

P12

MAHREZ DOUBLE FIRES MAN CITY INTO CHAMPIONS LEAGUE FINAL



P15

BAVARIA TO REOPEN ITS DOORS TO TOURISM AS HOPES RISE FOR PANDEMIC END



P17

OMANI FIRMS SECURE \$610M WORTH CONTRACTS FROM BP OMAN



MUSCAT

CRUDE PRICE AT \$67.80 A BARREL

Oman oil price for July delivery on Wednesday reached \$67.80, comprising a rise by \$1.90 from the price of Tuesday, which was \$65.90. The average price of Oman oil for May delivery has stabilised at \$64.43, thus \$3.58 per barrel higher than April delivery. Oil prices climbed to multi-week peaks as more countries opened their borders to travellers, improving the demand outlook for petrol and jet fuel. Brent added 1.2 per cent to \$69.69 a barrel, near its highest since mid-March, while US crude rose 1.1 per cent to \$66.43 per barrel, having earlier climbed to the most since March 8.

TEL AVIV

NETANYAHU RIVAL TOLD TO FORM GOVT

Israel's president on Wednesday chose Yair Lapid, a centrist politician and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's strongest rival, to try to form a new government, but his path to success was still uncertain. Israel's longest serving leader, Netanyahu, 71, has been fighting to hold onto office through four inconclusive elections since 2019. President Reuven Rivlin, in a televised address announcing his choice of Lapid, said the former finance minister had the pledged support of 56 of parliament's 120 members, still short of a majority.

SEE ALSO P6

Now get news on the go



INSIDE



TALIBAN CAPTURE DISTRICT AMID SURGE IN VIOLENCE

P7



FOREST EMISSION CUTS GET A MAKEOVER...

P9

Substantial drop in new cases, inpatients

73,269 PEOPLE RECEIVED SECOND DOSE OF VACCINES

VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

Oman reported only 770 new cases indicating that restrictive measures have been paying off. However, the daily deaths recorded high at nine.

With 1,352 people recovering from the infection, the number of inpatients dropped substantially to 782. The recovery rate is now 90.6 per cent. Only 75 people were admitted to hospitals in the 24 hours across the Sultanate, while the intensive care units (ICUs) still have 281 patients.

The total number of cases registered in the Sultanate has now reached 198,572, including 2,071 deaths.

Meanwhile, the Directorate General of Health Services in Muscat is making continuous efforts to complete the vaccination process by ensuring that the primary health services are not affected.

According to Dr Lamia bint Hussain al Balushiyyah, Director of Disease Control and Disease Control Department, the directorate continues with primary healthcare by providing health centres with its basic services and

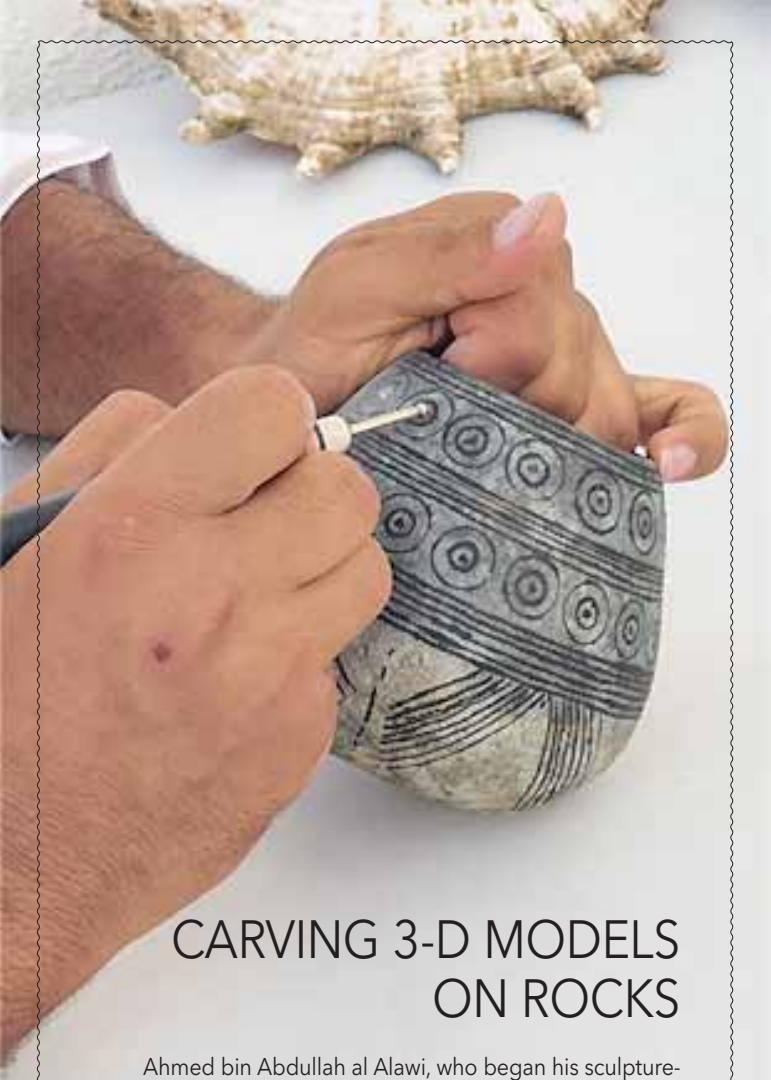


its new role to confront Covid-19 cases. So far 73,269 people have received the second dose of vaccines in the country, including 18,936 community members and 7,424 health workers in Muscat.

TECHNICAL TEAM

A technical team was formed to implement the campaign based on the target groups and the quantities of available vaccines. After initial reluctance to vaccinate, the turnout at all health centres designated for vaccination has improved.

TURN TO P2



CARVING 3-D MODELS ON ROCKS

Ahmed bin Abdullah al Alawi, who began his sculpture-making journey 10 years ago, was bowled by three-dimensional models. He excels in the craft of carving on rocks, which is one of the oldest crafts practised by Omanis in the past. He prefers craft sculpture which is based on the formation of three-dimensional models bearing ancient handicraft shapes such as pottery vessels, silver jewellery or some ancient stone shapes, and that handicraft sculpture differs from other types of sculpture because it depends on the speed of the craft of carving on rocks, as it highlights some of the ancient Omani heritage.

DETAILS ON P3

RAINS CAUSE DAMAGE IN NORTH AL BATINAH

LAKHSMI KOTHANETH
@lakshmioman

Tuesday's heavy rains, thunderstorms and gust caused severe damages in North Al Batinah, especially in Saham. The wilayat incurred significant damages to public and private properties as well as vehicles.

According to the Met Office weather forecaster, Saham received the highest amount of rainfall, while Khabourah experienced strong winds. It was the combination of rain, strong winds and gust which caused the damage. All the wadis in North Al Batinah, Al Dakhiliyah and Al Sharqiyah are overflowing. The Met Office has also alerted sea enthusiasts and fishermen not to venture into the sea during thunderstorms as downdraft could cause high waves.

Clouds are developing over Al Hajar Mountains since Wednesday afternoon. The weather expert said by evening, it is expected to reach the coastal areas of Al Batinah and Muscat.

Cloud advection continued over most of the Sultanate with a chance of convective clouds



development and rain occasionally thundershowers associated with fresh downdraft winds and hail over Musandam, Dhofar, Al Hajar Mountains and adjoining areas towards the afternoon and extend to the coastal areas of the Sea of Oman.

TURN TO P2

Excessive salt is putting millions at greater risk!

GENEVA:

Excessive salt in food and beverages is putting people at greater risk of potentially fatal heart disease and strokes, the World Health Organization (WHO) said on Wednesday, issuing fresh guidelines for limiting sodium content.

An estimated 11 million deaths globally are associated with poor diet each year, including 3 million attributable to high sodium intake,



it said in a report.

In many wealthy countries, and increasingly in lower-income nations, a significant proportion of sodium in the diet comes from manufactured foods such as bread, cereal, processed meats and dairy products including cheese, the WHO said.

Authorities must establish policies to reduce salt intake and provide people with information

to make the right food choices, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said.

"We also need the food and beverage industry to cut sodium levels in processed food," Tedros said in a statement.

The new WHO benchmarks, for 64 food and drink categories, are aimed at guiding health authorities in its 194 member states in talks with the food and

beverage industry.

For example, potato crisps should contain a maximum of 500 mgs of sodium per 100g serving, pies and pastries up to 120 mgs and processed meats up to 360mgs, according to its benchmarks.

"Excess dietary sodium intake increases blood pressure and consequently increases the risk of cardiovascular diseases," the WHO said.

— Reuters

RO 2.9m awarded for additional works

MUSCAT: The Tender Board on Wednesday approved RO 2,931,115 worth additional works for the following additional works:

- 1- Renewal of leasing contract for the building of the Public Prosecution Department in Al Khuwair at RO 199,236.
 - 2- Additional works for the tender related to consultancy services for preparation of the governorates' comprehensive urban strategy at RO 575,934.
 - 3- Additional works for the tender related to supply of surgical instruments for the Ministry of Health at RO 1,502,318.
 - 4- Additional works for the tender related to supply of surgical equipment for continuous ambulatory peritoneal dialysis (CAPD) and automated peritoneal dialysis (APD) for different health institutions of the Ministry of Health at RO 595,002.
 - 5- Additional works for the tender related to insurance of state properties for 2020 – 2021 at RO 58,624.
- The board meeting was held under the chairmanship of Dr Said bin Ahmed al Saqri, Minister of Economy, Chairman of the Tender Board. — ONA



Substantial drop in new cases, inpatients

FROM PAGE 1

Five central sites have been activated in Muscat to give vaccinations, which is the main hall of the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Bausher and Sablat Muttrah and the office of the Wali of Qurayat and the Qurayat Health Complex.

The director urged all community members to start protecting themselves, adhering to preventive measures, applying social distancing standards, wearing masks, not circulating rumours.

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Health has notified that the second dose of Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine will be given four months from the first dose due to the shortage in the global supply.

RAINS CAUSE DAMAGE IN NORTH AL BATINAH

FROM PAGE 1

Along the coastal areas of Sea of Oman, winds will be northeasterly light to moderate during day, becoming variable light at night, and over the rest of the Sultanate, winds will be southerly to southeasterly light to moderate occasionally fresh changing during the evening to northwesterly moderate over Al Buraimi and Al Dhahirah.

The Met Office warned there would be very strong winds.

Thursday's weather forecast states that it is expected to be mainly clear skies with a chance of convective clouds development and rain occasionally thundershower over Dhofar, Al Hajar Mountains and adjoining mountains towards afternoon and may extend to the coastal areas of Sea of Oman.

There is also a chance for late night low-level clouds and fog along most of the coastal areas.



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1 Quick loading content

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8 Mobile-friendly pages

Oman Extensive Internship Programme launched

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, MAY 5

Under the auspices of Sayyid Salim bin Musallam al Busaidy, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Labour for Human Resources Development at the Ministry of Labour, Huawei, a leading global provider of information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure and smart devices, launches an 'Extensive Internship Programme 2021-2022' in Oman. The programme aims to find, train, and develop the right talent to support the Sultanate's digital transformation.

The launch ceremony was also attended by Shaikh Nasr bin Amer al Hosni, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Labour for Labour, Eng Omar bin Hamdan al Ismaili, CEO of Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA), Dr Ghalib al Hosni, Chief People Officer of Omantel and Chen

Bing, CEO of Huawei Oman. The three-year programme offers internships for students who completed their bachelor's degree, and will be selected by Huawei and the Ministry of Labour based on their GPAs. A total of 300 internships will be offered per three years with the potential of hiring high performing students at Huawei Oman office. Al Busaidy, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Labour for Human Resources Development, said: "We are proud to be collaborating with Huawei on launching this programme and commend them for such initiatives that aim to upskill the youth of Oman and prepare them for the careers of tomorrow. It is our utmost duty to provide the right tools and resources to develop Oman's ICT talent and support them to realise their full potential."

Chen Bing, CEO of Huawei Oman, said: "Through such joint

internship programmes, Huawei aims to develop Oman's digital ecosystem by empowering the local talents in the ICT field.

We firmly believe that developing these skills contributes to Oman's national vision for long-term economic growth and prosperity."

The programme will start with a three-month online training course, followed by a three-month Classroom training, then practice in actual work, after which the students will have to chance to join Huawei or one of its partners for a part-time and full-time on job practice which runs for almost 3 years. Once the latter is completed, the programme comes to its end and students complete their graduation. Through this programme, Huawei Oman aims to get the participants job-ready and to provide them with a competitive edge in developing their careers further.



MoU to support training efforts

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Labour (MoL) has signed a memorandum of understanding with an Internship platform to support training efforts by contributing to the search and display of training opportunities for job-seekers, students and employees on the platform.

The MoU was signed by Sayyid Salim bin Musallam al Busaidy, Under-Secretary of the Ministry for Human Resources Development and Saleh bin Mahfoudh al Qasbi, the CEO of National Innovative & Technology



Company.

The Internship platform www.internships.com.om is considered as an interactive SMART national network linking higher education institutions, academic students, graduates, job-seekers, as well as

those with skills to facilitate the effort of searching for various training opportunities and part time jobs in the public and private sector institutions.

The Internship platform will contribute a continues search for

an inhouse trainings programmes for kind of specialisations, part time jobs opportunities and presenting them on the platform, for those wishing to obtain training and employment opportunities.

The platform will also provide the MoL the statistics that will contribute to boost the recruitments, training processes and strategies among academic students, graduates, job-seekers and retired employees and people of determination at various public and private sectors.

Scrapping of NOC will make labour market competitive

STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT, MAY 5

The General Federation of Oman Workers (GFW) said that a set of legislations and initiatives implemented recently will fundamentally make the labour market in the private sector in the Sultanate more attractive, especially the abolition of the requirement to provide a No-Objection Certificate (NOC).

“The decision to scrap NOC will undoubtedly contribute to reducing human trafficking and providing more room for the worker to get better job opportunities”, said Nabhan al Battashi (pictured), Chairman of GFW, in his statement on Labour Day on May 1.

He added that the Job Safety Fund launched this year will enhance the principle of social solidarity, and gives protection to the workers of the private sector worker against any risk that may threaten their future job stability, especially during this current critical situation where a number of private establishments have to



mass layoffs of its workers

In the field of improving litigation procedures in labour cases, the Law issued by Royal Decree 125/2020 will have a major prominent impact on enhancing the effectiveness and efficiency in adjudicating labour disputes, through which we hope to address many problems that existed in the job market.

Other priorities will be to follow up on the adoption of the new labor law, in which GFW contributed to the preparation of its draft, provided its observations, supported by legal bases and comparative legislations to reach the right objective.

■ BARKA FISH MARKET TO OPEN SOON



The fishing harbour project as part of the Barka Marina is expected to be a major tourism and economic project in the country. Saeed bin Rashid al Muqbali, Director of the Department of Fisheries in Barka, said the building designated for fishermen – landing, selling and cutting – is ready for soft opening in the coming days with all basic services such as water, electricity and air-conditioning fully provided and successfully tested.

Mastering the craft of stone carving

MUSCAT: Ahmed bin Abdullah al Alawi, who began his sculpture making journey 10 years ago, was bowled by three-dimensional models. He excels in the craft of carving on rocks, which is one of the oldest crafts practised by Omanis in the past.

