

MUSCAT: Before His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, a number of ambassadors took oath of office at Al Barakah Palace on Tuesday morning. The oath taking ceremony was attended by Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister. **DETAILS ON P3**



HM PRESIDES OVER CABINET MEETING

His Majesty approves launch of Oman Vision-2040

HM orders establishment of two pension funds

Fiscal Plan 2021 for rationalisation of spending and to augment revenues

State Council, Majlis partners in development process

Expedite implementation of Unified E-Government Portal

Commends late Emir of Kuwait's efforts for GCC unity



MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on Tuesday presided over a meeting of the Council of Ministers at Al Barakah Palace.

At the outset of the meeting, His Majesty the Sultan gave thanks and praise to the Almighty Allah for the riches that He has bestowed on Oman. He prayed to Allah to perpetuate the bounties of security and stability enjoyed by the Sultanate.

Then, His Majesty the Sultan reviewed local and international developments. His Majesty

the Sultan valued the efforts and tasks undertaken towards the preparation of Oman Vision-2040. He commended the efforts of the Main Committee, the Technical Committee, sectoral committees, citizens and establishments that contributed to the formulation of the strategic vision.

Given the results achieved so far, His Majesty the Sultan approved the launching of Oman Future Vision-2040 to be applied from the beginning of 2021 till 2040. The vision, His

Majesty the Sultan noted, has been the outcome of national and harmonious societal efforts. Its success is credited to all participants and contributors, without exception.

NATIONAL PRIORITIES

Based on national priorities on which Oman Vision-2040 is based, His Majesty the Sultan called for channelling all efforts and resources for the realisation of goals and programmes of fiscal balance, the development of legal instruments for investment, the

streamlining and acceleration of government services, the development of economic zones and the implementation of major projects, along with the upgrading of national expertise-with all this to be linked to the employment of citizens, being a top national priority.

In this context, His Majesty the Sultan underlined the government's constant keenness to pursue five-year plans aimed at achieving the goals and priorities of Oman Vision-2040.

TURN TO P2

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HM presides over cabinet meeting



FROM PAGE 1

His Majesty the Sultan said that he followed up, with great attention, the stages of preparation of the 10th Five Year Plan (2021-2025), as well as the State's General Budget for Fiscal Year 2021, which is considered the first executive plan of Oman Vision 2040.

FISCAL PLAN

His Majesty the Sultan pointed out that the Fiscal Plan 2021 is compatible with financial conditions being experienced by the Sultanate and that emphasis is laid on maintaining fiscal sustainability through rationalisation of spending and augmenting of revenues.

The Five Year Plan and the Budget projects will constitute a cornerstone for the sustainability of economic and social stability and the realisation of good, consistent development rates, His Majesty the Sultan said.

His Majesty the Sultan added that he studied the comments and recommendations submitted by the State Council and Majlis Ash'shura on the draft Budget and Five Year Plan. He reaffirmed that the State Council and Majlis Ash'shura are basic partners in the development process and that their efforts serve the public interest and go hand in hand with other roles undertaken by the government and all other sectors.

His Majesty the Sultan underscored the need to maintain continuous cooperation and partnership between the government and the Council of Oman in a manner that realises their full integration.

Within the context of the Royal attention to achieve fiscal efficiency and sustainability of pension funds and, in light of challenges faced by the funds and due to their multiplicity, which necessitates collaborating efforts to raise the competence of their funds' investment, His Majesty the Sultan endorsed the recommendations listed below:

PENSION FUNDS

The establishment of two pension funds, the first for the civil sector and private sector and the second for personnel of military and security units.

Amending the minimum service for entitlement to early retirement in all current systems to be 30 years of service.

Devising a uniform retirement system for new personnel of government units and the private sector. The system applies in arrears to employees who have not completed ten years of the prescribed duration for entitlement to pension pay.

Regarding the employees who were transferred as per restructuring from units that are subject to a retirement system to units that are subject to another one, His Majesty gave his directives that these employees should continue to be subject to the earlier retirement system provided that they have spent two thirds of the subscription period in accordance with that system.

Also, within the context of the Royal attention to continue boosting digital competence and preparedness and to accelerate the pace of e-government transformation, His Majesty the Sultan

The Supreme COVID-19 Committee and the Committee entrusted with tackling the economic impacts of the pandemic to be merged

Omani foreign policy is based on good neighbourliness, friendship and cooperation with all

Top officials and governors must hold regular meetings to study the needs of the wilayats for services and development projects

10th Five Year Plan (2021-2025) as well as the State's General Budget for Fiscal Year 2021 reviewed

Maintain continuous cooperation and partnership between the government and the Council of Oman in a manner that realises their full integration

reaffirmed his constant follow-up of the efforts exerted by the government.

The overall aim is to speed up procedures for the realisation of aspirations of citizens, residents, entrepreneurs and investors and to empower the strategic, economic and developmental sectors in the Sultanate.

His Majesty the Sultan also gave directives to expedite the implementation of the National Unified E-Government Portal to serve as a composite platform incorporating all government services.

PANDEMIC IMPACT

His Majesty the Sultan listened to efforts made by the authorities concerned, including the Supreme Committee tasked with tackling developments resulting from coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and its health, social and economic impacts.

He was also briefed about steps taken to provide the appropriate vaccine in coordination with the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization, the World Health Organisation and the specialized firms.

His Majesty the Sultan stressed the need to maintain efforts and focus them during the next stage on societal and economic recovery from the pandemic.

In this context, His Majesty the Sultan gave directives to merge the Supreme COVID-19 Committee with the Committee entrusted with tackling the economic impacts of the pandemic.

REGULAR MEETINGS

His Majesty the Sultan also gave directives to top government officials and governors to

hold regular meetings, continuously, in the presence of wallis, with shaikhs, dignitaries and citizens in their respective wilayats to study the needs of the wilayats for services and development projects and to listen to their opinions about service plans and programmes in those governments.

NEUTRALITY

On the foreign front, His Majesty the Sultan reaffirmed the pursuance of permanent stands of Omani foreign policy, which is based on good neighbourliness, friendship and cooperation with all.

His Majesty the Sultan also reiterated the Sultanate's principle of neutrality and non-intervention in the internal affairs of others. In this context, His Majesty the Sultan commended the initiative of late Emir of Kuwait, Shaikh Sabah Al Ahmed Al Jabir al Sabah, in promoting rapprochement of views among Arab Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states.

He noted that the late Emir's efforts culminated in accord to take positive steps to find a way out of the impasse of misunderstanding and to work together to bring back the GCC household into full harmony.

His Majesty the Sultan expressed the Sultanate's continuous keenness to support all efforts to achieve consensus among GCC states.

At the conclusion of the meeting, His Majesty the Sultan touched on issues of interest to the nation and citizens, wishing all success in their benign endeavours towards realising prosperity for Oman and its noble people. — ONA



Before HM, Ambassadors take oath of office

MUSCAT: Before His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, a number of ambassadors took the oath of office at Al Barakah Palace on Tuesday.

HH Sayyid Faisal bin Turki bin Mahmoud al Said, the Sultanate's Ambassador to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and its Permanent Representative

to the Islamic Cooperation Organization; Dr Sayyid Ahmed bin Hilal bin Saud al Busaidy, the Sultanate's Ambassador to the United Arab Emirates; Abdullah bin Nassir bin Mussalam al Rahbi, the Sultanate's Ambassador to Egypt and its Permanent Representative to the Arab League; Moosa bin

Hamdan bin Moosa al Ta'ee, the Sultanate's Ambassador to the United States of America; Shaikh Hilal bin Marhoon bin Salim al Ma'amari, the Sultanate's Ambassador to Jordan, took the oath of office. The oath-taking ceremony was attended by Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister. — ONA



Bahrain to mark 49th National Day today

MANAMA: Bahrain will mark on Wednesday its 49th National Day and the 21st anniversary of King Hamad bin Issa al Khalifa of the Kingdom of Bahrain accession to the throne. Since 1971, the Kingdom of Bahrain has been able to march towards progress and development by relying on its own capabilities, as well as developing a strategic vision that enhances its economic and financial capabilities.

The Kingdom of Bahrain has witnessed a significant progress after King Hamad bin Issa al Khalifa took reins of power in 1999. He announced constitutional reforms and declaring the “National Charter” through which the parliamentary and democratic life of Bahrain was restored.

Bahrain has made remarkable and pioneering achievements in terms of political and democratic reform, economic and human development, the protection of rights of women and children, the respect for rights and fundamental freedoms guaranteed by the “National Charter”, the separation of powers, and the promotion of popular participation.

Through its diplomacy, Bahrain was able to boost its foreign position and enhance its image as a safe country for coexistence and tolerance. It also has a presence in all regional and international forums to defend GCC, Arab, Islamic and international issues of concern.

In the security field, it has succeeded in adopting plans and projects aimed at tackling all forms of crime and terrorism.

The year 2020 has witnessed many achievements by security personnel at various locations, particularly in their participation in the state’s tireless efforts to confront and limit the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in a manner that ensures the safety of society and preserves its resources.

The banking sector enjoys a great attention in the Kingdom of Bahrain, as it represents one of the most important pillars of Bahrain’s strategy to diversify sources



HM congratulates Bahrain King

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik sent a cable of congratulations to King Hamad bin Issa al Khalifa of Bahrain on the occasion of the 49th National Day of Bahrain. In the cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his sincere congratulations and best wishes of good health, happiness and a long life to King Hamad, praying to Allah the Almighty for the return of this occasion on King Hamad while the brotherly people of Bahrain realise aspirations of further progress and prosperity.

of income and expand the base of economic activities.

In the health field, Bahrain has intensified preventive efforts to enhance proactive health security by continuously monitoring global developments with vaccines-related experiments, as well as developing plans to easily provide safe and approved vaccine for all citizens and residents.

Bahrain also succeeded in

hosting two consecutive Formula 1 races last November, within a short period of time, which confirms Bahrain’s national experience in hosting and organising international sports competitions. The Kingdom of Bahrain is the first country to organise such kind of sports in the Middle East. It started in 2004 and attracted, through the race, audiences from all over the world. — ONA



Book traces RNO growth

MUSCAT: The Royal Navy of Oman (RNO) on Tuesday published a book titled “RNO in Five Decades” which documents major historical events of the Sultanate’s Blessed Renaissance.

The RNO book spans 50 years of sincere national action based on proper planning, armament and training that saw the evolution of the Omani navy into an advanced sea force that keeps abreast of modern day developments and enjoys high capabilities, both in preparedness and equipment.

The RNO’s growth, as

detailed in the book, was envisaged by the late His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said to realise the navy’s ability to efficiently carry out its tremendous national missions and duties.

The RNO book has been issued to mark the 50th anniversary of Blessed Renaissance and in celebration of the Armed Forces Day, the 11th of December. It narrates the progress made by the RNO over the past five decades until it developed into a fleet capable of restoring Omani naval glories. — ONA

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 15

Continued progress has been made on the construction of Outward Bound Oman’s third national training centre, in Jabal Al Akhdhar. The early stages of the project have involved laying down the foundations of the centre.

This project is a joint sponsorship of several oil and gas operators under the Corporate Social Responsibility initiative of the Ministry of Energy and Minerals (MEM), aiming to oversee and highlight CSR efforts across the sector, align these efforts by the operating companies and provide the necessary guidance to ensure projects that enhance sustainability and social responsibility.

Equipped to international standards, the centre, located at 2,300-metre altitude, will operate all year round, and will house facilities that include two fully equipped teaching rooms, an AV lecture theatre, equipment stores, environmental interpretation signage, four group-briefing pavilions, an outdoor climbing and



Artist impression of the project

teambuilding zone and basic accommodation. Renewable energies will be utilised through the use of both solar panels and micro-wind turbines. The expected completion date of the centre is September 2021.

Outward Bound Oman (OBO), which has operated in the Sultanate since 2009, offers unique experiential learning and training courses to a wide variety of groups, including school and university students, organisations, government institutes and private companies.

OBO delivers more than 100

training courses for over 3,000 people a year. The courses normally take place out of doors and require participants to interact and engage with the natural environment through powerful and challenging expeditions, creating an immersive, impactful physical, mental and educational learning experience.

Construction of the centre has been sponsored under MEM’s CSR initiative, in cooperation with Occidental Oman, Petroleum Development Oman, BP Oman, OQ, Daleel Petroleum and CC Energy Development. Occidental Oman

is managing the construction of the centre on behalf of the contributing companies.

Salim bin Nasser al Aufi, Under-Secretary at the Ministry of Energy and Minerals, said: “We are pleased to support this important project as part of the Energy Sector CSR initiative, which extends its support to include training and development of Omanis and providing them with the right skills and leadership qualities. Working with Outward Bound Oman by building their third centre in the Sultanate will enhance their capabilities and increase the opportunities for people to benefit from their extensive and unique training programme, which has local and international reputation.

“My sincere appreciation goes to Occidental Oman, Petroleum Development Oman, BP Oman, OQ, Daleel Petroleum and CC Energy Development who have put their hands together to fund the Al Jabal Centre. “I look forward to seeing the centre completed, operational and realising its and OBO’s objectives for more and continued success.”



In brief

■ MUSCAT

10 GAS DELIVERY VANS
TO OMANI YOUTH

Muscat Gases Company in collaboration with the Authority for SMEs Development and the Ministry of Social Development, announced an initiative aimed at creating job opportunities for Omani youth by providing 10 gas cylinder delivery vans.

Details of the initiative were announced at a press conference held at Al Bustan Palace hotel, on Monday.

