

First day of Eid al Adha on July 20

The main Committee for Moonsighting has received evidence of sighting of the crescent, therefore it decided after reviewing the evidence to approve the sighting of the crescent of the month of Dhul Hijjah, 1422 AH. Hence, Sunday (July 11) will mark the beginning of Dhul Hijjah and Tuesday 10th Dhul Hijjah (July 20) will mark the beginning of the blessed Eid al Adha.



HM BEGINS SAUDI VISIT TODAY

AFFIRMS THE DEPTH OF HISTORICAL RELATIONS BETWEEN TWO COUNTRIES

MUSCAT: In affirmation of the depth of historical relations between the Sultanate and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and, based on the keenness of the two countries’ leaderships to enhance joint ties, His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik will begin an official visit to Saudi Arabia from Sunday, in response to an invitation from King Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud.

During the visit, discussions will cover all aspects of cooperation between the two countries with a view to upgrading bilateral relations, and realising the aspirations of the two peoples and achieving the objectives set in all fields. The discussions also aim at reaching results that serve common interests and establishing a more prosperous future for the two countries.

DEEP SIGNIFICANCE

HH Sayyid Faisal bin Turki al Said, Sultanate’s Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, affirmed that the visit of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to his brother King Salman bin

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The visit has great importance and deep significance of the strong and special relations binding the two brotherly countries

HH SAYYID FAISAL BIN TURKI AL SAID
Sultanate’s Ambassador to Saudi

Abdulaziz al Saud of Saudi Arabia, has great importance and deep significance of the strong and special relations binding the two brotherly countries and their links amidst the conditions surrounding the region.

In a statement to Oman News Agency (ONA), HH Sayyid Faisal said that the meeting between the two leaderships will be a quantum leap in fostering several aspects concerning

the two brotherly countries and their peoples. He confirmed that the land port linking Oman and Saudi Arabia will facilitate direct land transport either for trade or individual movement.

HH Sayyid Faisal said that bilateral visits are continuing and the recent period has witnessed visits and meetings between officials from the two brotherly countries, which come within the framework of strengthening cooperation and partnership in various fields, noting that the current economic momentum in Saudi Arabia is large, extended and, and is in line with the programmes of the Saudi Vision 2030. It is simultaneous and similar to the Oman Vision 2040 programmes in many aspects, taking into account the special circumstances and the peculiarity of each country.

The Sultanate and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia are engaged in strong and mutual economic relations. The national visions represented by Oman’s Vision 2040 and the Saudi Vision 2030 target to formulate economic trends and objectives

that will achieve transformation and promote economic diversification as well as raise the volumes of trade exchange with other countries through executive plans and programmes of the two economic visions.

A report issued by the Saudi Ministry of Economy indicated that Saudi investments in the Sultanate cover several economic and production sectors. — ONA



Important date in diplomacy

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
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Sunday is an important date in the history of Oman and Saudi Arabia’s diplomacy as His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik begins official visit.

Sultanate’s Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, HH Sayyid Faisal bin Turki al Said sees an important development in bilateral relations and economic cooperation.

“I think the timing could not have been more perfect than now with His Majesty’s visit. This is going to cement what all we have been doing till now. So this visit, in the context of what we’re doing and the context of Saudi Arabia’s relationship with Oman, comes at a very important time. And I think it will set the standard for what is yet to come in the future as well,” said HH Sayyid Faisal speaking to the *Observer* from Saudi Arabia.

When asked about the potential areas of cooperation and investment, he said: “As we met the government officials in Saudi Arabia, it was crucial that, first of all, that we understand and see what is happening in Saudi, and more specifically in the context of the Vision 2030. **DETAILS ON P2**

Oman-Saudi Summit to witness launch of coordination council

MUSCAT: The summit between His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik and King Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud of Saudi Arabia, will witness the launch of a coordination council between the two countries.

This was stated by Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, in an interview with *Asharq al Awsat*. He said the Saudi-Omani Coordination Council will act as the framework for several agreements between Riyadh and Muscat.

“Coordination and consultations are always necessary, especially between brothers and neighbouring countries”, he added. “The Kingdom and the Sultanate share several interests”, Sayyid Badr said.

“The council will pave the way for the next phase in cooperation and the summit will likely witness the signing of several agreements and memoranda of understanding in several fields.” He predicted that relations will witness a giant leap in the future, especially in wake of the anticipated historic opening of the first direct land border between the two countries. That will lead the way for promising logistic projects between them, he added.

Asked about Oman’s role at the summit in January which achieved Gulf reconciliation, he said that from the start, Muscat sought to support the Kuwaiti initiative that was proposed by late Emir Shaikh Sabah, and continued by his successor Shaikh Nawaf al Ahmad al Jaber al Sabah.

“We are now working with the Gulf Cooperation Council foreign ministers and secretary-general to follow up on the summit between late His Majesty Sultan Qaboos and Shaikh Sabah that was held in Al Ula in January 2020”, he said.

Moreover, he stressed that

“
Coordination and consultations are always necessary, especially between brothers and neighbouring countries. The Kingdom and the Sultanate share several interests

SAYYID BADR BIN HAMAD AL BUSAIDY
Foreign Minister

Saudi Arabia and Oman are closely coordinating their stances on a number of regional issues, starting with the conflict in Yemen.

Yemen, continued the minister, is of great importance at the regional and international levels.

“We are working tirelessly and constantly to stop the suffering of the brotherly Yemeni people, to end the war, and help as much as possible to achieve peace and stability”, the minister added.

Oman supports the Kingdom’s initiative to reach a ceasefire in Yemen, as well as the Riyadh Agreement and the efforts of the United Nations and the United States envoys to the war-torn country.

“Our common goal is ending the conflict according to a solution that respects the concerns of all parties and helps them reach understandings that provide Yemen and the Yemenis with stability and coexistence”, he added.



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An important date in Oman and Saudi diplomacy

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Sunday is an important date in the history of Oman and Saudi Arabia's diplomacy with the official visit of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik.

Sultanate of Oman's Ambassador to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, HH Sayyid Faisal bin Turki al Said, has been in the post little over six months now, and this week sees an important development in bilateral relations and economic cooperation.

Meetings have been followed by the high official delegation visits and the virtual meetings.

"I think the timing could not have been more perfect than now with His Majesty's visit. This is going to basically be concreting or cementing of everything that we have been doing and putting a solid foundation to what is yet to come. In the following weeks and months from now on as well. So this visit, in the context of what we're doing and the context of Saudi Arabia's relationship with Oman comes at a very important time. And I think it will set the standard for what is yet to come in the future as well," said HH Sayyid Faisal speaking to the *Observer* from Saudi Arabia.

PRIORITY SECTORS

When asked about the potential areas of cooperation and investment, according to him he said, "As we met the government officials in Saudi Arabia, it was crucial that, first of all, that we understand and go to what is happening in Saudi Arabia and more specifically in the context of the 2030 vision. And it was very interesting to see the transformation that has happened in Saudi Arabia. But if I were to summarise what could be the areas of collaboration that have been explored and needs to be further explored, they would be manufacturing, tourism, logistics, fisheries and technology, which will obviously be complemented by other sectors in the same context.

"This falls within how we perceive our priority sectors and Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030.

"While logistics is one of the potential areas, the reports on the road network between Oman and Saudi Arabia reaching the final stages has created excitement."

He said it was around 2016 when it was officially talked about and announced, but what many people do not understand is that there are so many technical challenges and, more importantly, on the side of Saudi Arabia and this is purely because of the nature of the



I think the timing could not have been more perfect than now with His Majesty's visit. This is going to basically be cementing of everything that we have been doing and putting a solid foundation to what is yet to come

HH SAYYID FAISAL BIN TURKI AL SAID

The Sultanate's Ambassador to KSA

Empty Quarter and the hard environment that is there.

"This has been among the top priorities in terms of the discussions that I have been attending with officials from both sides.

"It has been apparent that this is going to be one among the top priority focus areas. Why so?

"Because if we were to talk about attracting more businesses, encouraging investments from

Saudi Arabia and vice versa, logistics is significant.

"The road providing access is one of the world's most important strategic projects that both sides have been committed to.

"We are extremely hopeful that before the end of the year, it would be officially inaugurated," he explained.

"Now, this means different things to different people or the general public. That is simply road access that is easy and for businesses, it means so many things ease of doing business, moving goods, getting closer to providing services and so on. But what is going to be more important is regardless of when this road would be actually officially inaugurated is I think, how businesses and governments would be working in terms of complementing services that would be required as well," the ambassador pointed out.

VISIONS

Looking into Saudi Arabia's achievements in diversification HH Sayyid Faisal said, "In December while in Oman when we were sitting with a team looking into the vision 2040, we created a comparison between the two visions and not looking into the obvious things of the economy.

"There are so many common denominators between the two in terms of the approach of the business, in terms of the projects, and to our priority sectors, in terms of the programmes on the application. What I have strongly noticed, and this was important, when we

came for a quick business meeting for two days while in Ithra and when I came in as an ambassador in 2021, there was a huge change in terms of how the government is basically operating, in terms of how they are setting the scene for shaping up the future of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia — e-government integration making it easier for the West to do business with Saudi Arabia, and attracting foreign investments and multinational companies.

"This notion of moving up the culture of the private sector and the values of the private sector and how it does business with the public sector.

"The government has been more dynamic, all of the factors

that show the sincerity and the commitment whether it was in the leadership, within those ministries and the top management as well. This vision is shaping the future of Saudi Arabia."

He added that the commitment of diversifying and lessening the dependency on oil is a key driver for the economy.

GOLDEN PHASE

"This phase of this relationship that I see as the golden phase, and especially for the development of business and economy. It is important to see how and what drives the government officials and the businesses in Saudi Arabia and what that would entail to be acquired as well from the Omanis to share the

same values and interests, because honestly, eventually we don't have the luxury of time.

"We are now facing challenges at the regional level and at our own national level because of Covid-19, because of the drop of oil prices etc," he said.

According to the ambassador, it is highly significant that Saudi Arabia has completed recently, almost five years since the launch of the new vision and the drive towards changes.

"I think those five years are very important to us as we launch in towards the 10th five-year plan and begin our journey of the 2040. There are so many learnings that we can take and share. Our brothers and colleagues in Saudi Arabia are more than happy to share. In a nutshell, we don't need to reinvent so many things. We can actually be sharing those experiences of building capacities and moving at a much faster pace towards enabling the mentioned sectors and the collaboration between those two sectors in Oman and in Saudi Arabia."

"If you go back and remember in January with the conclusion of an earlier summit it was mentioned that to see it as looking into economic complementation of each other, and that's very important.

"We cannot afford as the GCC nations to go into competing with one another in terms of what we need to do or in the sense of being perceiving that each need to create something that is unique to the nation. So, first of all, it is important to complement the challenge. We have been spending a lot of time in understanding what could be those common denominators and the common grounds that we need to look into."



The annual growth rate of Saudi imports to the Sultanate in five years (2016-2020) reached 6.49 per cent, while the annual growth rate of Omani exports to Saudi Arabia during the same period was 7.4 per cent.

HM's visit to usher in a new era of expanded cooperation

MUSCAT: A number of members of the State Council and Majlis Ashshura, analysts, economic experts and businessmen affirmed the visit of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to the brotherly Kingdom of Saudi Arabia will open new and broader horizons of joint cooperation in various fields thereby contributing to prosperity in both countries by increasing commercial partnership and the exchange of expertise to realise the objectives of Oman Vision 2040 and the Saudi Vision 2030.

They explained that the new phase of the economic, trade and investment partnership between the Sultanate and the brotherly Kingdom of Saudi Arabia will take advantage of the investment opportunities and economic potentials available in both countries.

Dr Ali bin Ahmed al Issa'ei, member of the State Council, said that the visit of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to the brotherly Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is the first official visit by His Majesty since he took office,

and it confirms the depth of the strong relations that bind the two brotherly countries and their willingness to further bolster their relations.

In comments to Oman News Agency (ONA), Al Issa'ei added that the Sultanate and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia contribute to resolving all the regional issues in a bid to serve the interests of the two brotherly countries and ensure their stability. He stressed that during the visit the two countries will work to establish great economic and investment

cooperation and integration, thereby increasing the volume of trade, economic and investment exchange between the two countries.

Dr Abdulaziz bin Amer al Sawa'ee, member of the State Council, explained that the historic visit of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik will strengthen bilateral relations to achieve the aspirations of the wise leaderships of the two countries as well as translate the directives and objectives of Oman Vision 2040 and the Saudi Vision 2030.

He added that this historic event will enhance trade exchange between the two countries, noting that the visit has a historical dimension and its positive effects will translate into various issues in the region.

Besides, the visit will reaffirm the convergence and consensus of views between the two countries which reflects in the stability and security of the region.

Dr Said bin Mubarak al Muharrami, member of the State Council, said that the focus should be laid on the industries where

raw materials are available in the two brotherly countries with the aim of creating an added value for natural materials and benefiting from these resources, which will provide a competitive advantage with similar industries in other countries, such as industries that utilise various oil products and the mining and metallic industries, adding that focus should be laid on the tourism sector, particularly family tourism, as both countries have many potentials that enable them to develop the tourist industry.



OMAN-SAUDI TIES A PROMISING FUTURE



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Historic visit to open new horizons

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, JULY 10

The Saudi-Omani relations at this historic stage, under the leadership of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud and His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq are heading steadily to broader horizons of joint action and investment in national capabilities as an added value in various fields that would bring further prosperity to the two countries and achieve the aspirations of Saudi and Omani citizens, said the Saudi Press Agency in a report.

The principles of fraternity and unity have set the foundations for strong and solid relations between the two sides, thus strengthening the common aspects of bilateral cooperation and constituted a starting point for building bridges of understanding and dialogue with various countries in the region and the world to achieve security and stability.

Over half-a-century-long relations between Riyadh and Muscat have been featured by cooperation and mutual respect between the two leaderships and understanding on various regional and international issues, while the peoples of the two countries have long-standing bonds of fraternity, framed by common history, authentic Arab customs and traditions, and popular heritage.

Regionally, the two countries' efforts are joined by their brothers under the umbrella of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) for the Arab States, in accordance with common visions and strategic goals, in order to achieve coordination and integration between member states in various fields, and their roles expand within the Arab League, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and with the international community in the United Nations (UN) in support of peace and security efforts.

The successive changes in the region are pushing the leaderships of the two countries for more cooperation at the bilateral, Gulf, and regional levels to move forward in establishing permanent security and stability and ensure that their positive outcomes are reflected



on development programmes in service of their nations.

His Majesty the Sultan's visit to the Kingdom comes in response to the invitation of King Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud, representing the first foreign visit of the Sultan since taking office in January 2020, reiterating the status of the Kingdom and its leadership at the political and popular level in Oman, matched by the appreciation and respect of the leadership and people of the Kingdom to the Omani people and leadership.

The meeting of the Saudi and Omani leaderships, at this time for consultation and coordination in various affairs that serve the interests of the two countries and the region and its stability, reflects the wisdom and foresight the two leaders enjoy in dealing with the latest developments in the region and internationally.

His Majesty the Sultan's assumption of power in Oman came at an important historic stage, given the political, economic, social, and health changes and challenges that the region and the world are witnessing, which require dealing with them, taking into account the preservation



of the established traditions of governance in Oman, and the necessities and requirements of change and modernisation.

His Majesty the Sultan upon his assumption of power announced major political, financial and economic reforms, and the development of the structure of state's agencies and institutions to become more effective in meeting the hopes and aspirations of the

Omani people, and preserving the safety and stability of the country.

At the same time, His Majesty the Sultan pledged to continue the approach that Oman has followed in its foreign policy, and its commitment not to interfere in the affairs of other countries, and to advance the process of joint action among the GCC member states.

His Majesty the Sultan continues to face current and future

challenges with an accumulated experience of diplomatic and governmental work, which has spanned for many years before assuming power, especially assuming the presidency of the main committee for the future vision Oman 2040.