In an interview to Oman News Agency, he said that he prefers craft sculpture which is based on the formation of three-dimensional models bearing ancient handicraft shapes such as pottery vessels, silver jewellery or some ancient stone shapes, and that handicraft sculpture differs from other types



of sculpture because it depends on the speed of the craft of carving on rocks, as it highlights some of the ancient Omani heritage.

He added that the Omani



environment is distinct and rich in many shapes, colours and various sizes of rocks. From this diversity, he was inspired by the idea of

creativity in this art and made it an innovative professional way to highlight the original Omani heritage.

OQ to plant half-million wild trees across Oman

STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT, MAY 5

OQ Group — the Sultanate’s global integrated energy group — has pledged to plant half a million trees across the Sultanate as part of the National Initiative for Planting Wild Trees.

The national initiative is being spearheaded by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources in cooperation with the Environment Authority.

In a post on social media, OQ8 (Duqm Refinery and Petrochemical Industries Company), a subsidiary of OQ Group, said it has so far planted 9,500 trees in Al Wusta Governorate with the support of 685 volunteers. Organised as part of its Corporation Social Investment, OQ8 said the plantation drive was in support of OQ Group’s Green Initiative centring on the National Initiative for Planting Wild Trees.

Beautification of sixth commercial district in Al Amerat under way

STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT, MAY 5

Muscat Municipality is intensifying its efforts to develop and beautify the sixth commercial district in Al Amerat, including efforts to regulate traffic movement at entry and exit points.

The project included the establishment of organised parking spaces for buildings and shops in an organised manner. The total parking spaces to be provided is 717, in addition to special slots for the disabled.

This project was launched due to traffic congestion and unorganised parking, especially in the evenings.

The Muscat Municipality is keen to continue the development process, by following a more flexible model and a sustainable future in terms of urban planning, infrastructure and various areas of municipal work.





Oman Gulf Enterprises LLC



RECALL CAMPAIGN
For SUBARU XV & FORESTER



Date of Campaign : 6 / 5 / 2021
Campaign Type : Recall
Recall Segment : Rear Suspension
Product Description : Subaru Forester 2019MY , XV 2018 to 2019 Model

Model Year	Division	Vehicle Model	Affected Vehicle VIN Range	No. of Affected Vehicles in Oman
2018 - 2019	Subaru	XV & Forester	JF2GT2LB8JG009281 to JF25K74C3KG024689	134

Description:
 The bolts on the rear stabilizer bracket might become loose during vehicle usage and may cause an abnormal noise. If the vehicle is used continuously, the bolt may fall off and the bracket itself may move freely while driving. In the worst case, it might damage to its peripheral parts such as brake pipe, drive shaft or sub-frame.

Procedure: For all the affected vehicles, Subaru dealer will inspect the condition of the bolts and tighten them to the specified torque. If the bolts are missing, the new bolts will be attached.

For More information:
 Customers of effected vehicles may please call Oman Gulf enterprises LLC for further details/booking.

Contact Details: Toll free No 80050004 on all working days between 8:00 am to 1:00 pm & 2:00 pm to 5:30 pm with effected from date 6.05.2021



Ramadhan

M U B A R A K

Unleash the Power of Prayer

PICTURE BY SHAMSA AL HARTHIYA

KABEER YOUSUF

[@kabeeryousef](#)

The people of the Sultanate of Oman, both citizens and expatriates will join His Eminence Shaikh Ahmed bin Hamed al Khalili, Grand Mufti of the Sultanate, in a mass prayer for healing the world and to save it from the pandemic on Friday.

Officials of the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Endowments (MARE) has requested everyone to pray to God to lift the epidemic and misfortune that was befallen on the world.

People from all governorates and states of the Sultanate will offer two rak'ahs of the prayer of distress and will be held with a unified supplication under His Eminence.

The prayers be held at 12:30 pm through satellite and radio channels and various media outlets to bestow us with our normal life.

"Surrender yourself and plead for the world.... For sure, the last 10 days are the period Almighty Allah will never turn down any request and prayers," says Mufti Menk, who is due to speak to Oman on Thursday.

About the power of prayers during the last few days of the holy month, as it is about to go away from mankind this year, leaving trails of trials and tribulations, Mufti Menk said,

"Give it your all these last days and do unselfish and random acts of kindness. Whenever you see an opportunity to do good, just do it. Amidst all the problems the world faces today, sometimes it's that one noble act that reminds us there's still some good around us! Go on and do it!"

Being impatient as one could be at times of wanting for what they strongly desire for, he warns one to be careful.

"Being impatient can be dangerous. Instead of trusting the Almighty's timing, you think you know better? Get out of this mindset. Lay your trust in what He is doing. He is the best planner right down to the last second. Never doubt that."

As the holy month is about to leave the lives of the believers, Mufti Menk advises all to stop sharing their pain with everyone and never on social media.

"There are many who would be happy to see you in pain. Be mindful of who you allow into your circle. Not everyone is there for your healing. Some will even pray against you. Take your pain to the Almighty, your Healer, and not to anyone else," Mufti Menk adds.

Facebook oversight board upholds Trump ban

WASHINGTON: Facebook's independent oversight board on Wednesday upheld the platform's ban on former US president Donald Trump while ordering further review of the case, in a decision with a potentially far-reaching impact on the regulation of online speech.

The board, whose decisions are binding on the leading social network, said Trump "created an environment where a serious risk of violence was possible" with his comments regarding the January 6 rampage by his supporters at the US Capitol.

"Given the seriousness of the violations and the ongoing risk of violence, Facebook was justified in suspending Mr Trump's accounts on January 6 and extending that suspension on January 7," the board said after its review.

But the panel also ruled that "it was not appropriate for Facebook to impose the indeterminate and standardless penalty of indefinite suspension."

"Within six months of this decision, Facebook must reexamine the arbitrary penalty it imposed on January 7 and decide the appropriate penalty," the review board said in its written opinion.

"It is not permissible for Facebook to keep a user off the platform for an undefined period, with no criteria for



In this file photo illustration, a phone screen displays a Facebook logo with the official portrait of former US President Donald Trump on the background in Arlington, Virginia. — AFP

The board said Trump "created an environment where a serious risk of violence was possible" with his comments

when or whether the account will be restored," it added.

The case had been intensely followed for its repercussions for social networks seeking to curb misinformation and abusive content while remaining open to political discourse.

Trump was suspended from

Facebook and Instagram after he posted a video during the deadly January 6 storming of the Capitol in which he told his supporters: "We love you, you're very special."

The US leader was banned permanently by Facebook the following day, and he was taken off other platforms including Twitter and YouTube.

Some analysts said Facebook and other social networks should have acted on Trump sooner, after years of giving him an exemption from rules on hateful content because of his "newsworthiness" as a political leader.

CLARIFYING THE RULES

In its ruling, the oversight board — envisioned by

Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg as the equivalent of a "supreme court" for thorny content decisions — made additional recommendations on dealing with potentially harmful content from world leaders.

The board said "that it is not always useful to draw a firm distinction between political leaders and other influential users, recognising that other users with large audiences can also contribute to serious risks of harm," according to its statement.

"When posts by influential users pose a high probability of imminent harm, Facebook should act quickly to enforce its rules."

The board also "called on Facebook to address widespread confusion about how decisions relating to influential users are made" and said "considerations of newsworthiness should not take priority when urgent action is needed to prevent significant harm."

Trump's former chief of staff Mark Meadows, responding to the decision, said it would have a chilling effect on free speech and that Facebook needed to be regulated or broken up.

"It's a sad day for America, it's a sad day for Facebook," he told Fox News.

"We need to have some standards, they are not able to police themselves." — AFP

Scotland's electoral bid for independence vote too close to call: Poll



Nicola Sturgeon, Scotland's First Minister and leader of the Scottish National Party, takes a selfie photograph with locals as she campaigns in Alford, on Wednesday. — AFP

EDINBURGH, Scotland: The Scottish National Party's bid to win a clear mandate for having another independence referendum was balanced on a knife edge on the eve of Thursday's parliamentary election, with polls showing the expected result was too close to call.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson has repeatedly said he will not grant a second referendum on Scotland breaking from the United Kingdom.

But the SNP, the main pro-independence party and the dominant force in Scottish politics, says that if it secures a majority of seats in the devolved parliament in Edinburgh, its demand for one cannot be ignored.

A Savanta ComRes poll indicated the SNP would fall six seats short of winning an outright majority in the 129-seat parliament, though it showed the Greens, which are pro-independence, were set for gains.

An Ipsos MORI poll found that while the SNP was far ahead of other parties it was not clear if it would win an outright majority.

"The SNP is going into Thursday's election in a very strong position," Ipsos MORI said. "However, it is not possible to predict with confidence on the basis of these results whether the SNP will definitely win an outright majority of seats."

If the SNP wins Thursday's election,

Johnson will have a difficult choice: refuse a referendum and thus allow Scottish discontent to simmer, or allow a referendum which could break apart the union he says is so dear to him and his party.

The only time the SNP have won a majority before was in 2011. Britain's then Prime Minister David Cameron bowed to pressure and agreed to a referendum in 2014.

Scots voted 55-45 per cent against independence in that referendum. But Britain's departure from the European Union with Brexit, approval for First Minister Nicola Sturgeon's handling of the Covid-19 crisis, and antipathy in Scotland to Johnson's Conservative government in Westminster have bolstered support for independence.

The Greens in Scotland could be an important factor.

They have cooperated with the SNP to pass legislation, are pro-independence, and have not ruled out a coalition with the SNP.

If there was a pro-independence majority returned to parliament, the SNP would most likely say it had a mandate for another referendum, though London would likely dispute that. At a debate ahead of the election, SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon said she would not call an illegal, so-called "wildcat" referendum if PM Johnson refused to allow one. — Reuters

Mourners pay tribute to South Africa's late Zulu regent queen

JOHANNESBURG: Mourners in traditional leopard skin regalia on Wednesday gathered outside a Johannesburg morgue to accompany the body of the late Zulu regent queen on the eve of her funeral.

The 65-year-old queen, Shiyiwe Mantfombi Dlamini Zulu, died on April 30, weeks after she was named interim successor to her late husband, King Goodwill Zwelithini, the longest-serving leader of South Africa's largest ethnic group.

A day ahead of her funeral, hundreds of mourners paraded through the inner-city suburb of Hillbrow, singing and dancing as they made their way to the mortuary under a clear autumn sky.

Men known as "amaButho" or Zulu regiments, donned traditional leopard skin ponchos and headbands, wielding clubs and shields made of animal hide.

Young women wore colourful miniskirts and beads, while their elderly married counterparts followed in head wraps and patterned shawls.

"Our wounds had not healed from the passing of the king, now the queen has followed," said mourner Jabu Mangena, dressed in black and



Mourners gather in front of the morgue in Johannesburg on Wednesday to pay their last respects to the Queen Shiyiwe Mantfombi Dlamini Zulu who died on April 29, 2021, just a month after she became regent. — AFP

wearing a broad-brimmed red hat.

"We will remember her as a woman who was proud of her culture and heritage," she said.

Mourners will accompany the queen's remains to KwaKhangelamankengane Royal Palace in the southeastern town of Nongoma, around 480 kilometres from Johannesburg, where she will be buried on Thursday.

"In line with her wishes,

as was done for... the King, her majesty will be interred at the crack of dawn in a private burial," Zulu prince and traditional prime minister Mangosuthu Buthelezi said in a statement.

A memorial service will be held a day after the funeral that will be marked by flags flying half-mast across Kwa-Zulu Natal province.

Zwelithini died on March 12, aged 72 after half a century

on the throne, following a battle with diabetes-related illness.

He left behind six wives, 28 children and a turbulent succession battle.

In his will, Zwelithini had chosen Dlamini-Zuma — his third wife and also the sister of Eswatini's King Mswati III — to temporarily step in for him until a successor is appointed.

She died unexpectedly in hospital. — AFP

Sultanate of Oman

Ministry of Defence

ENGINEERING SERVICES

TENDER 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)
02/2021	Civil Work - Haima	First and Above	20 th May 2021	06 th July 2021	150/-

*For more information about the above Tenders please visit gate number (14)

- 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.
 - Full set of stamped drawings and documents, Tender Form and Tender Bonds to be submitted as hard copy and others documentation shall be as soft copy (USB) in two separate files:
 - Financial (bill 1&2 separated from bill3)
 - Technical files.
 - Confirmation of site visit.
 - 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.



General view of Kaaba as pilgrims wearing face masks and keeping social distance pray facing Kaaba during the annual Haj pilgrimage amid the Covid-19 pandemic, in the holy city of Mecca, on July 31, 2020. — Reuters file photo

Saudi ‘considers barring’ overseas Haj pilgrims for second year

DUBAI: Saudi Arabia is considering barring overseas pilgrims from the annual Haj for the second year running as Covid-19 cases rise globally and worries grow about the emergence of new variants, two sources familiar with the matter said on Wednesday.

Such a move would restrict the pilgrimage to Mecca, a once in a lifetime duty for every able-bodied Muslim who can afford it, to Saudi nationals and residents of

the kingdom who were vaccinated or have recovered from Covid-19 at least months prior to attending.

While discussions about a possible ban have taken place, there has been no final decision on whether to pursue it, they said.

Before the pandemic enforced social distancing globally, some 2.5 million pilgrims used to visit the holiest sites of Islam in Mecca and Medina for the week-long Haj, and the lesser, year-round umrah pilgrimage, which

altogether earned the kingdom about \$12 billion a year, according to official data.

Two sources familiar with the matter said authorities have suspended earlier plans to host pilgrims from overseas, and will only allow domestic pilgrims who have been vaccinated or have recovered from Covid-19 at least six months before the pilgrimage.

Restrictions will be applied on the age of participants as well, one of the sources said.

A second source said the plans were initially to allow some numbers of vaccinated pilgrims from abroad, but confusion over types of vaccines, their efficacy and the emergence of new variants has pushed officials to reconsider.

The government media office did not respond to a request for comment. Saudi Arabia barred foreigners from the Haj last year due to the pandemic for the first time in the kingdom's modern history. — Reuters

Syria says Israeli raids target Mediterranean port region of Latakia

AMMAN: Syrian air defences downed several Israeli missiles during pre-dawn raids on the Mediterranean port city of Latakia, the Syrian army said on Wednesday, a rare attack on the ancestral home region of the Syrian leader and close to a Russian air base.

A Syrian army statement said aerial strikes soon after 2 am hit several areas along the south west coast of Latakia. One civilian was killed and six injured in one of the strikes that the army said hit a civilian plastics factory.

“Our aerial defences intercepted the aggressors missiles and downed some of them”, the army

communique said.

State media earlier reported the Israeli attack also hit the town of Hifa, east of Latakia, and Misyaf in Hama province.

The Israeli military declined to comment.

Although Israeli strikes in the last few years have targeted many parts of Syria, they have rarely hit Latakia which is close to Russia's main air base of Hmeimim.

A senior military defector said the Israeli raid struck several areas in the town of Jabla in northwestern Latakia province, a bastion of Syrian President Bashar al Assad's minority Alawite sect that dominates the army and security forces.

— Reuters



An injured girl is treated after pre-dawn raids on the Mediterranean port region of Latakia, Syria, in this handout picture released on Wednesday. — Reuters

Israel president eyes new candidate to form government

TEL AVIV: The Israeli president met with party leaders on Wednesday to determine if any lawmaker can form a government to end an unprecedented gridlock after veteran Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu failed.