Application for the imitative will open on Sunday December 20. The applicants will be required to fill in an electronic form which is directly linked to the civil registry to ensure that the applicant meets the required conditions.

OMAN AIR ENHANCES
SERVICE AND TRAINING
EFFICIENCY

Oman Air continues its efforts to improve efficiency and service to guests with the introduction of its new in-flight entertainment training system. The kiosk-based system displays ARIA, the airline's in-flight entertainment system, along with First, Business, and Economy Class screens and the cabin crew control panel. The training kiosk, which recently arrived in Muscat, makes training processes more efficient and cost-effective because it eliminates the need to use aircraft for training cabin crew in the use of ARIA, which is mandatory for cabin directors. Oman Air's system also facilitates quality control reviews of all content before it is installed into the system for guests to view.

SAI TAKES PART IN IN
MENA-OECD MEET

The State Audit Institution (SAI) on Tuesday participated in the annual virtual meeting of the MENA-Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development Business Integrity Network (MOBIN). The meeting, held through video-conferencing from Sweden, showed a wide participation from experts and specialists under the theme of promoting dialogue between public and private sectors for flexible anti-corruption frameworks. The meeting focused on discussing advancements and challenges in the field of business integrity and fighting corruption in the Middle East and North Africa region.

A number of topics were reviewed including public procurement, whistleblowers' protection, risks and digitalisation opportunities.

Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine
gets approval of ministry

VINOD NAIR

@vinot_nair

The Ministry of Health approved Pfizer and BioNTech vaccine for Emergency Use Authorization (EUA) against COVID-19 in individuals 16 years of age and above.

This approval is part of the ministry's efforts to ensure facilitation and acceleration of the provision of the vaccine in the Sultanate for EUA according to the policies approved by the ministry. "The Directorate General of Pharmaceutical Affairs and Drug Control evaluated the efficacy and safety studies that were provided by the American company Pfizer and concluded that the known potential risks of the vaccine outweigh its expected risks. It has been also approved by the health authorities in

the United Kingdom, Canada, and the US Food and Drug Administration."

The vaccine will be given in two doses, with an interval of three weeks. The studies included safety data available from clinical studies that covered nearly 38,000 participants.

The vaccine's effectiveness was followed up for two months after receiving the second dose, and the most common side effects were the same that are associated with any other known vaccines.

A national awareness survey on the COVID-19 vaccine by the Ministry of Health is currently underway, aimed at promoting scientifically-based information and refuting misinformation and rumours by identifying the extent to which the members of the community know about vaccines.

Around 3,000 participants, including Omanis and non-Omanis from all governorates, will be randomly picked for the survey.

MOH said it has identified the priority groups for a vaccination with a strategy to cover 60 per cent of the total target population to prevent the spread of the disease in the Sultanate.

The target group will get vaccines and will be free and people who are highly exposed to risks and complications of the disease will be vaccinated according to priority, including frontline workers, basic service providers, chronic diseases patients, the elderly, and immunocompromised patients with two doses per person.

No law compels a person to have any vaccination except for some groups of children, so the vaccine will not be compulsory.

Over 2.1m workers in Sultanate

MAJID AL HATTALI
MUSCAT, DEC 15

The E-Census 2020 revealed that the number of employees who are 50 years old and above stands at 252,200 including 32,180 in the public sector and 168,800 in the private sector.

The total number of workers in the Sultanate stands at 2,158,807 of whom 1,457,029 are employed by the private sector and 393,042. The family sector employs 302,378, the community sector 5,399 while other sectors employ 959 workers.

The data indicates that the total number of national employees stands at 751,831 including 350,378 in the private sector, 349,200 in the public sector, 50,965 in the family sector and 1,265 in the community sector.

The total non-Omani workforce stands at

1.4 million of whom 1.106 million work in the private sector, 43,842 in the public sector, 251,400 in the family sector, and 4,134 in the community sector.

The data shows that job-seekers represent 65,438 of whom 24,559 are men and 40,879 are women. Among men, 11,693 have the general education diploma (GED) while job-seekers with lower-than-GED level represent 6,265, holders of bachelor's degree above (4,013) and the higher education diploma (2,400).

Among women job-seekers 20,288 are holders of bachelor's degree and higher qualification followed by 10,470 with GED, higher education diploma (8,097) and lower-than-GED qualification (1,828).

The majority of job-seekers (47,115) are in the age group 29 years and below. Of the total, 20,400 are men and 26,600 are women.

OQ to divest shares in BORL

MUSCAT: OQ, Oman's global integrated energy company, is looking to rationalise its local and international portfolio to fuel growth in its core business and achieve set 2030 targets.

In light of this, OQ is currently in discussions with its partner Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd (BPCL) on potential divestment of its shares in Bharat Oman Refineries Ltd (BORL).

OQ is a global integrated energy company with roots in Oman. It was set up in 2019 after the merger of nine legacy companies,

united to form a stronger, more efficient, and consolidated entity. OQ operates in 16 countries and covers the entire value chain in the hydrocarbon sector from exploration and production, to marketing and distribution of end-user products. Its fuels and chemicals are sold in over 60 countries worldwide. OQ also partners with local and international companies in the hydrocarbon sector to increase value for the shareholders and reap greater benefits for the communities.

— ONA

215 new COVID-19
cases, 8 people die

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Health (MOH) reported 215 new cases of COVID-19 on Tuesday, bringing the total number of cases registered in the Sultanate to 126,719. Eight died due to coronavirus infection taking the total death toll to 1,475. The total recovery cases reached

118,505, which is 93.5 per cent of the total cases reported so far. The ministry also pointed out that 17 cases were hospitalised over the past 24 hours, adding that the total number of current hospitalised COVID-19-infected patients stands at 115, out of which 54 are in intensive care units (ICU). — ONA

HALLIBURTON

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Announcement

Halliburton Worldwide will launch unused spare parts for wholesale. Interested buyers can visit our base in Adam to inspect the goods, the company also announces the sale of scrap /ton and can be contracted annually.

You may visit Halliburton base on 20th and 21st of December to inspect the goods (You can find Halliburton Adam base in google maps) from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.

Contact Mr. Anwar - 97970718.



The Egyptian School- Muscat

The Egyptian School Muscat (Al Ansab) is seeking experienced teachers for The IGCSE-GCE Department in the following subjects:

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Muscat Municipality

Advertisement No. 59/2020

Specialized Companies in the field of tender shown below and registered with Tender Board, may obtain tender documents from the website through the following link:

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

against non-refundable fees until the end of deadline stipulated below.

Tender No.	E- Tender No.	Description of Tender	Tender Fee	Last date to collect the tender	Tender return date	Grade
PRE/18/063	2020/MM/ QS/42 Re-Call	Refurbishment of Existing Toilet at Souk Muttarah (E- Tender) (Re-Call)	Rial 25	17/01/2021	24/01/2021	First
PRE/20/099	2020/MM/ QS/47 Re-Call	Manufacture, Supply, Replacement of Condenser Coils And Commissioning of the Air Conditioning Unit. (Re-Call)	Rial 25	17/01/2021	24/01/2021	Excellent

Tender Conditions :-

1. Bidders shall submit their offers electronically accompanied with an electronic copy of bond issued by any local bank in Oman addressed to Muscat municipality. The bond shall be (1%) of the tender value valid for ninety (90) days starting from the date of bids submission. Any tenders which do not meet the required bond shall not be accepted.
2. Tender Bonds shall be placed in the Tender Bond Box for E-Tendering in the Ground floor at Muscat Municipality Building, Ruwi, before 10:00 am as per the date Mentioned in the above table. All envelopes are to be clearly marked with the name of the Tender being presented and no other marks.
3. For any inquiries regarding tenders, please visit e-tendering website: (<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>).
4. For technical support of e-tendering system please send an email to (etenderhd@ita.gov.om) or call (+96824166670).

Path to Lebanese cabinet totally blocked: Speaker

BEIRUT: The path to a new Lebanese government is completely blocked, Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri said in comments published on Tuesday, but he held out hope that French President Emmanuel Macron might be able to help in a forthcoming visit.

Fractious politicians have been unable to agree on a new government since the last one quit in the aftermath of the August 4 Beirut port explosion, leaving Lebanon rudderless as it sinks deeper into economic and financial crisis.

“We have entered a tunnel and I don’t know how we will get out of it,” Berri told *Al-Jumhuria* newspaper.

“We are in a pitiful situation. The government situation is completely blocked.”

Prime Minister-designate Saad al Hariri and President Michel Aoun aired their differences over the government in statements on Monday, each blaming the other for the delay.

“Why this blockage? The answer certainly lies with the president and prime minister-designate,” said Berri, an ally of the Hezbollah group. “God willing, the French President Emmanuel Macron will be able to do something in his coming visit. We can only wait.”

Macron is due to visit Lebanon later this month, his third visit since the devastating port explosion which worsened an economic crisis. Caused by decades of corruption and bad governance, the financial meltdown is the worst crisis to hit Lebanon since its 1975-90 civil war.

— Reuters



Lebanon's Prime Minister-designate Saad al Hariri walks with Lebanon's caretaker Prime Minister Hassan Diab at the government palace in Beirut. — Reuters



Saudi Arabia has been hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic with unprecedented restrictions imposed on pilgrimages to the holy places of Mecca and Medina this year. — AFP

Saudi announces three-phase roll out of COVID-19 vaccine

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia on Tuesday announced a three-phase COVID-19 vaccination programme, as it began registering citizens and foreign residents after approving the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine.

People aged over 65 as well as those with chronic ailments or at a high risk of infection will receive the vaccine in the first stage, and those aged over 50 in the second, the official Saudi Press Agency said.

Everyone else will be vaccinated in the third stage, SPA said citing the health ministry, without specifying the dates for each phase or how long the mass campaign would take.

The kingdom has a population of more than 34 million, according to official figures.

The ministry opened registration for the vaccination campaign through an online application called “Sehaty”, and said the vaccine would be “free for all citizens and residents”.

Last week, the kingdom approved the use of the vaccine developed by US pharmaceuticals giant Pfizer and its German partner BioNTec, becoming the second Gulf country after Bahrain to green-light the drug.

Britain, Canada and the United States have also approved the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine and have already launched mass inoculation campaigns. Neighbouring Jordan green-lighted the drug on Monday.

Saudi Arabia has so far recorded more than 360,000 novel coronavirus cases, including more than 6,000 deaths — the highest in the Gulf. But the kingdom has also reported a high recovery rate.

The start of the first vaccination programmes comes with several European countries announcing new lockdowns amid spiralling infections, highlighting the long road to ending the pandemic which has killed more than 1.6 million people worldwide.

JORDAN APPROVES EMERGENCY USE

Meanwhile, Jordan too has approved emergency use for a COVID-19 vaccine developed by US pharmaceutical giant Pfizer and German partner BioNTech, a health official said on Tuesday. Nizar Muhaidat, the head of Jordan Food and Drug Administration, told the state-run Jordan TV the authorisation comes two weeks after the producing companies filed a request. Jordan, a country of around 10 million people, has recorded more than 260,000 coronavirus cases and 3,400 deaths. Several countries in the Middle East have approved the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine.

— AFP/dpa

Tunisia intercepts 93 migrants

TUNIS: Tunisia’s navy said on Tuesday it had intercepted 93 African irregular migrants after their boat ran into trouble in the Mediterranean Sea during an attempt to reach Italy. The defence ministry said the boat carrying “93 migrants of various African nationalities”, including three Tunisians, had broken down 42 kilometres northeast of the coastal city of Sfax on Monday night.

They included 37 women and four children, spokesman Mohamed Zekri said in a brief statement. The navy and coast guard took them “to Sfax fishing port and handed them over to the national guard to carry out the relevant legal measures,” he added.

Tunisia, just a few hundred kilometres from mainland Europe, has long been a launchpad for migrants making desperate clandestine bids to reach Europe.

Those departures peaked in 2011 following the revolution that overthrew dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, but numbers have since dropped significantly.

But, with many Tunisians disillusioned by years of economic crisis and ballooning unemployment, the numbers are ticking up again.

The UN’s refugee agency UNHCR says a fifth of refugees and migrants arriving in Mediterranean countries this year have been Tunisians. Tunisian Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi said on Monday night during a visit to France that the two countries were looking into the causes of clandestine immigration. — AFP

■ YEMEN CRISIS



Military personnel of Yemen's Southern Transitional Council are pictured during their redeployment from the southern Yemeni province of Abyan. Government troops and separatist forces continued to redeploy their troops in southern Yemen under a Saudi brokered-agreement. — Reuters

SHORT TAKES

BEIRUT

COVID-19 vaccines expected in two months

Lebanon is expected to sign a deal this week for supplies of Pfizer-BioNTech’s COVID-19 vaccine and is set to receive the first batch eight weeks after that, the caretaker health minister said.

A surge in infections is straining Lebanon’s healthcare system which has been struggling amid a financial crisis and after a huge port explosion in August smashed up hospitals in Beirut. Adding to the pressures, the economic meltdown has prompted many doctors to emigrate and raised concerns that subsidies on medicines will be removed.

Lebanon, with an estimated population of 6 million, has reported 1,210 deaths as a result of COVID-19. — Reuters



TEL AVIV

Netanyahu picks new head of spy agency

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Tuesday picked the next director of the Mossad spy agency, identified only as “D”, to replace Yossi Cohen, a high-profile player in recent normalisation deals with Arab states.

Netanyahu “decided to appoint Deputy Mossad Director ‘D’ as the next Mossad Director. ‘D’ is an accomplished Mossad veteran,” a statement from the prime minister’s office said.