Within the framework of the joint action between the two countries to strengthen economic relations, the visions of the Kingdom 2030 and Oman 2040 constitute a common denominator in the field of trade and benefit from the investment opportunities available, in a way that achieves for both countries diversity in their economies and sources of income.

Within the context of the Omani vision, which relied on its political and economic stability, the country ranked 23rd in oil reserves in the world and 27th in gas reserves. The Sultanate has taken concrete steps to diversify its national income sources and reduce dependence on oil.

Oman's strategic location and its political and security stability have provided a competitive advantage to attract foreign investments, and the Sultanate has sought to exploit this advantage by establishing a number of economic zones and

The principles of fraternity and unity have set the foundations for strong and solid relations between the two sides

ports and focusing on promising sectors, most notably the tourism and logistics sectors, in addition to its unique natural features that made the Sultanate a destination for Saudi and Gulf tourists, who share with the Omani people the religion and language, as well as social customs and traditions.

The Green Middle East initiative announced by His Royal Highness Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz, Crown Prince, Deputy Prime Minister, and Minister of Defence represent a promising aspect for cooperation between the Kingdom and Oman in combating climate change.

In order to enhance the participatory efforts, the two sides aspire that the "establishment of the Saudi-Omani Coordination Council" will contribute to setting a common vision for deepening and sustaining relations and raising them to the level of integration in the political, security, military, economic, developmental and human fields.

One of the most important gains for the two neighbouring countries in the near term is the completion of the land port project linking the Kingdom and Oman with a distance of more than 680 km so that after its inauguration, it will contribute to accelerating and increasing the volume of trade and investment exchange between the two countries, as it will shorten the travel distance by about 800 km. It will also facilitate the movement of goods from the Kingdom to the rest of the world via land and through the Omani ports.

It is noteworthy that the volume of trade exchange between the Kingdom and Oman last year amounted to \$3.36 billion, which included iron, steel products, and organic chemical products, while the value of Saudi non-oil exports to Oman amounted to \$1.16 billion, including metal products, iron or steel products and food products.

VACCINATION IS A MUST

2.3 MILLION PEOPLE WILL BE INOCULATED BY JULY-END

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The total number of people vaccinated as of July 7 reached 1,266,293, according to the continuous updates of the Ministry of Health (MoH).

Ibrahim al Maimani, a specialist in analysis and statistics, said that between July 3 and July 7, 169,455 people were vaccinated, at a rate of 42,364 people per day. "At this rate, 2.3 million people will be vaccinated until the end of this month, and the percentage will increase from 34 per cent to 62 per cent, as the Sultanate also targets 3.7 million people over 12 years old", he added.

This was also confirmed by Dr Saif al Abri, the Director-General of Disease Surveillance and Control.

"The expected daily number of the vaccinated will be 80,000 after Eid al Adha with the arrival of a considerable number of vaccines", he said and stressed that more than 10,000 pregnant women have been vaccinated so far.

The Supreme Committee decided to activate the complete lockdown during the three days



of Eid al Adha, which is expected on the twentieth of this month. Therefore, the vaccination campaign will remain suspended during that time.

Dr Ahmed al Saeedi, Minister of Health, stated that this short suspension would not affect the course of the immunisation campaign, and the appointments will be compensated with other dates after Eid.

In the media conference last

Thursday, the minister confirmed that the death rate decreased among the age group of 60 years and over who received the vaccine. The Sultanate has booked 7 million doses by the end of this year, including 4.2 million of Pfizer.

"Vaccination is one of the prevention tools, but still, precautionary measures will help you and your families", he said.

Al Saeedi stressed that the

technical team is currently studying the vaccinations' advantages after the vaccination rate reached 50 per cent.

In recent decisions, the Supreme Committee allowed those who received at least one dose from inside the Sultanate or those who received two doses from abroad to enter Dhofar Governorate during the current khareef season.

He asserted that legal action

would be taken in future against workers in government institutions who refuse to take vaccine without a convincing medical reason, adding that private institutions may take the same approach.

"The Sultanate will not leave anyone in the target groups without vaccination. Vaccine, however, has been made available to expatriates in Dhofar whose companies have not booked doses

for them", he indicated.

On Thursday, the Sultanate reported 1,453 new cases and 15 deaths over the past 24 hours. The total number of cases registered in the Sultanate reached 281,688, including 3,371 deaths.

The total number of inpatients was up to 1,447, including 494 in intensive care units. The total number of recoveries was 250,564 while the recovery rate was 88.9 per cent.

Let's abstain from extended celebration

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Oman is welcoming the fourth Eid under the shadow of lockdown in 17 months ever since the deadly virus stuck the world.

Oman announced full lockdown for three days during Eid in view of a potential spike in the number of cases if people go out free and mingle with each other, flouting Covid-19 protocol as experienced last year.

"How can we celebrate Eid when our dear ones are dying due to covid everyday", Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Saeedi, Minister of Health, asked at the Supreme Committee meeting last Thursday.

To ensure that the lockdown is implemented fully, checkpoints between various governorates will be instituted, and people's movement between these regions will be strictly stopped these days.

Last year around, the highest one-day cases of Covid-19 was reported on one of the Eid holidays as family gatherings had triggered the surge in the

number.

According to the Supreme Committee, the family members, friends, and relatives who travelled across the country, from wilayats to wilayats, engaged barbers, and got their dresses stitched by tailors despite the lockdown, have all contributed to the high incidence.

"Numerous family gatherings flouting the prevailing Corona rules were the root cause behind the high incidence of infection among Omanis", Dr Saif al Abri, Director General of Diseases Surveillance and Control had said.

"In the past few weeks before Eid al Adha, some people took the eased restrictions for granted and travelled to meet their family and friends", he said adding that human contact was the sole reason behind the high number of cases.

In light of the experience, the authorities have urged both citizens and residents to avoid extra-familial gatherings just as the Eid al Adha is round the corner and be loyal to the country by avoiding such meetings.

Don't go by looks, Nerium oleander plants can be dangerous!

TEXT & PHOTOS BY
YAHYA ALSALMANI

The Nerium oleander plant is one of the shrubs spread over in our public gardens and planted along our main and branch streets.

Today, this tree has become common sight in our residential neighbourhoods, where it adorns the home gardens. This evergreen tree is characterised by its long branches, thick leaves, pink, yellow and white flowers.

The tree may be new for some, but it has long and old roots, even in Oman. Some sources indicate that people used it for many medicinal purposes in olden times.

Thus, the existence of this plant is for thousands of years, with ancient texts and popular narrations tell us its prevalence for more than 1500 years.

The Greeks, Babylonians, Romans, Arabs and Indians used them. Despite its toxicity, studies show that it has medicinal properties. The plant's leaves and branches emit some juices, which people were using to treat many diseases, including dermatitis, eczema, psoriasis, sores, tumours, asthma, malaria and diabetes.

Some substances of the tree were used even as tonic for the heart and an anti-bacterial agent that helped reduce the spread of cancer cells in the lung.

The oleander flower was also designed as an official symbol for the Japanese city of Hiroshima. It was the first flower that bloomed after the atomic bomb was dropped on the city in 1945.

Since the medicinal benefits of the tree is not foolproof, some studies confirm that it causes nausea, diarrhoea, lethargy and



laziness, headache, stomach pain, and serious heart problems.

In addition, some plant sciences studies describe it as one of the dangerous sources of plant poisoning.

For example, the oleander tree has become notorious in Sri Lanka for its association in the minds as a 'tool for suicide'. It causes them to faint and then die.

Some studies indicate that cooking over oleander wood may poison cooked food or grilled meat.

Some animals were given oleander extract as part of some study, and it was found that mammals were particularly sensitive to it, as there are chances of fatality among the cows, sheep and horses if they eat them and even if they drink water in which their leaves have fallen.

If a person consumes it by

mistake, he should be immediately given medical attention. Induced vomiting and gastric lavage are used as preventive measures to reduce the body's absorption of toxic compounds.

Cases of such poisoning among humans, however, have rarely been reported.

Oleander blooms throughout the summer until autumn, and its flowers vary in colour between pink, red, violet, white and yellow. They are widely planted as ornamental trees or as hedges around the lands in public and private parks. On the sides of streets and highways because it tolerates drought.

Its toxicity deters animals from tampering with it; it can be considered a natural insecticide. Agricultural sources indicate that the oleander tree is a beautiful evergreen tree that grows to

a height of about six metres. It adapts to a wide variety of conditions, including semi-arid and temperate regions. It tolerates drought, wind, saltwater spray and wetland soil.

Some health and environmental specialists call for removing oleander trees because their leaves contain highly toxic substances to humans and animals and replace them with other trees. However, some assert that this plant is not poisonous unless a person eats from it equivalent of 30-100 grams. The study draws on plants found in gardens in various world countries to help absorb air pollutants. In addition, scientists are currently looking at exploiting the health benefits of diluted oleander extracts, which are now used in medicines as immune system boosters and natural remedies for some diseases.

After going through the negative and positive facts about the tree, many people have started thinking carefully before starting to plant it in their homes.

"We are waiting for confirmation from the competent authorities about the effects of planting these trees in our homes", some locals said.



Oman participates in Human Rights Council meeting

MUSCAT: The Sultanate, represented by the Foreign Ministry, took part in the Human Rights Council's 47th meeting in Geneva.

The virtual meeting aimed to adopt the 3rd Universal Periodic Review (UPR) on human rights.

The Sultanate's delegation was headed by Shaikh Humaid bin Ali al Ma'ani, Head of the International Affairs Department at the Foreign Ministry.

Shaikh Humaid delivered

the Sultanate's speech before the Council, during which he highlighted the progress achieved by the Sultanate so far in human rights since the 2nd UPR in 2015.

He also touched on the most important achievements made in different aspects of citizens' rights in the Sultanate and the various areas of human rights (civil, social, economic, health and cultural) and other rights that enjoy a continuous care and attention of His Majesty

Sultan Haitham bin Tarik.

The speech also previewed the Sultanate's efforts during the period covered in the report to enhance human rights by joining a number of human rights-related conventions and treaties, as well as enacting legislations to promote them.

Shaikh Humaid underscored the Sultanate's embracement of many recommendations in different fields of human rights, such as empowering and protecting women

in society, children's rights, freedom of speech, combating human trafficking and maintaining workers' rights.

The Sultanate's participating delegation comprised Idris bin Abdulrahman al Khanjari, Permanent Representative of the Sultanate to the United Nations (UN) in Geneva, and a number of officials from the Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs, Foreign Ministry, Ministry of Social Development and Ministry of Labour. — ONA

His Majesty greetings to Mongolia President

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Ukhnaagiin Khürelsükh of Mongolia, on the occasion of his country's National Day. In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his sincere greetings and best wishes to the President and the friendly Mongolian people. — ONA

Oil above \$70 brightens fiscal outlook

SAMUEL KUTTY

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Despite a revenue fall in the first five months of 2021, the relatively buoyant crude oil prices bode well for the Sultanate to realise its budget estimates.

Omani crude is currently trading at prices that prevailed before the outbreak of coronavirus pandemic. On the Dubai Mercantile Exchange, Oman crude for delivery in September 2021 reached post-Covid peak of \$73.09 per barrel on Friday,

At the same time, the average price of Oman oil for July delivery 2021 has stabilised at \$66.40 per barrel, registering \$3.30 per barrel higher than June delivery 2021 and higher than the budgeted price.

Oman's budget is based on the assumption that oil will be at \$45 a barrel (RO 17.5) in 2021. This is a marginal rise of two per cent over last year's level.

According to experts, Oman's fiscal outlook will be significant should oil prices remain above the \$70 per barrel mark. "The current oil price above \$70 is providing a much needed breather from a fiscal balance perspective. The surplus generated as a result of higher oil price throughout the rest of 2021 will significantly contribute towards lowering the annual deficit and perhaps bring us closer to breakeven much faster than anticipated in the Medium

Term Fiscal Plan," said Alkesh Joshi, Tax Partner and MENA Energy Tax Lear for Earnest and Young.

As per 2021 Fiscal Budget, 63 per cent as expected in the budget would yield an additional RO 1 billion to the exchequer.

"This would reduce the originally planned deficit of RO 2.24 billion by almost 50 per cent. Therefore oil pricing staying above \$70 for the rest of the year will be extremely positive for the economy and the economic climate in the near future," Alkesh added.

According to International Monetary Fund observations, Oman economy is expected to gradually recover from the pandemic and strengthen over the medium term.

"Benefiting from the projected modest increase of hydrocarbon production, overall GDP is projected to grow around 2.5 per cent in 2021 with about 3 per cent average growth over the medium term. Non-hydrocarbon GDP growth of 1.5 per cent is projected for 2021," commented a report by the staff of the global agency after its recent visit to the Sultanate.

The IMF mission also pointed out that with oil prices currently higher than budgeted, "there is scope for additional temporary targeted support for affected households and businesses if needed without jeopardising medium-term consolidation objectives".

RNO concludes sailing training programme

MUSCAT: The Royal Navy of Oman (RNO), in cooperation with the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, has concluded the sailing and adventure training programme for 2021.

The closing ceremony was held at Said Bin Sultan's Naval Base under the auspices of Khalifa bin Saif al Issa'ee, Director-General of Sports Activities at the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth.

The event was held on-board RNO vessel *Shabab Oman II*. As many as 20 male and female civil employees took part in the programme. The event's activities kicked off on June 27.

During the programme, the participants were familiarised with sailing sciences, arts of sea and navigation; in addition to training them on the sailing systems, how to sail with triangular and square sails, using safety equipment on the sea, fire exercises, how to deal with floods on ships, using maps and ship maintenance.

The programme also focused on the principles of teamwork, endurance, marine adventure, self-restraint and bonding with teammates. — ONA



Oman Air operations as per schedule during lockdown

MUSCAT: All flights are departing on time and for services operating during the lockdown period, passengers and those dropping them off or picking them up are allowed to travel to the airport, Oman Air said in a statement.

"Please ensure that you always carry a printed copy of travel tickets along with all applicable travel documents and valid ID in the event that you are asked to present them to the relevant authorities," the airline said.

"Don't forget to check the airline website for the latest travel updates, restrictions, and Covid-19 health and safety advisories before your next flight," the airline said.



MINISRTY OF HEALHT ROYAL HOSPITAL

ANNOUCEMENT FOR AUCTION

THE DIRECTORATE GENERAL OF ROYAL HOSPITAL INVITE SPECIALIZED COMPANIES TO SUBMIT BIDS

AUCTION NO.	DESCRIPTION	LAST DATE FOR COLLECTION OF DOCUMENT	CLOSING TIME/DAY/ DATE	ELIGIBILITY	AUCTION FEE (NON-REFUNDABLE)	OFFICE WHERE AUCTION ARE TO BE DEPOSITED (RH)
1/2021	SHOP FOR RENT (FOODSTUFF) AT ROYAL HOSPITAL	27/JULY/2021	Before 10 AM ON TUESDAY 10/AUGUST /2021	SPECIALIZED COMPANIES REGISTERED WITH TENDER BOARD	25 RIALS	OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR OF FINANCE-ROYAL HOSPITAL

Notes:-

- Copy of Registration Certificate Issue By Tender Board Is To Be Submitted For the Collection of Auction Documents.
- Auction Document Can Be Purchased From The Office of The Director of Finance At Royal Hospital Between 8.00 am and 12.00 pm on Working Days till date of 27/ JULY /2021, On Payment of Auction Fee Mentioned Above.
- Auction Should Be Submitted in Plain, Sealed Envelope, Enclosing A Bank Guarantee Issued By A Local bank for not less then 200 RO.
- Auction(s) Submitted Without Bank Guarantee or a Certified Cheque Will Not Be Considered.
- Requested to Deposit Their Auction Documents at the Office of Director of Finance Directorate General of The Royal Hospital (RH), Before 10.00 am on Tuesday, 10/August/2021, and bids submitted after this date shall not be considered, whatever the reasons for the delay.
- The Directorate General of Royal Hospital is not bound to accept the lowest or any other offer.