Netanyahu's right-wing Likud party finished first in the March 23 election, Israel's fourth inconclusive vote in less than two years, helping the divisive premier earn a 28-day mandate to negotiate a government.

But that mandate expired at 2100 GMT on Tuesday and Netanyahu informed President Reuven Rivlin he had been unable to secure a majority in the 120-seat parliament. Netanyahu's failure further highlighted deep

fractures in the Israeli electorate, which spread its support across the political spectrum, including far-right Jewish extremists and a conservative Islamic party.

Rivlin, whose largely ceremonial role has taken on outsized prominence amid the seemingly endless cycle of elections, has voiced doubt any lawmaker could form a government.

But several political experts on Wednesday predicted he would give a chance to opposition leader Yair Lapid, a former television anchor whose centrist Yesh Atid party finished second in the March vote.

Rivlin met on Wednesday with Lapid and Naftali Bennett,



Yesh Atid party leader Yair Lapid and Yamina party leader Naftali Bennett. — AFP

a religious right-winger who has become a closely-watched kingmaker, despite his Yamina party controlling only seven parliament seats.

LAPID-BENNETT DEAL?

Bennett was once a close Netanyahu ally and served as his defence minister but their relationship has disintegrated.

During Netanyahu's ongoing corruption trial where the 71-year-old premier is accused of trading regulatory favours with media moguls in exchange for favourable coverage, the court heard testimony about Netanyahu's alleged obsession with smearing Bennett.

Bennett said on Monday that he would have struck a deal with Netanyahu but concluded the prime minister could not clinch a coalition. Israeli media have watched for hints of a brewing Lapid-Bennett accord.

Lapid, already supported by much of the anti-Netanyahu bloc, on Wednesday was endorsed by a group of Likud defectors from the New Hope party as the best choice

to form a government.

New Hope, led by another former Netanyahu ally, Gideon Saar, abstained during Rivlin's last round of consultations but their shift to Lapid on Wednesday could be a sign of momentum.

Lapid said he offered Bennett a rotating prime ministership in which he would take first turn, in the interest of agreeing a government that could end Netanyahu's record 12 straight years in office.

Bennett said on Monday that if Netanyahu failed to secure a coalition he would work towards a “unity” government, as his top priority was averting a fifth election in less than three years. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

CAIRO

Egypt to get further 4.9m vaccine doses in May

Egypt said on Wednesday it will receive another 4.9 million doses of different types of coronavirus vaccines in May.

The earliest of these will be a shipment of 1.7 million doses of the AstraZeneca Covid-19 vaccine which is due to arrive next week as part of the global COVAX agreement, the Egyptian cabinet said in a statement.

Egypt will receive an additional shipment of 1.7 million AstraZeneca vaccines



by the end of May, 1 million doses of the Chinese Sinopharm vaccine to arrive in two shipments, and 500,000 doses of the Chinese Sinovac vaccine, the cabinet said. — Reuters

KIRKUK

Militants attack oil wells in Iraq's north

Militants using bombs attacked two oil wells at an oilfield close to the northern Iraqi city of Kirkuk on Wednesday, killing at least one policeman and setting off fires, the oil ministry said.

Industry sources said the attack had not affected production. A statement from the oil ministry did not comment on production.

The statement said one of the fires, at Well 177 at the Bai Hassan oilfield, had been put out and emergency teams were



working to halt a second at Well 183. The militants attacked a nearby security post during the assault, killing one policeman and wounding three others, security officials said. — Reuters

BRUSSELS

Diplomat's 20-year sentence confirmed

An Iranian diplomat's 20-year sentence in Belgium for “plotting to bomb an opposition rally outside Paris” was confirmed on Wednesday after he failed to appeal, his lawyer and prosecutors said.

Assadollah Assadi, 49, was convicted in February by an Antwerp court of supplying explosives for the planned June 30, 2018 attack on the exiled opposition group the National Council of Resistance in Iran (NCRI).

“I confirmed today that Mr



Assadi does not wish to appeal”, his lawyer, Dimitri de Beco (pictured), told AFP, adding that his client contests the legitimacy of the Belgian justice system. — AFP



In brief

■ SYDNEY

NEW ZEALAND PM
ARDERN PLANS
SUMMER WEDDING

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern plans to get married during summer but did not disclose the date, local media reported on Wednesday.

Ardern told Coast Radio that she and her partner television host Clarke Gayford have “finally got a date” for the wedding, New Zealand Herald said in a report.

“That doesn’t mean we’ve told anyone yet, so I feel like we should probably put some invites out,” Ardern was quoted as saying by the report. Ardern, 40, got engaged to Gayford, 44, during the Easter holidays in 2019 and they have a two-year-old daughter. — **Reuters**

■ MUMBAI

INDIA ANNOUNCES
\$6.7BN FUNDING FOR
VACCINE, HEALTH FIRMS

India released \$6.7 billion in cheap financing for vaccine makers, hospitals and other health firms on Wednesday, to counter the devastating coronavirus surge gripping the country. Reserve Bank of India governor Shaktikanta Das also vowed to deploy “unconventional” measures if the crisis worsens.

He spoke as India announced a record of 3,780 deaths in 24 hours as well as 382,000 new cases.

This week it became the second country after the United States to pass 20 million cases. — **AFP**

■ KUALA LUMPUR

MALAYSIA TIGHTENS
CURBS IN CAPITAL AS
VIRUS CASES CLIMB

Malaysia will tighten coronavirus curbs in the capital to combat a fresh spike in cases, with only essential businesses allowed to operate and restaurant dining-in banned, authorities said Wednesday.

The partial lockdown in Kuala Lumpur, initially set to last from May 7 to 20, comes a day after officials announced tougher restrictions in several districts surrounding the city.

The country was hit by a fresh Covid-19 outbreak at the start of 2021, prompting authorities to re-introduce curbs not seen since the start of the pandemic and declare a state of emergency. — **AFP**

Taliban capture northern Afghan district amid surge in violence

KABUL: Taliban insurgents captured a district in northern Afghanistan, forcing government troops to retreat to the provincial capital amid a recent surge in violence, officials said on Wednesday.

Fighting has escalated sharply in recent weeks, with Afghan officials saying the Taliban have stepped up their attacks since Washington announced plans last month to pull out all US troops by September 11.

The militants seized the district of Barka in the northern province of Baghlan after hours of fighting with Afghan forces, who retreated to the main city, said Jawed Basharat, a spokesman for the provincial police.

The Taliban suffered heavy losses in the fighting, he added, but a senior security official who sought anonymity said at least 10 security forces were killed and 16 others captured by the Taliban.

The district fell a day after Afghan security forces fought back a major Taliban offensive in the southern province of Helmand.

The Afghan government says it has recorded more than 100 Taliban attacks on security forces and other government installations in 26 of the 34 provinces over the last 24 hours.

The Taliban overran a small outpost on a highway in Baghlan, killing nine Afghan soldiers and wounding several, regional officials said on Tuesday.

Kabul police spokesman



Afghan National Army (ANA) soldiers march during a ceremony at a military base in the Guzara district of Herat on Wednesday. — **AFP**

Ferdaws Faramarz said one person was killed and three wounded when a roadside bomb hit a vehicle belonging to a health official outside the city.

Another roadside bomb killed a district police commander in the southeastern province of Paktika on Tuesday, officials said.

Although the United States missed a May 1 withdrawal deadline agreed in talks with the Taliban last year, its pull-out has begun.

Critics of President Joe Biden’s decision to withdraw say the militants will try to sweep back into power.

JOURNALISTS THREATENED

The Taliban and the Afghan government on Wednesday threatened journalists and media workers for alleged propaganda following the intensification of the conflict between the warring sides.

Ahmad Zia Saraj, the chief of Afghanistan’s National Directorate of Security (NDS), the country’s intelligence agency, said that some TV stations are broadcasting propaganda in favour of the Taliban, calling it “shocking.”

Saraj has made the remarks during a closed session of

parliament.

“We will not tolerate this,” he was quoted saying by Afghan lawmaker Arif Rahmani, who was present at the meeting.

The same statement was posted in the official Twitter account of the NDS but it was removed shortly after.

In the meantime, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid accused media outlets of making “one-sided propaganda” for the past few days. Without naming any media outlet, Mujahid warned media workers of consequences if they don’t maintain neutrality.

— **Reuters/dpa**



Francia Nolasco, 78, gets a shot of China’s Sinovac vaccine at home, administered by health workers at Marikina, Metro Manila, on Wednesday. — **Reuters**

Heath workers
bring vaccines to
housebound in
Manila suburb

MANILA: Going door-to-door in a Manila suburb, Philippines health workers administered Covid-19 vaccinations on Wednesday to those unable to visit clinics due to illness or old age as part of efforts to protect more vulnerable groups in the area.

The Philippines is battling one of the worst coronavirus outbreaks in Southeast Asia, with the capital region, an urban sprawl of 16 cities that is home to at least 13 million people, the epicentre for the latest wave of infections.

In Marikina City, east of central Manila, residents unable to make it to inoculation centres can register for vaccinations.

“Other people are afraid of being vaccinated, but I am not afraid. I want it,” said Ederlina Barrida Paraiso, 81, speaking just after receiving a shot of the Chinese vaccine developed by Sinovac Biotech.

The rollout of vaccinations in the Philippines has been far slower than in many neighbouring countries. — **Reuters**

Myanmar’s anti-junta unity
govt says forms defence force

YANGON: Myanmar’s National Unity Government, set up by opponents of army rule, said on Wednesday it had formed a “people’s defence force” to protect its supporters from military attacks and violence instigated by the junta.

Since the military seized power and ousted an elected government led by Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi on February 1 there have been daily protests and a surge of violence with security forces killing hundreds of civilians.

The National Unity Government said in a statement the new force was a precursor to a Federal Union Army and that it had a responsibility to “make effective reforms in the security sector in order to terminate the 70-year long civil war”.

It also said it has a responsibility to deal with “the military attacks and violence from state administration council on the people”.

The unity government, established last month by an array of groups opposed to the junta, has pledged to end violence, restore democracy and build a “federal democratic union”.

A spokesman for the junta did not answer a call seeking comment. Myanmar was ruled by the military for nearly half a century from 1962 before the generals launched a tentative transition to democracy a decade ago. That



Women carry pots with flowers as they take part in a protest against the military coup in Yangon, recently. — **Reuters file photo**

process was brought to a halt by the coup, to the anger of many people unwilling to put up with another phase of military rule.

The National Unity Government did not provide details of how the new force would be organised or armed, or how it would try to achieve its objectives. A spokesman for the unity government was not immediately available for comment.

Myanmar’s well-equipped army is one of the region’s most battle-hardened forces.

But despite that, opponents of the coup have in some places been using crude weapons to fight troops while others have sought training with ethnic minority insurgents who have been battling the military since independence in 1948 from remote border areas.

DEADLY BLAST

Myanmar has in recent weeks seen an increasing number of small blasts in cities and towns, some targeting government offices and military facilities.

There have been no claims of responsibility but the military has blamed people bent on destabilising the country.

Five people killed in an explosion this week, including a former member of parliament for Suu Kyi’s party, had been building a bomb, the state-controlled *Global New Light of Myanmar* newspaper reported.

The newspaper said security forces had searched the scene of the Monday afternoon blast in the central Bago area and found wire, batteries, damaged phone and phone parts. — **Reuters**



A man wearing a protective face mask, amid the Covid-19 pandemic, makes his way at a local shopping street in Tokyo, on Wednesday. — **Reuters**

Japan heads towards
longer state of emergency

TOKYO: Japan is considering extending a coronavirus-spurred state of emergency in the capital, Tokyo, and other major urban areas, sources said on Wednesday, a move that could cast doubt on the planned Summer Olympics.

Officials were leaning toward an extension of the measures in Tokyo, Osaka, Kyoto and Hyogo prefectures beyond May 11 as the country battles a surge in Covid-19 cases, three sources said.

Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga told reporters after meeting with cabinet ministers and advisers on Wednesday that he wants to make a decision this week.

An official announcement could come as early as Friday, one of the sources told Reuters. *The Yomiuri* newspaper earlier reported that an extension was likely.

Extending the measures, which were imposed on April 25, would likely fan persistent concerns about whether the Tokyo Olympics, scheduled to begin on July 23, can be held as planned.

The games have already been delayed once from last year due to the pandemic. The city of Sapporo, on the northern island of Hokkaido, hosted a half-marathon test event on Wednesday.

One proposal that has emerged is an extension until the end of the month, according to two of the sources. All three people requested anonymity because they were not authorised to speak with the media.

The governor of Osaka Prefecture said an extension of three weeks to a month may be necessary, according to domestic media. — **Reuters**

US aims for 70pc of adults to get one vaccine dose by July 4

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden on Tuesday announced a goal to vaccinate 70 per cent of US adults with at least one Covid-19 shot by the July 4 Independence Day holiday and said the government would inoculate 12- to 15-year-olds as soon as allowed.

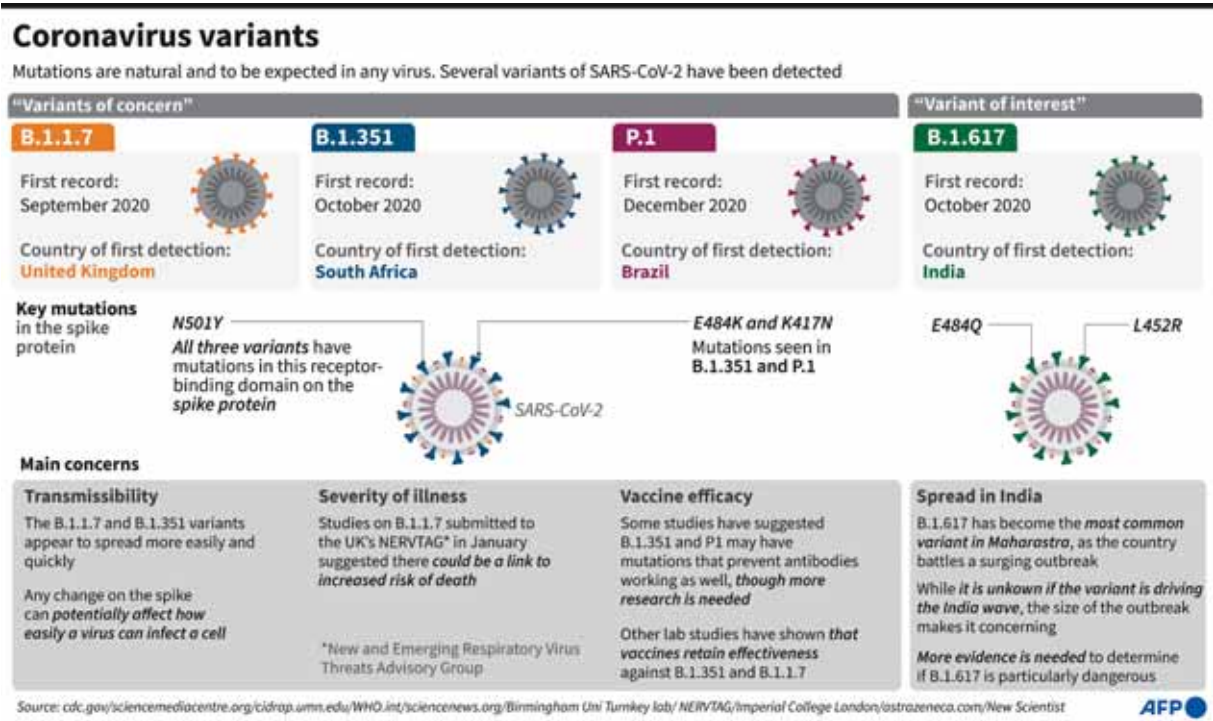
The president, who has made fighting the coronavirus a key priority of his administration, had previously announced July 4 as a target date for Americans to gather in small groups to celebrate the holiday and signal a return to greater normalcy in the middle of the pandemic.