TEHRAN

Dual-nationals not allowed to contest elections

Iran’s parliament passed a measure on Tuesday to ban dual nationals and holders of foreign residency from running in presidential elections, after speculation that some officials may hold Green Cards from the United States.

The measure, passed in a session carried live on state radio, still needs to be approved by a high clerical council before it takes effect.

Hardline figures and media outlets have long speculated that some senior officials, such as US-educated Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, hold dual nationalities or US residency and that this posed a security risk.

Zarif has denied even applying for a Green Card. — Reuters





In brief

■ SINGAPORE

**BUSINESS TRAVEL
ALLOWED WITH
RESTRICTIONS**

Singapore is to allow a limited number of business, official and other “high economic value” travellers from abroad under a “bubble” arrangement that offers a glimpse into what visitors for this year’s relocated Davos conference might expect.

The annual World Economic Forum (WEF) will make its debut in Asia in May after being moved from its usual home in the Swiss ski resort of Davos over coronavirus safety concerns. Singapore’s borders have been effectively shut for months as part of strict rules to keep out a virus still raging across the world, and it faces challenges hosting an event that usually attracts thousands just five months from now.

■ COLOMBO

**AIR FORCE PILOT
KILLED IN CRASH
IN NORTH-EAST**

A Sri Lankan Air Force aircraft crashed in the north-eastern part of the country while on a training mission, killing the pilot on Tuesday, an official said. The aircraft had crashed in Kantale shortly after it took off from a training base located in the coastal city of Trincomalee.

An Air Force spokesman said only the trainee pilot was on board at the time of the crash.

The cause of the crash was not immediately known, and the weather conditions were normal at the time of the incident.

The Chinese-built PT 6 aircraft which crashed was one of those being put into use to train newly enlisted pilots.

■ BANGKOK

**AUTHORITIES TO CLAMP
DOWN ON POLLUTERS**

Bangkok on Tuesday introduced measures to tackle rising pollution, as concentrations of microparticles hit unhealthy levels in several parts of the Thai capital, shrouding high-rise buildings in a murky haze.

Air quality in the city of around 10 million people has deteriorated markedly in recent days, and authorities said large construction projects had been asked to halt and checkpoints were being set up to test vehicle emissions. “It affects my daily life because every time I walk outside, my nose and neck feels irritated and when I cough, people get suspicious about whether I have COVID or not,” said Bangkok resident Sarunya Pongsumdee. — Reuters

Johnson to visit India to boost trade ties

NEW DELHI: India and Britain will push negotiations on trade ties, their foreign ministers said after talks in New Delhi on Tuesday, as both countries seek to restart economies battered by the coronavirus pandemic.

Indian Foreign Minister S Jaishankar said trade ministers from both countries had held discussions and there was “a serious intent” to deepen trade.

Britain’s Dominic Raab said the two foreign ministers “would like to nudge our trade negotiators along and see what we can achieve.” “What I think we recognise is the possibilities of a deeper trading relationship.

“The contours of our economies would allow that and we, certainly, as foreign ministers see a very powerful strategic case,” Raab said after four hours of talks with Jaishankar.

Trade and investment will be high on the agenda of Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who will travel to New Delhi in January,



Britain’s Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab and India’s Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar during a joint news conference after a meeting in New Delhi. — Reuters

his first bilateral visit since taking office. Earlier this year, trade minister Piyush Goyal said India was open to engage with Britain on a preferential trade agreement, ultimately leading to a free trade agreement.

India pulled out of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, an Asia-Pacific free

trade agreement, last year due to fears over China’s access to its markets. Britain is seeking fresh deals, having cited the freedom to strike bilateral agreements as a benefit of leaving the EU.

Trade between Britain and India totalled more than £20 billion (\$26.60 billion) in 2018, according to Britain’s Department

for International Trade.

**NO WINTER
PARLIAMENT SESSION**

The Indian government has said there will be no winter session of parliament this year due to the coronavirus pandemic, even as the number of new COVID-19 cases declines.

On Tuesday, less than 22,000 new daily cases were reported for the first time since July 7, according to the Health Ministry.

The South Asian country has the world’s second-highest total of COVID-19 infections after the United States with a caseload of around 9.9 million, and 143,709 deaths.

The government’s decision comes during widespread farmers’ protests against a set of laws hurriedly passed by parliament during a two-week session in September. The demonstrations have now reached the doorstep of the Indian capital. The monsoon legislative session was held with COVID-19 safety protocols in

place, at a time when the country was reporting its highest infection numbers of around 75,000 to 85,000 daily.

India’s winter session of parliament usually begins in mid-December. The cancellation was confirmed by opposition Indian National Congress leader Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury who received a letter from the parliamentary affairs minister Prahlaad Joshi saying the next session was likely to be held in January.

“Winter months are very crucial for managing the pandemic because of the recent spurt in cases during this period, particularly in Delhi,” Joshi wrote in a letter to Chowdhury. Joshi said the decision to not hold the session was taken in consultation with leaders of other political parties. Chowdhury, who is floor leader for his party in parliament, said he received the letter after he asked for an urgent session to discuss the farmers’ protest.

— Reuters/dpa

Bomb kills deputy governor in Kabul

KABUL: A deputy governor of Kabul province and his aide were killed on Tuesday by a bomb in the Afghan capital, officials said, the latest in a wave of targeted killings in the country.

Mahbobullah Mohebi died when a bomb attached to his vehicle detonated while he was on his way to his office, the interior ministry said.

Mohebi’s secretary, who was travelling with him, was also killed, and two bodyguards were wounded.

Hours later, in the central province of Ghor, a similar bomb killed Abdul Rahman Akshan, the deputy chief of the provincial council.

Akshan was killed and his two bodyguards were wounded when a “sticky bomb” attached to his vehicle detonated in the city of Feroz Koh, a local official said.

Violence has raged across the country since the Taliban and Afghan government launched peace talks in Qatar in September.

Afghanistan — and especially Kabul — have seen a spate of murders of prominent figures, including journalists, clerics, politicians and rights activists.

Last week, a female news anchor was shot dead in the

Afghanistan — and especially Kabul — have seen a spate of murders of prominent figures, including journalists, clerics, politicians and rights activists

eastern city of Jalalabad, the second journalist to be murdered in less than a month.

The capital has been hit by rockets twice this month and recently battled major attacks on educational centres, including a massacre of students at a university campus.

In a separate attack in Kabul on Tuesday, a policeman was killed and two others wounded when gunmen attacked their checkpoint, officials said.

Peace talks have paused until January, with government negotiators expected to return to Kabul from Qatar this week to meet with senior officials.

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and some other senior officials have called for talks to be moved to Afghanistan from Doha. — AFP



An Afghan woman cries at the site of a bomb blast after she heard her relative was among the victims. — Reuters

■ FLOATING BRIDGE ON THE GANGES



Workers build a floating bridge on the banks of the Ganges River ahead of the Magh Mela festival in Allahabad on Tuesday. — AFP

Philippines’ hospital expects pandemic baby boom

MANILA: The Philippines’ largest maternity hospital is expecting a baby boom next year, partly because of the difficulty of accessing contraception during the country’s coronavirus lockdown.

There are currently between 30 and 40 deliveries a day at the Dr Jose Fabella Memorial Hospital, according to Diana Rose Cajipe, a doctor and spokeswoman for the facility.

“We are anticipating a baby boom in the first quarter of next year not only because couples and partners were always together due to the lockdown, but also because access to contraception was interrupted,” she said.

Women who wanted to get reproductive health services were either unable to travel to the hospital due to the lockdown, or were afraid to go to the hospital for fear of getting infected with the coronavirus, Cajipe said.

Contraceptives were available in pharmacies, but the burden of family planning in the Philippines



Street dwellers, including children, queue up for free food distributed by a charity in Manila. — AFP

usually falls on women. Cajipe said the hospital and staff were prepared for the predicted spike in births.

The current number of births was low compared to before the pandemic, when it peaked at around 60-70 per day, she noted.

The hospital, however, had already been struggling with patient numbers even before the pandemic, with two mothers and

their babies sometimes sharing one bed. Now, the hospital puts together two beds to create space to accommodate five to six mothers with their babies, Cajipe said.

“I will not hide the truth of what is happening in a government hospital like us,” she said.

“Even if we would want to do social distancing, what will happen to mothers if we turn them away?” — dpa

Boko Haram claims kidnapping of hundreds of Nigerian schoolboys

KANKARA: Boko Haram on Tuesday claimed the abduction of hundreds of students in northwestern Nigeria, in what would be its first attack in the region since it launched a militant uprising more than a decade ago.

Boko Haram and its rival, the IS in West Africa Province (ISWAP) group, have until now waged an insurgency in the northeast of the country and neighbouring Cameroon, Chad and Niger, killing thousands and displacing millions of people.

Local authorities said the abductors responsible for Friday's attack "made contacts with the government."

"Talks are ongoing to ensure their safety and return to their respective families," the governor of Katsina state, Aminu Bello Masari, said on Twitter.

The army said over the weekend that it had located the gunmen's enclave and that a military operation was under way.

On Tuesday, dozens of aggrieved parents thronged the deserted streets of Kankara, a sleepy town in the state of Katsina, confused and in shock after Boko Haram claimed it took their children.

Clustered inside the school compound and nearby, under



An empty classroom with school bags and wares belonging to pupils at the Government Science school where gunmen abducted students, in Kankara. — AFP

palm, mango and tamarind trees, one father said his hopes of a swift release were now weakened.

"The news that our children were kidnapped by Boko Haram has destroyed whatever hope I had of seeing my son soon," said Ahmad, who gave only his

first name to protect his child's identity.

"We were thinking they were just taken by bandits who would release them for ransom, but Boko Haram saying they are holding them has changed everything."

The audio released on Tuesday

featured a voice resembling that of the elusive Boko Haram leader, Abubakar Shekau, who was behind the 2014 abduction of 276 schoolgirls in Chibok that sparked global outrage.

"I am Abubakar Shekau and our brothers are behind the

kidnapping in Katsina," said the voice in a four-minute recording sent to AFP through the same channel as previous messages from Boko Haram.

"We carried out the Katsina attack to debase unbelief"

— AFP

Republican leader greets Biden on election win

WASHINGTON: Republican Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell congratulated President-elect Joe Biden on Tuesday, dealing a blow to any lingering hopes Donald Trump may have had of reversing his election defeat.

"The Electoral College has spoken," the powerful senator from Kentucky said in a speech on the Senate floor. "So today I want to congratulate President-elect Joe Biden."

McConnell also congratulated California Senator Kamala Harris on her election as Vice President.

"Beyond our differences, all Americans can take pride that our nation has a female Vice President-elect for the first time," McConnell said.

Members of the Electoral College met around the country



McConnell acknowledged the Democrats' win of the White House following Monday's formal result issued by the Electoral College.

— AFP

on Monday and delivered 306 votes to Biden and 232 to Trump, who has refused to concede the November 3 election and claimed falsely that it was marred by fraud.

Many leading Republicans lawmakers have refused so far to acknowledge Biden's win, but McConnell's remarks are a clear signal to the White House that

further efforts to challenge the result are futile.

Joe Biden is set to travel to Georgia on Tuesday to campaign for two Democratic US Senate candidates whose January 5 runoff elections could make or break his domestic policy agenda.

Biden's narrow win in Georgia in the November 3 election underscored the Southern state's transformation from Republican stronghold to one of the country's most competitive political battlegrounds.

Republican Senators David Perdue and Kelly Loeffler are facing Democratic challengers Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock, respectively, in twin races that will determine which party will control the US Senate when Biden takes office on January 20. — AFP

Record number of journos imprisoned in 2020

NEW YORK: A record number of journalists were behind bars this year, a US-based watchdog said on Tuesday, accusing governments worldwide of suppressing the media and fuelling misinformation amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

The annual report by the Committee to Protect Journalists found that 274 journalists were imprisoned in 2020 — the highest number since the non-profit organisation began its survey in the 1990s.

The report also found that 26 journalists and media workers had been murdered this year, with Mexico listed as the world's most dangerous country for the press.

"It's shocking and appalling," CPJ Executive Director Joel Simon said in a statement.

"This wave of repression

is a form of censorship that is disrupting the flow of information and fuelling the infodemic," he added.

The worst offender was China for the second consecutive year, the survey found, with 47 reporters behind bars and where authorities only last week detained a Bloomberg employee on suspicion of endangering national security.

Other top jailers were Turkey Belarus and Ethiopia — where popular unrest and armed conflict flared this year — also seeing sharp increases in the number of reporters behind bars.

While the US had no reporters in jail as of the report's release, the survey noted an "unprecedented" 110 had been arrested or detained through the course of the year.

— AFP

Somalia cuts diplomatic ties with Kenya

MOGADISHU: Somalia severed diplomatic ties with Kenya on Tuesday, accusing Nairobi of interfering in its political affairs as Mogadishu prepares for long-awaited elections.

The move came as Kenya confirmed it had hosted the leadership of Somaliland, a breakaway state not recognised by Mogadishu, following months of rising tensions between the two neighbours.

Somalia has bristled over what it calls Kenya's meddling in regions over its border, while Nairobi has accused Mogadishu of using it as a scapegoat for its own political problems.

Somali Information Minister Osman Abukar Dubbe told reporters on Tuesday that Kenyan diplomats in Mogadishu had been given seven days to leave, and that Somalia's envoys were being recalled from Nairobi.

"The government took this decision to respond to recurring outright political violations and interference by Kenya against the sovereignty of our country," he said in Mogadishu.

