman looking at her phone as she attends a training session to get retirees up to speed with digital devices at the Xiaojiahe University of Old Age in Chengdu. — AFP

Demonstrating how to shut down background apps, the teacher tried to use terms the greying students could grasp.

"It's like the room has become too crowded, and you need to clean

it up," he said.

China is pushing a years-long effort to boost domestic consumption to bring balance to an economy traditionally over-reliant on manufacturing and government

investment.

Vast and growing amounts of Chinese economic activity are now handled through digital apps that have become part of the fabric of life in modern China, led by Tencent's WeChat Pay and its rival Alipay, run by Alibaba spin-off Ant Group.

Together they dominate the huge Chinese online payments industry, typified by shoppers scanning QR codes to make purchases rather than use physical cash, which has become old-fashioned in China.

Brands worldwide are chasing the so-called "silver dollar" and governments also are keen to get elderly savings flowing into economies to boost growth.

But China's ageing population offers a particularly rich opportunity. Chinese retirees are expected to number 300 million by 2025, and Daxue Consulting now

Malaysia launches
10-year tourism
plan after \$25 bn
loss in 2020

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia on Wednesday launched a 10-year plan to restart its battered tourism sector, which is estimated to have lost more than 100 billion ringgit (\$24.61 billion) this year due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The Southeast Asian country had initially targeted 30 million tourist arrivals through its "Visit Malaysia 2020" programme, up from 28 million last year. But the global pandemic has crippled the tourism industry, which in 2019 had contributed 240.2 billion ringgit, or 15.9 per cent of Malaysia's gross domestic product, Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin said.

Malaysia closed its borders to most foreigners in March, with entry strictly limited to business purposes, as part of restrictions imposed to stem the spread of the coronavirus.

That has helped to keep infections to less than 100,000 and COVID-19 deaths to just 439. "Clearly, we have been impacted by the outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic this year and economic activities related to the tourism industry... are being forced to face their most difficult moments," Muhyiddin said during a virtual launch of a national tourism policy for 2020-2030. — Reuters

— AFP

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features



Rogan Café, an initiative by three young Omanis from Misfat Al Abriyeen village recently opened a restaurant and is already a popular destination amongst visitors to Misfat... **P18**

INSIDE STORIES

CHRISTMAS

LONELY CHRISTMAS IN SANTA'S HOMETOWN AS TOURISTS STAY AWAY

In Finland's snowy far north, international visitors normally flood the Santa Claus Village amusement park, in search of reindeer rides, snow castles and a meeting with the jolly man himself... **Story on Page P19**

MOVIES

RACE, MUSIC, STRONG WOMEN AT HEART OF MOVIE 'MA RAINEY'

Film drama "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" may be set in the racially divided United States of the 1920s and was written almost 40 years ago, but it arrives with much to say about today... **Story on Page 19**

READ

THE DIARY OF A YOUNG GIRL

BY ANNE FRANK SUMMARY

It tells the story of her family who live in Frankfurt, Germany and suddenly have to go into hiding as a result of Hitler and the Nazi Party's treatment of Jews in Europe during the second world war.

DOMESTIC TOURISM

THE HIDDEN FOREST

Located in the heart of Muscat, Qurum Nature Reserve, a mangrove forest that protects the mangrove trees and the migratory seabirds was opened early this week for visitors... **Story on Page 20**

CELEBRATE

POP SUPERSTAR ARIANA GRANDE ANNOUNCES ENGAGEMENT

US pop superstar Ariana Grande has announced her engagement to Los Angeles luxury real estate agent Dalton Gomez. The "Stuck With U" singer, 27, confirmed the news in an Instagram post Sunday showing photos of her fiancé and her diamond engagement ring, with the caption "forever n then some."



AN EXPERIENCE WITH OMANI HERITAGE

SAMUEL KUTTY
@samkuttyp

One of the main challenges when Oman set out on its Renaissance journey was the preservation of the country's heritage and culture. And there has not been any compromise that development and modernity, in any means, obliterate the country's glorious tradition. The Omani authorities represented by the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism has relentlessly been making efforts with focus on heritage tourism to provide visitors with authentic experience of places, artefacts and activities that represent the past and present including cultural, historical and natural resources. The mountain oasis village of Misfat Al Abriyeen, located 1,000 meter above the sea level in the Wilayat of Al Hamra in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate, is an attractive tourist destination due to the many features that make it a