Biden's new goal takes into account an increasing, though not unexpected, challenge of getting shots into the arms of people who are hesitant about the vaccine.

Biden said his administration would focus on getting vaccine to more rural areas of the country, using smaller locations as mass vaccination sites were wound down.

"Now that we have the vaccine supply, we're focused on convincing even more Americans to show up and get the vaccine that is available to them," Biden told reporters at the White House while announcing his target. "If we succeed in this effort ... then Americans will have taken a serious step towards a return to normal."

Biden's new goal includes having 160 million adults fully vaccinated by the Fourth of July.



The administration is working to win over those who are hesitant about the vaccine, including supporters of former President Donald Trump and young adults

repeatedly have set goals such as getting 100 million people vaccinated during his first 100 days in office, a target he later increased to 200 million people, only to surpass them.

"One characteristic of Biden's Covid approach has been under promise & over deliver. So when they say they have a goal of 70 per cent of adults having

received at least one shot by July 4, it means they're pretty sure they can do better," Dr Robert Wachter, professor and chair of the Department of Medicine at the University of California, San Francisco wrote on Twitter.

The president made clear his administration is gearing up to administer vaccines to 12- to 15-year-olds once authorised by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Current vaccines cover age 16 and up.

"I want American parents to know that if that announcement comes, we are ready to move immediately," Biden said, adding that 20,000 pharmacies across the country would serve as vaccination sites as soon as FDA approval came through. — Reuters



Nearly 20m more people hit by food crises last year

LONDON: Nearly 20 million more people faced food crises last year amid armed conflict, the Covid-19 pandemic and weather extremes, and the outlook for this year is again grim, according to a report by the Global Network Against Food Crises.

The humanitarian agency, set up in 2016 by the European Union and United Nations, also warned that acute food insecurity has continued to worsen since 2017, the first year of its annual report into food crises.

"We must do everything we can to end this vicious cycle. There is no place for famine and starvation in the 21st century," said UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres. He added that conflict and hunger need to be tackled jointly, as they reinforce one another.

Defined as any lack of food that threatens lives, livelihoods or both, acute food insecurity at crisis levels or worse impacted at least 155 million people last year,

the highest number in the report's five-year existence.

It warned the situation is not expected to improve this year, driven first and foremost by conflict, but with containment measures related to the Covid-19 pandemic an exacerbating factor.

Two out of three people affected by food crises last year were in Africa, though other parts of the world were not spared, with Yemen, Afghanistan, Syria and Haiti among the 10 worst hit locations.

"The Covid-19 pandemic has revealed the fragility of the global food system and the need for more equitable, sustainable and resilient systems," said the EU, the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation, the UN World Food Programme and USAID in a joint statement.

"A radical transformation of our agri-food systems is needed," it added. "If current trends are not reversed, food crises will increase in frequency and severity."

— Reuters

Covid scare at G7 meeting after Indian delegates test positive

LONDON: The Group of Seven foreign ministers' meeting in London was hit by a Covid-19 scare on Wednesday when India's foreign minister and his entire team said they were self-isolating after two delegation members tested positive.

Britain is hosting the three-day meeting — the first such G7 event in two years — which has been heavily billed as a chance to restart face-to-face diplomacy and a opportunity for the West to show a united front against threats from China and Russia.

India, currently undergoing the world's worst surge in Covid-19 cases, is attending the G7 as a guest

and had been due to take part in meetings on Tuesday evening and throughout Wednesday.

"Was made aware yesterday evening of exposure to possible Covid positive cases," Indian Foreign Minister S Jaishankar said on Twitter. "As a measure of abundant caution and also out of consideration for others, I decided to conduct my engagements in the virtual mode. That will be the case with the G7 Meeting today as well."

The meeting is a precursor to the main G7 summit due to take place at a rural English resort in June, with US President Joe Biden and other world leaders set to



Day two of the G7 foreign ministers meeting begins in London on Wednesday. — AFP

attend.

A British official confirmed the two positive tests and said the entire Indian delegation was self-isolating. British rules require a 10-day self-isolation period.

The Indian delegation had not yet attended the main summit venue at Lancaster House, and so meetings scheduled for Wednesday went ahead as planned.

Asked if, in light of the positive tests, it had been a mistake to hold the summit in person, Prime Minister Boris Johnson said: "I think it's very important to try to continue as much business as you can as a government."

— Reuters

WASHINGTON

OSLO

BAMAKO

Ex-cop convicted of Floyd murder seeks new trial

Norway to introduce vaccine certificates

French scribe kidnapped by militants in Mali







Derek Chauvin, the white ex-policeman convicted of murdering African-American man George Floyd, asked on Tuesday for a new trial on claims of jury and prosecution misconduct. The 45-year-old — who knelt on Floyd's neck for more than nine minutes in Minneapolis — faces up to 40 years in prison after being found guilty in a case that prompted a national reckoning on racial injustice and police brutality.

Nelson argued that his client did not get a fair trial due to publicity around the case, court and prosecution errors, as well as "race-based pressure" on the jury.

Chauvin's attorney Eric

Norway will introduce verifiable vaccine certificates in early June, allowing holders to gain admittance to events held in Norway, with an updated, EU-compliant version to be rolled out in late June, Prime Minister Erna Solberg said on Wednesday.

Around a quarter of Norway's population have received a first dose and 6.8 per cent have received two doses. "We can use such a certificate to open our society more, and quicker," Solberg told a news conference.

Initially to be used primarily for larger public events, cruises and package tours, a later version of the certificate, planned to be rolled out in late June, will be in line with EU standards. — Reuters

A missing French journalist said he was kidnapped in Mali by a militant group with links to Al Qaeda, according to a video circulating on social media on Wednesday, the latest foreigner to be taken hostage in the West African country.

The video of Olivier Dubois, who worked with several French media, could not be immediately verified independently, although Reporters Without Borders (RSF) and an official at the French foreign ministry confirmed he

was missing.

In the undated video, Dubois, 46, said he was abducted on April 8 in Gao, central Mali, by the GSIM, the biggest militant alliance in the Sahel. — AFP

Biden poised to pivot US arms deals towards security, human rights

MIKE STONE

Ninety minutes before President Joe Biden took office on January 20, the United States signed a \$23 billion deal to sell F-35 jets, drones and advanced missiles.

It was part of flurry of last minute deals president Donald Trump had told Congress were coming in his last two months in office, forcing the Biden administration to make quick decisions on whether or not to stick with the geopolitically sensitive weapons sales.

To the surprise of some Democratic allies, Biden has so far kept the lion's share of Trump's more controversial agreements. Executives at five large defence contractors who requested anonymity to speak freely were also surprised by the speed of the Biden administration's deliberations.

Longer-term, however, those executives and five more people in and around the administration said that Biden's policy will shift to emphasise human rights over Trump's more commercial approach to exporting

TO THE SURPRISE OF SOME DEMOCRATIC ALLIES, BIDEN HAS SO FAR KEPT THE LION'S SHARE OF TRUMP'S MORE CONTROVERSIAL AGREEMENTS

military equipment.

Biden's posture towards arms exports — specifically around reducing weapons used to attack others — could shift sales at Boeing Co, Raytheon Technologies Corp and Lockheed Martin Corp. That means fewer bullets, bombs and missiles, while security products like radars, surveillance equipment and defences against attacks get the green light.

In an interview last week, Raytheon's CFO Neil Mitchill said that offensive munitions exports, "going forward, the kinds of sales that we were talking about have been declining", adding there has been a multi-year downward trend of offensive weapon sales to foreign customers. Boeing and Lockheed declined to comment.

In the early days of the Biden administration, officials paused weapons sales to some allies, including sales of Raytheon's and Boeing-made precision guided munitions.

Eventually a determination was made to only sell "defensive" arms.

Biden's team ultimately decided to

stick with the massive deal. The move spurred criticism from the human rights group Amnesty International which immediately bashed the decision and drew complaints from lawmaker Robert Menendez, Chairman of the powerful Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

One former US official familiar with the Biden transition team's thinking noted that many aspects of the F-35 sale still need to be negotiated.

"While economic security will remain a factor" when reviewing weapons sales, the Biden Administration will "reprioritize" other factors including US national security, human rights and nonproliferation, a US official has said.

"I'm hopeful that as we hear statements that support human rights as being front and centre in arms transfer deliberations, we'll see that play out through actual decisions, and not just words", Rachel Stohl, Vice-President at the Stimson Center in Washington said.

— Reuters

A CHANGING LANDSCAPE

Right's Madrid win a warning for leftist government

MATHIEU GORSE

Just two years ahead of general elections, Spain's right-wing opposition has set its sights on repeating its Madrid triumph on a national scale, sounding a warning to Pedro Sanchez's leftist government.

Although the electoral success of the right-wing Popular Party was never in doubt, the scope of its win in Spain's richest region dealt a heavy blow to the prime minister's Socialist party and its left-wing allies.

Thanks to a populist campaign focused on her refusal to impose tight restrictions on the local economy, Madrid's hardline leader Isabel Diaz Ayuso won by a landslide, with the PP securing 65 of the regional parliament's 136 seats, more than double its showing in 2019.

But falling just short of an absolute majority of 69, she will need the support of the far-right Vox to govern.

For Sanchez, however, the campaign has been a disaster. Personally involved since the start, his Socialist party suffered a major drubbing, shedding 13 seats to end up with 24, the same number as the hard-left upstart Mas Madrid.

Equally hard hit was the far-left Podemos, Sanchez's junior partner in government, whose leader Pablo Iglesias announced his withdrawal from politics after the left's three parties collectively secured fewer seats than Ayuso's PP. Although the PP has ruled Madrid for 26 years, the party was ousted from Spain's national government three years ago

“We’re now starting to set the stage for a general election and after what happened yesterday, it’s a scenario in which the right has the upper hand

ORIOL BARTOMEUS
A political scientist

and is now hoping it will be able to replicate its regional success across the rest of the country.

The leftwing government's "days are numbered", declared a triumphant Ayuso in her victory speech on Tuesday night. "Today begins a new chapter in the history of Spain."

For José Ignacio Torreblanca, a political analyst at European Council on Foreign Relations, the result was "a vote of no confidence in Sanchez and Iglesias... and in (their) coalition government" which took office in January 2020.

With Spain badly hit by the coronavirus crisis, suffering 78,000 deaths from more than 3.5 million cases, Ayuso had managed to "very successfully capitalise on the pandemic fatigue", he said.

All eyes are now on the PP to see if it can replicate its regional success at a national level in the general elections of 2023. "We're now starting to set the stage for a general election and after what happened yesterday, it's a scenario in which the right has the upper hand", said Oriol Bartomeus, a political scientist at Barcelona's Autonomous University.

For now, national polls put Sanchez's Socialist party ahead of the right-wing opposition.

But the PP "will launch a campaign to convince the electorate that we're entering a new phase, that the left-wing era is over and that now it's the turn of the right", he said.

Since the early 1980s, the two rival parties have been alternating in government, with the Socialists in power from 1982-1996, then 2004-2008 and since 2018, and the PP ruling between 1996-2004 and 2011-2018. — AFP

NOT AN EASY WAY OUT

Forest emission cuts get a makeover...

MEGAN ROWLING

Few people, nowadays, would disagree the world's forests need better protection. But many conservation projects that offer carbon credits have an image problem, with critics saying they allow buyers to offset their planet-warming emissions without actually cutting them and have limited climate benefits.

Former US president and global-warming sceptic Donald Trump turned heads by signing up to the 1t.org tree-planting initiative in 2020, citing the need to conserve "the majesty of God's creation and the natural beauty of our world".

And at the 2019 Madrid climate conference, oil giants raised eyebrows when they backed an effort to build a global market for carbon credits generated from projects to protect forests, soil and wetlands.

The LEAF Coalition, a new \$1 billion forest conservation programme backed by the United States, Britain and Norway alongside multinational companies including Amazon, Unilever and Nestle, is hoping it can put the shine back on paying for nature-based emissions reductions.

On its Earth Day launch last month, Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg emphasised tropical forests are indispensable to fighting climate change and biodiversity loss, "and have received far less attention and finance than they deserve".

The coalition is "a first, crucial step to change that", as businesses and donor governments will reward tropical forest nations for positive results in lowering deforestation.

"I am delighted that big companies are now stepping up to provide this finance in addition to cutting their own emissions", Solberg said in a statement.

NORWAY ALONGSIDE SOME MULTINATIONAL COMPANIES, IS HOPING IT CAN PUT THE SHINE BACK ON PAYING FOR NATURE-BASED EMISSIONS REDUCTIONS

LEAF, which stands for Lowering Emissions by Accelerating Forest finance, differs from earlier schemes in that participating companies must prove they are already making efforts to reduce their emissions in line with science, and the fact that it will apply across entire countries or regions.

Manish Bapna, interim CEO of the US-based think-tank World Resources Institute (WRI), which is not part of the coalition, said it "offers an important new approach that can help scale forest protection finance,

without diluting emissions reductions elsewhere".

Forests can provide over one-fifth of the emissions reductions needed before 2030 to keep planetary heating to relatively safe levels, but efforts to protect them account for less than 3 per cent of climate funding, Bapna noted. Meanwhile, tropical forest loss increased by 12 per cent from 2019 to 2020, releasing emissions equivalent to those of 570 million cars last year alone, WRI-backed research showed in March.

— Thomson Reuters Foundation



Greenpeace activists stage a protest against deforestation of the Amazon rainforest, in Vienna, Austria.

— Reuters

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f t i y l p u



Oman beach volley team aims Olympic spot

SIX OVERSEAS CAMPS TO SHAPE UP SQUAD FOR QUALIFIER

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, MAY 5

Oman beach volleyball team is gearing up for the final qualifier of the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games to secure a slot in the top Olympic sporting event which will be held this summer after a postponement due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Asian men's qualification of beach volleyball at the 2020 Summer Olympics will be held in Thailand from June 24 to 30.

Oman beach volleyball head coach Khalifa al Jabri unveiled the comprehensive preparatory plans for the Olympic qualifier in an exclusive with *Oman Daily Observer*.

The experienced national coach said the players are undergoing training since March until the decision to suspend the sporting activities by the Supreme Committee and the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth.

"Despite the decision, the players are on daily home training plan which features some basic training to keep them fit. The team is seeking alternative solutions to continue training on the field. The association has decided to have a series of overseas training camps."

Oman's beach volleyball players took the first dose of vaccination while the second dose is scheduled on May 15. "Taking vaccination is very critical for anyone especially for athletes to travel during this tough period and it is one of the requirements to take part in some beach volleyball tournament including 'Star' events. Therefore, the team



Oman team will take part in high-profile Star 1 and 2 tournaments in Bulgaria and Prague, which will offer top-class matches

KHALIFA AL JABRI
Oman head coach

players took the first dose and the second will be taken very soon," he added.

EUROPEAN CAMPS

Explaining the scheduled external training camps, coach Khalifa said: "The first abroad preparatory camp will take place in Bulgaria from May 18 to 24. This camp will feature the team's participation at the 'Star 1' tournament which will include attendance of top teams in the region.