Somali officials did not point to specific grievances for the decision to break off diplomatic relations.

But the announcement came as Kenya President Uhuru Kenyatta received the president of the self-proclaimed independent Somaliland region, Muse Bihi Abdi, in Nairobi.

The leaders announced closer relations in a joint statement on Tuesday, with Kenya committing to opening a consulate in Somaliland's capital Hargeisa by the end of March.

The statement added that Kenyan airlines would start direct flights between Nairobi and Hargeisa by that date.

"The two leaders acknowledged Kenya's commitment to a peaceful, stable, strong and prosperous Somalia, in which the voices of all the people of Somalia have opportunity to express their sovereign will," the statement said. — AFP

BERLIN

Merkel laments 'devastating' lack of discipline

Some people are determined to poke holes in Germany's coronavirus rules in a bid to get around them, Chancellor Angela Merkel says, calling such behaviour "devastating." Some take comfort in the fact that the virus mainly poses a risk to older people, Merkel told students in an online forum with the chancellor.

"[But] it does make a difference whether my parents die at age 80 or 90," she added.

The second waves of pandemics are often the most



dangerous," Merkel warned, while appealing to the population to take the situation seriously.

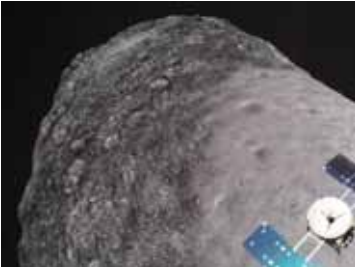
German Health Minister Jens Spahn is aiming to have around 60 per cent of the country's population vaccinated. — dpa

TOKYO

Delight as probe brings more asteroid material

The Japanese space probe Hayabusa 2 collected more material from the surface of its target asteroid than expected, the space agency Jaxa said on Tuesday.

A first analysis revealed the probe had successfully collected substantial gas and soil particles from the Ryugu asteroid some 300 million kilometres from Earth, Jaxa said. The mission was concluded perfectly, said Yuichi Tsuda, project manager of Hasabusa 2, calling it a



milestone for space research. The probe collected samples in two landings from the surface of Ryugu and, for the first time, from below the surface of an asteroid. — dpa

LONDON

Top court to give Heathrow expansion go-ahead

Britain's Supreme Court will give Heathrow Airport the go-ahead to expand on Wednesday, a lawyer in the case said, a decision that would put the 14 billion pound (\$19 billion) plan back on track after years of legal battles and political wrangling.

The plan to build a new runway was declared unlawful on environmental grounds by the Court of Appeal in February, but the country's top court is set to overturn that earlier decision, said a lawyer involved in the



campaign against the airport's plans.

Heathrow, west of London, is Britain's biggest airport and prior to the pandemic was the busiest hub in Europe. — Reuters

Taking vaccine reduces burden on healthcare system

As a prelude to the regulatory approval for the COVID-19 vaccines, the Sultanate has started preparing the ground for the rollout with the launch of an awareness drive with the aim of disseminating scientific insights and allaying fears among both citizens and residents in the country.

Now expectations are high that we may soon turn the corner on the pandemic and end the deadlock resulting from the pandemic and begin the Year 2021 with new hopes.

But even as the Sultanate is set to receive the vaccine before the end of this year, the cautionary message from Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Saeedi, Minister of Health, is that the pandemic is still lurking with the same strength and power of propagation. This means, along with the vaccination, we should be more cautious about the measures that need to be taken to keep the pathogen from being spread further.

Even after the wide availability of the vaccines to every individual in the society, it is likely that the coronavirus will circulate for years to come, and



SAMUEL KUTTY
@samkuttyp

THE PANDEMIC IS STILL LURKING WITH THE SAME STRENGTH AND POWER OF PROPAGATION

so it is prudent to plan on this basis. Also there is no clarity whether the vaccines will reduce the severity of disease or will still allow transmission, leading to doubts over the protection of unvaccinated people.

Generally, vaccines are effective in limiting the spread of infections by providing immunity. When individuals are immune to a disease, they are unable to be infected by it, which means they will not be able to pass it on to others either.

Reports indicate that every year the World Health Organization tracks approximately 200 epidemic events globally. Many of these are illnesses that are controlled by the country or the region of origin by itself. But, due to the increasingly interconnected characteristics of the world, some infectious microbes pose a threat to the world as the current pandemic. When diseases spread, the costs to control them become heavy, both in terms of human life and economic impact.

Now that we are on the verge of receiving the vaccine, there will be limited supplies initially, we may have

to wait patiently for our turn.

In the Sultanate, the authorities are open, honest and scientific in their actions and public communications as Dr Ahmed says, “No law compels anyone to take any vaccine, except childhood immunisations.”

According to him, whether or not to take the vaccine depends on the decision of the individual. “We rely on the awareness of society in this matter. Once the vaccine is received in the Sultanate, it will be given first to eligible segments, free of charge.”

But one thing is sure that getting vaccinated is more important now than ever. Widespread vaccination helps protect communities from outbreaks. Not only that any vaccination is beneficial to individuals to reduce their risk of hospitalisation and death, it is also beneficial for the healthcare system.

It is even possible for diseases to become completely eliminated like what we have done in the past with several epidemics. Vaccination is the best way to protect us from severe illness and has the added benefit of decreasing spread to others!

UNDER ONE ROOF

US cities look to co-living to ease housing crisis

CAREY L BIRON

When teacher Ashley Johnson arrived in Atlanta after a cross-country move last year, she was quickly confronted with the city’s affordable housing shortage, one of the worst in the country.

Eventually, a friend told her about a service called PadSplit, which connects tenants with shared housing options, similar to boarding houses, that are quickly growing in popularity across the United States.

For \$145 a week, including utilities — far less than an apartment would have cost her — Johnson found a room in a house with four other housemates, just minutes from her work, with a furnished bedroom, and shared bathroom, kitchen and living room.

Five months later, she was able to move out. “It gave me time to save enough money to get my own housing,” Johnson, 30, said by phone. Informal shared housing — when someone finds roommates and splits the cost of an apartment — remains a key way for young people to move to urban areas and join the workforce.

Formal shared housing — also known as co-living when it refers to tenants from higher income levels — differs in that a specialised firm

vets applicants and typically deals with utility bills so tenants have just one monthly payment. The rise of this type of housing has also allowed companies to construct or refurbish buildings specifically for this use. The idea is not a new one but it is seeing a resurgence in US cities as both residents and housing providers grapple with an ongoing shortage of affordable units.

Nearly half of realtors reported seeing an increase in “group-living” last year, according to the National Association of Realtors. And that trend does not appear to have been slowed by the novel coronavirus pandemic, despite the potential implications of an airborne virus for shared housing.

By the end of the second quarter of 2020, there were about 8,000 co-living “beds” in the United States, with more than 54,000 more under development, according to a November report from Cushman & Wakefield, a real estate services firm. Such options are up to 30 per cent cheaper than studio apartments, the report found, going on to say “several indicators point to continued demand” despite the pandemic.

That does not surprise PadSplit founder Atticus LeBlanc, whose company focuses on tenants making an average of about \$25,000 a year — “the front-line workforce,” he said. “They don’t have access to any other type of housing,” LeBlanc said. “Their options are in an extended-stay motel that is twice as much or more, so they can’t afford it. Or they can look at living in a car or on someone’s sofa. That’s it.”

Boarding or rooming houses played a key role in housing US urban workers for decades and, at the time, helped keep the homelessness rate close to zero, said Nan Roman, president of the National Alliance to End Homelessness. As recently as the 1960s, there may have been as many as 2 million such “single room occupancy” (SRO) units across the country, but today that number has probably fallen to fewer than 100,000, she said. The alliance encourages cities to pay more attention to shared housing, Roman said, noting that getting the SRO number back to 2 million would “solve the homelessness crisis” for most individuals.

— Thomson Reuters Foundation



It gave me time to save enough money to get my own housing

ASHLEY JOHNSON
A teacher

GRIEVING ALONE

Turks want lockdown to halt new virus wave

DAREN BUTLER

Siyar Guldiken, still short of breath from his own battle with the coronavirus, was not able to grieve after his grandmother and uncle died of the related disease, as one of the world’s worst second waves of the pandemic slammed Turkey.

After 10 days in isolation in Diyarbakir last month, Guldiken said only a full lockdown could stop the pandemic from worsening in Turkey, which has registered the seventh most cases globally.

Ankara has resisted such calls so far. But pressure for more stringent action is growing from medical bodies, opposition parties and Istanbul’s mayor, after daily cases jumped to more than 30,000 and deaths to 200, even as the country prepares for a vaccine to arrive shortly.

President Tayyip Erdogan’s government has issued weekend stay-at-home orders to tackle the pandemic, and it plans a five-day lockdown over New Year.

“The measures are really inadequate,” said Guldiken, 42, local head of a health and social services union in southeast Turkey’s largest city. “I can comfortably say for Diyarbakir, numbers will rise,” he added, as he looked at photos of his late grandmother and uncle.

He said full lockdowns would have prevented deaths such as that of his uncle, who died five days before his test results came back positive. His mother recovered from the disease after two weeks in hospital, but his youngest uncle lost both his parents to it.

“We couldn’t live and share our grief as much as we wanted to,” he said. “This stemmed from the insufficiency of the measures.”

The government has defended the measures it has taken, saying they have started to slow the spread of infection,



A man feeds birds during a two-day curfew, amid the spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), in Istanbul, Turkey. — Reuters

with daily cases falling several thousand from their peak to below 30,000. But it has also said economic activity must be sustained.

At the other end of Turkey, in Istanbul, the head of the city’s cemeteries department, Ayhan Koc, said its planning had to be adjusted as the death rate leaped to more than 400 a day in November — around double the level in previous years.

It is a statistic cited by Mayor Ekrem Imamoglu in demanding drastic measures to protect the city of 16 million people, alongside steps to support workers concerned about the economic impact of a lockdown.

“Let’s shut down for 2-3 weeks,” he urged the central government at a memorial ceremony last week for a doctor

who died of COVID-19.

“I beg them, please take measures. Let’s fight with all we have.”

Hospitals are struggling to meet demand for treatment and thousands of municipal employees are infected, Imamoglu said. Turkey only began reporting all cases, including asymptomatic ones, in late November. It waited until last week to give the pandemic’s full tally of nearly 1.9 million, on a par with Britain and Italy.

Erdogan said late on Monday that distribution of China’s Sinovac vaccine would begin soon, while there were hopes to roll out a domestic vaccine in the spring. But spotty public disclosure could impede the vaccine rollout, said Turkish Medical Association head Sebnem Korur Fincanci. — Reuters

THE GOVERNMENT HAS ISSUED WEEKEND STAY-AT-HOME ORDERS TO TACKLE THE PANDEMIC

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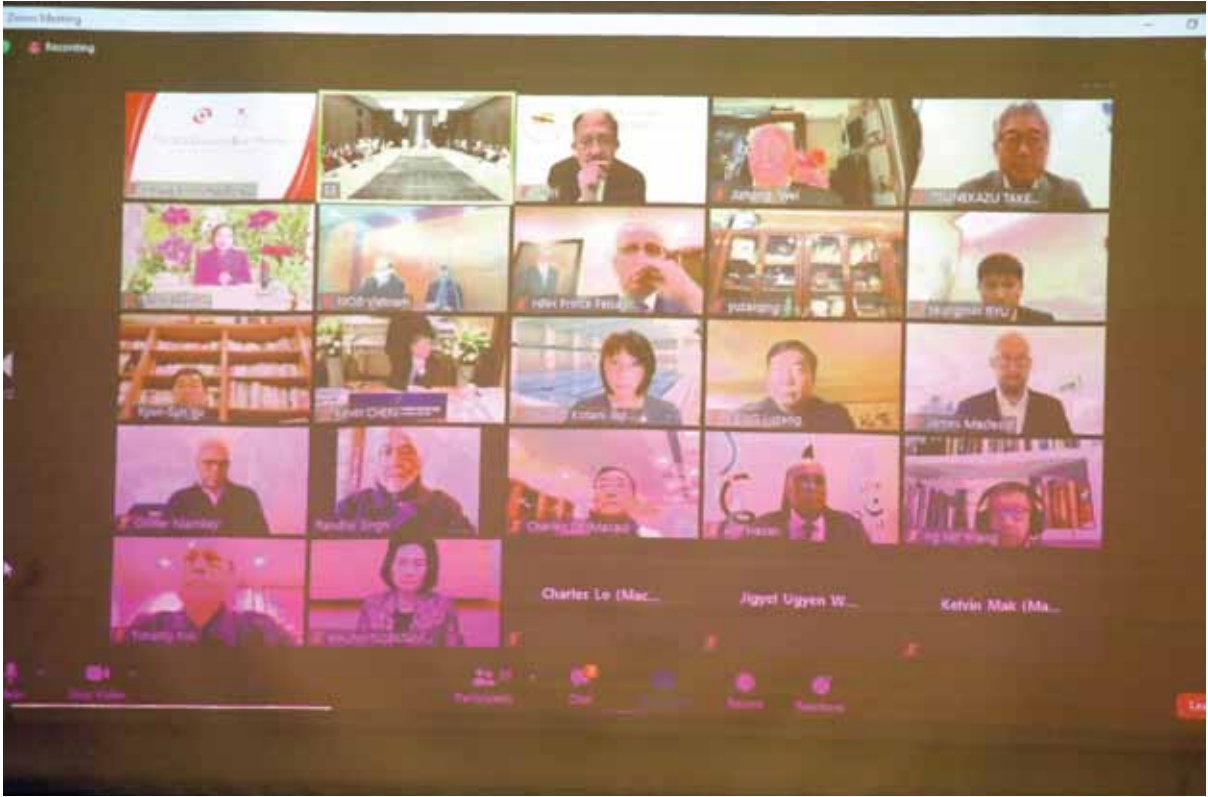
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NOCs to decide 2030 Asian Games host city

RIYADH AND DOHA MAY GET CHANCE TO HOST EVENT IN 2030 AND 2034

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DEC 15

Riyadh and Doha, the top bidders for Asian Games 2030, may both get chance to host the Asian sports event as the 2034 Games may be awarded to the losing city this year, according to some sources from the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA).

