

Muscat Stock Exchange launched

A ceremony was held on Sunday to mark the launch of Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX), a closed joint stock company reporting to Oman Investment Authority (OIA) as stated in Royal Decree No 5/2021 promulgating the bourse. The ceremony was held under the auspices of Abdullah bin Salim al Salmi, CEO of the Capital Market Authority (CMA). The establishment of the MSX ushers in a new stage in the money market and opens inroads for the national economy. **DETAILS ON P13**



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OMAN OBSERVER

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MAKING
AQUAPONICS
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KEEP PRESSURE
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WITH US STOCKS
AT RECORD HIGHS,
INVESTORS LOOK TO
UPCOMING EARNINGS



MUSCAT

DRAFT AMENDMENTS
REFERRED TO HM

The State Council referred the visions of the Council of Oman regarding the draft amendments of the Insurance Companies Law and Takaful Insurance Law, referred by the Council of Ministers, to His Majesty the Sultan. Earlier, the enhanced committee comprising members of the Economic Committee and the heads of the standing committees of the State Council, met under the chairmanship of Dr Rashid bin Salim al Badi, Head of the Committee, and finalised discussions on the Economic Committee's report about the two draft amendments.

DETAILS ON P3

488 FOOD ITEMS
EXEMPTED FROM VAT

The Tax Authority has issued a decision identifying the food commodities which will be subject to value-added tax (VAT) at a rate of zero per cent. The decision is based on the VAT Law issued by Royal Decree No 121/2020 and later decisions specifying food commodities subject to value-added tax at a rate of zero per cent. The Tax Authority has identified 488 food commodities which are exempted from value-added tax, including vegetables, fruits, legumes, grains, dates, spices, oils, fish, red meat, and poultry, in addition to milk, cheese, tea, coffee, sugar, salt, and juices without added sugar or sweetening materials.

DETAILS ON P2



MESSAGE FROM TURKISH PRESIDENT'S SPOUSE

The Honourable Lady, Spouse of His Majesty the Sultan, has received a written message from Spouse of the Turkish President Emine Erdogan. The message was handed over by Ayse Sozen Usluer, Ambassador of the Republic of Turkey to the Sultanate, when The Honourable Lady, received her at Al Barakah Palace on Sunday. **DETAILS ON P2**

Oman's economy set to
grow 7.4% in 2022: IMF

WASHINGTON: Oman's gross domestic product (GDP) to grow by 7.4 per cent in 2022 against 1.8 per cent in 2021, according to outlook of the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The IMF report on prospects of World Economy Outlook (WEO) predicted that inflation in the Sultanate to retreat to 2.4 per cent in 2022 compared to 3.8 per cent in 2021.

Global prospects remain highly uncertain one year into the pandemic. New virus mutations and the accumulating human toll raise concerns, even as growing vaccine coverage lifts sentiment

Economic recoveries are diverging across countries and sectors, reflecting variation in pandemic-induced disruptions

and the extent of policy support. The outlook depends not just on the outcome of the battle between the virus and vaccines-it also hinges on how effectively economic policies deployed under high uncertainty can limit lasting damage from this unprecedented crisis.

Global growth is projected at 6 per cent in 2021, moderating to 4.4 per cent in 2022. The projections for 2021 and 2022 are stronger than in the October 2020 World Economy Outlook.

The upward revision reflects additional fiscal support in a few large economies, the anticipated vaccine-powered recovery in the second half of 2021, and continued adaptation of economic activity to subdued mobility. — ONA

New Covid-19 variants spreading very fast

FIELD HOSPITAL READY TO DEAL WITH EMERGENCY

VINOD NAIR
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The health experts have warned that the current Covid-19 situation is severe than last year. The new variant is spreading faster by about 70 per cent.

The Ministry of Health (MoH) reported 3,544 new cases of coronavirus (Covid-19) during the last three days, in addition to 29 new Covid-19-related death cases, bringing the total death toll to 1,776, while 105 people were hospitalised during the past

24 hours. The total number of inpatients in hospitals stood at 733, including 229 in intensive care units (ICUs). The percentage of the total recovered cases has dropped to 89 per cent.

According to the ministry, the majority of cases reported are from Muscat (1,854). The capital and Dhofar also recorded nine deaths each.

Meanwhile, the director of Covid-19 field hospital in Muscat has expressed concern about the third wave and added that the



A vaccination campaign was launched on Sunday in Muscat Governorate.

facility is ready to deal with any emergency.