Al Jabri said the first overseas camp will be followed by a Czech camp in Prague city. The camp's duration is from May 26 until 31.

"Taking part in the 'Star 2' championship is the main assignment in this camp. It will be a golden opportunity to raise level our level as these tournaments will feature tough international matches,"

"Then, after completion of both camps, the players will head off to Turkey to have the third part of the external camp. The duration



of the Turkey camp is eight days and will begin from June 1 until 8. The selection of the Turkey camp came due to the geographical distance between these countries as the team have to return back to Bulgaria for another camp. We have communicated with many teams in Turkey to arrange for some friendly matches," he pointed out.

FINAL CAMP IN THAILAND

Oman, champions of the Arab tournament in 2011, will revert to Bulgaria for the fourth part of the preparatory programme from June 10 to 15.

"The team will participate in the 'Star1' tournament once again in Bulgaria. The last camp destination will be Thailand where the Olympic qualifiers will be held. The team will arrive in Thailand on June 16 ahead of the qualifier by one week. We prefer to reach Thailand prior start of the qualifier to train more on the field and get more adapted. Also, the team will do their best to have more preparatory matches," he said.

The Sultanate side will aim to book a spot in the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games. "Our objective is to play among the top teams in the Olympic Games and to register top results in the high-profile event," he ended.

The Oman team comprises Haitham al Shuraiqi, Ahmed al Hosni, Nuh al Jabubi and Mazin al Hashmi. The team is trained under the supervision of the national head coach Khalifa al Jabri and Badar al Subhi, assistant coach.

In brief

■ PRAGUE



PREGNANT STRYCOVA HANGS UP RACKET AT 35

Czech doubles specialist Barbora Strycova, who announced her first pregnancy in March, said on Tuesday she was retiring from tennis, hoping for one last game after she gives birth. Currently ranked second in doubles and 52nd in singles, Strycova, 35, won the Wimbledon doubles title with Hsieh Su-wei in 2019 and reached the singles semifinals there the same year, her best Grand Slam results ever.

"I want to play one more game with an audience," the former world number one-ranked doubles player said.

■ TOKYO



FANS WARNED OFF TOKYO OLYMPICS MARATHON TEST

Spectators were urged to stay away as a subdued Tokyo Olympics marathon rehearsal took place under strict anti-coronavirus conditions in Sapporo on Wednesday, as officials grapple with a rise in infections and public antipathy to the Games.

Scattered onlookers in face masks clapped but refrained from cheering, to avoid spreading droplets, as Kenya's Hillary Kipkoech won the scaled-back men's half-marathon in 1hr 46sec and Japan's Mao Ichiyama was the women's winner in 1hr 8 min 28 sec.

■ BUCHAREST



WTA ANNOUNCES NEW TOURNAMENT IN ROMANIA

The WTA has added a new women's tournament to the 2021 calendar in Cluj-Napoca, Romania scheduled for the week starting August 2, it announced on Tuesday.

The Winners Open, a WTA 250 event, will be played outdoors on clay and will feature a 32-player singles main draw and a 16-team doubles draw.

Romania previously hosted a WTA tournament from 2014-19 in Bucharest, which saw current world number three Simona Halep lift the trophy twice on home soil.



Oman Sail opens registration for Asian event in Khasab

MUSCAT: Registration for the Asian Windsurfing Championships 2021 in Khasab, Musandam, is now open. Taking place from 11 to 16 October 2021, the event, organised by Oman Sail, will bring together talented male and female surfers in the Techno293, Techno-293Plus and the foiling Formula Windsurfing class, which will be making its Asian Windsurfing Championship debut this year.

The fleet will feature 50 of the best windsurfers from 15 countries in Asia, including past champions and talented young riders. Conditions in Khasab are expected to be perfect for sailing, with winds typically between 7 and 15 knots. A combination of powerful sea breezes and pleasant waves will challenge the competitors while also providing the platform for exhilarating action on the water.

Taking place in Khasab, Musandam, fifty of the best windsurfers from 15 countries in Asia will compete over six days between 11-16 October 2021, including past champions and promising young riders from 15 countries.

Conditions are expected to be perfect for sailing with a combination of powerful sea breezes and pleasant waves making for ideal sailing conditions while shining a light on Musandam as one of Oman's most exciting and unexplored tourist destinations.

Rashid al Kindi, Director of Sailing at Oman Sail, said, "This is an exciting return to elite competition for windsurfers across Asia and a great opportunity to introduce Khasab as a new venue in Oman for world class sport. We are looking forward to welcoming the fleet to Oman and one of the first international events post-Tokyo 2020. As well as being a major continental championship for the Asia region, this is also the first step for many on the road to Paris 2024."

Piotr Oleksiak, International Windsurfing Association manager, said, "The introduction of the Formula Foil this year makes the Asian Windsurfing Championships 2021 an interesting proposition going forward. We are delighted to be returning to Oman,

which has become the example to follow for the growth of sailing in Asia. This is an important event for the sailors in all classes, as both a return to action and a chance to compete for the title of Asian Champion in the three classes. We look forward to enjoying Oman's traditional warm hospitality at a great new venue in Khasab, Musandam."

The Asian Windsurfing Championships 2021 will be held at the Atana Musandam Hotel, Musandam, the northernmost exclave of Oman. Its spectacular landscape has seen the area become known as the 'Norway of the Middle East' due to the imposing mountains rising from the sea and its clear blue seas reminiscent of the Scandinavian fjords, known locally as khors.

Online registration for the Asian Windsurfing Championships 2021 is open until 6 October 2021. To register, view the Notice of Race, and find out more about the championships, visit the official website, <https://asians2021.internationalwindsurfing.com/>.

Eight IPL England players return home

NEW DELHI: Eight England players returned to London on Wednesday after the abrupt suspension of the Indian Premier League (IPL), with tournament organisers planning an airlift to Maldives or Sri Lanka for the stranded Australian cohort.

Hours after the lucrative cricket league was suspended on Tuesday because of India's Covid-19 crisis, the English members of the Delhi Capitals squad rushed to Delhi from Ahmedabad to catch a flight to Heathrow.

Jonny Bairstow, Jos Buttler, Sam Billings, Chris Woakes, Moeen Ali, Jason Roy and Curran brothers Sam and Tom landed on Wednesday morning, an England spokesman said.

"They will now quarantine in government-approved hotels," he said. England's limited-overs captain Eoin Morgan, batsman Dawid Malan and all-rounder Chris Jordan would leave India in the next 48 hours, he added.

The 38-strong contingent of Australian players, coaches, umpires and media pundits will have to wait longer, though, to get home, in the face of a ban on arrivals from India until at least May 15.

Cricket Australia said there was a plan to get them out of the pandemic-ravaged country by chartered flight "in the next two or three days".

"What the BCCI are working to do is to move the entire cohort out of India where they will

wait until it's possible to return to Australia," CA interim Chief Executive Nick Hockley said in Sydney.

"That's now narrowed down to the Maldives and Sri Lanka. The BCCI are committed not only to the first move, but also to putting on a charter to bring them back to Australia."

The CA official refused to speculate if the league could resume this year.

"I think it's premature to speculate on that," he said.

"At the moment, the BCCI are very focused on getting all the players, not just the Australians, home safe."

Chennai Super Kings' Australian batting coach Mike Hussey, who has tested positive for Covid-19, will stay back to complete his quarantine period in India.

SAFE PASSAGE

While the Indian cricket board (BCCI) has promised safe passage for the players and officials, New Zealand Cricket said all of their players were isolating in team hotels in India. An NZC spokesman said captain Kane Williamson and several of his team mates had already been booked to join rest of the Test side in England next month.

"We haven't got the finer details of that sorted yet. We're working now with the ECB (English cricket board) and BCCI to arrange flights to get them over to England," the spokesman said.

— Reuters



Cyclists cycle past the main entrance of the Narendra Modi Stadium, a venue of the 2021 Indian Premier League in Motera. — AFP

Badosa beats Bencic to reach Madrid last four

MADRID: Paula Badosa reached the semifinals of the Madrid Open on Wednesday after a straight sets 6-4, 7-5 win over eighth seed Belinda Bencic.

Wild card entry Badosa will play either world number one Ashleigh Barty or ninth seed Petra Kvitova, who face off later on Wednesday, in the last four after becoming the first Spanish woman to make the tournament's semis.

The 23-year-old's win over the world number 11 was her third against a player in the top 20 following her victories over Bencic and Barty in her run to the semifinals in Charleston a month ago.

Badosa kissed the clay court in celebration of a win that will shoot the world number 62 up the WTA rankings.

In the men's draw second seed Daniil Medvedev, returning to the circuit after testing positive for Covid-19 in mid-April, picked up his first win on clay for two years when he came back from a set down to beat Alejandro Davidovich Fokina 4-6, 6-4, 6-2.

The Russian has always



Spain's Paula Badosa celebrates beating Switzerland's Belinda Bencic. — AFP

struggled on clay.

In four attempts, he has failed to get past the first round of the French Open. Nor has he won a match in Rome while this was his first win in Madrid in his third appearance.

"I love clay," he said ironically into the camera at the end of the match.

In total, the 2021 Australian Open has only notched up 11 wins on the surface although he will have the chance to make that 12 when he takes on Christian Garin in last 16.

HALEP CRASHES OUT

World number nine Diego Schwartzman was dumped out by Alsan Karatsev 2-6, 6-4, 6-1. Russian Karatsev will take on Alexander Bublik in the next round.

On Tuesday, world number three Simona Halep lost 4-6, 7-5, 7-5 in the last 16 to Belgian Elise Mertens, while Dominic Thiem claimed a straightforward win in his first match since March.

Romania's Halep, who won the Madrid title in 2016 and 2017, is still yet to reach a WTA Tour

final this season and this was her earliest exit in the Spanish capital since a 2015 first-round loss.

In the quarterfinals, 13th seed Mertens will meet her doubles partner, Belarusian seventh seed Aryna Sabalenka, who dispatched American Jessica Pegula 6-1, 6-2 in just 52 minutes.

The final last-eight tie will see Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova play Karolina Muchova, who needed four match points to beat Maria Sakkari 6-0, 6-7 (9/11), 7-5.

Russian Pavlyuchenkova edged out Australian Open runner-up Jennifer Brady 7-5, 6-7 (8/10), 6-3 despite missing a match point in the second set. In the men's draw, world number four Thiem eased to a 6-1, 6-3 thrashing of American Marcos Giron in his first match for almost two months. — AFP

MADRID OPEN RESULTS Men (second round)

Aslan Karatsev (RUS) bt Diego Schwartzman (ARG x7) 2-6, 6-4, 6-1; Christian Garin (CHI x16) bt Dominik Koepfer (GER) 6-3, 6-4; Daniil Medvedev (RUS x2) bt Alejandro Davidovich (ESP) 4-6, 6-4, 6-2

Women (quarterfinals)

Paula Badosa (ESP) bt Belinda Bencic (SUI x8) 6-4, 7-5



MAHREZ DOUBLE FIRES MAN CITY INTO CHAMPIONS LEAGUE FINAL

MANCHESTER:

Riyad Mahrez struck twice as Manchester City reached the Champions League final for the first time thanks to a 2-0 victory over Paris St Germain at the Etihad Stadium on Tuesday that secured a 4-1 aggregate win.

City were dominant against their French opponents, who lost their heads in the second half and finished the semifinal, second leg with 10 men after Angel Di Maria was sent off in the 69th minute for an off-the-ball stamp on Fernandinho.

Pep Guardiola's City side will now face the winner of Wednesday's last-four match between Chelsea and Real Madrid in the May 29th final in Istanbul.

Guardiola, who won the competition twice with Barcelona, has waited 10 years to get back to the final and was in no doubt about the scale of his team's achievement, with City having won all six games in the knockout stages.

"People believe it's easy to arrive in the final of the Champions League. Getting to the final now makes sense of

what we have done in the past four or five years. Every day these guys have been consistent and this is remarkable", he said.

"It is for all of us and the club. I'm incredibly proud", added the Spaniard.

Mahrez put City ahead on the night in the 11th minute and then finished off a superb counter-attack in the 63rd to secure their place in the final.

PSG sorely missed their talented striker Kylian Mbappe who, still struggling with a calf injury, was forced to watch the match from the bench.

EARLY SCARE

A pre-match hail storm and downpour made for a tricky surface and City had an early scare when Dutch referee Bjorn

Kuipers pointed to the spot after PSG's players appealed for handball.

Yet a VAR review showed that the ball had bounced legally off the top of City fullback Oleksandr Zinchenko's shoulder and the penalty was overturned.

The nerves turned to delight in the 11th minute when Zinchenko raced on to a long ball from keeper Ederson down the left flank, found Kevin De Bruyne inside and the Belgian's blocked shot fell to Mahrez in the box who made no mistake with his finish.

Yet the goal did little to settle City at the back and the visitors could have levelled five minutes later when Marquinhos headed a Di Maria cross against the bar from close range.

City almost self-destructed

when Ederson, from the edge of his area, threw the ball out to Bernardo Silva who was robbed by Di Maria, but with the City keeper's goal unguarded, the Argentine failed to find the target.

PSG keeper Keylor Navas did well to keep out a low drive from Mahrez just before the break and the Costa Rican was called on quickly after the restart to deal with a Phil Foden effort from the left.

Without Mbappe, Neymar was rarely a danger, floating deep as he looked for the ball, but he opened up City's defence with a jinking solo run in the 56th minute before his shot from inside the box was blocked by Zinchenko.

City put the tie beyond the French side in the 63rd minute with a classic counter-attack, as Foden burst down the left and, after a quick exchange with De Bruyne, picked out Mahrez at the back post who slotted in from close range.

The frustration spilled over for Mauricio Pochettino's PSG side and Di Maria was sent off after a petulant spat with Fernandinho after the ball had gone out for a throw in.

From then on it was just a question of if City would add to the pain and the impressive Foden went close with a low drive that clipped the post.

The City fans locked outside of the stadium, celebrated wildly with car horns blaring but for PSG, beaten by Bayern Munich in the final last season, it was another year of disappointment.

"We played with character. We have to believe in ourselves, we will succeed", said midfielder Marco Verratti.