Such a decision is likely as both cities have provided their full readiness, commitment, interest and hard work to host successful edition through well prepared bid and presentation.

The National Olympic Committees of the OCA will vote on Wednesday to decide the hosting city of the 2030 Asian Games as part of the General Assembly meeting which will take place at JW Marriot. HH Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth, will be the chief guest for the opening of the General Assembly meeting in presence of the top dignitaries.

Shaikh Ahmad Al Fahad al Sabah, President of the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA), headed the 74th Executive Board Meeting of OCA on Tuesday at Kempinski Hotel.

The meeting started with a speech delivered by the OCA chairman as he affirmed that this is the first gathering among Asian family during this tough period.

"Special thanks to Oman and the Oman Olympic Committee (OOC) for hosting the OCA family in Muscat. This is the first joint meeting that combined 60 per cent physical attendance and the rest online. Technology was our main window to exchange and review the discussions but Muscat city offered the platform as we met here today. The COVID-19 impacted a lot on sporting events as the full calendar was affected and the top sporting events postponed including the 2020 Tokyo Games, Asian beach games and many other events," he said.

Shaikh Ahmad al Sabah expressed his pride on the two bids that are competing on hosting 2030 Asian Games.

"Two countries from the Gulf are showing their commitment, interest and hard work. I am proud of the system and level



Sayyid Theyazin receives Olympic officials

MUSCAT: HH Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth, on Tuesday received Shaikh Joaan bin Hamad al Thani, President of Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC).

During the meeting, the two sides discussed aspects of the joint cooperation in sport fields and means of promoting them to serve the sport march in the two brotherly

countries. HH Sayyid Theyazin also met Shaikh Ahmad Al Fahad al Sabah, President of Olympic Council of Asia (OCA).

PREPARATIONS

The meeting touched on the preparations for the meeting of the council's general assembly, scheduled to be held in Muscat on Wednesday. The meeting also reviewed

aspects of cooperation between the Sultanate and the OCA in the sport field.

HH Sayyid Theyazin also received Prince Abdulaziz bin Turki al Saud, Minister of Sports, President of the Saudi Arabian Olympic Committee (SAOC).

The meeting reviewed means of enhancing joint cooperation between the two brotherly countries. — ONA



Special thanks to Oman and the Oman Olympic Committee (OOC) for hosting the OCA family in Muscat. This is the first joint meeting that combined 60 per cent physical attendance and the rest online. Technology was our main window to exchange and review the discussions but Muscat city offered the platform as we met here today

SHAIKH AHMAD AL FAHAD AL SABAH
President
Olympic Council of Asia

of the presentation delivered by Riyadh city and Doha city. I have visited both sides and the presentation was better than many countries that hosted Olympic Games. I am wishing good luck to both cities," the OCA chief ended.

The agenda of executive board meeting witnessed roll call of the previous meeting — address by the OCA president and reports on the visit of the evaluation committee to the candidates of Doha and Riyadh to host the 2030 Asian Games. It also discussed the reports by chairperson of Standing Committee.

VOTING PROCEDURE
The voting will be conducted through a secured online procedure. A series of rehearsal was done on familiarising the methodology of the e-voting procedure. The official declaration will be made immediately after completion of the voting process with the developed technology platforms.
The Sultanate's delegation will be represented at the meeting by Sayyid Khalid bin Hamad al Busaidy, OOC Chairman, and Shaikh Badr bin Ali Al Rawas, board member.



Mushfiquur apologises after confrontation with team-mate

Former Bangladesh captain Mushfiquur Rahman apologised to a team-mate after an angry confrontation during a T20 tournament. The wicketkeeper turned on Nasum Ahmed after the two nearly collided while going for a catch. Mushfiquur made the catch, but then shied as if to throw the ball at Nasum, or land a blow.



‘Green to make Test debut against India if fit’

All-rounder Cameron Green will make his Test debut against India in the first game of the series in Adelaide if he comes through concussion protocols, Australia coach Justin Langer said on Tuesday. The 21-year-old was struck on the head when bowling to Jasprit Bumrah last week in an Australia ‘A’ game.

Klopp impressed with Mourinho turning Spurs into ‘results machine’

LONDON: Jose Mourinho has proven he has risen above criticism and bounced back to stake his claim as being a top manager after guiding Tottenham Hotspur to the Premier League summit, Liverpool’s Juergen Klopp said on Tuesday.

Mourinho’s Spurs have the best defensive record in the league and are ahead of reigning champions Liverpool on goal difference going into Wednesday’s top-of-the-table clash at Anfield.

Although Spurs have been accused of being a defensive, counter-attacking team, Klopp said there was more to their game than meets the eye and drew similarities with his own side.

“He (Mourinho) showed obviously some comeback skills, if it was that. Very impressive, what he has done at Tottenham,” Klopp told reporters.

“The way they play this year is really good, he turned them into a results-machine... Counter-attack is not their only strategy, they are a proper footballing side.

“Harry Kane drops (deep) in a way Roberto Firmino has done. Quick wingers... A very offensive midfielder in (Tanguy) Ndombele, then very strong midfielders behind. That is football, you cannot be top of the league with only counter-attacking.”

Klopp is wary of Spurs’ goalscoring duo of Son Heung-min and Kane — who have a combined 19 goals and 14 assists in the league — but pointed out they were not the only threats in the side.



Liverpool manager Juergen Klopp. — Reuters

“Unfortunately, if we keep them (Son and Kane) quiet, they are still a lot of really good players... with threats from a lot of areas on the pitch,” Klopp added.

“(Steven) Bergwijn plays an important role in counter-attacking moments. Ndombele needed a bit longer to settle at Tottenham, but he’s now 100% there.

“(Giovani) Lo Celso, (Moussa) Sissoko, (Pierre-Emile) Hojbjerg — a proper unit in midfield. It works well together... And Gareth Bale being fit again is another threat.” Klopp said defender Joel Matip was a doubt for the clash due to back spasms while he will take a late call on midfielder Naby Keita. — Reuters

Squad depth key for NZ, says stand-in skipper Latham

WELLINGTON: New Zealand captain Tom Latham said squad depth and their ability to adapt were the key factors in Monday’s clinical innings and 12-run victory over West Indies in the second Test at the Basin Reserve which sealed a 2-0 series sweep.

The hosts got their second successive innings victory, and second inside four days, without their best batsman and regular captain Kane Williamson, who withdrew on the day before the game to be with his pregnant wife.

Middle order batsman Henry Nicholls covered Williamson’s absence and scored a career-best 174 in their first innings of 460, before the bowlers dismissed the visitors for 131 and 317.

“Whoever comes into the side we expect them to do their role to the best of their ability,” Latham told reporters.

“It was about everyone standing up and it was great we were able to do it without Kane. “It’s great for our squad we do have depth.”

New Zealand did ride their luck in the first innings. Nicholls, who was named Man of the Match, was dropped three times and West Indies grassed several other opportunities.

Touring captain Jason Holder said those missed chances were critical. “I thought our bowlers were outstanding,” Holder said. “Just tough we didn’t take our opportunities when they came. It just show that when you give quality players, two, three, or four hands in one Test match they will make you pay.”

Holder was disappointed at his side’s lack of consistency in the match but was happy to see



New Zealand’s Tom Latham (R) celebrates their series win with team-mate bowler Neil Wagner during the fourth day of the second Test against the West Indies at the Basin Reserve in Wellington. — AFP

them show some resolve in their second innings.

Opener John Campbell top-scored with 68, wicketkeeper Joshua Da Silva scored 57 on debut, while the captain belted 61 and ensured the match went into a fourth day. “I was pleased to see the fight in the second innings,” Holder said. “(There were) positives, (we were) good in patches, but not good enough.”

HOLDER CALLS FOR END TO HOME UMPIRES

Holder later pressed for an end to cricket’s insistence on home umpires because of the coronavirus pandemic, although he had no serious complaints about the officiating in New Zealand.

Speaking after the West Indies suffered back-to-back heavy losses to the Black Caps when only New

The hosts got their second successive innings victory, and second inside four days, without their best batsman and regular captain Kane Williamson

Zealand officials were in charge, Holder said a fairer system would be to have an umpire from both countries on duty.

The International cricket Council (ICC) introduced neutral umpires 26 years ago to end accusations of home-team bias. But with the COVID-19 disruption to international sport and the “logistical challenges

with international travel” the ICC rescinded the rule this year to again allow for home umpires and match referees.

Holder said in any Test series there would be questionable decisions and he thought the New Zealand umpires “did a reasonable job” as the Black Caps coasted to a first Test victory by an innings and 134 runs and won the second by an innings and 12 runs.

“But, I don’t understand a situation where we’re having home umpires,” he said.

“If we can travel and do a quarantine, I don’t see why an opposing (team) umpire can’t do the travel and quarantine. If players are making the sacrifice and go on the road and continue cricket then I feel as though the umpires should do the same.”

— Agencies

Under-fire Arteta vows to stop Arsenal ‘blip’

LONDON: Mikel Arteta insists he is strong enough to cope with the pressure of Arsenal’s dismal run as the Gunners boss dismissed their recent struggles as merely a “blip”.

Arteta has faced calls for his sacking after Sunday’s 1-0 home defeat against Burnley condemned Arsenal to their worst start to a season since 1974.

Arsenal have lost their last four home league games — their worst sequence since 1959 — and another defeat at the Emirates Stadium against in-form Southampton on Wednesday would pile further pressure on Arteta.

The Spaniard was given a vote of confidence by Arsenal technical director Edu on Monday, but Arteta admitted he had to shoulder the responsibility for the team’s five-match winless run in the league.

Adamant he still retains the backing of his players, Arteta told reporters on Tuesday: “My feeling

is yes but this is a question for them obviously.

“When I see the reaction and the way they try, there’s not one bit that worries me that they’re not trying their best, that’s for sure.

“And in terms of Edu and (Manchester City manager) Pep (Guardiola), they obviously showed their appreciation, because in good moments it’s very easy.

“In difficult moments when you have people like them giving you support and two people that know very, very well what we’ve been through here, obviously it’s much appreciated.”

‘TAKE THE BULLETS’

Languishing in 15th place after seven defeats in their first 12 league games, Arsenal are closer to the relegation zone than the top four.

Arteta is not concerned that Arsenal now face an unthinkable relegation battle and is confident that results will turn soon.

“I want to think that we are



Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta applauds fans after the match. — Reuters

in a blip, losing football matches makes me believe that but we need to start to win,” he said.

“Because just dropping and dropping down the table is not the situation we want to be in.

“But this is our reality right

now and we have to face it and we have to face it being brave, fighting and no one giving up or anything.

“It’s not time to hide, it’s time to put your face and your body on the line and at the moment, I’m sorry, but we have to take the bullets.

Arteta said he accepted that he bore “maximum responsibility” for the bad results.

“At the end of the day you have to win football matches and this club is too big to accept this many losses in the last weeks. So my

chest is here and hit me, guys.”

Granit Xhaka’s needless red card for grabbing Burnley’s Ashley Westwood around the neck played a key role in Arsenal’s latest flop.

Angry Arsenal fans have called for the volatile Swiss midfielder to be sold, but he retains Arteta’s support for now.

Asked if Xhaka had apologised to Arteta and his team-mates, the Arsenal boss said the matter had been resolved “internally”.

“He has had tough times here and he’s not the only one, there’s a lot of players that have had rocky moments. But what I can say about Granit is that his professionalism and his commitment with the club and with his team-mates is maximal.

“He knows and we all know that he had a moment where he’s lost it and I know the reason why. But what I cannot do is just throw everything that he has done away because he’s made a mistake,” the Arsenal manager said. — AFP

PSG face Barcelona in Champions League knockout phase

PARIS: Paris Saint-Germain, last season's beaten finalists, will face Barcelona in the last 16 of the Champions League while Liverpool were paired with RB Leipzig in Monday's draw.

French champions PSG will relish another chance to avenge their soul-destroying 'Remontada' defeat to the Catalan giants in 2017.

Having beaten Barca 4-0 in the French capital, PSG crashed to a 6-1 defeat at the Camp Nou orchestrated by Neymar.

The Brazilian, who won the 2015 Champions League with Barca, then joined PSG in a world record move weeks later but has yet to taste similar European success with Ligue 1's dominant force.

They came closest last season when they were beaten 1-0 in the final by Bayern Munich, who claimed a sixth European crown thanks to a goal from PSG youth product Kingsley Coman.

With the first legs due to be played in February, PSG seem hopeful Neymar will have recovered in time from an ankle injury which forced him to be stretchered off the pitch in his side's 1-0 Ligue 1 defeat to Lyon on Sunday.

On Monday, PSG said Neymar's prognosis was "reassuring" while the 28-year-old said on Instagram that his injury "could have been worse" following a rough tackle from Lyon midfielder Thiago Mendes which left him screaming in agony.