wonderful experience for any visitor. The village that boasts amazing agricultural terraces, beautiful alleys, and old houses built on top of solid rocks has now been transformed following the implementation of the first phase of the Heritage and Tourism Development Plan produced by the University of Liverpool's Centre for the Study of Architecture and Cultural Heritage of India, Arabia and the Maghreb (ArCHIAM). Along with its firm belief that youngsters have more potential in preserving the intangible heritage and the need to instil its significance within them, many programmes have been rolled out with an aim to transfer the heritage from one generation to the next. While rejuvenating Misfat Al Abriyeen, three traditional houses in the village have been adaptively reused to accommodate tourism-related facilities, while connecting pathways with rehabilitation of open spaces. The project constitutes the



Phase-1 implementation of the Heritage and Tourism Development Plan produced by ArCHIAM, an initiative promoted by Oman's Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, funded by Bank Muscat and led by the local community cooperative, Misfat Al Ahlia. The main access gate has been converted into an information centre, while one

house is set to host a bread-making and training facility, another few meters away has been developed as a small restaurant, and the civic space linking the two buildings, known as Harat ash-Shua, has been reorganised. Uniquely, this project integrates heritage management with development and aims

to sustain the livelihood of the local community through key revenue-generating initiatives. The Rogan Café, an initiative by three young Omanis from the village, recently opened within the restaurant building and is already a popular destination amongst visitors to Misfat. Rogan is the name of a fort built before the advent of Islam by Persians. "We wanted to retain this historic name with the café so that visitors to the Misfat Al Abriyeen will remember the fort and its rich history", said Abdulrahim bin Hamed bin Abdullah al Abri, one of the partners of the café. Excited about the launch of the café and the overwhelming response that the joint venture by the young Omanis, Abdul Rahim said that they have plans to open more outlets in the same name at other places. "We have a good number of visitors including Omanis and expatriates to the café. But due to the restrictions following the coronavirus pandemic, there are no inter-

national visitors at present", he said. In a recent article published by the University of Liverpool, Professor Soumyen Bandyopadhyay, Director of ArCHIAM and Head of the Liverpool School of Architecture, said: "The implementation of the Misfat Tourism Development Plan has pioneered a community-led public and private partnership approach to heritage tourism in Oman. The continued habitation of Misfat poses a number of challenges as well as opportunities to the project, the resolution of which is expected to serve as a regional model for the engagement with traditional communities. Two core factors must be taken into account in this effort: The local community, which expects a raising of their living standards and infrastructural improvements though governmental support. The visitor community, which expects to be given an experience of Omani culture and the traditional lifestyle.



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CHRISTMAS

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Lonely Christmas

in Santa's homeland as tourists stay away



In Finland's snowy far north, international visitors normally flood the Santa Claus Village amusement park, in search of reindeer rides, snow castles and a meeting with the jolly man himself.

Under the pandemic travel restrictions, however, crowds in the Lapland town of Rovaniemi have dwindled to just a trickle and the joyful winter wonderland feels ghostly and abandoned.

"It's been an exceptional and difficult year," Santa tells AFP from behind a plexiglass screen installed in his grotto, adding that his visitors have appreciated being able to forget a tough year and enjoy the Christmas cheer.

Those who can't make it to Lapland can still purchase a remote one-on-one with Santa, at 79 euros (\$97) for five minutes, and the service has proven popular:

"People this year have most of all asked me for happiness, health and then a bit more happiness," although the children still want toys and games, he says.

"Santa actually had time to chat!" Andrea Karjalainen, on a short break to Rovaniemi from southern Finland with her family, says.

"You would expect that there are thousands of people now, but we're more or less alone," adds Teppo, her partner.

Livelihoods in danger

Since the 1980s, tourism chiefs have marketed the Arctic Circle town of Rovaniemi as the "real" home of Santa Claus, helping Finnish Lapland attract a record 2.9 million overnight stays last year, especially from Europe and Asia.

This year, however, visits

have plummeted to half a million, most from early 2020 before the virus hit.

"The local livelihoods are really in danger," Sanna Karkkainen, CEO of Visit Rovaniemi, tells AFP.

"We've already got news of the first bankruptcies and there's going to be more."

With Finland effectively shut off to international tourists, the impact on Lapland has been stark: 5,000 jobs and 700 million euros in revenue have already been lost, a drop of up to 70 per cent, Karkkainen says.

Many businesses have tried to stay open, such as the family-run Husky Park, whose current footfall is nothing like the normal 600 international visitors a day.