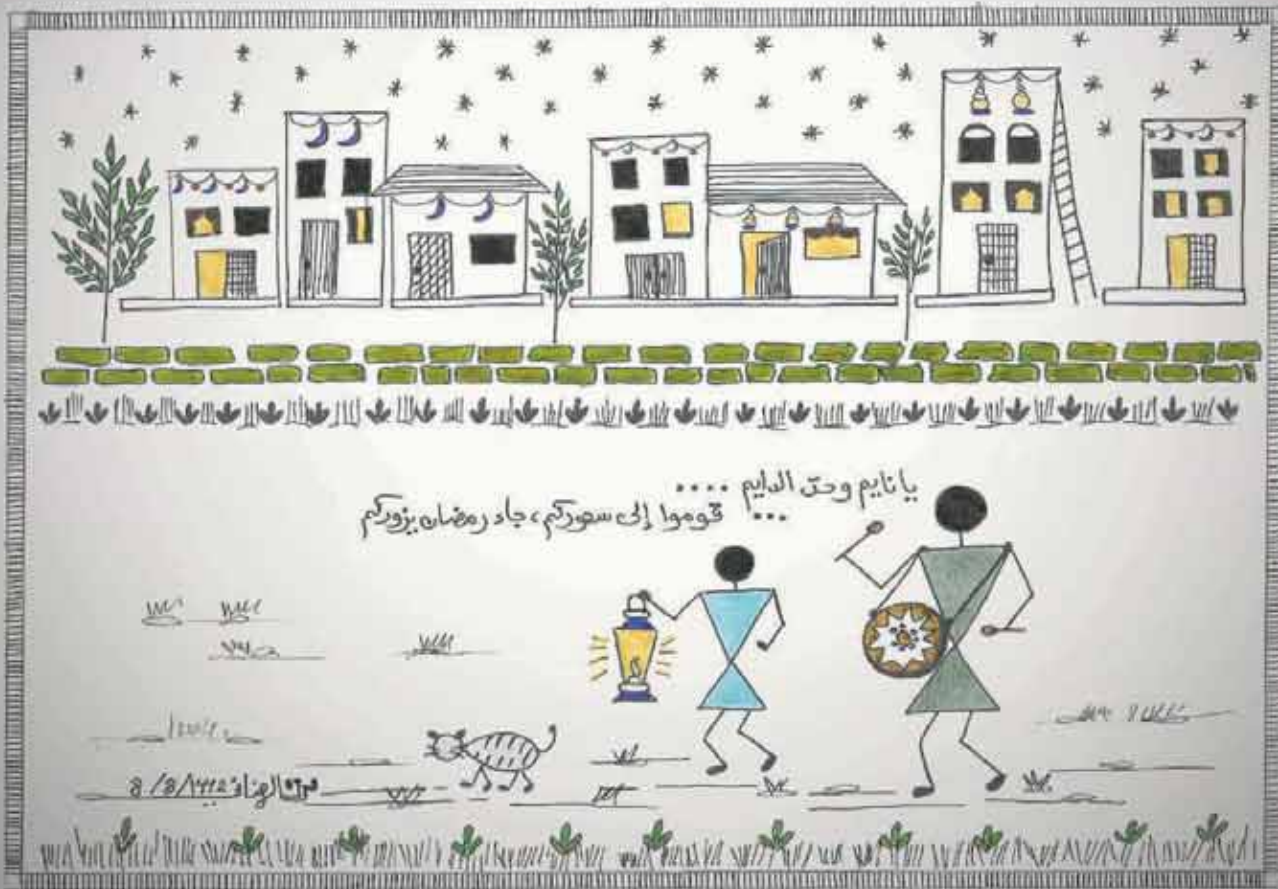
— Reuters



ramadhan

Preserving scenes of Ramadhan rituals in Warli art

The pandemic has caused a lot of challenges in celebrating the holy month of Ramadhan. This creates a certain sense of nostalgia for some who looks forward to celebrating the holy season with their family. In an attempt to preserve some childhood memories, Omani artist Marwa al Hinai started documenting some rituals of Ramadhan through Warli art.... **P14**



QURAN VERSE OF THE DAY

Have you not considered how your Lord dealt with the People of the Elephant? Did He not make their plan go wrong? He sent against them swarms of birds. Throwing at them rocks of baked clay. Leaving them like chewedup leaves.

Al Feel

FATWA QUESTION & ANSWER



HIS EMINENCE
SHAIKH AHMED BIN
HAMAD AL KHALILI
GRAND MUFTI OF OMAN

QUESTION

A person who has been fasting in Oman is suddenly required to travel to the United Kingdom, where the fasting hours are much longer. At what time should he break his fast?

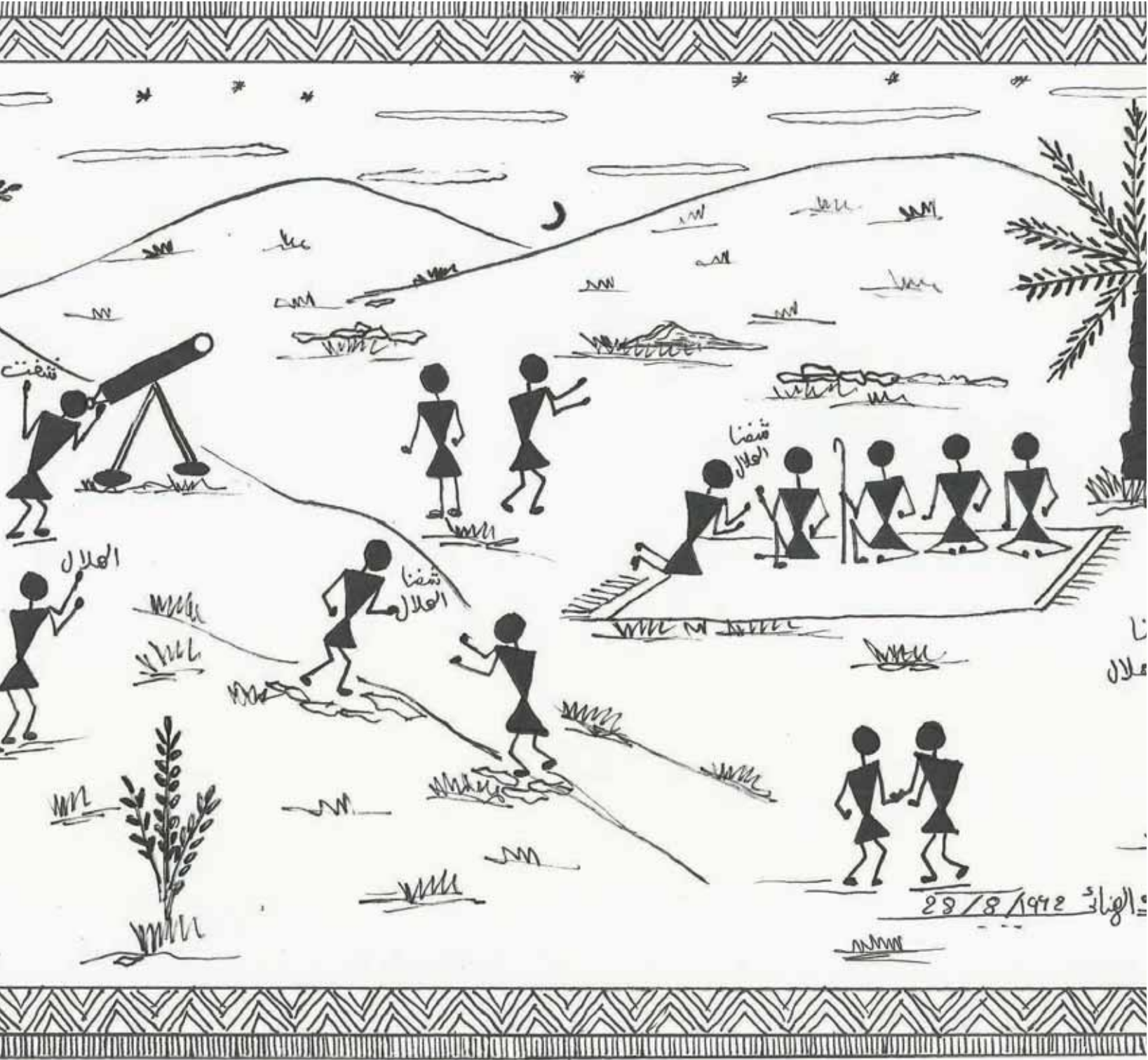
ANSWER

The Almighty says: Eat and drink until the white thread you found from the black thread of dawn (Al Baqarah: 187). It means fasting time doesn't depend on the number of hours. He should be fasting before sunrise until sunset.

HADITH A GUIDE FOR THE FAITHFUL

Marwan ibn Salim al Muqaffa' said:

I saw Ibn Umar holding his beard with his hand and cutting what exceeded the handful of it. He (Ibn Umar) said that the Prophet said when he broke his fast: Thirst has gone, the arteries are moist, and the reward is sure, if Allah wills.



Preserving scenes of Ramadhan rituals in Warli art

BY RUQAYA AL KINDI

Perhaps the most prominent of the Sultanate's Ramadhan rituals is the celebration of the completion of mid-Ramadhan "Qarangasho", which is similar to the celebrations of the neighbouring Gulf countries.

Omani artist Marwa al Hinai shared that it is important to document these rituals so they can be preserved. With modernisation creeping in, some of them may no longer be practised in the future.

Marwa was concerned that in the last two Ramadhans, the pandemic has caused previous rituals to be cancelled inspiring her to paint the scenes of these rituals by employing the popular Indian art of Warli.

"It is on the 15th night of Ramadhan where the children are dressed in traditional clothes and going in groups to the neighbours and knocking door to door while singing songs to get sweets and nuts. The words of the song contain prayers to protect the family and their children and keep them healthy, and ask Allah to return this month more and more years," she shared.

The municipality of Muscat and some Omani women's associations usually organise the Qarangasho. Modern celebrations brought these practices to parks, malls and cultural centres.

While Ramadhan is also a time for fasting, people in the Middle East, particularly Oman has also been keen on doing and playing traditional games during the holy month. They usually do this either before the sunset call to prayer or at night and eventually has become an important custom and tradition.

Marwa shared that pre-Covid, young and old people will usually be seen playing football on Ramadhan nights in stadiums.

"I've always seen this scene when I was growing up. From the balcony of my home, you can just see people engaging in sports activities. The residents, before Ramadhan, begin conceptualising and thinking of the award for this sport and they work together to make it a success," she said. Even walking itself became a shared activity.

The seasonal markets that are held in the last days of the holy month of Ramadhan (Al habta) are an ancient legacy in the Sultanate and are always witnessing a great turnout from visitors and citizens.



It is, as she shared, "a special Omani traditional outdoor market that takes place in the last ten days of Ramadhan in preparation for the Eid Al Fitr. It starts from sunrise till afternoon at 1:00 pm. It is, therefore, crowded by visitors to buy their needs to celebrate the Eid."

At habta, shoppers can find everything they need for Eid. "Habta market provides many things like items of clothing, Omani Halwa, livestock and cooking tools for making Eid meals. It, therefore, witnesses a great turnout from various segments of society as well as of all ages. It is not limited to the elderly only, but is also attended by young people remarkably," she explained.

Omanis also do habta-hopping where they visit one habta after another from one wilayat to another. These markets, also, held in a distinctive traditional atmosphere, where the shows of horses and camels are held on the sidelines as well.

At the end of the blessed month, the specialised committees are prepared to sight the official crescent of Shawwal month (the next month after Ramadhan). "The sighting of the crescent of the month of Shawwal is a declaration of the end of the month of fasting and the Eid will be the next morning. The people

exchange congratulations and blessings," she explained.

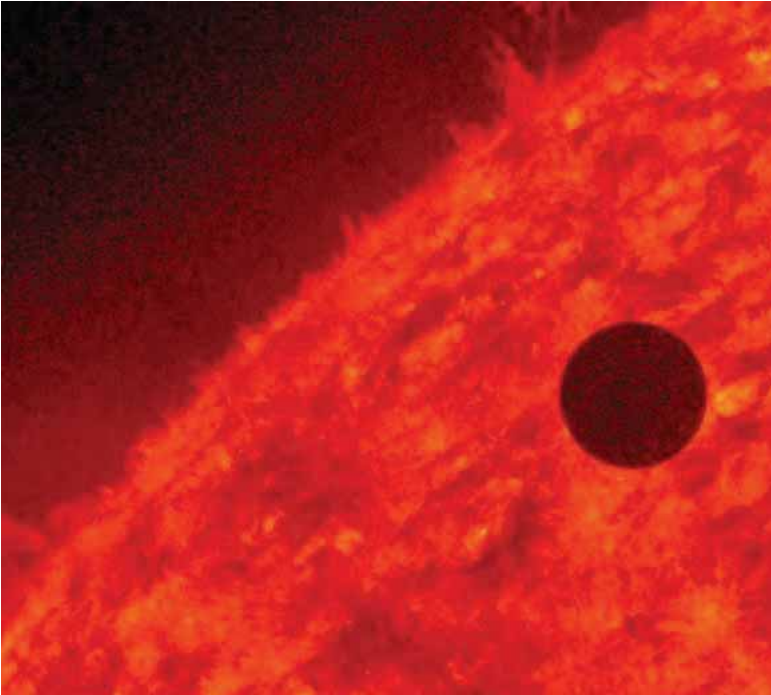
"As slaughtering cattle is one of noticeable ritual linked to Eid, the rituals differ from one state to another on the date of slaughtering cattle, but most states in which the slaughter takes place before the Eid prayer," she added.

Marwa explained that Warli art that she uses to illustrate the Ramadhan rituals is a folk-art painting used by the Warli tribe of Maharashtra in India to convey their daily and social events for a populace who are not acquainted with the written word. The roots of this art, as she read from Indian websites, may be traced to as early as the 10th century AD.

The technique of drawing this kind of art, she explained, is very basic using simple graphic vocabulary that usually includes triangle, rectangle, circle, line... etc. The artist positions them and controls their movement. "This art is very minimal with colours mostly using a lot of white space. The contemporary artists, nevertheless, was able to transcend the boundaries and utilise this art in the proportion of their artistic needs," she noted. Marwa explained that this kind of art (Warli art) is a modern style of pre-historic cave paintings.

Science

How long is the solar system's longest day? Venus has the answer



DATA OBTAINED by bouncing radio waves off Venus — treating it, as one scientist said, like a giant disco ball — is providing new insight into Earth's closest planetary neighbour, including a precise calculation of the duration of a Venusian day.

The study also measured the tilt of the Venusian axis and size of the planet's core, allowing for a deeper understanding of an enigmatic world sometimes called Earth's 'evil twin.'

It was already known that Venus has the longest day - the time the planet takes for a single rotation on its axis - of any planet in our solar system, though there were discrepancies among previous estimates.

The study found that a single Venusian rotation takes 243.0226 Earth days. That means a day lasts longer than a year on Venus, which makes a complete orbit around the sun in 225 Earth days.

The researchers transmitted radio waves toward Venus 21 times from 2006 to 2020 from NASA's Goldstone Antenna in the Mojave Desert of California and studied the radio echo, which provided information on certain planetary traits, at Goldstone and at the Green Bank Observatory in West Virginia.

"Each individual measurement was obtained by treating Venus as a giant disco ball. We illuminated Venus with a giant flashlight, the radar at Goldstone, and observed the reflections as they swept over the surface of the Earth," said UCLA planetary astronomy professor Jean-Luc Margot, who led the study published in the journal *Nature Astronomy*.

"Venus is an amazing laboratory for understanding planet formation and evolution, and it's a stone's throw away. There are likely billions of Venus-like planets in the galaxy," Margot added.

The new data showed that the Venusian planetary core has a diameter of about 4,360 miles (7,000 km), comparable to Earth's core. Previous Venus core estimates had been based on computer modelling rather than observational data.

Its core is almost certainly composed of iron and nickel, though it is unclear whether it is solid or molten, Margot said.

Venus spins on its axis almost upright — meaning it lacks discernable seasons — while Earth has more of a tilt. The study calculated the Venusian tilt at about 2.64 degrees. Earth's is about 23.5 degrees.

Venus, the second planet from the sun, is similar in structure but slightly smaller than Earth, with a diameter of about 7,500 miles (12,000 km). Above its foreboding landscape is a thick and toxic atmosphere that consists primarily of carbon dioxide, with clouds of sulphuric acid droplets. With a runaway greenhouse effect, its surface temperatures reach 880 degrees Fahrenheit (471 degrees Celsius), hot enough to melt lead.