Barca may not be as intimidating opponents as in the past after a troubled start to the season influenced by boardroom chaos and Lionel Messi's attempt to leave the club in the summer.

Messi saved Barca's blushes on Sunday with the only goal in a home win over lowly Levante, but they are nine points behind La Liga leaders Real Sociedad.

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE			
Last 16 matches		1ST LEG MATCHES: FEB 16, 17, 23, 24, 2021 2ND LEG MATCHES: MAR 9, 10, 16, 17, 2021	
 Monchengladbach (GER)	-	-	 Manchester City (ENG)
 Lazio (ITA)	-	-	 Bayern Munich (GER)
 Atletico Madrid (ESP)	-	-	 Chelsea (ENG)
 RB Leipzig (GER)	-	-	 Liverpool (ENG)
 Porto (POR)	-	-	 Juventus (ITA)
 Barcelona (ESP)	-	-	 Paris SG (FRA)
 Sevilla (ESP)	-	-	 Borussia Dortmund (GER)
 Atalanta (ITA)	-	-	 Real Madrid (ESP)
Source: UEFA		AFP	

BAYERN FACE LAZIO

Reigning champions Bayern play Italian side Lazio, who are in the knockout phase for the first time in over two decades.

"They are a very difficult opponent, we saw them in the group against Dortmund," said Bayern's sports director Hasan Salihamidzic.

"It is always difficult against the Italian teams. But it is always nice to go to Rome."

Lazio's Spanish midfielder Luis Alberto described the draw as "complicated".

Pep Guardiola's Manchester City team, who like PSG are still seeking a first Champions League title despite serious investment from Gulf state owners, must get past Borussia Moenchengladbach, European Cup finalists way back in 1977.

"I learned when I was in Germany how big and important and historical a team Gladbach

are. I respect the beauty of their football," said former Bayern boss Guardiola.

"I want to arrive in the best condition when we play them. We want to compete as best as possible and go through."

Frank Lampard said that Chelsea, winners in 2012, have been handed the hardest possible draw with their tie against Atletico Madrid.

"I think most people will say it's the toughest draw that we could have had," the Blues boss said.

Cristiano Ronaldo and Juventus will play Portuguese side Porto, winners in 2004, while Real Madrid take on last season's surprise quarterfinalists Atalanta.

Liverpool will be wary of an attack-minded RB Leipzig side who ended the hopes of Manchester United in the group phase. — AFP



This combination of pictures shows the selected three Fifa Best's Men players (from top) Juventus' Cristiano Ronaldo, Barcelona's Lionel Messi and Bayern Munich's Robert Lewandowski. — AFP

Neymar says ankle injury 'could have been worse'

RIO DE JANEIRO: Brazilian star Neymar gave fans a reassuring message on Monday after undergoing tests on the ankle he injured in Paris Saint-Germain's 1-0 Ligue 1 defeat to Lyon at the weekend.

Neymar left the field on a stretcher in apparent agony on Sunday but on Instagram he said: "It could have been worse."

PSG had earlier said "the clinical opinion following a left ankle sprain sustained last night, is reassuring."

"These tears, it's the pain, the fear, the worry, the surgeries, the crutches and other bad memories," Neymar wrote on his Instagram story alongside a picture of him in tears clutching his ankle.

It was a reference to previous injuries he has suffered — notably twice breaking his foot — since joining the French champions in

2017. "It could have been worse, but once again, God saved me from something serious," added Neymar.

"I'm going to recover and return as soon as possible."

The announcement is positive news for PSG after a bad night on Sunday in which they lost top spot in Ligue 1 to Lille following a 1-0 home defeat to Lyon, who also leapfrogged the capital club into second place.

Lyon's Brazilian midfielder Thiago Mendes, who was sent off for the foul that resulted in Neymar's injury, apologised on Instagram.

"Mistakes happen. But I'm here to sincerely apologise to Neymar. Like all Brazil's footballing public, I admire his football and I hope it's nothing serious."

Qatar-backed PSG will feel confident Neymar will be back in



Paris St Germain's Neymar reacts. — Reuters

time for their Champions League last 16 clash in February against troubled Barcelona.

It will be another chance for the French side to avenge their soul-destroying 'Remontada' defeat to Barca in 2017.

Having beaten the Catalans 4-0 in the French capital, PSG crashed to a 6-1 defeat at the Camp Nou orchestrated by Neymar, who joined PSG in a 222-million-euro (\$269 million) world record move weeks later.

On Sunday night, Neymar's father hit out at the treatment he claims the 28-year-old is subjected to by opponents, calling for more yellow cards.

PSG have been ravaged by a series of injuries, suspensions and coronavirus cases this season, which has left coach Thomas Tuchel's position in the balance.

— AFP

business

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Major pact signed for safe disposal of NORM waste

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 15

Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with three key parties for the establishment of a central facility for the management and disposal of Naturally Occurring Radioactive Materials (NORM). The agreement was signed by senior representatives from the Ministry of Energy and Minerals, Environmental Authority and the Oman Environmental Services Holding Company (be'ah). The project will be among

the first in the region to have a sustainable NORM waste management and disposal solution and is expected to generate significant cost savings. Currently around \$4.2 million is spent annually on exporting waste outside Oman for disposal. Waste contaminated with Naturally Occurring Radioactive Materials ("NORM Waste") is a by-product of Oil and Gas production. Safety is paramount in the handling of such items and incorporates a wide range of activities. This include rigorous

HSE management supported by robust assurance processes, compliance to agreed standards and regulations, competence and skillsets in management of

NORM Waste workers and in the complete technical supply chain including decontamination, treatment and storage of wastes. The Memorandum was

signed remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic by the Minister of Energy and Minerals Dr Mohammed bin Hamad al Rumhy; Environmental Authority Chairman Dr Abdullah al Amri; Chief Executive Officer of be'ah Engineer Tariq bin Ali al Amri; and PDO Managing Director Raoul Restucci. The four signatories will explore the possibility of establishing a national facility for NORM Waste management, which will build local capabilities through training and research activities. The project will assist the Government

in setting national guidelines for NORM waste management, which are aligned with internationally-recognised standards and best practices. It will also support the industry in NORM waste identification, mapping and establishing best handling practices. Dr Al Rumhy stated: "We will ensure that the project is smoothly progressed with strong support provided from experts in this field. We are committed to ensuring that Oil and Gas operators utilise the value of the facility in the most efficient way possible."

Confidence in Oman's financial system remains high: CBO

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 15

The Central Bank of Oman (CBO) released the eighth issue of the Financial Stability Report (FSR). The FSR 2020 indicates that "risks to the financial stability in the Sultanate remained on the expected trajectory during 2019 and the confidence of market participants in the Omani financial system stayed high." It also signified that the risks elevated in 2020 due to the economic and financial impact created by the COVID-19 pandemic. The FSR further indicated that while the Nominal GDP declined during 2019 due to lower oil prices, Oman witnessed an uptick in the real economic activity measured at basic prices along with low inflation. In the meantime, containing the twin deficit and levels of public debt remain top priorities of the macroeconomic policy in Oman to preserve the macro-financial stability of the economy over the medium term in accordance with Vision Oman 2040. The report also highlights the strength of the domestic banking sector, which allowed sufficient policy space to CBO to counter the impact of the pandemic. Omani Banks entered the pandemic from a position of strength underpinned by healthy capital buffers, solid asset quality, and strong liquidity. This enabled CBO to relax several regulatory capital requirements for the banks bolstering their capacity to support the real economy during the pandemic. While acknowledging the challenges posed by COVID-19 pandemic and the collapse in oil prices, the report asserts that risks to financial stability are well-contained, considering the renewed efforts to keep the economy on track and the strong financial sector supporting the real economy.



The realities of ransomware: Five signs you're about to be attacked

Whenever we work with ransomware victims, we spend some time looking back through our telemetry records that span the previous week or two. The telemetry sometimes records behavioral anomalies that (on their own) may not be inherently malicious, but in the context of an attack that has already taken place, could be taken as an early indicator of a threat actor conducting operations on the victim's network.

If we see any of these five indicators, in particular, we jump on them straight away. Any of these found during an investigation is almost certainly an indication that attackers have poked around on the network prior to the attack: to get an idea of the network layout, and to learn how they can get the accounts and access they need to launch a ransomware attack.

Attackers use legitimate admin tools to set the stage for ransomware attacks. Without knowing what tools administrators normally use on their machines, one could easily overlook this data. In hindsight, these five indicators represent investigative red flags.

- A network scanner, especially on a server
- Attacks typically start when an attacker gains control of one machine they can use as a foothold, from which they begin to profile the target organization: is this a Mac or Windows workstation; what's the domain and company name; what kind of admin rights does the computer have. Next, attackers will want to know what else is on the network and what can they access. The easiest way to determine this is to scan the network. If you detect a network scanner, such as *AngryIP* or *Advanced Port Scanner*, query the admin staff to make sure they weren't responsible for leaving it there. If no one recalls using the scanner, it's time to investigate.



By Peter Mackenzie, Incident Response Manager

SOPHOS

- Tools for disabling antivirus software

Once attackers have admin rights, they will often try to disable security software using applications created to assist with the forced removal of software, such as *Process Hacker*, *IOBit Uninstaller*, *GMER*, or *PC Hunter*. These types of commercial tools are legitimate, but in the wrong hands, security teams and admins need to question why they have suddenly appeared.

- The presence of MimiKatz

Any detection of the password extraction tool *MimiKatz* anywhere should be investigated. If no one on an admin team can vouch for using *MimiKatz*, this is a red flag because it is one of the most commonly used hacking tools for credential theft. Attackers also use Microsoft's *Process Explorer*, one of the Windows Sysinternals tools, that can dump LSASS.exe from memory, creating a .dmp file. They can then extract the passwords right on the foothold machine, or take the memory dump to their environment and use *MimiKatz* to safely extract user names and passwords on their own machine.

- Patterns of suspicious behavior

Any detection happening at the same time

every day, or in a repeating or regular pattern or tempo, is often an indication that something else is going on, even if malicious files have been detected and removed. Security teams should ask "why is it coming back?" Incident responders know it normally means that something else malicious has been occurring that hasn't (as yet) been identified.

- Test attacks

Occasionally, attackers deploy small test attacks on a few computers in order to see if the deployment method and ransomware executes successfully, or if security tools stop it. If the security tools block the attack, they change their tactics and try again. This will show their hand, and attackers will know their time is now limited. It is often a matter of hours before they launch a much larger attack.

Sophos' next-gen cybersecurity solutions to stop Ransomware

Sophos offers layered IT security for defending against the latest ransomware. Sophos not only provides best protection at every point, but also provides threat intelligence sharing between all these security points with synchronized security.

Sophos XG Firewall prevents attacks from getting onto a network. In the event ransomware does happen to get onto a network, Sophos XG Firewall can automatically stop ransomware dead in its tracks thanks to integration with Sophos Intercept X.

Sophos Intercept X Advanced with EDR includes anti-ransomware technology that detects malicious encryption processes and shuts them down before they can spread across network.

The Sophos Managed Threat Response (MTR) service adds human expertise to an organization's layered security strategy. An elite team of threat hunters proactively look for and validate potential threats, and then take action to disrupt, contain and neutralize attacks.

- Advertorial

Increase in M&A as crisis spurs sale of problem assets

With the pandemic taking its toll on earnings, it is spurring companies to sell underperforming units, as they come under pressure from investors to shore up their balance sheets and pay down debt.

International companies spanning a range of industries have been looking to unload non-core assets that are dragging on profits, as they shift their attention to higher-growth areas to prepare for tougher times.

Global head of mergers and acquisitions at international law firm Sullivan & Cromwell, Frank Aquila, said the rise in non-core asset sales is for myriad reasons.

"Some are selling simply because they need to fix their balance sheets, others are selling because they can no longer afford to invest in a business that is not

core and others are selling to invest in their higher-margin businesses."

By mid-2020, with countries in the grip of coronavirus, the sale of underperforming assets began to accelerate.

Marathon Petroleum agreed a \$21 billion sale of its gas stations to the owners of the 7-Eleven convenience store chain in the third quarter of the year.

Prior to that was BP's sale of its petrochemicals business to Ineos for \$5 billion and Unilever planned to sell its tea brands in the same period.

Head of UK investment banking at Jefferies, Philip Noblet said: "The public market is rewarding companies that are going to be the structural winners coming out of this crisis and that has accelerated conversations in board rooms as to what the shape of the company should be going for-



ANDY JALIL
andyjalil@aol.com

GOVERNMENTS HAVE BECOME MORE PROTECTIONISTS OF STRATEGIC ASSETS, AS KEY FIRMS HAVE BECOME MORE VULNERABLE DURING THE DISRUPTION CAUSED BY COVID-19

ward, which is driving the decision to shed certain businesses."

Managing partner, strategy and transactions at EY, Tom Groom, said that fiscal stimulus has prevented the need for firms to sell off distressed assets but COVID-19 has prompted firms to reassess their business portfolios.

He said: "While a number of actions were taken pre-COVID-19 to reduce costs, the reductions in interest rates, and likely increase in impairments puts a greater focus on costs than ever before and therefore some bigger strategic decisions may be required to support bottom-line returns costs."

Another trigger for shedding under-performing divisions could be companies looking to tidy up their businesses in anticipation of merger activity when the outlook stabilises in the wake

of the crisis.

Dwayne Lysaght, co-head of M&A for EMEA at JP Morgan, said: "Some bidders will not want exposure to one part of the business where there are no obvious synergies as it will dilute the case for a combination."

The pandemic has led to a partial unwinding of globalisation, as firms look to pull back from foreign markets after years of international expansion.