MUSCAT MUNICIPALITY

ANNOUNCEMENT

Muscat Municipality would like to announce there are some changes in obtaining bidding documents and the submission of bids has been extended according to the following:

Serial	Bidding No.	Bidding description	Document fee	Date for obtaining bidding docs.	Date of submission
1	RE-Bidding AB/08/2021	Investing plot number (271) at Muttrah	500/- OMR	13/7/2021	10/8/2021
2	AB/08/2021	Investing & Operating of the building on plot number (1023) at Qurum	450/- OMR	13/7/2021	10/8/2021
3	AB/16/2021	Rental & Operating of the building on plot number (115) located at Al-Qurum, Wilayat Boushar	90/- OMR	13/7/2021	10/8/2021
4	BB/11/2021	Rental & Operating a coffee shop located at Muttrah Market for Fishes, Fruits & Vegetables	25/- OMR	13/7/2021	10/8/2021

Registered companies with Muscat Municipality which are Specialized in above bids are invited to participate in the biddings as per the following:

- Pay the specified document fee for the requested bid via bank deposit to Muscat Municipality's Bank account as follows:
Bank Muscat | 0423010702710024
- A copy of the transaction's receipt MUST be sent to the following e-mail (MM.PC@mm.gov.om), provided with the company data (name and bid number, company name, commercial registration number of the company, delegate name, office phone number, mobile number and email address approved by the company).
- The bidding documents will be sent to the company via email.
- 2:00 PM on the above mentioned dates, is the last timing for obtaining Bidding Documents. Any bid's document request received after the specified time will not be considered.

Submitted offers must be accompanied with a bond mentioned in the tender document valid for a period not less than (90) days issued by any local bank in Oman addressed to Muscat Municipality. Bidding that do not meet the required bond will not be accepted.

Documents must be enclosed in a plain envelope sealed with red wax (without any company information), box's locations are As follows:

Bidding at The Serial	The Box's Location
1-2-3	Third floor at Directorate General of Quantity Surveying and Contracts in Muscat Municipality, Head Office, Darsail
4	First floor at Directorate General of Quantity Surveying and Contracts in Muscat Municipality, Head Office, Darsail

NOTES:

- Companies which are not registered in Muscat Municipality or their registration has been expired shall register through the municipality's website (www.mm.gov.om). For technical support, please contact Muscat Municipality through email (enr@mm.gov.om).
- If the bidders have any inquiries regarding the scope of the work, they have to send their inquiries through the following e-mail (MM.PC@mm.gov.om).
- 10:00 AM on the above submission mentioned dates, is the last timing for receiving bids. Offers submitted after the above mentioned date & time shall not be accepted for any reason.
- Muscat Municipality has the right to accept or reject any offer without assigning any reason.

Website: www.mm.gov.om

S Sudan leader pledges peace on independence anniversary

JUBA: South Sudan's President Salva Kiir made a pledge for peace on Friday as the country marked 10 troubled years of independence, with little cause to rejoice in the face of chronic instability and a deep hunger crisis.

At midnight on July 9, 2011, raucous celebrations erupted as the world's youngest nation was born and the people of South Sudan cheered the end of a decades-long struggle for separation from Sudan. But the revelry was short-lived.

Just two years later South Sudan was at war with itself, the task of nation-building forgotten as its liberators tore the country apart, dashing expectations of a glittering future.

Close to 400,000 people died and four million were displaced before a ceasefire was declared in 2018.

Today the country is more fragile than ever, beset by looming starvation, political insecurity, economic ruin and natural calamities.

"I assure you that I will not return you back to war again. Let us work altogether to recover the



South Sudan's President Salva Kiir addresses the nation as it marks the 10th anniversary of independence, at the State House in Juba, South Sudan. — Reuters

lost decade and put our country back to the path of development in this new decade," Kiir said in a televised address marking the milestone.

He hailed a "new spirit of dialogue" among political rivals and said the transitional government would focus on economic reforms and improving security.

But on Friday, there was none of the jubilation that greeted statehood, save for a fun run

Kiir hailed a 'new spirit of dialogue' among political rivals and said the transitional government would focus on economic reforms and improving security

through the capital that attracted some 10,000 people and was cheered by Kiir's nemesis and now vice-president Riek Machar.



South Sudanese people pose ahead of the 10th anniversary of the country's independence, in Juba, South Sudan. — Reuters

"We must keep the peace alive," said Machar. "Today we have promised that we are all one South Sudan."

Kiir had warned this week that the cash-strapped state was in no position to celebrate, blaming international sanctions for keeping prosperity out of reach.

South Sudan is reeling from economic chaos, with soaring inflation and a currency crisis, and faces its worst hunger crisis since independence. — AFP

US strikes deal with Russia to continue UN Syria aid

UNITED NATIONS: The UN Security Council on Friday extended a cross-border aid operation into Syria from Turkey after Russia agreed to a compromise in last-minute talks with the United States, ensuring the delivery of humanitarian help to millions of Syrians for up to 12 months.

"Parents can sleep tonight knowing that for the next 12 months their children will be fed. The humanitarian agreement we've reached here will literally save lives," said the US Ambassador to the United Nations, Linda Thomas-Greenfield.

Russia and the United States, whose relationship has been fraught on a number of issues, both described Friday's unanimous vote by the 15-member Security Council as an important moment.

"We hope that it might be a turning point that is indeed in line with what Putin and Biden discussed in Geneva," Russia's UN Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia told reporters after the vote. "It demonstrates that we can cooperate when there is a need and when there is a will as well."

US President Joe Biden had raised the importance of the cross-border aid operation with Russian President Vladimir Putin when they met in Geneva in June. The Biden administration warned that any future cooperation with Russia over Syria would be at risk if cross-border aid deliveries were shut down.

"It shows what we can do with the Russians if we work with them diplomatically on common goals," Thomas-Greenfield told



Parents can sleep tonight knowing that for the next 12 months their children will be fed. The humanitarian agreement we've reached will literally save lives

LINDA THOMAS-GREENFIELD,
US envoy to the UN

reporters. "I look forward to looking for other opportunities to work with the Russians on issues of common interest."

The council mandate for the long-running aid operation was due to expire on Saturday. The council first authorised a cross-border aid operation into Syria in 2014 at four points, but that was whittled down last year to one point from Turkey into a rebel-held area in Syria, due to Russian and Chinese opposition.

Russia, an ally of Syrian President Bashar al Assad, did not engage in weeks of talks on a resolution drafted by Ireland and Norway that initially sought aid access from Turkey and Iraq for 12 months. Then on Thursday, Russia proposed a six-month renewal for just the Turkish

Pharmacies in crisis-hit Lebanon strike over medicine shortages

BEIRUT: Pharmacies in crisis-hit Lebanon began an indefinite strike on Friday over medicine shortages as the cash-strapped state struggles to afford subsidies on key imports.

The country is facing what the World Bank has called one of the world's worst economic crises since the 1850s, and its foreign currency reserves are fast depleting.

Drug importers warned on Sunday that they were running out of hundreds of drugs, and that the central bank had failed to pay suppliers abroad millions of dollars in accumulated dues under a subsidy scheme.

The association of pharmacy owners announced there would be a "general open-ended strike across Lebanon" from Friday morning.

Ali Safa, a member of the association, said 80 per cent of pharmacies had stayed closed in Beirut and other big cities, and around half had done so in other areas.

An AFP photographer said



A shuttered door of a pharmacy in the Lebanese capital Beirut. — AFP

most pharmacies had closed along the densely populated coastline north of Beirut, while another said many remained shut in the capital's southern suburbs.

Some medicines have disappeared from the shelves in recent months, forcing many people to appeal on social media for help in finding them, including from friends and family abroad.

Beirut resident Elie, 48, said he had visited five pharmacies earlier in the week to find medicine to treat high uric acid. "They kept telling me there was none left, or that the suppliers had not delivered" the medicine, he said.

Medicine importers' syndicate head Karim Gebara said on Sunday that some drugs to treat cardiac diseases, high blood

pressure, diabetes, cancer and multiple sclerosis were already out of stock.

He said this was because the central bank was not releasing dollars, and importers could no longer open lines of credit.

Pharmacy owner Safa said that over the past two months suppliers had gradually stopped deliveries.

He said he and others wanted the health ministry to approve a list of medicines that would continue being subsidised according to priority, and then be sold at a fixed rate.

Suppliers could then sell all the other drugs according to the black market exchange rate to the dollar, he said, in order not to make a loss.

The central bank on Monday said it would earmark \$400 million to support key products including medicine and flour.

Gebara said the central bank had promised \$50 million a month in subsidies for medicine, which would cover just half of importers' current bills. — AFP

HARVESTING FRUITS OF LABOUR



A Yemeni farmer picks dates during the annual harvest season in Al Durayhimi district of Yemen's war-ravaged western province of Hodeida. — AFP

KARBALA

Iraqis protest round-the-clock blackouts

Hundreds of Iraqi protesters demonstrated in several southern towns and at a government-run power plant against prolonged electricity cuts as the mercury soars. "We want electricity to be restored and if it isn't we're not leaving this plant. We're going to stay put and shut it down," demonstrator Daa Wady said outside Al Khairat electricity station near the city of Karbala.

The predominantly male crowd surrounded and attacked the car of an official, smashing its



rear window and shouting.

"We are peaceful protesters who are here only for our rights. Our demand is for electricity to return and if it doesn't we'll bring our tents and camp out," said frustrated demonstrator Sajjad Aoun al Kiriti. — AFP

TUNIS

Tunisia struggles with Covid pandemic

Several countries promised to help Tunisia fight the coronavirus as the north African country recorded its highest daily death toll since the pandemic began, putting its healthcare system under severe stress and depleting oxygen supplies. President Kais Saied said that Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman had pledged to send vaccinations and whatever medical equipment Tunisia needed.

Libya also pledged to send medical aid, the president's office



said in a separate statement. Officials and local media said that Kuwait, Turkey and Algeria had promised to help. Qatar had already sent a military plane with a field hospital on board, including 200 medics and 100 respirators. — Reuters

TEHRAN

Iran railway firm denies cyber attack

Iran's national railway company denied having been hit by a cyber attack following reports of disruptions at train stations across the country, local media reported. The announcement came a day after Fars news agency reported "unprecedented chaos" at stations with hundreds of trains delayed or cancelled.

In the now-deleted report, it said the incident followed a widespread disruption in... computer systems that is probably due to a cyber attack. Sadegh



Sekri, a spokesman, told ISNA news agency that 'there has been no disruption or cyber attack for passenger, cargo or intercity trains.' The company had said in a statement that trains were arriving and departing on schedule with "no problems". — AFP

In brief

■ ISLAMABAD



PAKISTAN SUGGESTS BANNING AIR TRAVEL FOR UNVACCINATED

Pakistan's top body overseeing the pandemic response recommended that anyone who did not hold a Covid-19 vaccination certificate should not be allowed to travel by air after August 1. The guidance by the National Command and Operation Centre (NCOC) would need the federal government's approval, and came as the country's leadership warned a fourth wave of the pandemic was beginning and dangerous variants of the virus, including the Delta variant, had been detected.

New guidelines to curb the virus spread ahead of the Eid holiday later this month would be announced soon, the NCOC said. — AFP

■ DHAKA



BANGLADESH FACTORY OWNER HELD AFTER 52 DIE IN FIRE

Bangladesh police arrested for murder the owner of a factory where 52 people died in an inferno, as it emerged that children as young as 11 had been working there. Police said the owner of the food factory and four of his sons were among eight people detained over the fire that broke out Thursday and raged for more than a day.

A separate inquiry has been launched into the use of child labour at the facility. Jayedul Alam, police chief for Narayanganj district where the factory is located, said the entrance had been padlocked at the time of the blaze and the factory breached multiple fire and safety regulations. — AFP

■ JAKARTA



6.1-MAGNITUDE QUAKE STRIKES EASTERN INDONESIA

A 6.1-magnitude earthquake struck off the coast of Indonesia's Sulawesi island on Saturday, the United States Geological Survey said, but no tsunami warning was issued and there were no immediate reports of damage. The strong quake hit 258 kilometres northeast of the city of Manado in North Sulawesi at a depth of 68 kilometres.

Indonesia experiences frequent quakes due to its position on the Pacific 'Ring of Fire', an arc of intense seismic activity where tectonic plates collide that stretches from Japan through Southeast Asia and across the Pacific basin.

— AFP

Sydney reports biggest rise in Covid cases

MELBOURNE: Australia's New South Wales state reported its biggest daily rise in locally acquired coronavirus infections this year on Saturday, with authorities warning that worse may yet to come for Sydney, which is in a three-week hard lockdown.

There were 50 new cases of community transmission in the country's most populous state, up from 44 a day earlier, the previous 2021 record high. This brings the outbreak of the highly infectious Delta variant to 489 cases.

Of Saturday's cases, 26 were people who had spent time in the community while they were infectious, deepening concerns that the lockdown of more than 5 million people in Sydney and surroundings will be extended.

"When you know that there are 26 cases infectious in the community, the only conclusion we can draw is that things are going to get worse before they get better", state Premier Gladys Berejiklian told a televised briefing.

"I think it is pretty clear that unless we reduce that level of people in the community that are infectious, we won't be able to turn things around as quickly as we can or as quickly as we should."

There are 47 cases in hospital, or about one in 10 people infected



A person wearing a protective mask walks in a deserted shopping mall in the city centre during a lockdown to curb the spread of the coronavirus disease in Sydney. — Reuters

in the current outbreak. Of those, 19 people are under the age of 55 and 16 people are in intensive care, including a teenager.

No fully vaccinated people have required hospital care and 79 per cent of those admitted have not had any doses, health authorities said. Vaccinations are available in

Australia for now only to people over 40 and those in risk groups either due to their health or work.

The country has fared much better than many other developed countries in keeping its Covid-19 numbers relatively low, but its vaccination rollout has been among the slowest due to

supply constraints and changing medical advice for its mainstay AstraZeneca. Meanwhile, the world-famous Bondi Beach in Sydney, Australia, was temporarily closed on Friday due to numerous sharks in the water.

Helicopters in the area spotted the predatory fish in the sea

No fully vaccinated people have required hospital care and 79 per cent of those admitted have not had any doses, says health authorities

very close to dozens of surfers and swimmers. The sharks were apparently chasing a large school of fish.

In photos published by broadcaster ABC, the menacing dark outlines of the animals could be seen just below the surface of the sea.

The lifeguards who were immediately alerted went out on jet skis to chase away the sharks and warn the people in the water. It was not yet clear what species of shark was involved.

Bondi Beach is one of Australia's most famous beaches and attracted tourists from all over the world before the coronavirus pandemic.

However, there is a risk of shark attacks there — as in all parts of the country.

Only on Monday, a surfer at Crescent Head between Brisbane and Sydney was attacked by a 3-metre-long great white shark who seriously injured his arm.

— AFP/dpa

■ CARGO VESSEL COLLIDES



General view of the partially submerged M/V Palawan Pearl cargo vessel after it collided with the Cyprus-flagged BKM 104 dredger in Manila Bay, Manila. — Reuters

South Korea hits third straight record high in Covid cases

SEOUL: South Korea reported 1,378 new coronavirus cases on Saturday, a record high for the third day in a row as the country prepared to impose its highest-level curbs in the greater capital area next week.

The country had previously been held up as a model of how to combat the pandemic, with the public largely following social distancing and other rules, but it was slow to start its vaccine rollout due to supply shortages.

More than 1,000 of the new cases were in the capital Seoul and its surrounding areas, home to around half the South Korean population. Clusters have recently surfaced in areas including schools, offices and shopping malls, with people in their 20s and 30s — most of whom are not yet



People wait in line for a coronavirus disease test at a testing site which is temporarily set up at a public health centre in Seoul. — Reuters

eligible for vaccinations — driving up the numbers.

Only about 11 per cent of the country's 52 million population is fully vaccinated, according to health authorities.

On Friday, the country's prime minister Kim Boo-Kyum said the record spike in new cases left authorities no choice but to implement the highest-level curbs. — Reuters

Afghanistan to rush troops to border

KABUL: Afghan authorities prepared on Saturday to retake a key border crossing seized by the Taliban in a sweeping offensive that the insurgents claim has helped capture a vast swath of the violence-wracked nation.