Venus spins from east to west, the opposite direction from all other planets in our solar system but Uranus. In another quirk, its day-night cycle - the time between sunrises as opposed to the length of a single axial spin - takes 117 Earth days because Venus rotates in the direction opposite of its orbital path around the sun.

Venus has received less scientific attention than Mars, Earth's other planetary next-door neighbour, and other solar system destinations.

"I don't think that Venus would be more difficult to understand than other planets if we had adequate data, but there is a deplorable scarcity of data about Venus," Margot said.

"There have been no NASA missions to Venus in almost 30 years and about a dozen NASA missions to Mars in this time interval," Margot said, adding that the new findings on how Venus spins could help any future landing attempts. — Reuters



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ramadhan

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INSTAGRAM TOP PICKS



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ANIMAL PLANET



Busy bees in Colombia get respite in bamboo hotels

SOLITARY BEES are enjoying new digs in Barbosa, Colombia, where tiny hotels built by the Aburra Valley Metropolitan Authority provide places to rest and recover after a busy day pollinating.

Lovingly built from wood, with acrylic roofs to protect them from rain, the hexagonal structures are filled with a variety of bamboo canes that allow bees of all shapes and sizes to check in for a well-deserved rest.

"It's like a hotel because here they're going to have a quiet moment in their room... before setting off again", said Hector Ivan Valencia, an assistant for the local authority's risk management unit.

During the day, assistants like Valencia delicately clean the bamboo rooms using tools such as paint brushes.

"If this were a regular hotel, I'd be one of the people cleaning the rooms", Valencia said.

Colombia, the world's second-most biodiverse country, has registered 550 varieties of bees within its borders according to the environment ministry, although the true number of species could be as high as 1,445.

As elsewhere in the world, Colombia's bees — vital for fertilising plants — are threatened by human activity, including the use of pesticides and fertilisers and also by climate change.

The bee hotels were installed to protect species found in the 10 municipalities of the metropolitan area of the Aburra Valley, including Barbosa and Colombia's second city Medellin.

"Globally (bees) are being negatively impacted and they are losing more spaces everyday", said Juan David Palacio, Director of the Metropolitan Area's Environmental and Transportation Authority.

Yet while the plight of honey bees generates more of a buzz, solitary bee species do not have anyone in their corner, Valencia added.

"These little bees are supremely sensitive to poisons and since they don't produce honey no one speaks up for them, so we're coming to the rescue", he said. — **Reuters**

WHAT'S FOR IFTAR?

An Uzbek flavour to Iftar



BY KABER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

Uzbekistan holds Ramadhan in all its grandeur and religious importance and the various tradition and culture of fasting and iftar is something that every Uzbek attaches close to their hearts since its Soviet Union era.

Holding on to their religious and national traditions, Uzbeks invite neighbours and relatives to their iftar throughout Ramadhan because their tradition is based on 'giving'.

After the maghrib call for prayer, Uzbek families are often led by the head of the family in a common prayer just before the actual breaking of the fast.

Some of their favourite dishes are traditional Uzbek dessert called *nişalda*, *patir* bread, a pastry called *Samsa* and Uzbek *pilaf* which are all also some of the inevitable Ramadhan dishes in Uzbekistan.

Giving Uzbekistan's cuisine a little space in our iftar menu during the holy month would be a treat to our taste buds after prolonged fasting.

According to seasoned *nişalda* confectioner Barno Polatova, the sweet has many health benefits and can ease digestion.

RECIPE AND METHOD OF COOKING:

Rinse rice in cold water at least 7 times, pouring out all the water completely after each rinse; set aside

Boil water in a saucepan and add 2 tbsp salt to it; set aside

Cut up the lamb into 1 to 1-1/2 inch cubes.

Half and slice the onions 1/4 inch slices. Half lengthwise and slice or julienne the carrots

If you have fatty lamb pieces use those for melting out the fat, if not, use vegetable oil instead.

In a heavy bottom large pot or dutch oven heat the oil, or brown the fatty lamb pieces to get the fat out over high heat, until fat is smoky (but not burning)

Toss in all of the lambs and continue browning on all sides until pleasantly brown and stops sticking to the bottom.

You can either remove the meat now or continue with the meat on the bottom.

Reduce heat to medium

Toss in onions and cook in fat until

translucent, about 5-7 minutes, frequently stirring them

Toss in carrots, continue stirring
Add some of the remaining salt and half of the black pepper and paprika at this point

If you removed the meat earlier, now add it back and sprinkle some of the coriander and cumin over.

Stir for another 2-3 minutes

Fold-out all the rice over the meat, onions and carrots, spread it evenly, don't stir

Make a hole in the rice with a handle of a wooden spoon, and pour the water through that hole slowly, taking care not to disturb the bottom ingredients.

Water should cover the rice by not more than 1/2 inch. Better under-water it than over-water.

Reserve the remaining water, if you have any.

Leave the heat at medium

Cover the pot tightly and let rice steam through for about 15 minutes without opening the pot

After 15 minutes toss in the remaining spices and salt. Cover again and keep steaming

Cut the top off the garlic head, slightly exposing the garlic cloves. You'll need to use some effort to do it.

Stick the garlic head (exposed side down) into the middle of the steaming plov, about 3/4 way and cover again.

Steam for another 10 minutes or so.

Check plov once in a while for doneness — the top grains should be slightly firm, and the bottom ones — well done, but not mushy.

All water should evaporate, but not burn.

If you feel your plov is not done yet, but water is gone, make holes in the plov with the handle of the wooden spoon — all the way through to the bottom, and pour remaining salty water into those holes. Don't abuse this technique, because it's very easy to overcook the plov this way. Use very little water at a time.

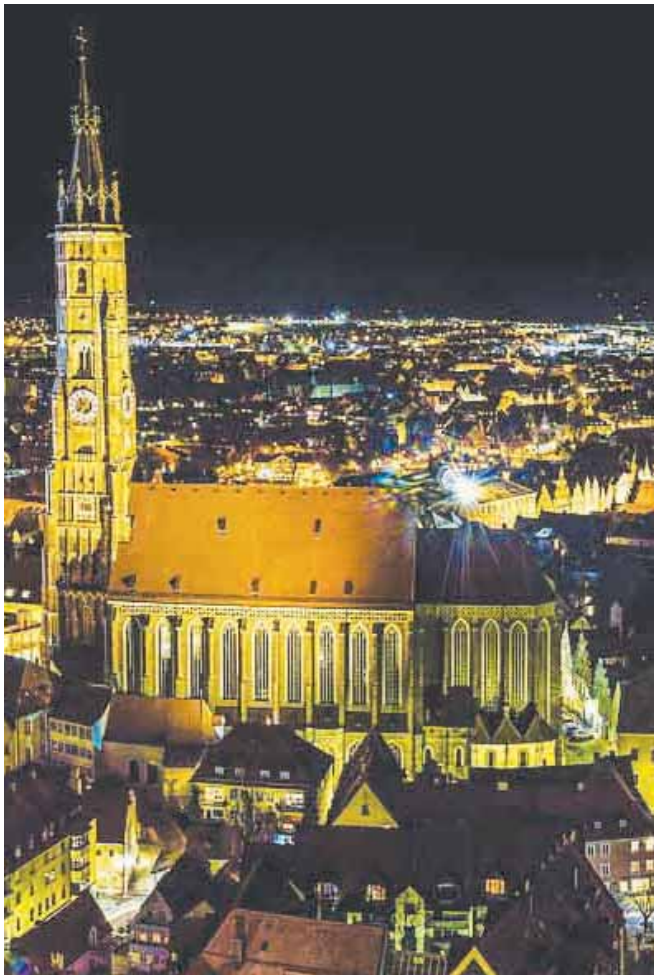
Remove from heat and stir with wooden spoon, bringing the bottom ingredients up to the surface.

Rice should be slightly sticky, but all grains should easily separate and not be easily mashed with a spoon. Meat should be tender and juicy, and vegetables should be all very tender.

Enjoy plov with pomegranate salad, if you are up for it.

TRAVEL TALES

Bavaria to reopen its doors to tourism as hopes rise for pandemic end



BAVARIAN PREMIER Markus Soeder declared on Tuesday that his state would be open again for tourists this month amid hopes that the worst of the coronavirus pandemic might be over for Germany.

Holidays in Bavaria, which is a popular destination for travellers not just from Germany but around the world, would be possible again from May 21 in regions with low infection numbers, Soeder said.

Bavaria's decision came amid signs that the number of new infections across Germany has been falling after a protracted lockdown.

Berlin, along with several states including Bavaria, is also moving to provide the fully vaccinated and those who have recovered with greater freedom from the pandemic rules.

Soeder said hotels, vacation apartments and campsites in districts and metropolitan areas with a stable seven-day incidence of less than 100 cases per 100,000 residents would be allowed to reopen.

At the same time, outdoor restaurants, theatres, concert halls, operahouses and cinemas will be allowed to reopen from next Monday in areas with a stable seven-day incidence below 100.

But several anti-coronavirus measures are to remain in place, Soeder said. They include ending outdoor restaurant trade at 10 pm (2000 GMT), as well the continuation of mask-and-testing rules. — **dpa**



Hard but sweet-smelling slog in Morocco's Valley of the Roses

To earn a dollar, rose picker Izza in Morocco's Atlas Mountains wakes up at dawn to collect three kilos of flowers — eventually distilled into precious oil costing \$18,000 per kilo.

"We earn just enough to live on," she says, her hands gloved against the thorns and her head covered against the hot sun bearing down on the Valley of the Roses in the kingdom's south.

The harvest begins at dawn, and it takes about six hours — before the sunshine damages the shocking pink petals — to fill the big bags that the women carry on their heads to the weighing station.

Izza Ait Ammi Mouh, a Berber woman of "about 40" — she doesn't know her exact age and can't spell her name — doesn't complain.

The work allows her to feed her family of five, picking 20 kilos (45 pounds) to take home just under \$7 a day during the short April-May season.

A kilo of essential oils requires between four and five tons of flowers.

The heady aroma of the Rosa Damascena, a variety introduced in the days of the caravan trade, perfumes hedges and fields irrigated by two wadis between the mountains and the Sahara desert.

Everything revolves around roses: the names of hotels, cosmetics sold in countless stores, necklaces offered by children in the streets.

The annual festival in the town of Kelaat Mgouna — with a rose statue at its centre — attracted thousands of visitors before Covid-19.

'LUCKY TO BE POOR'

"The rose is the only way to work in the valley," says Najad Hassad.

The 35-year-old happily left her job in a packaging factory to manage the Rosamgoun cooperative, a small distillery set up by two sisters who grow roses.

The work is much better paid, 2,500 dirhams (\$280) a month, almost the official minimum wage in Morocco, instead of 400 dirhams a month at the factory.

And the unit of five employees feels "like a family".

The distillery produces rose water and essential oils sold in the cooperative's store, along with cosmetic derivatives such as soap, creams, perfumes and ointments.

Rochdi Bouker, head of the Moroccan growers and proces-

sors association, Fimarose, sees the rose as "an engine of local development", banking on the global vogue for natural raw materials and organic products.

It aims to register an "organic" label for the valley to boost the value of local roses on a world market dominated by Bulgaria and Turkey, the leaders in rose-based perfumes.

"We are lucky to be poor," he said. "We don't treat our valley, or very little — (it) isn't filled with pesticides or insecticides".

To increase income and combat an exodus from rural areas, Morocco must "develop the derivatives that bring in the most" income, essential oils and "concrete", an extract obtained by a solvent which, once filtered, is highly prized by the luxury perfume industry, Bouker added.

'LOOKING FOR MORE'

Moroccan rose exports are currently restricted mostly to rose water and dried flowers.

Essential oils account for only about 50 kilos of annual exports and "concrete" for 500 kilos, a fraction of the industrial volumes sold by Bulgaria and Turkey, according to Fimarose.

"Here, the main buyers are tourists passing through," explains Mohamed Kaci.

The 40-year-old started with a still, and he now employs 30 people in his company, "La Valle des Roses", specialising in cosmetics.

But "unfortunately, Covid-19 is blocking everything," he says.

With the pandemic, the price of fresh flowers has sunk by about 30 per cent in the past two years.

The downturn came after a buoyant period, driven by the agriculture ministry's efforts to develop the sector.

"We're looking for more and more investors," says Hafsa Chakibi.

The 30-year-old Franco-Moroccan set up her own business, Flora Sina, in 2016 on the back of a university degree in chemistry, banking on the appeal of organic produce, small volumes and "traditional" distillation in copper stills.

Her "pure and natural" rose water has quickly found customers who are "looking for something more" in Canada, China, Britain, France and the Netherlands. — AFP

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Rosa
Damascena, a
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the Sahara
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Scamming activities intensify around vaccines



BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MAY 5

Scammers are continuing to exploit the Covid-19 pandemic for nefarious ends – this time, focusing on the vaccination process, according to Kaspersky cyber experts who have discovered various types of phishing pages distributed all over the world. As well as spam letters, recipients are invited to get a vaccine, to take part in a survey, or to diagnose Covid-19. For instance, some users from the UK received an email that appeared to come from the UK’s National Health Service. The recipient was invited to be vaccinated, having first confirmed their desire to be vaccinated by following the link. To make a vaccination appointment, the user had to fill in the form with their personal data, including bank card details. As a result, they handed their financial and personal data to the attackers. Another way to gain access to users’ personal data has been through fake vaccination surveys. Scammers sent e-mails on behalf of large pharmaceutical companies producing Covid-19 vaccines, inviting the recipient to take part in a short survey.

CMA prescribes book-building process for determination of offer price of IPOs

GOLD STANDARD: Capital Market Authority approves new rules regulating new public offerings

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MAY 5

Shaikh Abdullah bin Salim al Salmi, Executive President of the Capital Market Authority (CMA) has issued a decision approving new rules for specifying the price of shares in public offerings on the stock market. Decision 43/2021 has been issued pursuant to the Regulation for Public Joint Stock Companies issued earlier this year. The latest decision aims to regulate the issuance of initial public offerings (IPO) by specifying the methods for determining the price of shares in IPOs and the procedures to be followed to ensure a sound pricing process. Commenting on the significance of the new rules, Mohammed bin Said al Abri (pictured), Vice-President, Capital Market Sector, said the new guidelines provide for a transparent and lucid legal framework governing mechanisms for determining the offer price for businesses planning to convert from closed to public joint stock companies. It provides them with an appropriate environment for determining a



fair offer price objectively and transparently, he noted. The rules had allowed the issuer to specify the offer price through the issue manager using a fixed price method applied for years. In such an event, the CMA appointed a third party from among the entities licensed to carry out issue management activities or licensed audit firms at the expense of the issuer to conduct independent evaluation to recommend the appropriate price for the offering. The issuer was then be obliged to offer the shares at the recommended price or the price proposed by the issuer manager, whichever is less. In place of this methodology,



the new guidelines recommend the adoption of the book-building process, which is hailed as the most transparent method for pricing initial public offerings in the regional and global markets as it specifies the fair price for the offering by involving a greater segment of investors to explore and determine the offer price. This contrasts with the earlier

practice of only two parties involved in the fixed price method. The book-building process will enhance the efficiency and stability of the market, Al Abri said. The method works on receiving the applications from large subscribers containing their proposals for the quantities and prices within specific price band and the highest offer price and the quantities will be determined and then small investors will be allowed to subscribe at such price or lower price if the issuer is desirous to grant a discount. Al Abri added that there is another method to executing the book building process the issue manager may adopt by opening

The new guidelines provide for a transparent and lucid legal framework governing mechanisms for determining the offer price for businesses planning to convert from closed to public joint stock companies

subscription for small and large subscribers at the same time and receive the applications of large subscribers within the specified price band while small investors submit their applications at the highest limit of the price band and after the end of subscription the offering price will be determined for the whole quantity of shares and this price would be applied for small subscribers or a lesser price if the issuer intends to grant discount, if the subscription price for this category is less than the highest limit of the price band the surplus amount will be refunded to their bank accounts. The rules emphasise that the issuer manager should provide adequate information for the public on the offering and pricing method through book building in the various media to address any ambiguity or concerns of small subscribers specifically when subscribing at the highest limit of the price band.