"But we've been positively surprised that there have been home-grown tourists, and the snow here has

started bringing people in the south to Lapland," chief of operations Kristian Erkkila tells AFP over the noise of 90 huskies barking.

Behind him, a Finnish family is being helped into a sled, lined with warm reindeer fur, which is then pulled away by twelve huskies following the shouted commands of the musher.

"We're delighted to welcome everyone, but the whole time we're thinking what we need to do differently to be able to survive next summer," Erkkila says, but adds that the vaccine provides "some light at the end of the tunnel".

Waiting for decisions

At the nearby Santa Park underground theme park, owners Ilkka and Katja Lantinen have opted to cut their losses and reopen in winter 2021.

— AFP

MOVIES



Race, music, strong women at heart of movie 'Ma Rainey'

Film drama "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" may be set in the racially divided United States of the 1920s and was written almost 40 years ago, but it arrives with much to say about today. Starring Viola Davis as Black blues singer Ma Rainey and the late Chadwick Boseman as a hot-headed trumpet player, the movie comes to Netflix on Friday as Hollywood and the United States grapple with systemic racism.

"The reason why (the film) resonates today is because racism hasn't been destroyed. It has just evolved," said Davis. "You can't go through 400 years of systemic racism and policies and practices and not have it resonate today in education, in how women are paid and how Black people are paid, and how worthy we're seen," she added.

"Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" takes place on a hot Chicago day in 1927 during a tense recording session where the diva-like singer engages in a battle of wills with her white manager and her band over money and control of her music. Davis, who won a sup-

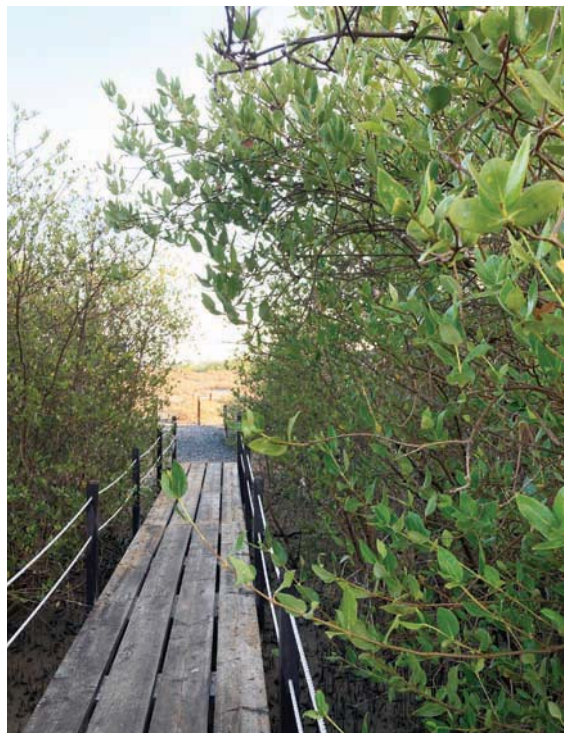
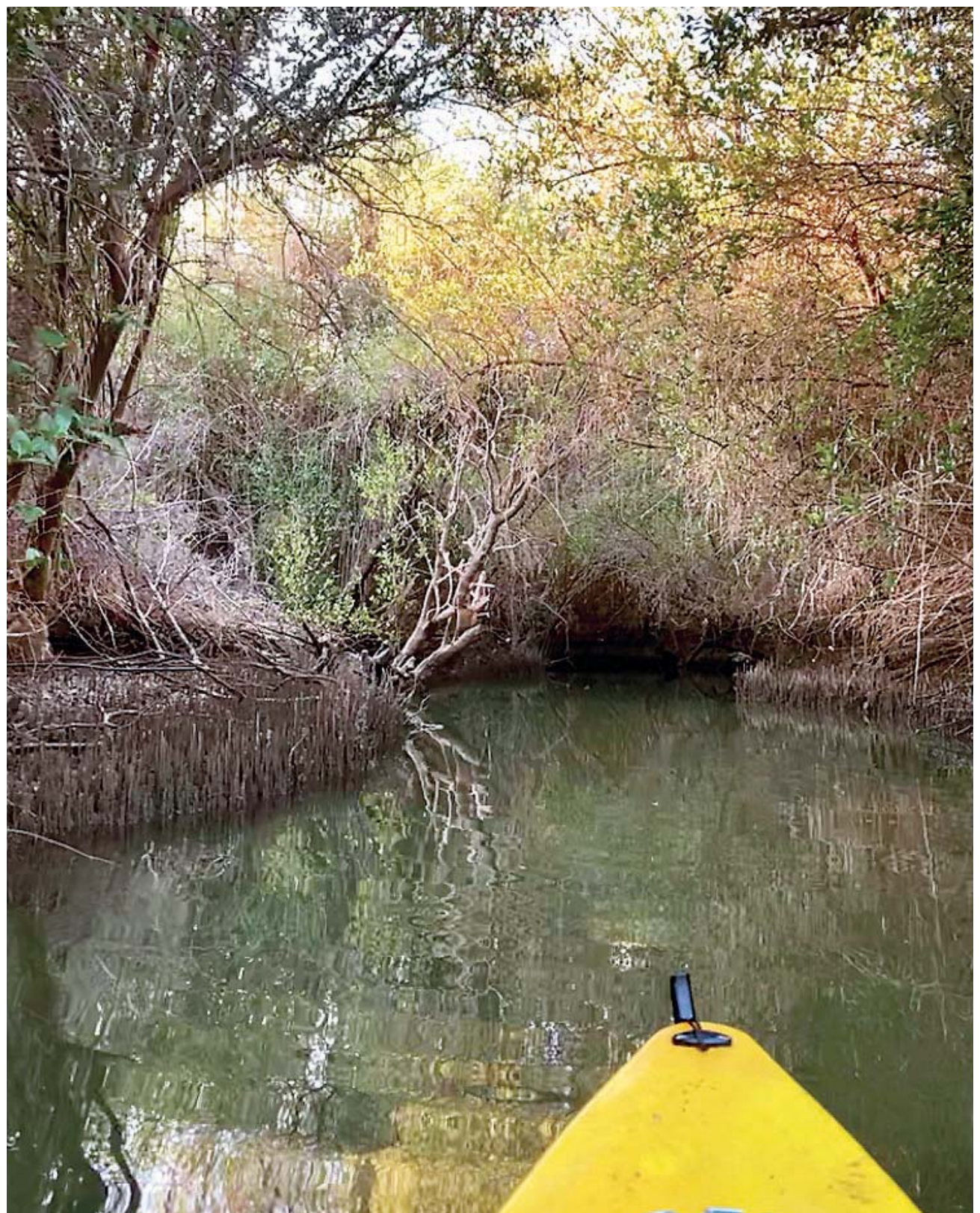
porting actress Oscar in 2017 and is widely expected to be nominated next year, said she saw Ma as a liberated woman "meaning she was not a woman of her time because she was a woman who unapologetically knew her worth."