Since its opening in October last year, he said the field hospital has treated over 600 patients with the help of 174 doctors and nurses. The occupancy rate at the hospital exceeded 90 per cent at one point.

The field hospital is fully prepared to face any increase in the number of cases infected with Covid-19, and the facility includes 23 doctors, including specialists for internal diseases and emergency treatment, 11 general

anaesthetists, and some general practitioners, and 140 nurses.

It is also equipped with support services such as the radiology department, laboratories, pharmacy, medical stores, and transport and ambulance services.

The hospital receives sick patients from various governorates of the Sultanate. Since its opening in October last year, 90 per cent of the patients were from Muscat and between 10-15 per cent are from the other governorates.

TURN TO P5

INSIDE



70 DEAD AS BATTLE FOR
YEMEN'S MARIB RAGES ON

P6



HUSBAND'S DEATH HAS LEFT
'HUGE VOID' FOR QUEEN

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Prepare your body for fasting
before Ramadhan, says expert

ZAINAB AL NASSRI
@zainabalnasseri

During the month of Ramadhan, the body of a fasting person undergoes hormonal changes which maintain the necessary vital nutrient supply to the body cells. For this, preparing the body for fasting, makes fasting easier. It helps reduce the adverse physical symptoms that the body may feel due to sudden changes in daily routine.

Hunger, thirst, lack of sleep and a sudden interruption of caffeine and nicotine are among the leading causes of fatigue and headache among a large number of fasting people at the beginning of Ramadhan. There are tips that



Hunger, thirst, lack of sleep and a sudden interruption of caffeine and nicotine are among the leading causes of fatigue and headache among many people

the fasting people should follow during Ramadhan.

Dr Abdullah bin al Murr al Subhi, Senior Specialist, Internal Medicine at Nizwa Hospital, said one of the most important general preparations for Ramadhan is to rid the body of toxins through healthy nutrition, enough sleep, and regular exercise.

"For nutrition, one should adhere to three main meals. Give up snacks between the main meals; adhere to a diet rich in carbohydrate, protein and fat; avoid fried food, saturated with sugars and salt; eat vegetables and fruits that provide vitamins; reduce caffeine to avoid a severe headache..."

TURN TO P2



ARABIAN LEOPARD
SPOTTED IN DHOFAR

The Office for Conservation of Environment at the Diwan of Royal Court conducted a study which documented the presence of Arabian leopard in the area of Harweeb in the north of Jabal Al Qamar, Governorate of Dhofar. **DETAILS ON P3**

WEATHER

MUSCAT: Max 34°C Min 24°C SALALAH: Max 31°C Min 23°C NIZWA: Max 36°C Min 22°C

PRAYER TIMINGS

SUNRISE: 05:49 FAJR: 04:31 DHUHR: 12:13 ASR: 15:40 MAGHRIB: 18:32 ISHA: 19:44

Honourable Lady receives message from spouse of Turkish President



MUSCAT: The Honourable Lady, Spouse of His Majesty the Sultan, has received a written message from spouse of the Turkish President Emine Erdogan. The message was handed over by Ayse Sozen Usluer, Ambassador of the Republic of Turkey to the Sultanate of Oman, when The Honourable Lady, received her at Al Barakah Palace on Sunday. The ambassador conveyed greetings of the spouse of the Turkish President along with best wishes of continuous health, happiness and a long life to The Honourable Lady. The Turkish President's spouse also wished further progress and prosperity for the Omani people. The Honourable Lady, Spouse of His Majesty the Sultan asked the ambassador to convey her greetings and best wishes of permanent health and wellbeing for the spouse of the Turkish President. The Honourable Lady, also wished further progress and welfare for the brotherly people of Turkey. – ONA

Prepare your body for fasting before Ramadhan

FROM PAGE 1

reduce daily coffee consumption and tea and replace them with fresh, healthy juices that are beneficial to the body.”

Dr Al Subhi advised that one must drink lot of water and maintain body moisture during the day and avoid eating foods that cause dehydration, such as stimulants.

“For sick people, it is advisable to consult their doctor before deciding to fast, especially for patients with type ‘A’ diabetes, kidney and liver diseases. If your health condition does not suit fasting and if you take certain medications, consult your doctor for the possibility of adjusting the time of taking them,” he added.