Omani firms secure \$610m worth contracts from BP Oman

NEW COMMITMENT: Energy major launches first socioeconomic review in Sultanate in 2020

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MAY 5

Omani registered companies were beneficiaries of \$610 million worth of contracts awarded by BP Oman last year, representing around 90 per cent of the company’s total spend during the year. Announcing the launch of its first socioeconomic review in Oman, the energy major said it had also spend \$28.6 million directly with small and medium enterprises (SMEs) either through direct contract awards or through third party contracted services. Around 4,202 people employed through BP contracts, it said. BP Oman President Yousuf al



Ojaili commented: “Oman is a strategically important country for bp and we’re extremely proud of our partnership with the Sultanate and the stories portrayed through this review. Whilst bp’s role as an energy provider is core to what we do

and a key contributor to Oman’s economy, our impact is much broader.” Dr Mohammed bin Hamad al Rumhy, Minister of Energy and Minerals commented: “Oman’s oil and gas industry is a key part of our 2040 Vision to support

energy security and the national economy. Block 61 is a core part of that contribution, one of the Middle East’s largest and most challenging gas fields. We are proud of our partnership with BP in the development of this important

BP Oman spent \$4.5million spent on social investment programmes, which benefited nearly 18,000 people. Local contractors were also developed into internationally competitive companies

resource. As well as benefitting from their global experience, and pioneering technologies and approaches — such as green completions — it’s encouraging to see their commitment to Oman’s economy and society.” In other highlights, BP Oman spent \$4.5m spent on social investment programmes, which benefited nearly 18,000 people. Local contractors were also developed into internationally competitive companies. Omanisation within the company climbed to 85 per cent, with 50 per cent of leadership

team represented by nationals, it said. The report includes examples of how BP has supported the development of Omani companies, including local drilling contractor Abraj Energy Service who completed its first well stimulation in Block 61 – the largest stimulation completed by the company — and Sarooj Construction company who improved its worker welfare rights with BP’s guidance. In 2020, BP safely reduced over 148,000 tonnes of CO2e — 111 per cent higher than planned — thanks to a reduced flaring concept called ‘green completions’. BP is the first company in Oman to introduce this pioneering concept. BP has had a presence in Oman since 2007 and is a major investor in the country alongside partners OQ, PTTEP and Petronas. In October 2020, BP started production from Block 61’s Ghazeer development safely, with capital discipline and significantly ahead of schedule.

Bus project exemplifies Omani-Qatari investment

I had the privilege to attend the ground-breaking on the site of the distinguished Karwa Motors project, being established by an Omani-Qatari joint venture, at the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Duqm.

The visit took place before the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic.

This industrial and economic zone, located on the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean, is presently home to a number of industrial and logistics project, including Karwa Motors. The latter is designed to manufacture and assemble buses and related automotive vehicles.

The State of Qatar contributes

70 per cent of the project's capital through its national transport company, Mwasalat Qatar, while the Omani sovereign fund contributes the remaining 30 per cent.

The project, planned for implementation over several phases, will initially cost \$90 million in the first phase.

As a venture that requires a large area, the Duqm authorities have allocated 55 hectares for the project to manufacture 2,000 units of large buses, trucks and other vehicles in the first phase.

This project is being carried out in cooperation with the Chinese "Higer" company, while the management aims to position the company as one



HAIDER ALLAWATI
haiderdawood@hotmail.com

THIS PROJECT REINFORCES ECONOMIC DIVERSIFICATION PLANS IN LINE WITH THE CONCERN SHOWN BY THE OMANI GOVERNMENT TO MOVE TOWARDS NON-OIL PROJECTS

of the largest players in the markets of the Middle East and North Africa. In addition, the plant will also meet demand in Oman and Qatar.

The company is also working on plans to increase production to 3000 vehicles per annum by equipped the plant with the latest technologies.

This vision will also drive the growth of new investors setting up ancillary facilities to provide Karwa Motors with auto parts and other components.

Furthermore, the buses will be designed to perform in the challenging temperature and climate conditions of the Middle East. Over time, investment in the project is expected to reach

RO 160 million (\$416 million).

This joint investment by the two sisterly countries has been praised by many private enterprise owners, particularly those engaged in the provision of transportation services to schools, educational institutions, universities, and large contracting companies.

These vehicles, they point out, should be built to international specifications and meet the requirements of the transport sector in the region. Competitive pricing should be a key factor too.

This project reinforces economic diversification plans in line with the concern shown by the Omani government to

move towards non-oil projects in keeping with Vision 2040.

This policy is also consistent with the objectives set by the Omani government in its Five-Year Development plans. This project will also contribute to creating job opportunities for Omani youth, support the growth of the country's manufacturing base, and encourage Arab and foreign investment into the Sultanate.

This is also evident from the government's efforts to establish modern infrastructure that includes an international airport, commercial port, dry dock for maintenance of ships, and highways linking the capital with this important coastal city.

Bank Muscat's fixed deposits are low risk, safe investments



MUSCAT: Bank Muscat has invited its customers to take advantage of its Fixed Deposit accounts to save a lump sum amount for a rainy day. Fixed Deposits are financial instruments that provide a higher rate of interest than a regular interest bearing savings account. Also known as time deposits or term deposits, they are low risk and safe investments that help customers grow their money over the medium or long-term. They may be opened by individual as well as corporate and institutional customers at the bank's branches across the Sultanate. Customers may open deposits with a minimum of RO 1,000 and enjoy highly competitive interest rates tenors up to 6 years.

Fixed Deposits made in Omani Rials or US Dollars are accepted by the bank for different tenors starting from one month to 6 years. Shorter deposits of up to 12 months are also accepted by the bank in a few other currencies including the British Pound, Euro and UAE Dirhams. Funds may be transferred through digital channels from a savings or current account or paid by cheque or cash at any Bank Muscat branch.

Abdullah bin Tamman al Maashani (pictured), DGM — Institutional Sales & Product Development, Bank Muscat, said: "The bank's Fixed Deposit scheme will cater to the long-term financial planning needs of our customers and have a positive impact on Oman's economy in terms of further popularising savings amongst our customers. Any Bank Muscat customer can apply for a Fixed Deposit, which offers guaranteed returns and protection for the deposits themselves. We encourage all our customers to take advantage of the excellent interest rates and save for a future financial goal."

Celebrate Ramadhan with Nissan Kicks

MUSCAT: Nissan Oman from the house of Suhail Bahwan Automobiles (SBA) is offering a wide range of rewards for the patrons of youth centric and stylish Nissan Kicks.

Customers of Nissan Kicks will have a choice of benefits including 0 per cent interest for three years on specific models, cash gift, free service, insurance and more. The offer, which is available on all models purchased for personal use, will go on till June 3, 2021.

The spectacular Nissan Kicks combines emotion and practicality by blending familiar Nissan design signatures with striking modern themes.

From a spacious interior that maximizes room with a flat floor design, to the high degree of craftsmanship apparent in every design element, Nissan Kicks



gives owners the perfect excuse to stay out and have fun.

A spokesperson for Nissan Oman, said, "Nissan Kicks has been impressing customers with its excellent mileage, unique styling, roominess, personal technology, smart functionality, and advanced safety features. It is a perfect vehicle for people located in urban areas, and looking for a vehicle which provides technology, best-in-class fuel economy, and an overall great value proposition."

Al Mouj Muscat volunteers support Ramadhan charity gesture

MUSCAT: A group of volunteers from Al Mouj Muscat including the management team, staff and residents came together this week to distribute charity boxes to construction workers to support them during the holy month.

Around 870 food boxes were filled with essential food items then handed out to anyone working on the construction of key projects such as Zunairah, Juman Two and Ghadeer Villas, saving time and making it easier for them to prepare their Suhoor and iftar meals.

Nasser bin Masoud al Shaibani, Chief Executive Officer of Al Mouj Muscat says: "Our construction and maintenance workers play an important in



building our community so this helpful goodwill initiative was a simple way to show our appreciation during the holy month of Ramadhan. I

The best time to own a Lexus sedan range with exclusive benefits

MUSCAT: Owning a Lexus has never been this amazing with exclusive benefits, including free service 6 years/60,000 kms (whichever is earlier) and free registration (first year). (Conditions apply. For details visit your nearest Lexus showroom).

Customers looking forward to owning a Lexus sedan can choose from the IS, ES and LS. The redesigned new IS has attractive looks, which is complemented by its balanced, linear and confident driving signature. Owners can choose from two engine options; a 2.0-litre, turbocharged and intercooled inline four-cylinder engine delivering 241 hp and 35.7 kg.M of torque, and a sophisticated 3.5-litre V6 engine that produces 312 hp and 38.5 kg.M of torque.

The two engines paired with an eight-speed sport direct-shift



automatic transmission that offers superb drivability, together with outstanding fuel efficiency and quietness even at high speed.

The Lexus ES line-up includes the ES300h, a Hybrid Electric model, which combines two power sources consisting of a petrol engine and electric motor producing a combined system output of 215 hp. The ES300h offers an impressive 24.1 km/L mileage. The ES350 is powered

by a 3.5-litre V6 engine that is designed to deliver commanding acceleration along with an invigorating sound.

For more information, please visit www.lexusoman.com or www.youtube.com/lexusoman or www.facebook.com/LexusOmanSBA or [instagram.com/oman.lexus/](https://www.instagram.com/oman.lexus/). For further details & to ascertain availability of stocks, please visit your nearest Lexus Showroom.

Enjoy special interest rates on popular Renault models

MUSCAT: Renault Oman, from the house of Suhail Bahwan Automobiles (SBA), has announced



unlimited benefits on its popular models Duster, Koleos and Megane.

In line with the spirit of the Holy Month, Renault Oman is offering attractive value benefits such as special interest rate (0 per cent up to three years or 1.99 per cent for four years or 2.49 per cent for five years or 2.99 per cent for six years), assured cash gift, free periodic vehicle service package, free insurance, digital promotion, assured RO 100 gift voucher and free registration on models Duster, Koleos and Megane. Social media users who participate in the Ramadhan promotional campaign will also be eligible for attractive prizes.

The Renault Ramadhan promotion which has already begun will go on till June 6, 2021. All retail customers purchasing Renault vehicles are entitled to the special offer. Vehicles purchased with commercial registration will not be eligible for the scheme. Vehicles bought for taxi, driving school, ministries, fleet and rent-a-car usage will not be eligible for this scheme.

Avail special offer on family-friendly crossover Infiniti QX60



MUSCAT: Infiniti Oman has announced a special Ramadhan offer on Infiniti QX60, the seven-passenger crossover that offers world class technology, comfort, space and an array of features which underline its position as a luxury vehicle.

Customers who purchase Infiniti QX60 during the Ramadhan promotion are eligible

for assured cash gift, free registration, free window film and ceramic paint protection coat, free periodic vehicle service package and free AAA Assistance Card. The special offer is valid till June 6, 2021.

A senior spokesperson at Infiniti Oman said, "This is the perfect season to book a versatile car like Infiniti QX60. The 5 per

cent VAT charge applicable at the time of purchase will be borne by us. Only something stunning and intelligent could bring life and luxury together. Infiniti QX60 is one such car where family-first versatility and generous comforts form a vibrant collaboration. There is no other seven-passenger crossover like this incredible model."

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EU executive slows push for China investment deal



An attendant walks past EU and China flags at Diaoyutai State Guesthouse in Beijing, in this file photo. — Reuters

BRUSSELS: The European Commission has dialled down efforts to promote its planned investment agreement with China, recognising that EU lawmakers will not approve any such deal while Beijing maintains sanctions on five of their colleagues.

The Commission said in a statement on Wednesday that the China comprehensive agreement on investment (CAI) could not be divorced from other EU-Chinese developments and that the sanctioning of EU lawmakers was “unacceptable and regrettable”. “The prospects for CAI’s ratification will depend on how the situation evolves”, the Commission said. — **Reuters**

Robust domestic demand lifts US trade deficit to record high

WASHINGTON: The US trade deficit jumped to a record high in March amid roaring domestic demand, which is drawing in imports, and the gap could widen further as the nation’s economic activity rebounds faster than its global rivals.

Manufacturers lack the capacity to satisfy the surge in demand because of resource constraints and bottlenecks in the supply chain. Inventories are very lean. Demand is being driven by a rapidly improving public health situation and massive government aid to households and businesses to cushion the blow from the Covid-19 pandemic.

“The widening of the trade gap will likely be a persistent feature of the economy this year as domestic demand outstrips the US economy’s productive capacity”, said Conrad DeQuadros, senior economic adviser at Brea Capital.

The trade deficit increased 5.6 per cent to an all-time high of \$74.4 billion in March, the Commerce Department said on Tuesday. The trade gap was in line with economists’ expectations. Imports soared 6.3 per cent to a historic \$274.5 billion in March.

Goods imports shot up 7.0 per



Containers are stacked up at the port in Long Beach, California. — Reuters

cent to \$234.4 billion, also an all-time high. Imports of consumer goods were the highest on record, as were those for food and capital goods.

The nation imported a range of goods including apparel, furniture, toys, semiconductors, motor vehicles, petroleum products and telecommunications equipment. But imports of civilian aircraft and cellphones fell. The government has provided

nearly \$6 trillion in pandemic relief over the past year.

Americans over the age of 16 years are now eligible to receive the Covid-19 vaccine. Demand during the pandemic shifted to goods from services, with Americans cooped up at home. The economic boom is also being boosted by the Federal Reserve’s ultra-easy monetary policy stance.

The bulk of imports in March came from China, boosting the

politically-sensitive goods trade deficit with Beijing to \$27.69 billion from \$24.62 billion in February, reversing a tariffs-driven improvement during the Trump administration.

“The widening in the trade balance with China over the last few months has erased the tightening that occurred over 2019 as a result of tariffs”, said Veronica Clark, an economist at Citigroup. — **Reuters**

Oil prices gain after steep drop in US crude inventories

SINGAPORE: Oil prices rose for a third day on Wednesday after industry data indicated US crude inventories fell much more than expected last week, reinforcing bullish views on fuel demand in the world’s largest economy.

US West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude futures rose 43 cents, or 0.7 per cent, to \$66.12 a barrel at 0704 GMT. Prices climbed as to high as \$66.58, the most since March 8.

Brent crude futures were up 49 cents, or 0.7 per cent, at \$69.37 a barrel after touching a more than seven-week high of \$69.78 earlier in the session. Both benchmark contracts rose nearly 2 per cent on Tuesday.

The American Petroleum Institute (API) industry group reported crude stockpiles fell by 7.7 million barrels in the week ended April 30. — **Reuters**



A pump jack and a black barrel placed on top of US dollar notes are seen in this illustration. — AFP

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