As US troops continued their withdrawal, the Taliban said its fighters had seized two crossings in western Afghanistan — completing an arc of territory from the Iranian border to the frontier with China.

It now held 85 per cent of the country, a Taliban official said, controlling about 250 of Afghanistan's nearly 400 districts — a claim impossible to independently verify, and disputed by the government.

On Friday Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said their fighters had captured the border town of Islam Qala on the Iranian



Afghan security personnel stand guard along the road amid ongoing fight between Afghan security forces and Taliban fighters in Kandahar. — AFP

frontier and the Torghundi crossing with Turkmenistan.

Herat governor spokesman Jilani Farhad said the authorities

were deploying fresh troops to retake Islam Qala post, the biggest trade crossing between Iran and Afghanistan. "They will be sent

there soon", he said.

The Afghan government has repeatedly dismissed the Taliban's gains as having little strategic

value, but the seizure of multiple border crossings and the taxes they generate will likely fill the group's coffers with new revenue.

With the Taliban having routed much of northern Afghanistan in recent weeks, the government holds little more than a constellation of provincial capitals that must largely be reinforced and resupplied by air.

The air force was under severe strain even before the Taliban's lightning offensive overwhelmed the government's northern and western positions, putting further pressure on the country's limited aircraft and pilots.

On Thursday President Joe Biden said the US military mission would end on August 31 — nearly 20 years after it began — but he admitted it was "highly unlikely" Kabul would be able to control the entire country. — AFP

US rebuffs Haiti troops request after president’s assassination

WASHINGTON/PORT-AU-PRINCE: The United States on Friday rebuffed Haiti’s request for troops to help secure key infrastructure after the assassination of President Jovenel Moise by suspected foreign mercenaries, even as it pledged to help with the investigation.

The killing of Moise by a squad of gunmen in the early hours of Wednesday morning at his home in Port-au-Prince pitched Haiti deeper into a political crisis which may worsen growing hunger, gang violence and a Covid-19 outbreak.

Haitian Elections Minister Mathias Pierre said a request for US security assistance was raised in a conversation between interim Prime Minister Claude Joseph and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Wednesday. Haiti also made a request for forces to the United Nations Security Council, Pierre said.

But a senior US administration official said there were “no plans to provide US military assistance at this time.”

A letter from Joseph’s office to the US Embassy in Haiti, dated on Wednesday and reviewed by Reuters, requested the dispatch of troops to support the national police in reestablishing security and protecting key infrastructure across the country following Moise’s assassination.

A similar letter, also dated on Wednesday and seen by Reuters, was sent to the UN office in Haiti.



A Haitian National Policeman guard the entrance to the US Embassy as people gather to ask for asylum following the assassination of President Jovenel Moise, in Port-au-Prince, on Friday. — Reuters

“We were in a situation where we believed that infrastructure of the country — the port, airport and energy infrastructure — might be a target,” Pierre said.

Another aim of the request for security reinforcements would be to make it possible to go ahead with scheduled presidential and legislative elections on September 26, Pierre said.

The UN political mission in Haiti received the letter and it was being examined, said Jose Luis Diaz, spokesman for the

UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs.

“The dispatch of troops under any circumstances would be a matter for the (15-member) Security Council to decide,” he said.

RIDDLED WITH BULLETS

The United States and Colombia said they would send law enforcement and intelligence officials to assist Haiti after a number of their nationals were arrested for Moise’s murder.

Police in Haiti said the assassination was carried out by a commando unit of 26 Colombian and two Haitian-American mercenaries. The two Haitian-Americans were identified as James Solages, 35, and Joseph Vincent, 55, both from Florida.

Seventeen of the men were captured — including Solages and Vincent — after a gun battle with Haitian authorities in Petionville, the hillside suburb of the capital Port-au-Prince where Moise resided. — Reuters

Delta puts brakes on return to post-Covid normality

PARIS: Nations across the globe hit new pandemic highs and reimposed Covid-19 restrictions on Saturday as the highly contagious Delta variant forced governments to put the brakes on plans to return to normality.

The highly transmissible Delta variant, first detected in India, is sweeping the globe as countries race to inoculate their populations to ward off fresh outbreaks and allow for economies and daily life to recover.

The European Union — lambasted early on in the pandemic response for a botched vaccine acquisition programme — said on Saturday it has delivered enough shots to cover 70 per cent of the bloc’s population.

“By tomorrow, some 500 million doses will have been distributed to all regions of Europe,” EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said.

But according to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, the proportion of adults aged 18 years or over fully vaccinated in the EU and European Economic Area is still only 44.1 per cent.

Russia announced on Saturday that cases continued to surge and it had a new record number of daily deaths, the fifth since the beginning of the month.

The 752 new deaths bring Russia’s total toll to 142,253. The country also recorded 25,082 new infections, meaning there have been more than 5.7 million cases.

State statistics agency Rosstat, which defines coronavirus-related deaths more broadly, put the figure at 270,000 by the end of April.

Less than 20 per cent of Russians have received a single dose, despite shots of locally developed vaccines being readily available. — AFP



A healthcare worker injects a dose of Russia’s Sputnik Lite Covid-19 vaccine at a vaccination centre at the Olympic Luzhniki football stadium in Moscow. — AFP

Biden presses Putin to act on ransomware attacks

WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden increased pressure on Russian President Vladimir Putin on Friday to move against ransomware groups operating in Russia, warning the United States is prepared to respond if cyberhacks are not stopped.

The two leaders held an hour-long phone call on Friday, their first since they discussed ransomware attacks at a summit in Geneva on June 16. Biden’s message to Putin in the call was direct, suggesting a growing impatience over attacks that have disrupted key US sectors.

“I made it very clear to him that the United States expects, when a ransomware operation is coming from his soil even though it’s not sponsored by the state, we expect them to act if we give them enough information to act on who that is,” Biden told reporters.

He said the two governments have now set up a means to communicate on a regular basis “when each of us thinks something is happening in another country that affects the home country.”

“And so it went well. I’m optimistic,” he said.

The United States has not indicated how it plans to respond to the attacks emanating from Russia, but Biden hinted at digital retaliation if Russian cooperation was not forthcoming.

Asked by a Reuters reporter whether it would make sense to attack the Russian servers used in such intrusions, Biden paused, smiled and said: “Yes.”

Biden told reporters there would be consequences to Russian inaction, but gave no details. He said a joint meeting had been set for July 16th, adding, “I believe



President Joe Biden addresses the media as he walks to board Air Force One at Joint Base Andrews in Maryland, on Friday. — Reuters

we’re going to get cooperation.”

A senior Biden administration official said a response could come soon. “We’re not going to telegraph what those actions will be precisely

— some of them will be manifest and visible, some of them may not be — but we expect those to take place, you know, in the days and weeks ahead,” the official told

reporters.

Ransomware is a breed of malicious software that hackers use to hold data hostage in exchange for payment. Cybercriminals have used it to paralyse thousands of American organisations and businesses around the world, setting off a series of increasingly high-profile crises.

Many of the gangs carrying out the ransomware attacks are alleged by American officials and cybersecurity researchers to be operating out of Russia with the awareness, if not the approval, of the government there.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said on Friday that the United States had no new information suggesting the Russian government directed last week’s ransomware attack on Florida IT firm Kaseya by prolific

cybercrime syndicate REvil, but said Moscow had a responsibility to take action against such groups operating in Russia.

Moscow and Washington disagreed over whether the United States had formally sought Russian assistance to rein in ransomware attacks.

A Kremlin statement said Putin told Biden that Russia “had not received any requests from the relevant US departments in the last month despite the readiness of the Russian side to jointly stop crime in the sphere of information.”

The senior Biden administration official disputed this statement, telling reporters in a conference call that multiple requests had been made by the United States to Russia through normal diplomatic channels.

— Reuters

SHORT TAKES

KANO

Bandits kill 35 villagers in northwest Nigeria

Armed cattle thieves have killed at least 35 people in five villages in northwest Nigeria’s Zamfara state, police said on Saturday, in the latest violence in the restive region. Local residents however said up to 43 villagers were killed in the attack late on Thursday.

“Thirty five people were killed by the bandits in the five villages,” state police spokesman Mohammed Shehu said.

Motorcycle-riding gunmen launched coordinated attacks on



remote villages of Gidan Adamu, Tsauni, Gidan Baushi, Gidan Maidawa and Wari in Maradun district, shooting residents and burning homes.

MOGADISHU

At least 8 die in Mogadishu bomb attack

A suicide car bomb targeting a government convoy exploded at a busy junction in Somalia’s capital on Saturday, killing at least eight people, an eyewitness said.

Abdiasis Abu Musab, military operations spokesperson for the Al Qaida-linked militant group Al Shabaab, said it was responsible for Saturday’s attack. The group, which wants to overthrow the government, frequently carries out such bombings.



The convoy was carrying senior police official Farhan Qarole, who survived the attack, the Somali government news agency reported.

HAVANA

Cuba okays use of home-grown vaccine

Cuba on Friday approved its home-grown Abdala vaccine for emergency use, the first Latin American coronavirus jab to reach this stage and a possible lifeline for a region trying to battle a killer pandemic with modest means.

The country’s CECMED health regulator gave the go-ahead after Abdala’s makers last month announced the vaccine candidate was more than 92 per cent effective at preventing Covid-19 disease after three



doses.

Cuba is working on five coronavirus vaccines, and in May started immunising its population using two of them.

Europe’s carbon push stokes backlash fears

KATE ABNETT AND MARK JOHN

A European Union plan to extend carbon pricing to the fuel used in cars and to heat homes is facing a wall of early resistance from countries and lawmakers fearing a public pushback unless backers find ways to compensate those worst hit.

According to leaked drafts, the scheme would set up an Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS) for transport and heating, creating a market price for carbon — a price that fuel suppliers are likely to pass on to Europe’s half a billion consumers in the form of higher bills.

Expected to be part of a package of proposals on July 14 aimed at ensuring the EU hits a target of cutting net emissions by 55 per cent by 2030, it has been singled out by some capitals as something that could hurt the poorest in the 27-nation bloc.

Some even raise the prospect of it triggering “yellow vest” movements like the often violent protests that spread across France from late 2018 after an attempt to raise fuel taxes. “This is a big risk for the willingness among the population to go forward with the transition,” one EU official said, of the EU’s goal to move towards a climate-neutral economy. “We have to tread very carefully.”

If they go ahead with it next week, European Commission policy-drafters promise to add social protections, including by channelling some revenues from the new ETS into a social fund to support the needy.

But critics question whether risking a political backlash is wise for something they say will only indirectly influence consumers’ behaviour — especially when the EU is already planning tougher car CO2 standards and energy-saving requirements for buildings to curb emissions in those sectors.

“Taking such a political risk for a limited gain, I think it’s not worth it,” Pascal Canfin, a member of French President Emmanuel Macron’s La Republique En Marche! movement and chair of the European Parliament’s environment committee, said.

Canfin, who created a stir in June by declaring the plan “political suicide”, described it as a de facto regressive tax and cited analysis by the Commission itself suggesting an ETS for road transport would cut emissions by barely 3 per cent. Any plan proposed by the Commission must be negotiated and eventually approved by the European Parliament and member states. — Reuters



END OF LEGAL BATTLE

Workers remove a statue of Confederate General Robert E Lee, after years of a legal battle over the contentious monument, in Charlottesville, Virginia, the US, on Saturday. — Reuters

“This is a big risk for the willingness among the population to go forward with the transition. We have to tread very carefully

EU OFFICIAL



Ray Petersen
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ENGLISH IN BASIC EDUCATION HAS OUTSTANDING TEXTBOOKS THAT EFFECTIVELY REPRESENT OMAN AND THE WORLD BEAUTIFULLY

Pupil and student learning needs change, and what I now see as practical, would have been unthinkable to me ten, five, or even less, years ago, but the altered circumstances of the Sultanate, and my reflections, have led me to offer this opinion.

Most kids here attach little or no value to learning English, they don’t need it, they don’t want it, they can’t understand why they learn it, yet it’s a fait accompli. Few speak English at home, at play, with family and friends, and it has a puzzling irrelevance in their lives. Few mums and dads, grandmas’ and grandads’, uncles, aunties, or cousins speak it, and if they do, rarely at home, so the kids are not getting the linguistic exchange necessary to develop their English language.

English in basic education has outstanding textbooks that effectively represent Oman and the world beautifully. The subject is taught passionately and enthusiastically in several schools and classrooms, grudgingly, reluctantly in many others, and with disdain, as an inconvenience in most, and who is to say who is right or wrong? But there are insufficient English teachers for effective English teaching. This sees pupils graduate to secondary schools with insufficient English skills to handle their workload, demotivating them. Most ‘hang in’ to the modest programme demands to somehow progress to higher education. Here they

enter a Foundation programme, where the learning process, the psychology of learning, in all subjects, is hindered by the vast disparity in English language skills between those who know and understand English, and those who made it ‘by the skin of their teeth.’

The Foundation programme initiates students in higher education, where caring, professional, teachers, confront diverse student intakes with English vocabularies from ten, to ten thousand English words, with the less able expecting their teachers to be like Harry Potter... to wave a magic wand and teach them to learn English overnight! These teachers are fantastic, make no mistake, but they are not magicians! Here students must pass the English language focused course in English Reading, Writing and Grammar, also Math, Life Skills, and IT components. The Foundation course confirms that the student has sufficient English skills to function effectively in higher education, and the sooner a student can satisfy that requirement, the sooner they can go forward to their major studies.

This is where, academically and intellectually, “The rich get rich, and the poor get poorer,” a clumsy analogy maybe, but certainly the ‘ten thousand words’ capable English students, display an exponential dominance of the classroom despite teachers’ awareness of the need to support all students equally, seeking to

modify that dominance. It is human nature if you are good at something, to want to be better, and to show that you are, and do. Meanwhile the ‘ten words’ students, while not left behind, are overcome, psychologically, and culturally, at a time in life when they want to be full of the joys of life... Many feel betrayed, they become embittered, disruptive, demotivated... their punctuality and attendance fail, and worse... they stop caring for, and about, themselves.

In my opinion, Oman’s society does not prepare its young people for life in or beyond education by denying the realities of educational need by only ‘sampling’ English, and I believe the answer must be to provide a basic education system, without English, for all pupils... at... this... time. The well-intentioned English focus was just exactly that, and it was a great concept, poorly resourced, now beyond redemption. Pupils, students, and parents who have specific, English speaking goals should patronise private, international schools, and training providers can assume English Language studies prior to higher education, as the “cloth must be cut to suit the means,” in the current financial climate.

Few of the young genuinely aspire to science, academia, diplomacy, or finance... so why English? There are many more words to be written and spoken on this topic, but the time is right for this conversation. Isn’t it?

Get vaccinated... as staying safe is always a wise choice



Rasha al Raisi
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OUT OF THE THREE THEY ONLY OFFERED ASTRAZENECA TO INDIVIDUALS (AND THE POINT OF SPOILING US WITH CHOICES IS?)

When the radio announced the start of the vaccination campaign here at the beginning of June, mom was super relieved.

Like many of her age group, mom’s appointment for the second vaccine of AstraZeneca was delayed and later cancelled with no further explanation.

We went to the stadium two days in a row and it was jam-packed. By the third day the police was put in charge and mom managed to enter and get vaccinated.

As for me, I decided to go the following week as they told mom that they’ll be vaccinating whoever interested. Of course, this wasn’t the case. As we left the car, we heard the policeman announcing that the entire week

was dedicated to vaccinating government sector employees.

“When will it be for individuals?” “No idea!”

At this stage mom was panicking as I was the only one left home without vaccination. We decided to go to Badr al Sama in Al Khuwair as a friend of mine had shown me an advert that announced their vaccination campaign for Omanis between the ages of 18-45.

When my cousin and I arrived there, the place was crammed and we were in fear of contracting something other than Covid-19 from the crowd (my cousin was wearing two masks and I regretted instantly calling him teddy bear muzzle).