"Adapted from August Wilson's play of the same name, "Ma Rainey" was filmed in July 2019, a year before street protests broke out nationwide over the killings of Black people by police. "To me, (the movie) is a conversation about how can we have a future until we come to terms with, and heal, and address the sins and scars of the past? That to me is the American conversation," said director George C. Wolfe. Davis said the same conversation also applied to the entertainment industry, which is under pressure to increase diversity behind and in front of the camera. "A lot of our artistry, a lot of our imagination, a lot of our ideas are not seen as good as our white counterparts. So there's a lot of things that still resonate because they haven't changed," she said. — Reuters





The Hidden Forest



By Al Anood Al Wahaibi

Located in the heart of Muscat, Qurum Nature Reserve, a mangrove forest that protects the mangrove trees and the migratory seabirds was opened early this week for visitors.

The Mangrove forest was under an Open Protected Area according to the Royal Decree No. 38/75. This showcases how the government in Oman takes important measures in conserving the wildlife and natural reserves.

Qurum Nature Reserve is however, finally opened for kayaking trips which are only handled through Wave Summit, a sea adventures tour agency.

"It's been almost 4 years since we started working on the preparations for this project inside Qurum

Mangroves", says Bassam al Jabri, founder and owner of Wave Summit. we have proposed to the Environment Authority many times to run these trips, and have got the approval this year to run kayaking trips without impacting the wildlife in the Mangrove".

"We have won the approval because I am confident that we are qualified in terms of experience. We are pretty sure that we can run trips without impacting the wildlife. We are fully responsible in running the kayaking tours." Al Jabri adds.

Wave Summit called it the Hidden Forest because not many people know about the place, many know that it's a nature reserve but don't know what it's inside. Tours and kayaking trips are open from December 20th. For booking: <https://www.wavesummitoman.com/qurum-kayaking/>