Much-awaited rains bring relief from heat

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
@lakshmioman

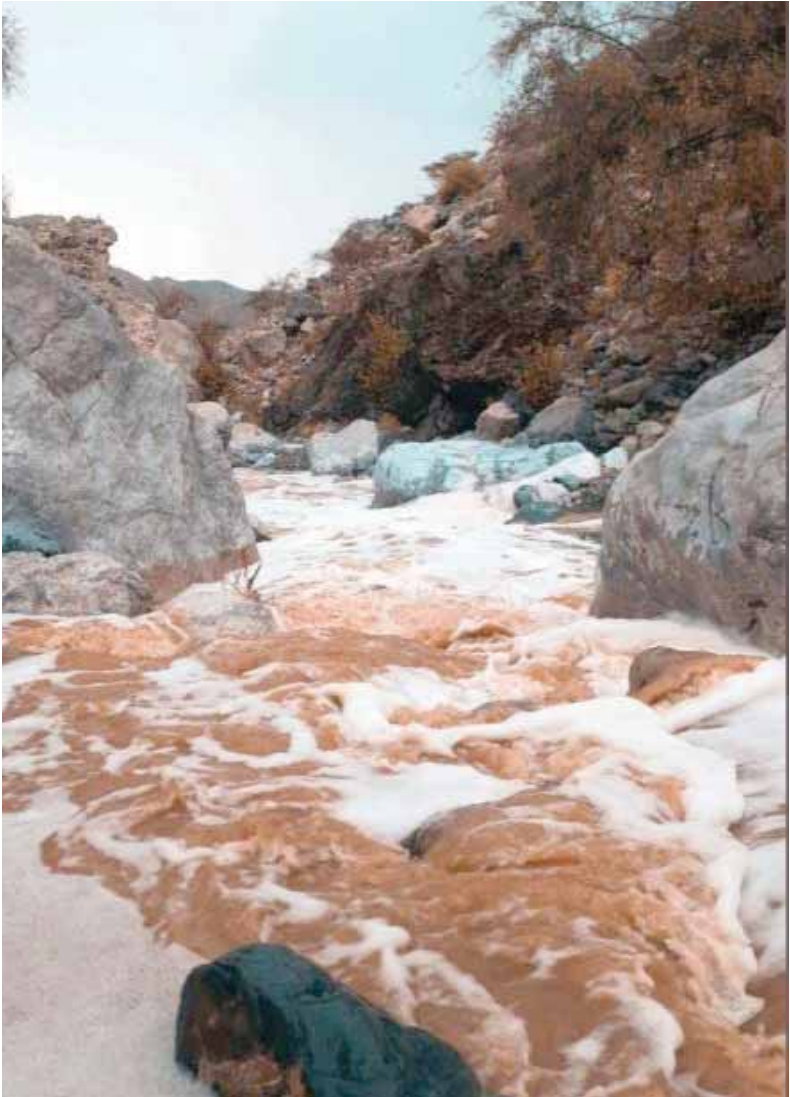
Rains have been experienced in some parts of the Sultanate since Sunday afternoon and are expected to last for two more days all over Al Hajar Mountains.

On Sunday, the much-awaited rains started in Al Khabourah, Nizwa, Al Rustaq and Al Amerat and parts of Al Hajar Mountains.

The Met Office has predicted cloud development in the areas of Al Hajar Mountains and isolated rain and occasional thunderstorms associated with fresh wind isolated rain occasionally and hail. The forecast also states that there could be chances of late night to early morning low level of clouds or fog patches over governorates of South Al Sharqiyah, Al Wusta, Dhofar and along the coastal areas of Oman Sea.

As of now, only Al Amerat has received rain in Muscat Governorate.

“There could be a chance if the cloud reaches to the other areas, but it is only Al Amerat that has received rain in Muscat Governorate right now. The three days will be moderate along the coastal area of Dhofar Governorate with a maximum wave height of two meters. Slight to moderate along South Al Sharqiyah and Musandam Coast and Oman Sea coasts with a maximum wave height of 1.0 metre,” explained the weather forecaster from Oman



Met Office.

Along the coastal areas of Oman Sea, winds will be northeasterly light to moderate during day becoming variable light at night. Along Arabian Sea, winds will be southwesterly light to moderate, while over the rest of the Sultanate, winds will be southeasterly light to moderate.

The Met Office has also cautioned on reduction in visibility during fog and thundershowers.