There was no one around to

ask and we bumped into the supervisor by chance. Funny enough, he denied any knowledge of the advert and kept insisting that if we don’t belong to a company then we won’t be vaccinated (that was the only time I wished I had a smart phone to shove their advert under his nose).

My cousin decided that enough was enough and he booked me an appointment immediately in the new Oman hospital. It was for the afternoon of the next day and when I went it was busy too. The receptionist kept apologising to the frustrated masses for not being able to stick to the appointments due to the many walk-ins they’ve been dealing with since morning (why insist on booking appointments then?).

She gave me a form to fill with three vaccine options: Pfizer, AstraZeneca and Sputnik (I didn’t know that we had it here!). Out of the three they only offered AstraZeneca to individuals (and the point of spoiling us with choices is?). While waiting for my turn, the Tunisian man next to me grumbled about not being convinced with the efficacy of the AstraZeneca. I silenced him by saying that all he should care about is being vaccinated and that’s that!

Finally, I paid RO 11 for the dose and it was my turn. I walked in a long corridor before queuing in a longer line. When I went to get the jab, the room had an English teenager who the nurse was giving a list of instructions:

“Don’t lift heavy things with the jabbed arm! Don’t worry if your arm gets sore!”

I was preparing myself for a similar lecture but once my painful jab was over all I got was: “Wait for 10 minutes before going home!” (Moral of the story: Omani girl is tough, English boy is not!). When my ten minutes were over, I went home. The next day I had a slight fever and was sweating profusely for a few hours in which mom kept checking on me every couple of minutes, asking worriedly: “Can you breathe?”. I was fine the next day and kept pestering my cousin to get vaccinated. I urge you too — dear reader — to get vaccinated, as staying safe is always a wise choice.

(Rasha al Raisi is a certified skills trainer and an author)

sport



England's defender John Stones takes part in England's MD-1 training session. – AFP

LONDON: England and Italy are counting down to Sunday's Euro 2020 final, with Gareth Southgate's men seeking to end a 55-year trophy drought but the Italians aiming to spoil the Wembley party.

Sporting immortality beckons for England captain Harry Kane and his team-mates, who are desperate to etch their names in the record books by winning just the second major trophy in the nation's history.

Wembley, which was also the venue for England's 1966 World Cup triumph, will host around 65,000 fans for the game despite coronavirus restrictions still in place.

England began the tournament as one of several contenders to lift the trophy and have taken advantage of playing all but one of their matches at home.

Southgate's men will be willed on by the vast majority of a crowd that created a crackling atmosphere for England's second-round match against Germany

and the semifinal against Denmark.

"We've all waited so long as players, as public, as people to see us in a final," said Kane. "So these are the opportunities you have to grab with both hands."

"We have an amazing chance to win our second major trophy as a country. The players we've had over the years and produced, we feel proud to be representing them as well."

"We've got to be excited for it, we've got to enjoy it, but of course, any football match, we're all winners here, we all want to win, and we're going to need every bit of that to get the job done on Sunday."

ITALY REDEMPTION

Standing in England's way are a battle-hardened Italy side who have restored the nation's pride after failing even to qualify for the 2018 World Cup.

England have never beaten Italy at a major tournament, although meetings between the nations have been few and far

ITALY LOOK TO PLAY PARTY POOPERS IN LONDON



England's forward Raheem Sterling (R) and England's defender Reece James (L) attend England's MD-1 training session at St George's Park. – AFP

between. Italy triumphed in a penalty shoot-out in the quarterfinals of Euro 2012 in Ukraine and won 2-1 when they met in the group stage of the 2014 World Cup, although both sides ended up being eliminated in the first round.

Both teams have been transformed since then.

The Azzurri have lit up Euro 2020 ever since beating Turkey 3-0 in the opening

“We’ve all waited so long as players, as public, as people to see us in a final. So these are the opportunities you have to grab with both hands

HARRY KANE
England captain

game a month ago. They are on a national record 33-match unbeaten run under coach Roberto Mancini, who has spent time in England both as a player and as a manager. This will be their third game of the tournament at Wembley, where they beat Austria 2-1 in extra time in the last 16 and Spain on penalties in a gripping semifinal on Tuesday. "Playing at their home does

ENGLAND CHASE HISTORY AT WEMBLEY



England's defender Kyle Walker attends England's MD-1 training session. – AFP

not scare us," Italy's veteran defender Leonardo Bonucci said. "We are looking forward to taking to the field even though most of the fans present will be English. We want to do something historic, have a great performance and then we'll see how it ends." Italy had the backing of around 11,000 British-based

fans at the semifinal and their supporters will once again be there for the final. Reports in Italy said that 6,500 tickets had been sold to fans already in Britain and that number would be bolstered by 1,000 more who will fly into the country for the game, including President Sergio Mattarella. – AFP



An Italy fan holds up a football on the beach. – Reuters

MESSI, NEYMAR TO BATTLE IN DREAM COPA FINAL FOR 1ST TITLE

RIO DE JANEIRO: Former Barcelona team-mates Lionel Messi and Neymar will line up opposite each other in Saturday's Copa America final looking to end a hoodoo that has also affected some of their countries' greatest players.

Like Brazil's Pele and Diego Maradona of Argentina before them, neither Messi nor Neymar has ever won the Copa.

That statistic will change for one of them in the dream final at Rio de Janeiro's iconic Maracana stadium.

For six-time Ballon d'Or winner Messi, this will be his fourth Copa final and perhaps his last chance to finish on the winning side.

He's been his team's standout performer, as ever, scoring four goals and creating five more — the tournament leader in both categories.

But at 34, this may well be his last Copa and next year's World Cup could be his last major international tournament altogether.

So far, finals have led only to disappointment for Messi having lost in 2007, 2015 and 2016 at the Copa, and seen his side beaten 1-0 by Germany at the 2014 World Cup. Some people believe winning something with Argentina is Messi's only remaining professional goal.

"We'll try to stop him achieving this objective," said Brazil centre-back Marquinhos.

"As much as Messi, we also have players that deserve this title... like our own 'Ney' who wasn't there for the last Copa," he added.

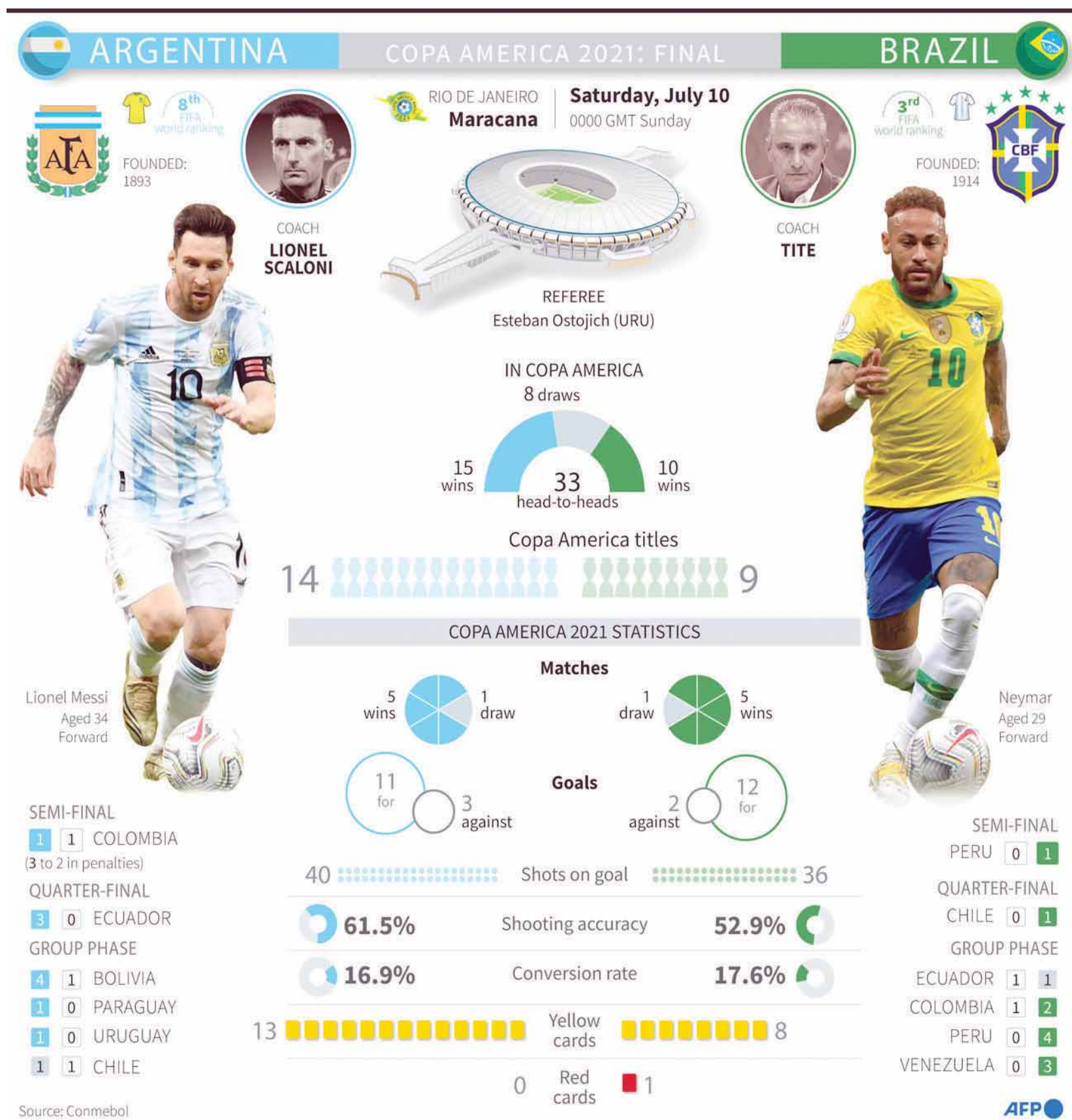
At 29, Neymar has a bit more time on his side but he was injured and absent two years ago when Brazil won their ninth title on home soil, beating Peru 3-1 in the final.

'ETERNAL RIVALS'

But as well as the two superstars lining up on opposite sides on Saturday, this is a classic match between two world heavyweights.

"We're going to play a final against our eternal rivals, the life-long ones, the two most powerful national teams in South America and we hope... it will be a great match," said Argentina coach Lionel Scaloni.

"Brazil versus Argentina is



much more than a simple game of football... these jerseys make the world stand still to watch their games. That represents the history of Brazil-Argentina," added Marquinhos.

Incredibly, these two sides are not even the two most successful ones in Copa history, with Uruguay having won 15 titles to Argentina's 14 and Brazil's nine.

In what is the 47th edition of the Copa, this is also just the



fourth time these two have met in the final, with Argentina triumphing the first time in 1937 and Brazil coming out on top in 2004 and 2007. And that is despite having faced each other more than 100 times in their history.

They have been by far the strongest two sides in the competition, even if Argentina rode their luck a touch in their semi-final penalty shoot-out win over Colombia.



We'll try to stop him achieving this objective. As much as Messi, we also have players that deserve this title... like our own 'Ney' who wasn't there for the last Copa

MARQUINHOS

Brazil centre-back

'WORLD-CLASS PLAYERS'

The two squads are impressive for their strength in depth.

In their semifinal victory over Peru — and despite Manchester City forward Gabriel Jesus being suspended — Brazil left the likes of Liverpool's Roberto Firmino, Flamengo hot-shot Gabriel Barbosa and Real Madrid starlet Vinicius Junior on the bench.

In midfield, Liverpool's Fabinho has been kept out of the side by a resurgent Fred, of Manchester United.

Likewise, Paris Saint-Germain winger Angel Di Maria — a bright spark when he came on in the semifinal against Colombia — has mostly started on the bench while new Barcelona signing Sergio Aguero has hardly had a look in for Argentina.

Messi and Inter Milan's Lautaro Martinez (three goals) have provided Argentina's main attacking thrust but they have quality and creativity throughout.

"Argentina are not just Lautaro and Messi, we cannot only concentrate on those two," said Brazil and Real Madrid midfielder Casemiro.

"They're great players, world-class players, but if Argentina have reached the final it's because of the (whole) group, we have to respect this."

As well as looking to end his career-long trophy drought with Argentina, Messi could make history in another way on Saturday.

He currently sits on 76 goals for Argentina, one shy of Pele's South American record of 77 national team goals. — AFP

Oman grouped beside UAE, India and Kyrgyz Republic

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, JULY 10

Oman is placed in Group E with UAE, India and Kyrgyz Republic in the AFC U23 Asian Cup Uzbekistan 2022. The Qualifiers Draw took place in Tashkent on Friday noon. As many as 42 teams will take part in the qualification and they will be divided into eleven groups. The winners of each group and four best second-placed teams will advance to the Finals beside Uzbekistan as hosts and this is the first time that the tournament will be staged in the Central Zone. The finals of the AFC Asian U-23 Championship will be held in Uzbekistan from September 6 to 25, 2022.

The qualifier matches will take place from October 23 to 31. Oman Olympic team will commence the campaign with a match against India on October 27, 2021. The next match is scheduled against Kyrgyz Republic on October 29 and the concluding match is on October 31 against the hosts UAE.

Hosts Qatar will organise the group A matches which will comprise of Syria, Yemen and Sri Lanka, while Islamic Republic of Iran, hosts of group B alongside with Tajikistan, Lebanon and Nepal. Iraq will join hosts Bahrain in Group C beside Afghanistan and Maldives. Group D comprise of hosts Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh and Uzbekistan. The hosts Jordan clubbed in Group F

with Palestine and Turkmenistan teams.

Oman had hosted the first edition of AFC U23 Asian Cup in 2014 while Qatar was the hosts for 2016 edition. China was the organiser for 2018 while Thailand hosted AFC U23 Asian Cup in 2020.

Oman Olympic (U-23) football team is undergoing a camp in Salalah until mid of July.

The 15 days preparatory camp is part of the team's preparation for the Asian Olympic Qualifiers that will take place in October.

Oman U-23 team is supervised under a coaching staff headed by Croatian coach Dario Basic and assisted by Mohammed Khamis al Oraiimi.





Australia's Ashleigh Barty holds the trophy after winning her final match against Czech Republic's Karolina Pliskova. – Reuters

“ I hope I made Evonne proud
ASHLEIGH BARTY, Wimbledon champion

Barty wins first Wimbledon title on Cawley anniversary

LONDON: Ashleigh Barty won her first Wimbledon title on the 50th anniversary of fellow indigenous Australian Evonne Goolagong Cawley's maiden crown, beating Karolina Pliskova 6-3, 6-7 (4/7), 6-3 on Saturday.

The 25-year-old Australian — who wore a specially-designed dress in tribute to Cawley's iconic scallop one she sported in 1971 — adds the Wimbledon crown to her 2019 French Open title.

“I hope I made Evonne proud,” said Barty.

It was the first women's Wimbledon final to go to three sets since 2012 when Serena Williams beat Poland's Agnieszka Radwanska.

Barty had looked like cruising to victory after soaring into a 4-0 lead over her opponent — the Australian's start so blistering that she won the first 14 points.

However, 29-year-old Pliskova steadied herself and also due to Barty faltering on

several occasions especially serving for the match in the second set the Czech took it into a decider.

However, Barty got the break early and with one or two wobbles she got herself over the line sinking to her knees, her hands over her face in disbelief.

She wiped a couple of tears away before climbing up to the player's box, just like her compatriot Pat Cash did when he won the Wimbledon men's title in 1987. — AFP

Illness forces Al Zubair to miss out as Soucek and Barker fly team flag

HUNGARORING (HUNGARY): Illness has forced Oman's Al Faisal al Zubair to miss out on the third round of the 2021 International GT Open Championship at the Hungaroring, but team-mate Andy Soucek is taking part nonetheless with replacement driver Benjamin Barker.

The Lechner Racing Team Porsche 911 GT3 R crew currently lead the championship by a single point heading into the weekend's two Hungarian races, but Al Zubair was not able to travel.