Governments have become more protectionists of strategic assets, as key firms have become more vulnerable during the disruption caused by the COVID-19 crisis.

Wilhelm Schulz, Chairman of Europe, the Middle East and Africa M&A at Citigroup, said the move away from globalisation will spur more corporations to divest divisions outside of their home countries.

"Companies want to deploy their capital in local markets so they can have full control of the value chain."

British Gas owner Centrica, for example, struck a deal back in July to sell its North Americas subsidiary Direct Energy for \$3.6 billion to US integrated power firm NRG Energy, to concentrate on the UK and Ireland, as well as pay down its £2.8 billion net debt.

Buyout groups will seize the opportunity to pick up some of the assets being sold.

Bankers say those in the consumer, technology and communications sectors are particularly attractive to private equity firms looking to deploy their uninvested capital of \$1.5 trillion, according to data from Preqin.

(The writer is our foreign correspondent based in the UK)



High-level delegation visits Masar Service Centre

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 15

Qais bin Mohammed al Yousuf, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion visited the Masar Service Centre at Al Rusayl Industrial City on Tuesday.

Al Yousuf was introduced to the objectives of Masar in presenting a platform that brings together several government bodies to facilitate and simplify the procedures for the investors to obtain necessary approvals, permits and licenses for their projects under one platform and within a particular timeframe.

The minister was accompanied by Dr Saleh bin Said Masan, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Invest-

ment Promotion for Commerce and Industry and Chairman of Madayn's board of directors; Asila bint Salim al Samsami, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion for Investment Promotion; and Hilal bin Hamad al Hasani, Chief Executive Officer of the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn).

During the visit, Ibtisam al Farooji, Director General of Investor Services at Madayn, pointed out that Masar aims at enhancing an attractive investment climate in the Sultanate through easing the procedures and services offered to the investors.

"This shall consequently reinforce ties with our partners to provide integrated services to the

investors as well as strengthen relations with the investors to achieve an ideal and secure business environment," Al Farooji said.

She added, "In order to achieve investor satisfaction, Masar presents a transparent, effective and smooth interaction between the business community and the government for daily dealings under one platform.

The establishment of Masar Service Centre comes along the efforts of Madayn to contribute in achieving comprehensive and sustainable economic and social development."

Madayn inaugurated the Masar Service Centres in Al Rusayl and Suhar Industrial Cities last November.

ME economic outlook slightly improves as pandemic lingers

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 15

'Economic Update: Middle East Q4 2020', from Oxford Economics and commissioned by chartered accountancy body ICAEW, reports that economic recovery is slowly underway in the Middle East but won't return to pre-crisis level until 2022. GDP forecasts for the Middle East for this year and next stand at -6.8 per cent and +2.9 per cent, compared to an average pace of 2.6 per cent between 2010 and 2019.

As a second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic takes hold in Europe and other parts of the world, global recovery has stalled. While containment measures for the virus are being re-imposed in many economies, economic recovery for the Middle East has lost momentum, despite a strong bounce back in the third quarter of this year.

With infections largely in check, GCC countries have continued to ease out of lockdowns. While clearly positive, Google mobility trends show the pace of return to normality has slowed, particularly in the important workplace category, and tourism traffic has also been subdued.

The oil sector remains a drag on overall growth as countries cut production in line with the OPEC+ April deal. Therefore, with both oil and non-oil sectors facing hurdles, the GCC is set for a large GDP contraction of 5.3 per cent this year, before recovering by 2.4 per cent in 2021.

While high OPEC+ compliance with the current deal continues to offer support to oil prices, they are still down by over 26 per cent from their levels in January. The group agreed to an increased output of almost 0.5mb/day from January 2021 and will review the process on a monthly basis to sustain drawdown in inventory levels.

In its latest Economic Update, ICAEW's estimate for Brent crude is \$41.7pb for this year and US\$49.3pb in 2021, slightly higher than forecasted figures back in March. However, there is limited upside for oil prices



RIISING SENTIMENT: Progress on a COVID-19 vaccine bodes well for the easing of restrictions and an improvement to Middle East GDP forecasts, says a new report

through 2022 and 2023.

The subdued outlook for oil prices will limit GCC governments' room to provide fiscal support, preventing growth from returning to the levels they were at the end of 2019 before late 2022, later than most other regions in the world.

Regional fiscal buffers were already weakened heading into the dual oil and COVID shock, apart from in UAE and Qatar, and budgets have come under further pressure this year amid loss of the dominant oil and gas revenue. Several governments, including Oman and Saudi Arabia, look eager to repair their finances by implying more restrictive fiscal policies in 2021-2022. This will weigh on demand and keep inflation low. But other governments are well-positioned to capitalise on lower borrowing costs to fuel recovery even if oil prices stay lower for longer – the UAE getting its first federal credit rating may be an indication of an upcoming issuance.

In the non-oil economy, recent vaccine developments boost the chances of consumer-facing sectors, such as hospitality and airlines, being viable in a year's time. This should benefit regional countries with a higher share of tourism, mainly the UAE and Bahrain, where non-

oil economies have struggled to pick up pace and companies have continued to trim their workforces.

The burden of job losses has fallen on the expat population, leading to a departure of many workers and a decline in population.

Michael Armstrong, FCA and ICAEW Regional Director for the Middle East, Africa and South Asia (MEASA), said: "2020 has been a challenging year for Middle Eastern economies. The dual shock of the COVID-19 pandemic, paired with continued uncertainty in the global oil market has meant that, in 2020, the Middle East economy is experiencing its lowest growth in decades. While the COVID-19 vaccine rollout is underway, the Middle East governments must ramp up their economic diversification efforts by developing sectors and industries that generate net value for the economy and fostering innovation."

Elsewhere in the region, the outlook remains weak, with Iran and Lebanon both thrust into renewed lockdowns. Inflation has spiked in both countries against the backdrop of currency devaluation and is predicted to be in double digits this year and next.

"Joe Biden's victory in the 2020 United States presidential election has not changed our near-term assessment of the economic outlook, as his administration will uphold relations with traditional allies. But his win will likely yield a more balanced approach to the regional rivalries and a softer stance on Iran," Armstrong added.

Oman Aviation Group, Oman Post and ASYAD Express in strategic agreement

MUSCAT: Rashid al Aghbari, Executive Director of Airport Cities at Oman Aviation Group, and Nasser al Sharji, Acting CEO of Oman Post and ASYAD Express, part of ASYAD Group, has announced that Oman Post has moved both its postal and ASYAD Express operations to Muscat International Airport as part of a strategic agreement between both companies.

The move highlights the rapid transformation of several key sectors of Oman's economy, including the logistics sector, to improve capabilities, modernize infrastructure, and leverage emerging technologies to align with Oman Vision 2040 objectives for ad-



Nasser al Sharji



Rashid al Aghbari

vancing national priorities and facilitating economic diversification.

According to Rashid al Aghbari, "A key component of the National Aviation Strategy 2030 is attracting local and global companies to establish their operations in the former airport terminal redevelopment zone, part of the future Muscat Airport City.

We are delighted to welcome

Oman Post, the country's leading postal and logistics services company, to their modern new facility.

Nasser al Sharji stated "The agreement with Oman Aviation Group to move the operations of both postal and ASYAD Express to Muscat International Airport marks a new chapter in our journey and allows us to explore airside operations in view of strengthening our logistics capabilities.

This is in alignment with Oman Vision 2040 and the mandate of ASYAD, which focuses on enhancing the economic diversification and private development across transformational industries."



In brief

■ SOUTH CAROLINA



BOEING BROADENS 787 INSPECTIONS

Boeing Co has expanded inspections of newly produced 787 Dreamliners after finding a previously disclosed manufacturing defect in sections of the jet where it had not previously been detected, the *Wall Street Journal* reported on Monday.

US air-safety regulators and Boeing engineers agree the newly discovered problem does not pose an imminent safety hazard, the WSJ reported, citing industry and government officials.

However, the new issue will likely ramp up a Federal Aviation Administration review of 787 production safeguards, the WSJ added, citing one of the officials.

■ BERLIN



ADIDAS EXPLORING STRATEGIC OPTIONS

German sportswear maker Adidas AG said it was assessing strategic options, including a potential sale, for Reebok, 15 years after it bought the US-focused brand to take on arch-rival Nike on its home turf.

The decision will be announced on March 10, when it officially presents its new strategy, Adidas said.

"These strategic alternatives include both a potential sale of Reebok as well as Reebok remaining a part of the company," the company said in a statement. Adidas bought Boston-based Reebok for \$3.8 billion in 2005, but a lack of progress in turning it around led to repeated calls from investors to dispose of the brand.

■ CALIFORNIA



US GAMING PLATFORM ROBLOX TO DELAY IPO

US gaming platform Roblox Corp has put off its planned initial public offering (IPO) until next year as it works with advisers to improve the process to benefit employees and investors, the company told employees in a memo seen by Reuters. "We've seen companies take innovative approaches to create a more market-based relationship between investors and companies," Roblox Chief Executive David Baszucki said.

"We've decided to take this opportunity to work with our advisers to see how we can make such improvements."

The San Mateo, California-based firm had filed to raise \$1 billion through an IPO on the New York Stock Exchange and was expected to join a year-end IPO wave.

Draft EU rules propose mammoth fines, bans for technology giants

BRUSSELS: Draft EU rules to be unveiled would see tech giants face huge fines or banned from the market for breaches, sources said, posing a major challenge to the likes of Google and Facebook.

The EU Commission is gearing up to present its long-trailed Digital Services Act and its accompanying Digital Markets Act to lay out strict conditions for Internet giants to do business in the 27 countries.

EU sources said on Monday the landmark legislation would see tech behemoths facing fines of up to 10 per cent of their revenues for breaking some of the most serious competition rules.

It could also see some of the world's biggest firms banned from the EU market "in the event of serious and repeated breaches of law which endanger the security of European citizens", the sources said.

The proposals — which could revolutionise how Big Tech does business — aim to tackle hate speech and disinformation online and curb the might of leading firms to dominate markets.

The largest companies would



European Union flags fly outside the European Commission headquarters in Brussels. - Reuters

be designated as Internet "gatekeepers" under the legislation, subject to specific regulations to limit their power over the market.

Some ten firms — including Google, Facebook, Apple, Amazon and Microsoft — will be slapped with the designation. The draft laws will go through a long and complex ratification process,

Some ten firms including Google, Facebook, Apple, Amazon and Microsoft will be slapped with the designation

with the EU's member states, the European Parliament, and company lobbyists and trade associations influencing the final law. "The idea is not to do away with the large platforms, but to impose rules on them to prevent them from posing risks to our democracy," the bloc's industry commissioner Thierry Breton said. — AFP

ExxonMobil pledges emissions cut as investor campaign targets board

NEW YORK: ExxonMobil announced on Monday it will reduce its emissions over the next five years bowing to growing public pressure from activists, including the Church of England, to make changes.

The US oil giant said in a statement that by 2025 it will cut emissions from upstream activities, which includes oil drilling and extraction, by between 15 and 20 per cent compared to the 2016 levels.

It also will cut its flaring intensity by 35 to 45 per cent as well as methane intensity by 40 to 50 per cent, and aims to achieve a World Bank goal of eliminating routine flaring by 2030, the company said, describing the moves as consistent with goals outlined in the Paris Climate Agreement.

"These meaningful near-term emission reductions result from our ongoing business planning process as we work towards industry-leading greenhouse gas performance across all our



business lines," ExxonMobil chairman and CEO Darren Woods said in the statement.

The company is facing an activist shareholder push to get it to act more forcefully on reducing carbon emissions, led by investment firm Engine No. 1 and supported by California State Teachers' Retirement System, the second-largest pension fund in the United States.

Last week, the campaign announced four board of director candidates for the company,

citing the need to slash emissions and fears for the company's long-term future.

The push earned the support of the Church of England's investment arm.

"Calls for the company to address shareholders' concerns about strategy, governance, and climate mitigation in order to stop the destruction of shareholder value have gone unheeded," the Church Commissioners head of responsible investment Bess Joffe said in a statement. — AFP

Apple adding privacy fact labels to App Store items

SAN FRANCISCO: Apple on Monday began adding labels that reveal what user data is gathered by games, chat or other software offered in the App Store for its popular mobile devices.

The iPhone maker announced plans for such "privacy labels" when it first unveiled the new version of its iOS mobile operating system, which it released in September.

"App Store product pages will feature summaries of developers' self-reported privacy practices, displayed in a simple, easy-to-read format," Apple said in a blog post when iOS 14 launched.

"Starting early next year, all apps will be required to obtain user permission before tracking."

Apple began pushing out the labels on Monday, with the rule applying to new apps for iPhones, iPads, Apple Watch, Apple TV and Mac computers.

The labels will contain information provided by developers when they submit apps for approval to appear on the App Store's virtual shelves, according



to the Silicon Valley-based company.

Apple last week began requiring developers to submit privacy information for use in labels.

"Apple recently required that all apps distributed via their App Store display details designed to show people how their data may be used," Facebook-owned smartphone messaging service WhatsApp said in a blog post explaining what data the app gathers.

"We must collect some information to provide a reliable global communications service."

The aim, according to Apple, is for users to be able to easily see and understand what apps do with their data, from lists of contacts to where they are. — AFP

WTO fails to net deal to halt over-fishing before deadline

GENEVA: The World Trade Organization on Monday said it had failed to clinch a long-awaited deal on banning subsidies that contributed to over-fishing by a year-end deadline, adding that talks would resume in January.