Humidity in Muscat ranged between 50 per cent and 90 per cent, while in Salalah the humidity ranged between 50 per cent and 80 per cent.

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488 food commodities exempted from VAT

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 11

The Tax Authority has issued a decision identifying the food commodities that will be subject to value-added tax at a rate of zero per cent.

The decision is based on the Value-Added Tax Law issued by Royal Decree 121/2020 and decision 2021/2 specifying food commodities subject to value-added tax at a rate of zero per cent.

The Tax Authority has identified 488 food commodities that are exempt from value-added tax, including vegetables,

fruits, legumes, grains, dates, spices, oils, fish, red meat, and poultry, in addition to milk, cheese, tea, coffee, sugar, salt, and juices without added sugar or sweetening materials.

The government had previously announced 93 basic food commodities exempt from value-added tax, but the list of these commodities was expanded to 488 food commodities within the package of social protection initiatives issued on Thursday.

The value-added tax will be introduced in the Sultanate from April 16.

The government has also

decided to bear the cost of the VAT charged against electricity and water services for all citizens who own two accounts or less of the residential category. This includes families that were previously eligible for government support for the two services.

It will increase the volume of subsidised fuel to be consumed by holders of the National Subsidy Card from 200 litres to 400 litres per month. The government bears the cost of the VAT towards that amount so that it remains at the same subsidised price of 180 baisa per litre.



Preparatory meeting for UN Food Systems Summit held

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, in cooperation with Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), on Sunday organised a meeting via video conferencing to prepare for the UN Food Systems Summit.

The summit will be held on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly scheduled to be held at New York, US next September 2021. The meeting was headed by Dr Saud bin Hamoud al Habsi, Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources.

Al Habsi said that the summit will address the major challenges facing the reality and future of food systems in the world at large. He also stressed the importance of concerted efforts to find practical solutions for such challenges at the global,

regional and local levels.

He pointed out that many food systems are fragile and on the brink of collapse as experienced currently by millions of people around the world due to Covid-19 pandemic.

He added that the Sultanate has made progress in food security index that covers food availability, quality and safety.

Dr Nora Ourabah Haddad, FAO Representative in Oman, said that these discussions aim at drawing courses to build up national sustainable food systems that will be presented months before the summit.

She reaffirmed the necessity to establish more resilient food systems which requires participation of all stakeholders to realise Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 2030). — **ONA**



State Council refers draft amendments to His Majesty

MUSCAT: The State Council referred the visions of the Council of Oman regarding the draft amendments of the Insurance Companies Law and Takaful Insurance Law, referred by the Council of Ministers, to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq.

Earlier, the enhanced committee comprising members of the Economic Committee

and the heads of the standing committees of the State Council, convened under the chairmanship of Dr Rashid bin Salim al Badi, Head of the Committee and finalised discussions on the Economic Committee's report about the two draft amendments.

Following the discussion, the committee decided to refer the draft amendments to His Majesty.

Meanwhile, the State Council's Education and Research Committee discussed its study about the reality and legislations of distance education.

The committee hosted a number of academic experts from public schools and discussed with them several significant topics related to the legislations and policies governing distance education at government schools

and reviewed the experiences of distance education of some schools as well as the regional and international experiences in this regard.

The committee debated infrastructure readiness at schools and the challenges facing the application of distance education and reviewed the legislations required for applying distance education in the Sultanate.

Presence of Arabian Leopard documented in Dhofar



MUSCAT: The Office for Conservation of Environment (OCE) at the Diwan of Royal Court conducted a scholarly study that documented the presence of Arabian leopard in the area of Harweeb in the north of Jabal Al Qamar, Governorate of Dhofar.

The documentation caps extensive efforts exerted for the conservation of this rare animal, which is considered a species that is seriously endangered with extinction, according to the classification of the International Union for Conservation of Nature.

This detailed study covers most of the areas historically roamed by the Arabian leopard in Dhofar.

The Harweeb registration of Arabian leopard is the last stage of scientific documentation of

The Harweeb registration of Arabian leopard is the last stage of scientific documentation of the species in Najd areas north of Jabal Al Qamar

the species in Najd areas north of Jabal Al Qamar.

The project assumes significance in denoting the expansion of geographical area of the Arabian leopard and an indication of environmental balance and ecological variety. It also proves the success of environment conservation procedures undertaken by Oman, represented by the OCE. — **ONA**

Omanis can visit India on medical visas

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 11

Even as India continues to battle the coronavirus pandemic, the country, on Sunday, eased travel restrictions to a number of countries including Oman.