“I have been forced to miss this round,” said the disappointed young Omani. “I will resume my participation after I recover. I wish success

to my team-mate Andy Soucek and the team and I promise to return for the next round at Imola in Italy.”

Al Zubair's replacement, Barker, is 30-years-old and resides in London. He has been competing in the LMGTE Am class of the FIA World Endurance Championship in a GR Racing Porsche 911 RSR. He was the 2010 Australian F3 champion, the Bathurst 12-Hour winner on four occasions (2013, 2018, 2019 and 2020) and won the Dubai 24-Hours in 2020.

Soucek and Barker topped the opening free practice session on Friday morning with a fastest lap of 2min 01.472sec.

That enabled the Lechner Racing GT3 crew to win the session by 0.033 seconds from Michele Beretta and Frederik Schandorff in the Vincenzo Sospiri Racing Lamborghini. Belgium's Baptiste Moulin and Japanese team-mate Yuki Nemoto were third in the second of the VSR Lamborghinis.

The duo finished fifth in the second of the practice sessions on Friday afternoon in a stint where the Polish Olimp Racing team topped the times in a Mercedes AMG GT3. Kessel Racing's Michael Drinan and Robby Foley were second quickest, as attention then turned to the car set-up for the first of the weekend's races.



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Imports of cosmetics, personal care products subject to safety regulation from August 1

SAFETY MEASURES: Potentially thousands of products to be covered by new measures in compliance with Gulf and Omani standards and specs

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JULY 10

Thousands of different types of cosmetics and personal care products imported into the Sultanate will be brought under the strict purview of the GCC and Omani standards and specifications with effect from August 1, 2021 — a move aimed at ensuring that all such goods are safe for use by consumers.

Accordingly, importers of cosmetics and personal care products will be required to submit technical information about their merchandise when routing their goods through Customs, an official of the

Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) said.

This comes in line with the implementation of Ministerial Decision No 128/2019, that is considering the Gulf standard specifications for safety requirements in cosmetics as an obligatory Omani specification in terms of regulating imports and ensuring their safety for use by the consumer in whatever related to personal care requirements and cosmetics.

Hiba bint Yasser al Mazrouei, a chemical products quality control specialist in the Directorate-General of Standards and Metrology at the ministry, noted that the new guidelines represent the second stage of the rollout of specifications governing the import of cosmetics and personal care products.

The latest measure will cover the following: All cosmetic and



(Image for illustration only)

personal care products (other than products for rinsing), products to be used on the skin (face, body, hand, feet, etc) such as creams, emulsions, lotions, jelly/buttery gels, oils and serums.

It also includes oral and dental care products, which fall under:

various types of toothpastes, mouthwash products and perfumes, in addition to cosmetic products for using on hair (head, face, beard), such as: hair dyes of all kinds, products for curling, straightening and fixing hair, products for strengthening and reviving hair such as oils, creams, etc, hair decoration products, hair cleaning products, hair shaping products, sun protection products of all kinds, deodorants and antiperspirants.

“In accordance with the regulations and procedures prepared by the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, represented by the Directorate-General of Standards and Metrology, importers must also submit technical documents through the ministry’s platforms for approval some time before shipments arrive in order to avoid the challenges of delays at border ports,” she added.

396 SAOC companies licensed to date



BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JULY 10

Fifteen new closed Omani joint stock companies (SAOC) were granted licences by the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) during 2020, taking the total number of SAOC companies in the Sultanate to 396 with a total issued capital of around RO 8.5 billion.

This compares with 14,021 companies registered under the Foreign Investment Law as of end-December 2020.

The aggregate capital of the companies is RO 5.586 billion, the ministry said. New registrations last year alone totalled 1,414 companies with a capital of RO 118.311 million.

The Foreign Capital Investment Law permits investors to set up companies in any of the permitted activities by owning its entire capital without stipulating a minimum capital for the company, provided that the foreign investor shall adhere to the submitted timetable of implementing the investment project, which is approved in accordance with an economic feasibility study without any non-approved fundamental modifications to the investment project.

TRIPs protects ‘trade secrets’ linked to pharma, agri-chemical products

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JULY 10

The WTO Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) contributes to the protection of undisclosed information (trade secrets) related to pharmaceutical and agricultural chemicals, according to the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion. Article 39 of the TRIPS agreement, terms it “Protection of undisclosed information”, and includes it within the intellectual property, which is similar to trade secrets protection system in US law.

Amina bint Sulaiman al Balushi, a pharmaceutical patent specialist in the National Intellectual Property Office at the ministry, said: Article 39.1 of TRIPS agreement stipulates that undisclosed information includes all technical, technological information, knowledge and secrets related to a commodity or a particular product, including innovations, formulations, components, elements or industrial methods, methods or means maintained by the producer or manufacturer,



and not disclosed.

In the course of ensuring effective protection against unfair competition as provided in Article 10bis of the Paris Convention (1967), members shall protect undisclosed information in accordance with paragraph 2 and data submitted to governments or governmental agencies in accordance with paragraph 3, she noted.

Accordingly, the protection prescribed for undisclosed information is focused on two types of information: the first type includes the confidential information and data that belong to natural and legal persons who shall have the possibility of preventing information lawfully within their control from being disclosed in accordance with Article 39, paragraph 2, while the second type includes the data and information submitted to the government agencies when requiring, as



a condition of approving the marketing of pharmaceutical or of agricultural chemical products in accordance with Article 39, paragraph 3. So the agreement has obligated member states to protect both types of information with the rules that are stipulated in Article (10) bis of Paris Convention, while it considered the infringement of this information is an unfair competition.

Significantly, the right of ownership of confidential information is not limited to its owner, as others can, if they obtain this information or develop it independently on

Undisclosed information includes all technical, technological information, knowledge and secrets related to a commodity or a particular product, including innovations, formulations, components, elements or industrial methods, methods or means maintained by the producer or manufacturer

their own through researches that they are conducting or through reverse engineering or to any other lawful way.

The agreement also prohibits third parties from using and obtaining it illegally, as indicated in Article (65), paragraph 1, of the Omani Industrial Property Rights Law 67/2008, stressing that certain conditions, including general and special conditions must be met in the information so that it can be legally protected.

Amina also pointed out that the required general conditions for protection of the such information includes that the information

must be confidential, and of commercial and economic value, while the holder of the information shall seriously take measures to preserve the confidentiality of the information. This is as indicated in Article (65), paragraph 2, of the Omani Industrial Property Rights Law 67/2008.

The special conditions are related to the second type of information and data submitted to the competent government agencies to obtain a licence to market pharmaceutical products and agricultural chemical products, where the submission of data and information to the government entity must be a necessary condition for obtaining a licence to market medicines or agricultural chemical products.

For example, it is known that pharmaceutical companies shall not launch any medicine in the market until after conducting a lot of experiments, tests and clinical trials that are financially costly and go through stages, which may take a long time to ensure the safety and effectiveness of the drug.

Good signs in finance and economy

There are many good news coming from both economy and finance in Oman. Recently published figures are better than expected in many areas of concern, especially in finance. This is still not a full recovery, but certainly a sign that the darkest moments could be in the past.

Let us start from the economy. Non-oil economy — thus excluding everything related to oil — increased by a very encouraging 5.7 per cent in the first quarter of this year, amounting to RO 5.7 billion.

To put numbers in context, during the same period Bahrain economy contracted by 2.11 per cent overall, with the most significant decline coming in fact from the non-oil economy, down 2.97 per cent.

The most affected sectors for Bahrain were hospitality, with hotels and restaurants losing 20.44 per cent. Meanwhile Bahrain's oil sector grew by 2.04

per cent during the same period, causing an overall decrease in the GDP of 0.10 per cent from the previous quarter.

In Oman, on the other hand, the oil sector reached RO 1.9 billion, thus contracting by a significant 20.6 per cent, while natural gas went down by 10.4 per cent, reaching RO 320.8 million. These numbers are likely to be revised very soon, as the oil assumption made by Oman was at \$45 a barrel for this year, but the current trend seems to be more positive. The assumption also continued at \$50 until 2025, with high potential upside.

The negative performance of oil dragged down the GDP overall, despite the good performance of the non-oil activities. The GDP contraction was recorded at 2.5 per cent on Q1. According to the National Center for Statistics and Information the GDP at current prices amounted to slightly less than RO 7.5 billion.



STEFANO VIRGILLI
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OMAN HAS CHANGED THE GDP METHODOLOGY FOR PREPARATION AND ESTIMATION TO FOLLOW INTERNATIONAL PRACTICES, SO THE NEW CALCULATION MIGHT BE SHOWING A PICTURE SET TO STABILISE IN THE QUARTERS TO COME.

It is important to say that Oman has changed the GDP methodology for preparation and estimation to follow international practices, so the new calculation might be showing a picture set to stabilise in the quarters to come.

Talking about finance, the Central Bank of Oman has announced that foreign assets are on the rise. Exceeding RO 7 billion in early Q2, 2021, a growth by 8.1 per cent was recorded. On the same trend, the total deposits in the private sector increased by 6.8 per cent, with RO 17.2 billion in both Islamic banking and commercial financial products. Over a billion Omani riyals higher than a year prior.

Loans have also increased. A 3 per cent growth brought the total amount loaned from RO 26.4 billion to RO 27.18 billion. I read this as a sign of confidence in the market and readiness to go back to spend. This could easily translate in

economic uptrend for day to day activities and inject fresh cash in the pocket of the Omani people.

The international community now sees Oman as more prominent player in the international market. It is also seen as transparent to investors, therefore more appealing for inbound foreign investment. According to the Head of Capital Markets at Gulf Investment Corporation, Raffaele Bertoni: "With the latest issue Oman has refinanced bonds expiring in 2021 and the current public deficit... allowing the government to concentrate on the budget deficit consolidation."

Based to Market Derived Signal Score, a model by S&P Global, for the first time in over two years, Oman's credit rating was not downgraded through the pricing of credit default swaps.

[The columnist is a member of the International Press Association]

MEDRC announces research grants to support small desalination units

MUSCAT: In partnership with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), MEDRC has launched an international call for research proposals in a bid to spur innovation in small scale desalination technologies.

To engage the broadest possible community of researchers and innovators from across the world, MEDRC's desalination innovation strategy has two approaches — an innovation inducement prize called the Oman Humanitarian Desalination Challenge Prize Competition carrying a \$700,000 cash prize, and the international research call announced today with support from USAID.

MSX WEEKLY REVIEW

MSX ends week 1.01 per cent higher, buoyed by financial and services sector

M SX 30 Index ended the week higher by 1.01 per cent. All sub-indices ended in green except Industrial. Financial sector gained 1.32 per cent while Services went up by 2.40 per cent while Industrial sector closed down by 1.91 per cent. MSX Shariah Index closed down by 0.65 per cent.

Ominvest has received Central Bank of Oman approval to acquire additional 5 per cent stake in Bank Muscat. 5 per cent additional stake may result in upto a maximum 15 per cent total shareholding in Bank Muscat.

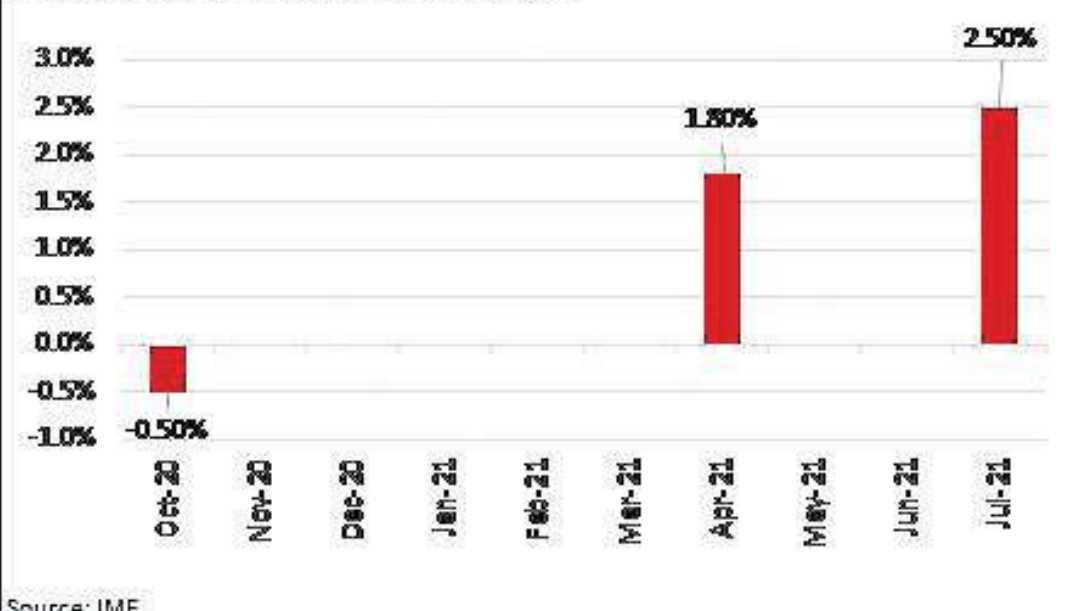
Ominvest also informed the bank that this additional stake purchase will be through the market in a time bound manner depending on the market conditions.

With reference to OAB disclosure on the MSX on December 22, 2020, on the criminal complaint related to the existence of a suspicion of forgery and embazzlement of approximately RO 6m, OAB disclosed that it has received the communication from the loss adjuster that the reinsurers have confirmed that the policy liability in principle for the amount claimed as mentioned above.

OAB would also informed that it is continuing to follow up the case with the public prosecutor, in order to preserve the rights of the bank and its shareholders, legally and financially.

IMF Staff Concluding Statement of the 2021 Article

Oman GDP Estimates for 2021 by IMF



Source: IMF

IV Mission; Real GDP revised to 2.5 per cent for 2021 from 1.8 per cent earlier. The summary of the IMF meeting was as follows:

- The economy is expected to gradually recover from the pandemic and strengthen over the medium term.
- Fiscal and external balances are projected to improve considerably over the medium term.
- Steadfast implementation of the Medium-Term Fiscal Plan (MTFP) is essential to reinforce fiscal sustainability.
- The exchange rate peg remains an appropriate policy anchor, delivering low and stable inflation.
- Enhancing public financial management and fiscal governance would improve accountability and effectiveness of policy.
- The authorities have requested IMF technical assistance to help develop a medium-term debt strategy to guide the government's borrowing programme and

provide more predictability to the financial system.

The total number of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) at the end of May 2021 were 53,166 which is an increase by 20 per cent compared to the same period of 2020.

Among the governorates, Al Wusta topped the list with 39 per cent SMEs registered in May 2021, followed by Al Sharqiyah South with 25.5 per cent, Al Batinah South with 23.6 per cent, Al Buraimi with 22.3 per cent, and the rest are from the other governorates.

The Governorate of Muscat had 17,927 SMEs registered at the end of April 2021, followed by North Al Batinah with 8,411, Al Dakhiliyah with 6,616, Dhofar with 4,439 South Al Batinah with 4,049 and North Al Sharqiyah with 3,527 SMEs registered.

The total number of guests in hotel properties of the Sultanate increased 7.3 per cent to 439,182 in May 2021,

compared to 409,430 guests for the same period of 2020.

The occupancy rate decreased by 34.8 per cent, according to the latest monthly statistics released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI). Total revenues of these hotels fell by 44 per cent to RO 31.410m in May 2021, compared to RO 56.083m during the same period of the previous year.

Value of traded property in Oman went up by 32.2 per cent in 5M/2021 to RO 1,161m compared to RO 878.9m in 5M/2020. Traded value of mortgage contracts during the same period went up by 13 per cent to RO 660.8m compared to RO 586.0m in same period last year. Traded value of sale contracts rose by 73.4 per cent to RO 491.9m compared to RO 283.7m in 5M/2020. Number of properties issued during 5M/2021 also rose by 85.4 per cent to 108.2k compared to 58.362k in 5M/2020.