Fresh rounds of meetings will begin in the week starting January 18, said Colombian ambassador Santiago Wills, who has been chairing the negotiations.

That means a further extension of discussions that have been going for nearly 20 years.

It is widely agreed that action is needed against over-fishing,

which is stripping the seas of a hugely important resource that millions of people depend on for their livelihoods, but two decades of discussions have yet to resolve how to proceed.

"It is now clear that we simply cannot make up the time we've lost due to the COVID-19 pandemic and bring the negotiations to a successful outcome this year," Wills told reporters.

He said there had been a lot of progress during the talks throughout the year, but not enough.

"The delegations put forward



Workers unload seafood from fishing boats before super typhoon Lekima makes landfall in Zhoushan, Zhejiang province, China. - Reuters

many interesting ideas and in some areas, there was a willingness to compromise" but added that "major differences remain."

The coronavirus crisis forced a work shutdown for several months earlier this year.

While discussions resumed a few weeks ago, the restrictions around physical meetings, as well as the multiple difficulties facing members as a result of the crisis created significant obstacles.

Wills said he intends to issue a new revised draft text at the end of the week for governments to consider. — AFP

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WEDNESDAY

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Mohammed al Rashdi: 99841230
m.alrahd186@yahoo.com

Ali al Maashari: 99639264
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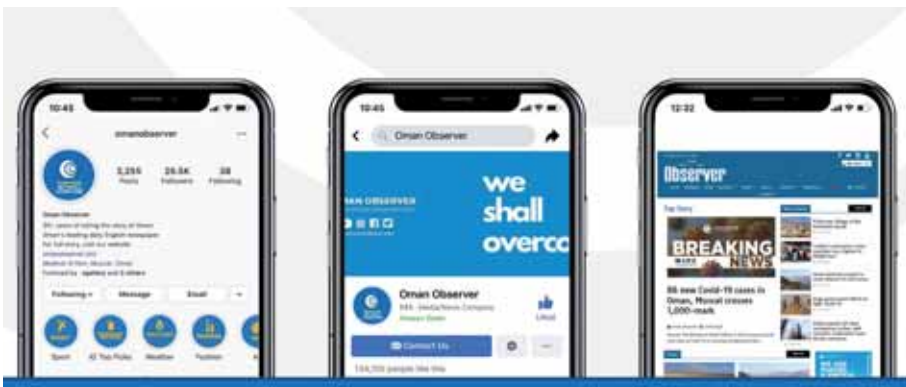
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features



Students turning discarded wood pieces into masterpieces

The idea of the team, as Nooh al Sultani, the head of the team explains, is based on converting wooden pieces into beautiful masterpieces by drawing shapes with shiny colours and wrapping them in a suitable attractive way to be presented as gifts or to be used for decoration or medals.... **P18**

INSIDE STORIES

TOURISM



BALAD SAYT

Balad Sayt is approximately half-way through the Dakhiliyah-Batinah mountain path. You can reach it either from Al Hamra by following the signs to Balad Sayt or by taking the Wadi Bani Awf turn off the Nakhl-Al Rustaq road. In both cases, the road is initially paved but becomes harsher... **Story on Page P20**

LIFE STYLE



BRITISH EXHIBITION DELVES INTO HANDBAGS

Whether touted by Conservative leader Margaret Thatcher or actress Sarah Jessica Parker, handbags pack a powerful punch, a British exhibition reveals. The Victoria and Albert Museum is showing some 300 items at the exhibition called "Bags: Inside and Out" ... **Story on Page 19**

READ



THE SPY WHO CAME IN FROM THE COLD

Le Carré's third novel, written while the young David Cornwell was still working for British intelligence, was an instant bestseller. Set against the atmospheric backdrop of Cold War Berlin, it recounts how Alec Leamas, is persuaded to cross the Wall for one final mission.

SONGS



TAYLOR SWIFT ANNOUNCES SECOND SURPRISE QUARANTINE ALBUM

Christmas came early for Taylor Swift's loyal legion of fans, as the popstar announced last Thursday she would drop her second surprise album of 2020 just months after this summer's hit record "folklore." ... **Story on Page 19**

CERMONY



NOBEL WINNERS GET PRIZES AT HOME

Dressing down, the 2020 Nobel winners got their awards in a broadcast aired on Thursday as, thousands of kilometres away and sitting two metres apart, musicians played classical interludes in an almost empty auditorium. In a disconnected ceremony at the end of a disconcerting year, Swedish television streamed the handovers from Stockholm City Hall on the day when a packed audience traditionally honours the prizewinners.



Students turning discarded wood pieces into masterpieces

BY RUQAYA AL KINDI

Art can be many things. The tools of the artist can also be diverse—some artists use brushes, others their tongue; some use canvas, others use toast; some use paint, while others use wood.

For artists, there are no specific rules for drawing. Any surface can be turned into a suitable area for drawing. This surface, therefore, does not necessarily have to be papers.

"Khashba", the Arabic equivalent for "wood", is the name of a student team from Sultan Qaboos University which participates in the fifth edition of the Money Challenge competition that is organised by the Innovation and Entrepreneurship student Group at SQU.

The idea of the team, as Nooh al Sultani, the head of the team explains, is based on converting wooden pieces into beautiful masterpieces by drawing shapes with shiny colours and wrapping them in a suitable attractive way to be presented as gifts or to be used for decoration or medals.

The four members of the team believe that art is one of the basic pillars of life and one of the main sources that spread beauty through the



details and delightful colours that it contains.

The team tend to use the wood, as Nooh pointed out, is because many wood pieces are not consumed properly and we seek to make use of them optimally in a beautiful artistic way. "Seeing art in many forms is one of our inspirations. Art is our constant inspiration," he added.

"The Money Challenge competition is a youth competition consisting of 20 teams focuses on supporting students at establishing a business with RO 15 only in one month, while attending enriching workshops and guided by distinguished entrepreneurs," Nooh explained.

"We acquired financial and marketing experiences. We were able to start a profitable project with this little capital of RO 15, can you imagine!!

The workshops were extremely helpful. We received knowledge on business, E-marketing and Financial management.

The most important goal of the team is reaching out to the local leadership in transforming discarded wooden pieces into beautiful masterpieces that add more beautiful details to everyone's life.

"Our future plans for the team are using alternative surfaces for painting. We would think of using stones as the next target. We also plan to get deals with major shopping centres to sell and display products for us," he noted.

FOLK ART

Olympics-Breaking's breakthrough brings electric 'folk art' to Paris Games



BREAKDANCING CLEARED ITS final hurdle to feature in the Paris 2024 Games on Monday, bringing the wholly original, electric art form to sport's biggest stage. Considered one of the pillars of hip-hop culture, breaking, as participants prefer to call it, originated in New York in the 1970s and has spread globally, enjoying enormous popularity beyond the United States and particularly across Europe and Asia. A 2019 Olympic Programme Commission Report estimated there were roughly a million participants in breaking worldwide and the 2019 Red Bull BC One World Final in Mumbai racked up more than 50 million views across streaming platforms including Facebook and YouTube.

"It can resonate with a lot of people because hip-hop culture resonates with a lot of people, hip-hop music resonates with a lot of people," Logan Edra, a 17-year-old American dancer who goes by the performance name Logistx and has performed on The Ellen DeGeneres Show, told Reuters. Breaking is not the first artistic movement counted as an Olympic sport but its inclusion in the Paris 2024 Games has prompted soul-searching among many dancers, including Edra, a former gymnast who aspires to win the Olympic gold. "It being in the Olympics, it makes sense that people would refer to it as (a sport) but I think one thing for the breaking community is we want to make sure that it's not known as just a sport but an art, a sport, a culture," said Edra, who won the 2018 Silverback Open Championship B-Girl solo competition.

Key elements in breaking include top rocks — typically a competitor's introductory dance moves — footwork, power moves and freezes. Power moves are explosive displays such as spins, while freezes are when a performer sticks a pose. In a blend of artistry and athleticism, competitors — known as "b-boys" and "b-girls" — are evaluated not only on the technical skill but also creativity and style, with strength, speed, rhythm and agility providing an edge.

"The biggest part is your stage presence and character and your rhythm, whether or not you're really feeling it," said Ronnie Abaldonado, a competitive breaker since 2004 who won the international Red Bull BC One competition in 2007.

"The biggest part is your stage presence and character and your rhythm, whether or not you're really feeling it," said Ronnie Abaldonado, a competitive breaker since 2004 who won the international Red Bull BC One competition in 2007. "People can hit the moves but if you're not feeling what they're doing then you just kind of look robotic and that's what kind of separates it being a sport to it being an art form." Richard "Crazy Legs" Colon, one of the pioneers during his upbringing in the Bronx in the 1970s, said he applauded breaking's inclusion in the Olympics but wanted to ensure its cultural core remained intact. "This is a true folk art from the music to the dance, to the DJ to the rapper," said Colon, who appeared in dance films of the 1980s including Beat Street and Flashdance. "We've already legitimized ourselves so we're not looking to the Olympics for legitimacy— Reuters





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LIFE STYLE

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SONGS

Taylor Swift announces second surprise quarantine album



CHRISTMAS CAME EARLY for Taylor Swift's loyal legion of fans, as the pop star announced last Thursday she would drop her second surprise album of 2020 just months after this summer's hit record "folklore."

"I'm elated to tell you that my 9th studio album, and folklore's sister record, will be out tonight at midnight eastern (0500 GMT Friday). It's called evermore," the global megastar tweeted, adding she would also release a music video for the single "willow."

The album release comes a few days before Swift turns 31 on December 13.

"Ever since I was 13, I've been excited about turning 31 because it's my lucky number backwards, which is why I wanted to surprise you with this now. You've all been so caring, supportive and thoughtful on my birthdays and so this time I thought I would give you something!" she said.

The pop shapeshifter this summer delighted fans with "folklore," a quarantine album that saw Swift turn to atmospheric rock while

embracing a dreamier aesthetic with 1960s-era Laurel Canyon vibes.

'JUST COULDN'T STOP WRITING'

In her tweet thread, Swift indicated "evermore" — her ninth studio album — would be an extension of that ethereal sensibility.

"To put it plainly, we just couldn't stop writing songs," she said.

"I've never done this before. In the past, I've always treated albums as one-off eras and moved onto planning the next one after an album was released. There was something different with folklore. In making it, I felt less like I was departing and more like I was returning."

"folklore" — which earned the star six Grammy nominations — also saw the famously introspective Swift delve into songwriting from the perspective of others, storytelling in the vein of American folk writers including John Prine, Bruce Springsteen and Bob Dylan.

"I loved the escapism I found in these imaginary/not imaginary tales," Swift said on Thursday. — **AFP**

British exhibition delves into handbags

BY PAULINE FROISSART

Whether toted by Conservative leader Margaret Thatcher or actress Sarah Jessica Parker, handbags pack a powerful punch, a British exhibition reveals. The Victoria and Albert Museum is showing some 300 items at the exhibition called "Bags: Inside and Out" that opens on Saturday.

They range from a 16th-century embroidered purse to a contemporary plastic rucksack by British designer Stella McCartney. The decorative arts and design museum has chosen to focus on the accessories for its first exhibition since England's lockdown was lifted in early December.

It looks at the "It bag" craze that kicked off in the 1990s, with women flocking to buy a certain design style, influenced by celebrity images.

One such bag on show is a purple

sequined Fendi baguette bag once carried by the Sex and the City character Carrie Bradshaw, played by Parker in the hit HBO show.

There is also a formidable leather handbag once carried by Thatcher, known as her "secret weapon".

Thatcher's assertive armoury of bags even led to the creation of a new verb: "to handbag", or browbeat into submission.

"These portable, yet functional accessories have long fascinated men and women with their dual nature that combines private and public," said Lucia Savi, the exhibition's curator.

FROM THE HERMES KELLY TO LADY DIOR

Bags are a connecting link between the home and the outside world and allow people to carry money or important documents out of sight.

The exhibition's first part looks at the different uses bags are put to.

An imposing Louis Vuitton trunk from the early 20th century was made for long voyages while a tiny leather bag

measuring just 16 centimetres can squeeze in a purse, an opera-glass, a notebook and a mirror: all you need for a night at the opera. The second part of the exhibition looks at bags and identity. What a bag says about the owner and their aspirations.

Some have become closely associated with celebrity owners, such as Hermes's "Kelly", a bold trapezoid-shaped bag. It was renamed after the icily stylish actress Grace Kelly was photographed carrying it.

Others include the Lady Dior, known as a favourite of Princess Diana, and the Hermes' Birkin bag created after the fashion house's head Jean-Louis Dumas met the British-born actress Jane Birkin on a plane.

These days it is social media that fuels desire for the latest bag.

"INSTAGRAMMABLE"

On video, Chinese influencer Tao Liang, known as Mr Bags, talks about the designs he has collaborated on with top luxury brands such as Burberry and Chanel. — **AFP**



BALAD SAYT

Balad Sayt is approximately half-way through the Dakhiliyah-Batinah mountain path. You can reach it either from Al Hamra by following the signs to Balad Sayt or by taking the Wadi Bani Awf turn off the Nakhl-Al Rustaq road. In both cases, the road is initially paved but becomes harsher and steeper as you go in Drivers taking the road from al Hamra, should climb the Hatt Mountain until Shurfat al Alamain Resort then follow the rocky unpaved road. Drivers should be extremely cautious and vigilant. It is an adventurous trip. You will definitely need a 4WD to get to Balad Sayt, and also need to be comfortable driving in narrow-mountainous paths.



PHOTOS BY ABDULRAHMAN AL MAMARI
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