Accordingly, nationals from 156 countries can enter India on different visas with immediate effect.

A tweet from the Bureau of Immigration of the Ministry of Home Affairs of India said, "E-visas under categories like e-Business Visa, e-Medical Visa, e-Medical Attendant Visa and e-Conference Visa has been restored with immediate effect."

Although re-tweeted by Indian Embassy Muscat, it doesn't mention about the quarantine, it said that e-Visa under Tourist Category will continue to be suspended. The list of countries whose nationals are eligible for e-Visa facility is available at the ministry's website..

Omanis can now visit India for medical treatments, which have been on hold as the country eased visa and travel restrictions imposed due to Covid-19.

Only 23 per cent mothers follow exclusive breastfeeding during first 6 months

KABEER YOUSUF
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Only 23 per cent mothers are sticking to the 'exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months' as more mothers have been asked to follow this breastfeeding policy, according to the Department of Nutrition at the Ministry of Health.

Speaking to the *Observer*, Dr Salima al Maamary, Director of the Nutrition Department, said mothers should stick to the six months exclusive breastfeeding policy as it is one of the most effective ways to ensure child health and survival besides

enhancing the baby's immunity against many known diseases.

"Breast milk is the ideal food for infants and is safe and clean and contains antibodies that protect against many common childhood illnesses. It can also provide all the energy and nutrients that the infant needs for the first 6 months of life and later," Dr Salima said.

The latest studies titled "The National Nutrition Survey 2017" conducted by Nutrition Department show that the rate of exclusive breastfeeding until the age of 6 months is 23 per cent, despite the efforts made in this regard. Hence, it is necessary to take action and make activities

Breastfeeding is one of the most effective ways to ensure child health and survival besides enhancing the baby's immunity against many known diseases

that would raise awareness in society, especially among mothers of children under six months old, to reinforce the importance of exclusive breastfeeding.

As a result, the National Exclusive Breastfeeding Campaign

initiated by the Nutrition Department in collaboration with the World Health Organisation and Al Jisr Foundation is currency under way.

Over a period of time, the Department aims to raise the rate of exclusive breastfeeding in the community as well as educating mothers about the importance of exclusive breastfeeding. They would also aim to cultivate shared responsibility for the care of children among parents and raise awareness among health workers and increase their knowledge of child and maternal nutrition issues.

Mothers need to be well-versed

with the importance of practicing correct complementary feeding and know how to reduce the prevalence of stunting and to waste in children under five years of age in the community.

Compulsory breastfeeding can also stop the increasing trend of obesity and overweight among children under five years of age

"We are also aiming to create a supportive community for breastfeeding and support working mothers and ensure compliance with the provisions of the Omani Code to regulate the marketing of breast milk substitutes in all health institutions in the governorates," adds Dr Salima.

BUILD IMMUNITY WITH GUT HEALTH

LAKSHMI
KOTHANETH
@lakshmioman

Our immunity matters a lot today. For that, everyone must focus on gut health.

According to celebrity nutritionist and fitness expert Dr Sangeeta Menon, there are at least three ways amongst many other methods to keep the stomach healthy.

One way is to consume fresh yoghurt and the best process is to make fresh curd at home. Secondly, explore the kitchen pharmacy — cinnamon, garlic, ginger, cumin to black pepper — the list is endless if one can understand the goodness in spices.

“Thirdly, reduce the consumption of certain food types, like processed food, fried, sugar, salt in addition to too many bakery products because all of

them increase acidity... Reduce acid-producing food,” says Dr Menon, who has her PhD in Dietetics.

Adding a fourth point, she said, “Recuperate with sleep. You must get sound sleep,” and explained that one must find out why their sleep is disrupted and find a solution.

It is often said that milk is helpful, and that is because milk is rich in magnesium.

“Even bananas, almonds, or a hot bath can help you get a goodnight’s sleep,” said Dr Menon who is also a certified sports nutritionist.

While recovering from Covid-19, the points to remember are to consume more alkaline food, soups, fruits, vegetables, juices, and proteins.

It is understood that the more fat cells we have in our body, our immunity goes down.

According to Dr Sangeeta Menon, to have the real benefits of consuming food, we must practice mindful eating.