[Courtesy: U-Capital]

Superior technology, maximum savings in 1.8L Toyota Corolla HEV



MUSCAT: Imagine the advantage of going places without worrying about fuel efficiency or power. The 1.8L Toyota Corolla Hybrid Electric Vehicle makes for a better option when compared to many petrol version vehicles in the category. That means lesser stops at the fuel station and more savings than expected. Based on the TNGA platform, the Corolla offers some of the smoothest and stable driving experiences too.

According to a loyal Corolla customer, "I have been a Corolla customer for many years now. Although I have moved on to own a Toyota Fortuner, my wife enjoys driving the Corolla.

Especially around town or when she is shopping. After spending almost 11 years with it, we wanted to purchase a new Corolla. That is when we explored the Hybrid Electric version. At first we were impressed with the silence even when the vehicle was on.

Apart from that, the power too is impressive, something that transforms what you can expect from a Hybrid vehicle. Also an 8 years / 160,000 kms Hybrid Battery Warranty (Conditions apply) ensures a peaceful ownership experience. I am very happy to have made the decision of buying the Corolla Hybrid Electric Vehicle."

Nissan Kicks available on a low EMI



MUSCAT: Offering an extraordinary assortment of features along with chic and modern design, Nissan Kicks has established a 'preferred' status among the youth in Oman.

The crossover commands attention for its vibrant styling and impressive performance. In addition, the Nissan Intelligent Mobility attribute guarantees flawless connectivity and advanced driver assistance features.

Nissan Kicks, which offers encompassing stance, alluring lines, appealing exterior styling, polished interior, superior connectivity, is available at the starting price of RO 119. EMIs

are calculated based on 2.99 per cent interest, 20 per cent down payment, six-year loan tenure, subject to credit approvals.

A spokesperson for Nissan Oman, from the house of Suhail Bahwan Automobiles (SBA) says, "The stunning Nissan Kicks blends emotion and practicality by combining established Nissan design signatures with remarkable modern themes. From a spacious interior that augments room with a flat floor design, to the high degree of craftsmanship obvious in every design element, Nissan Kicks gives youth the perfect excuse to stay out and have fun. We are happy to offer affordable EMI rate on Nissan Kicks."



NEW DESERT HIGHWAY TO ENERGISE OMAN-SAUDI ECONOMIC RELATIONS

SPANNING THE IMPENETRABLE EMPTY QUARTER STRADDLING THE LAND BORDERS BETWEEN SULTANATE OF OMAN AND THE KINGDOM SAUDI ARABIA IS A NEW 800 KM HIGHWAY THAT PROMISES TO SERVE AS A NEW LIFELINE IN SPURRING TRADE AND ECONOMIC RELATIONS BETWEEN THE TWO COUNTRIES

CONRAD PRABHU

@conradprabhu

Excitement is building over the anticipated completion of Oman's first — and shortest — overland link with Saudi Arabia, a roughly 800 km carriageway that when formally inaugurated perhaps later this year will provide strong new impetus to trade, commercial and economic ties between the two countries.

For one, the carriageway — traversing the treacherous dunes of the Rub Al Khali (The Empty Quarter) — will enable trade flows between the Sultanate and the Saudi heartland. All manner of local manufacturers, distributors and logistics operators are eyeing a bonanza of opportunities to freight goods from as far afield as Salalah and Duqm, among other areas, to sustain the growth needs of the Gulf's biggest economy. Overland transportation from, say, Duqm or Salalah, into Riyadh will be far cheaper and speedier than, say, a ship carrying the same goods making its way into the Upper Gulf via the Strait of Hormuz.

Aside from the immense trade and transportation spinoffs, the new carriageway will also provide a safer, shorter and more convenient alternative to the existing 1,640 km route that motorists must navigate to reach Saudi Arabia. Traversing the territory of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) en route, the latter route is reputed to take between 16-18 hours to cover.

Years in the making, the new Oman-Saudi desert highway is expected to cut travel time by around 12 hours and the journey by around 800 kilometres. The strategically important carriageway starts at Tanam in Ibri Wilayat and ends at the Omani border, about 160 km away. On the Saudi side, it runs for a further 550 km before linking up with the key Batha-Haradh Highway leading to Riyadh.

Dubbed by experts as a marvel of road engineering, the new road attempts to conquer The Empty Quarter's constantly shifting and soaring sand-dunes.

Not surprisingly, its completion — initially targeted by around 2014 — has been thwarted by all kinds of technical challenges. Officials on both sides are now confident that the road will be substantially complete before the end of this year to allow for limited operations soon thereafter. Indeed, for pilgrims and tourists, among others, the new road will be a blessing.

Trade and logistics will be among the biggest beneficiaries when the new highway is thrown open to traffic. Seeking to strengthen Oman's role as a global trade hub in line with the Sultanate of Oman Logistics Strategy (SOLS 2040), local authorities have been introducing internationally accepted trade facilitation to support speedy and cost-competitive trade flows between Oman and its neighbours.



As part of this objective, Oman piloted the first overland trade shipment with Saudi Arabia under the 'TIR System' of the International Road Transport Union (IRU) — a key mechanism for facilitating cross-border trade.

The maiden TIR-tagged shipment — a consignment of dairy products — swiftly and safely passed through border crossings (via the UAE) in a reflection of the readiness of Oman Customs to apply TIR Convention guidelines. Assisting in the facilitating of the shipment were Directorate General of Customs of the Royal Oman Police, as well as the IRU member in Oman — Asyad Group — and TIR issuing and guaranteeing association Sinyar.

TIR allows a smooth pre-clearance process through the Electronic Pre-Declaration System (TIR-EPD), enhances risk targeting systems, optimizes time and costs, and avoids the need for depositing a guarantee to cover duties and taxes at transit borders.

Boding well for a strong uptick in economic relations, Saudi Arabia announced last month that it is considering the feasibility of establishing an industrial zone in the

All manner of local manufacturers, distributors and logistics operators are eyeing a bonanza of opportunities to freight goods from as far afield as Salalah and Duqm, among other areas, to sustain the growth needs of the Gulf's biggest economy. Overland transportation from, say, Duqm or Salalah, into Riyadh will be far cheaper and speedier than, say, a ship carrying the same goods making its way into the Upper Gulf via the Strait of Hormuz

Sultanate.

It follows intensive talks by officials of the two countries to explore "prospects for cooperation and integration opportunities in the special economic zones in the

kingdom and the Sultanate", the Saudi Press Agency (SPA) revealed in a statement.

"The meeting also discussed studying the possibility of establishing a Saudi industrial zone in Oman, where the Saudi side would develop, operate and manage the zone, and build logistical routes to transport goods between Saudi and Omani special economic zones", the agency noted. The Kingdom is currently in the midst of an ambitious economic development plan, dubbed Vision 2030, aimed at weaning the domestic economy off its longstanding dependence on hydrocarbons.

The announcement came at newly revitalised talks between the two countries last month attended by the Omani side by Asila al Samsamiyah, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion. During the meeting, organised by the Council of Saudi Chambers, the visiting Omani delegation presented a large number of investment opportunities in the sectors of real estate development, industry, tourism, fisheries, renewable energy and petrochemicals.

BURGEONING INVESTMENT INFLOWS

While Saudi Arabia does not count among the top sources of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) into the Sultanate, Saudi owned businesses and enterprises have, of late, been increasingly eyeing opportunities to set up operations in Oman. This build-up in interest from the Saudi side has been sparked by a flurry of landmark reforms adopted by the Sultanate to enhance the country's overall investment appeal.

The *Observer* looks at some of the key investments and developments involving Saudi players preparing to establish a presence in the Sultanate:

Ibri II Solar IPP

Shams Al Dhahirah Generating Company, representing a multinational consortium led by ACWA Power — a leading developer, owner, and operator of power generation and water desalination plants based in Saudi Arabia — is preparing to bring its utility scale solar PV Independent Power Project (IPP) into operation at Ibri in Al Dhahirah Governorate before the end of this year.

The 500 MW project, billed as Oman's largest renewable energy based scheme to date, features an estimated 1.4 million solar panels covering an area of 13 million sq metres. At peak generation capacity, the plant output will be enough to supply an estimated 33,000 homes with electricity and will offset 340,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions a year.



Omani-Saudi JV to set up 7 plants in Khazaen

Khazaen Economic City signed last November three new tenancy agreements valued at nearly RO 3 million with United Vision for Investment and Development and Al Maha Food Industries LLC, an Omani-Saudi joint venture to establish several manufacturing units in the economic city.

Under the three agreements, Khazaen will lease about 27,000 m2 to United Vision for Investment and Development, and to Al Maha Food Industries LLC, to build seven manufacturing units for bottling drinking water, ice production, manufacturing of water bottles, sweets factory, production of tomato ketchup, baby related products in addition to a factory for plastic related products.

Logistics hub in Port of Duqm

Earlier in January 2020, Saudi-based Rezayat Logistics Group has signed an agreement for the establishment of a logistics hub at the Port of Duqm with an initial investment of \$15 million. Under the agreement, the company has leased four hectares of prime land within the port's Logistics Zone to set up Rezayat Logistics Oman (Duqm Branch). A shipment of modern and premium brand mobile cranes that was recently discharged at the port will be used to serve ongoing projects in Duqm. The initial \$15 million investment will cover services that include temperature-controlled, chilled, frozen and general warehousing, heavy transportation, equipment rental, crane rental and general transport which will expand its extensive GCC network and fleet.

\$500m Saudi-led steel plant in Salalah

Construction work is progressing on steel industries plant with a 150,000 tonnes production capacity per annum at Salalah Free Zone. It follows an agreement signed by the free zone with the National Company Complex of Saudi Arabia in September 2019. The plant will fabricate various steel products that are used in the manufacture of refrigerators, generators, panels, steel roofs, heavy structures for large commercial and residential buildings, bridges, commercial complexes, factories and gas stations. Two-thirds of this total output will be exported to regional markets.



\$500m Saudi-led steel plant in Salalah.

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INDIAN male, 24 years of total experience in which 16 years in a Multinational Freight Forwarding and Logistic Co., worked under the capacity of Senior Operation Executive/Senior Accountant having thorough knowledge in Ocean Freight, Air Freight, Land Transport, Warehouse Operations and Finance & Accounting. NOC available. Contact 93587605

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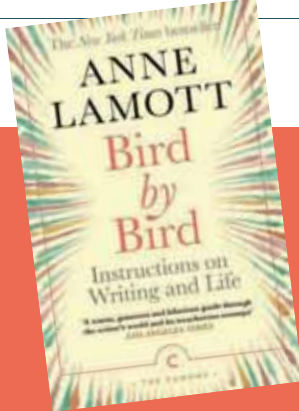
features



Should you visit Salalah to see khareef this year?

Khareef is in full swing in Salalah and with the latest announcement made by the Supreme Committee that those who got the first vaccine can visit made a lot of tour operators and hotels and businesses in the Garden City of Oman happy. But should you take the opportunity to travel, too? Here are a few things to consider... **P20**

READ



BIRD BY BIRD
BY ANNE LAMOTT

The introduction describes the author's lifelong love of books and her father's influence on her life and writing. Although she often wished that her father had a "regular" job like other fathers, she gradually began to realise that being a writer was the best job for him.

Defensive interface of Dibba through ages

MARBAT AL BAI'A or "Marbat al Shaikh", which is located in the Bai'a area near the merchant's neighbourhood and Dibba market, is one of the most important defensive fortifications in the Wilayat of Dibba. It has an area of 536 square metres and was built in 1931 AD by Shaikh Hassan bin Rahma al Shehi.

Omar al Shehi, a researcher

and historian, says that the "Marbat al Shaikh" consists of a majlis at the entrance dedicated to the military staff, and on the right, there is a special room for the shaikh and a majlis, on the left, there are several large rooms.

Al Shehi added that the Marbat al Shaikh has a three-storey tower, where there is a water well in the basement. On

the second floor, there is a room for the military, and the third floor is made up of a room for observation. The site of the fort was chosen near the seashore, which is located near the merchant's neighbourhood and Dibba market. Marbat al Shaikh was the residence of the shaikh, where he used to meet with people. It was also used to monitor the market and to monitor the ships and goods they carried, which were anchored on Dibba's shore.

The historian explained that there is a project to transform the fort into a museum to be a cultural and historical centre that displays the history and antiquities of the Wilayat of Dibba throughout history. Archaeological and heritage properties are an attraction for visitors to learn about the



historical and cultural identity of the Wilayat of Dibba.

Al Shehi confirmed that the fort is ready as a building, and the approvals from the concerned authorities have been completed to establish the museum. Due to the current Covid-19 conditions, the field-work is delayed.

It is expected that it will cost about RO 15,000.



Remaining compassionate in the time of pandemic and doing something about it

BY RAY PETERSEN

Alifa bint Dawood Khan is like a breath of fresh air, articulate, animated, and effervescent, yet socially responsible, modest, compassionate, as demonstrated in her recently created 'Families in Oman', Facebook group where charitably motivated individuals can sponsor disadvantaged people by subsidising their Covid-19 vaccinations.

In fact, she empathises with, and is philosophically drawn to the late humanitarian Abdul Sattar Edhi (1928-2016), dubbed 'the world's richest poor man', who has nothing! Yet, from meagre beginnings his 'Edhi Charitable Foundation, sponsors 1800 ambulances to work among the poor, is the registered father of 20,000 orphans, and has changed the global concept of care for the homeless, saying, "His selflessness and philanthropy are to be admired in a world where possessions supersede empathy and humanity. If more people followed his example, the world would be a much better place." Edhi is the only commoner, ever, to be accorded a state funeral.

Muscat born, the youngest of four siblings, Alifa's late father, Dawood Khan bin Fateh Mohammed Khan, was a businessman, of whom she said "I am continuously inspired by him. He was rough-hewn, and in every way the strongest man I have ever known, never backing down, always standing on the side of right. He had no fear of anything but the Almighty.. and he instilled life lessons and values in us that have made us strong and independent." She also looks up to her sister Atousa, a busy Mum of two chil-

dren, who also manages her father's business affairs. The pair share a unique relationship through having donated the kidney for a transplant that allows Alifa the quality of life that she treasures as "Writing, travelling, swimming, and snorkelling in the sea, spending quality time with mum Nafisa, 'Jeep adventures' with my hubby, Amin, and I have a little Shih Tzu, Lily, you couldn't help but love."

Meeting Alifa through social media marketplace and was interested to learn about her experience of managing an active social group.

"I didn't set 'Families in Oman' up", she explained, "it was being managed by my sister and a friend until 4 years ago, when they got busy with other commitments and handed the group over to me. Building the group, making it a comfortable, respectful, and friendly environment takes effort." Explaining that everyone who wants to join the group goes through a modest vetting process before they can contribute, and the group is monitored to ensure members comply with the rules.

Alifa went on to say, "Of course it is a misconception that managing a Facebook group is easy, occasionally concerns or issues must be addressed, and that can be challenging, but I generally manage with politeness and delicacy, to not offend, and be fair."

"My goal is to maintain a family-friendly platform for our diverse community, and I believe the quality of a group depends upon its members", is Alifa's response to the best part of FiO.

"Over time, you get to know a little bit about each other. It becomes less of a virtual, almost faceless group, and more like a community. 'Families in Oman' is just a big family and growing with each day with people of



diverse cultural, professional, and personal backgrounds, with common morality and values, friendly, helpful and caring. Simply put, being human! In a way, it's a weird connection, strangers who rarely meet, yet still share a feeling of unity."

"Many current members joined the page when they first moved to Oman, needing essential information such as residential, school and motor vehicle advice. I get lots of good feedback and gratitude from 'newbies' for the quality of advice they get from others in the group. Recently however, the group has been significantly focused on providing information about the pandemic", she said.

"As my husband is a doctor, his advice in providing the group with vital information on PCR testing, quarantine rules, vaccines, and much more appear to alleviate many of the otherwise mixed messages across the

spectrum. He also presents live online sessions for the group where he shares his pandemic experiences and discusses the group's concerns."

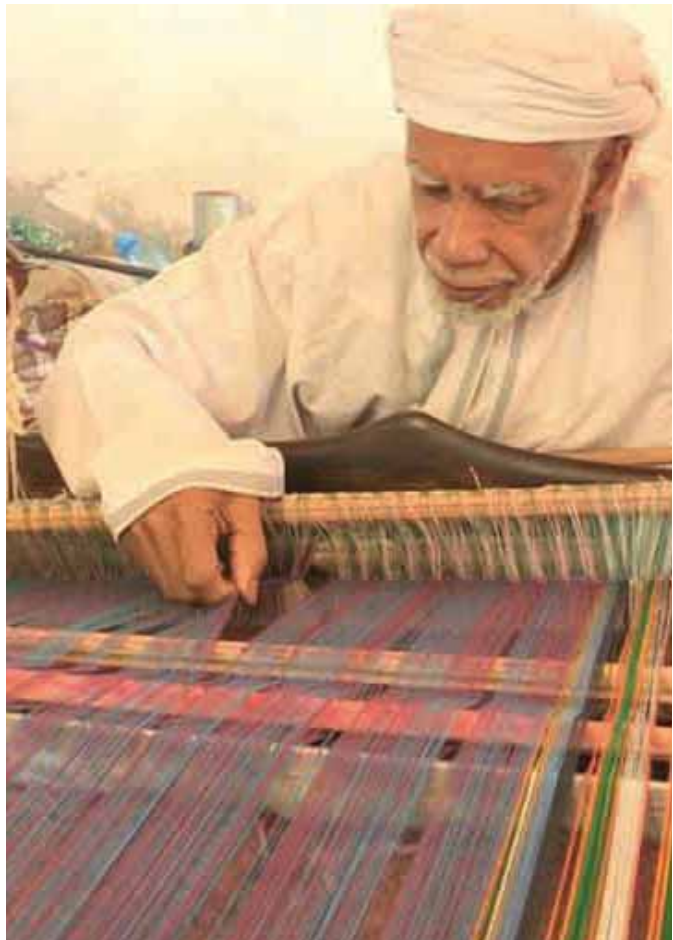
Educated in the capital, the former taxation consultant was to work in the broadcast media, however like many others, Covid-19 has put that in abeyance for now. "That was disappointing, but I am philosophical about it, and trust that opportunity may come again."

"So, has 'Families in Oman' been a 'fulfilling' adventure?" I asked.

"Yes, it has. I've been fortunate in voluntarily managing the page, to make good friends, earn a lot of love and respect, and been on the receiving end of prayers and blessings from many members, and despite its challenges, I have no regrets at all. In fact, I want to make myself even more useful, and help others in worthwhile ways, making my presence felt."

LOCAL SCENE

Al Badawi: 70 years of promoting weaving industry



THERE ARE MANY craftsmen in Samad Al Shan in the Wilayat of Al Mudhaibi who practice various crafts and have dedicated places that support these crafts to stay alive. The most important of these crafts is weaving. Many of these products are exhibited in souqs and shops and as a way, supports these craftsmen to increase their income and also to revive these crafts and preserve them for the next generations.

Adum al Badawi, one of the prominent craftsmen said: "I started working in the textile industry in 1951 when I was 15 years old at that time. Our ancestors practised weaving for 200 years."



"It was never easy to learn this profession, as it required time, patience and capabilities, and in the past, the necessary tools were not available as at the present time, but despite that, we continued in this field. I currently have a special factory for this whole work in the Wilayat of Al Mudhaibi with different tools, even the traditional tools", he said.



He explained that the weaving machine called "Al-Karjah" is made from the two Sidr trees or Al Qart, and these trees are abundant in the Wilayat of Al Mudhaibi, especially in the village of Al Rawdha.

He indicated that the textiles that he manufactures are Al Busaidi turban, various other types of turbans, cloths, Omani wizar. The price of each of these industries differs from the other as it could reach RO 100 depending on the material it is made from. the price of the "wizar" reaches RO 25, depending on the size and the material of the threads made of them, as well as the colours and their formations.

"We participate in many exhibitions held for craftsmen, where I had many participations in the Sultanate and the Gulf countries and was asked to participate in some European countries as well", Al Badawi added, while these participations played well at promoting the industry and also for his products.

"The government has its share in promoting for us as well. It allows us to exhibit our products in shops and also invites us to participate in the exhibition, whether inside or outside the Sultanate. It also supports us by providing tools for free", he added.



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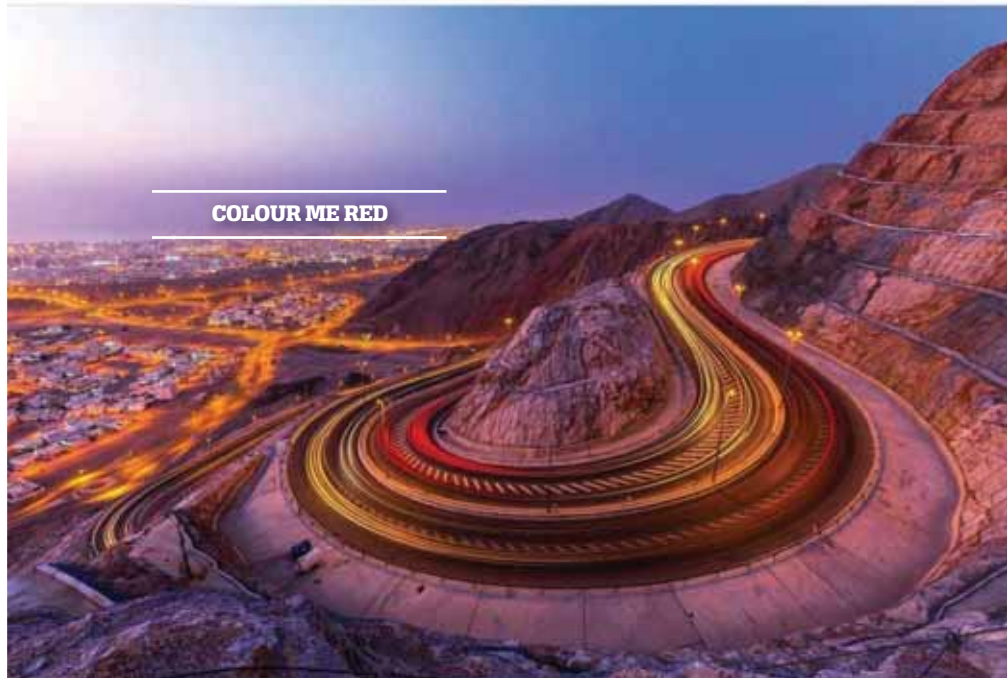
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ENTERTAINMENT



Film AlUla debuts at Cannes, announces new facilities for film crews

A DELEGATION from Film AlUla, the Royal Commission for AlUla's newly established film agency, arrived at Cannes Film Festival today to promote international film and TV production in AlUla, a region of outstanding natural and cultural significance globally in northwest Saudi Arabia.

Having launched at the Berlinale earlier this year, this is the first appearance for the destination at Cannes. Film AlUla also announced its new facilities which will accommodate 150 film crew and will include production offices and recreational facilities as well as an outdoor cinema. The first phase of construction is already under way with accommodation to be available by the end of 2021.

The Cannes Film Festival, celebrating its 74th edition, will take place from July 6 to 16, 2021. Film AlUla will showcase an extraordinary, mostly unexplored destination which presents film-makers and the world at large with some of earth's most sensational scenery.

The vast scope of impressive landscapes located along what was historically known as the Incense Route, is home to 200,000 years of history. Including the ancient city of Hegra, the Kingdom's first UNESCO World Heritage Site, the region features historical sites dating back to the Neolithic era through to the Ancient Arabian Kingdoms of the Dadanites and Nabataeans, the Roman era and the early Islamic period.

The terrain features breathtaking rock formations, volcanic craters, luscious oasis, untouched wilderness, fascinating wildlife, microclimates, and vast sandstone canyons. The extraordinary sweeping vistas present the perfect backdrop for a wide range of genres such as historical epics, fantasy adventures, extra-terrestrial worlds, and dramatic war movies, and can stand in for an array of different locations, countries, cities, or even another period in time.

AlUla is beginning to attract a

growing number of international and regional productions. It will soon welcome the upcoming action thriller *Kandahar*, directed by Ric Roman Waugh and starring Gerard Butler. Many local productions including *Noura*, directed by Tawfiq al Zaidi, will also shoot in AlUla, the latter partly financed by the Film Commission at the Ministry of Culture. The region is also attracting a broad range of documentary projects due to its many layers of rich history and culture and untold stories.

Production companies who choose to film in AlUla can benefit from a range of incentives such as free bespoke production support, location scouting, expert knowledge of filming in Saudi, assistance in sourcing equipment and professional crew locally and regionally, and, of course, year-round sunshine. Producers can expect a production-friendly setup location, a range of accommodation options with a skilled English-speaking team of experienced and established production experts to guide and support them every step of the way. As well as the new fit-for-purpose film crew accommodation, a range of other accommodation includes the 100 guest room Habitas AlUla, and the 79 room

Banyan Tree Ashar Resort, both set to open this Autumn.

Film AlUla will be based in the Saudi Pavilion, number 120, at the Festival alongside the Saudi film commission, Ministry of Investment, Red Sea International Film Festival, Neom, MBC, Ithra, Nebras Films, Cinewave, Telfaz 11 and Arabian Pictures. The Pavilion, located in the International Village, will host several industry gatherings to build international relationships within the industry and share with a global audience the development of Saudi Arabia's flourishing film and TV industry.

Stephen Strachan, Film Commissioner at The Royal Commission for AlUla, explained: "Our objective at Cannes Film Festival is to connect with the international film industry to introduce AlUla as a truly unique and exciting film destination, now open for international production."

"The Festival is the perfect platform to boost the development of the film-friendly ecosystem within the country, highlight the young pool of talent and experienced crew, and showcase this region of outstanding natural beauty and cultural significance which set it apart as a truly dynamic filming destination."

FASHION

Balenciaga makes striking comeback in couture show



BALENCIAGA PRESENTED embroidered evening gowns and luxurious oversized casual looks for its first haute couture collection in more than 50 years in Paris on Wednesday, in one of the most anticipated fashion shows of the week.

Creative director Demna Gvasalia dressed models in yellow and pink bathrobe-like coats, loose black trouser suits and embellished evening gowns. There were also voluminous satin coats and more casual looks made up of jumpers, jeans and jackets.

The designer said he had looked to the label's Spanish founder, Cristobal Balenciaga, for inspiration, showing egg-shaped silhouettes, a draped polka dot dress in chiffon and a shantung coat embroidered with faux fur.

Accessories included large flying saucer-like hats, visor sunglasses and long gloves.

"I see it as my creative obligation to the unique heritage of M Balenciaga to bring the couture back to his house," Gvasalia said in show notes.

"It is the very foundation of this century-old maison."

Cristobal Balenciaga, recognised as one of the top couturiers in the fashion industry, closed his Paris-based atelier in 1968. He died four years later.

The label reopened in the 1980s but without couture.

Guests at Wednesday's show, held inside Cristobal Balenciaga's atelier, included model Bella Hadid; rappers Kanye West and Lil Baby; and actor Salma Hayek, wife of Francois-Henri Pinault, chairman and CEO of Kering, Balenciaga's parent company.

Paris Haute Couture week, which runs until Thursday, has seen a return to live fashion shows as lockdown restrictions ease in France.

Labels are also streaming their presentations for the journalists, buyers and fashionistas who cannot attend in person. — **Reuters**



Should you visit Salalah to see khareef this year?

By Yeru Ebuen
Follow on Instagram: @yru_here

The Supreme Committee last week has announced that, unlike last year, Dhofar will actually be opened for visits to residents and citizens who had taken the first dose of the vaccine.

This was welcomed with a sigh of relief by a lot of tour operators, hotels and restaurants operating in Salalah and the nearby wilayats as they too had suffered tremendously over the last couple of years with businesses gravely affected.

After the announcement was made, a lot of people are contemplating whether travelling to Salalah at a time of the pandemic is worth it. We compiled a list of tips inspired by our recent visit to Oman's 'Garden City' that will hopefully give you some insight as you make that decision.

AVOID FLYING WHEN YOU CAN

During the peak of khareef season, the number of tourists travelling to Dhofar will definitely rise. The one place you don't want to be will be at the airport.

In our recent visit, despite it not being peak season of khareef yet, the plane we were on was fully booked. Just imagine what it's like when a lot of people all go at the same time. Unlike the clear guidelines on the ground for businesses where they have to abide by the 50 per cent capacity rule, such a rule seemed not to apply to airlines. While the rest of the airport consistently observed the social distancing guideline, everything flies out of the window by the time you proceed to the gate. Can you imagine what if the plane is like fully packed? With a screaming child three aisles in front of you and an elderly gentleman coughing at the back, it will be a very stressful ride. One asymptomatic person will definitely ruin not just your travel plan but raise the potential risk of getting infected. If you really want to go, then you have to at least double mask, avoid touching any surface and keep your head down and hope that you'd come out well after the flight.

CONSIDER PRIVATELY DRIVING ON THE LONG AND WINDING ROADS

Health-wise, driving on your private car is more sound as a decision. But remember that Salalah can be an 8 to 10 hours drive from Muscat depending on whether you take the coastal road passing through Sur and Al Ashkarah or the Adam-Thamrait Road. If you decide to drive with your family, make sure to stack on food. As you will be crossing a long expanse of desert, always remind everyone to hydrate. You won't be able to enjoy Salalah if you get dizzy once you arrive. Also, make sure to put on petrol every opportunity you have as the distance from each petrol station can be miles apart. Enjoy the ride but also always check on the timings —

you don't want to be caught driving in the middle of a curfew.

PRE-BOOK YOUR APARTMENTS OR HOTELS

Because of the ongoing curfews, making sure that you have a place to crash when in Salalah is just as important as the safety precautions on the road. Unlike in the past that you have all the time to look for a space to rent, such a scenario has been cancelled at the time of the pandemic. So before even going to Salalah, make sure that you pre-book your places to stay. To save on costs, some apartments are really good options. When these apartments allow you to cook your own meal, that is an even better deal. Make sure to have a Plan B and C of where you choose to stay.

EXPLORE THE UNIQUE FOOD SCENE

IN SALALAH

If there's one thing we realised, Dhofar is really a big place and that there's always something to discover. In our recent visit, we assumed that we already tried all of its street food but we were wrong. Other than the much-loved mishkak grilled on stone (which is some of the best in Oman, btw) and the chicken madhbi (also grilled on stones), we lately came across with masarin which is surprisingly good. We won't describe it to avoid spoiling the fun. There's also the desert called fattah which is a close cousin to Um Ali that is also delicious. Other than the street food, do enjoy the local fruits abundant during the time of the khareef season. And you can't miss the coconuts. Did you know that there are several varieties of coconuts you can try if you ask the seller?

TAKE THE UNCHARTED PATH

Salalah during khareef is nature at its finest. We won't even bother talking about it if it's not worth visiting. But Salalah is far more than just the usual attractions. If you've visited all the ains, waterfalls, peaks and beaches, remember that you have a wide playground at your disposal and there is definitely a different corner you haven't checked out. Heard of the unique baobab trees, some of the biggest that has grown in Salalah? Definitely sound intriguing right? Our recent visit had taken us to a wrong turn where we ended up visiting the upper part of the big waterfall in Wadi Darbat. From the top with the sweeping view of the valley below, that was a truly memorable experience.

KEEP THE MASK ON AND SOCIALLY DISTANCE AT ALL TIMES

Remember, we are still in the middle of a pandemic. We are also faced with an enemy who constantly mutates. The newer variants, as a lot of us already know, have a faster tendency of getting transferred so that's definitely a risk we can't take. Keeping our group close and adhering to the Supreme Committee rules as well as keeping precautions at all times made us enjoy our trip to Salalah the same as the previous years we explored it before corona. We would have to keep reminding though, while it's all fun and games and before you book that flight or drive that car, check on your family members. Contemplate. Is one of your family members considered high risk? If they are, the choice is always yours to make.