“It is about using your mind while eating. Look at what you are eating, touch your food, and feel it — let all your senses experience the food. This is when your system will produce the digestive juice. So if you are

watching television and eating, you have missed the whole process. Make sure you are sitting in your dining area and do not use technology. I ask my patients how they are eating more than about what they are eating,” she explained.

The three daily processes executed by the body must be respected. They are eating, absorption and elimination.

“One of the most important parts of maintaining your immunity is having the right combo on the plate and ensuring there are five fruits and vegetables in addition to protein supported by vegetarian or non-vegetarian food. Fasting is excellent. It is purifying and is perfect for detoxification. When you break the fast let it be with an alkaline juice such as lemon juice or coconut water,” Dr Menon noted.

She said when tea or coffee is consumed with breakfast, all the nutrients are nullified because caffeine interferes with the nutrient absorption of essential minerals such as calcium, iron, magnesium and B vitamins.

“Most people are anaemic because they have some form of caffeine with their meals,” she added.

While daily 15

minutes under the sun can get us our share of Vitamin D, caffeine can disrupt this vitamin’s absorption.

“So it is best to cut out any beverage while having your food. But ensure you are drinking enough water during other times,” she emphasised.

To build immunity, oxygen is of high priority, so one has to make sure he/she is breathing right.

This is one tip she would like to share, “After every hour, take ten deep breaths. When you wake up in the morning, step outside and breathe. Keeping indoor plants provides a good amount of oxygen.” Oxygen helps get rid of stress, which can be achieved by breathing right, meditation, and walking.

Stress can also lead to acidity problems, just like sugar products do. But what gives hope is — exercise improves gut health.

Fasting is excellent. It is purifying and is perfect for detoxification. When you break the fast let it be with an alkaline juice such as lemon juice or coconut water

DR SANGEETA
MENON

Nutritionist and fitness expert

Education challenges in the face of Covid-19 reviewed



MUSCAT: Dr Madeeha bint Ahmed bin Nasser al Shaibaniyah, Minister of Education, received in her office on Sunday Dr Abdulrahman Mohammed al Asmi, Director General of the Arab Bureau of Education for the Gulf States (ABEGS). During the meeting, the two sides exchanged experiences and expertise on education. They also discussed development aspects between the member states of the Bureau.

In addition, the two sides reviewed aspects of joint cooperation between the ABEGS and education ministers in topics related to upgrading education under the challenging circumstances imposed by Covid-19. They also discussed matters related to the ABEGS and its future programmes and strategies, as well as the Bureau's participation in different programmes and events. — ONA



Sultanate's register-based e-census a model: UNFPA

MUSCAT: The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) described the Electronic Census of Population, Residences and Establishments (eCensus) executed by the Sultanate last year as an international model to be followed in shifting from traditional censuses to register-based censuses.

The observation was made during a seminar organised by the UN to review the experiences of countries in the presence of international experts specialised in the field of censuses.

The Sultanate participated in the seminar with a paper presented by

the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI), which outlined Oman's successful experience in conducting the register-based eCensus despite the adverse conditions and challenges posed by coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic.

The seminar was aimed at providing an interactive environment for the exchange of information, studying the best practices in the management of statistical information and exploring ways to transfer censuses from conventional to register-based practices.

— ONA

■ MAN ARRESTED WITH NARCOTICS

The Directorate-General for Combating Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, has arrested a man on charges of possessing drugs for trafficking purpose and seized 10.427 kg of hashish and 256.5 grammes of morphine. The police said that legal procedures against the defendant are under way. In another development, the Oil and Gas Installations Security Police arrested three expats in connection with stealing from the concession areas. Legal procedures against the defendants are under way. The police command of North Al Batinah Governorate arrested a person on charges of vandalism and stealing from commercial stores. The case is under legal procedures.



Intensifying negotiations over vaccine procurement

VINOD NAIR

@vinot_nair

The Sultanate has intensified efforts to negotiate with vaccine manufacturers and make them fulfil their obligations as per the contracts signed last year.

The Director-General of the Directorate General of Medical Supplies at the Ministry of Health has told the *Observer's* sister publication in an exclusive interview that the Sultanate has signed agreements to purchase 5,20,230 doses of Covid vaccines to vaccinate 60 per cent of the population.

The Sultanate has so far received 254,740 doses of vaccines, including 111,540 from Pfizer-BioNTech and 143,200 from AstraZeneca.

The Sultanate has contracted with the Global Vaccine Alliance (GAVI) to supply 10 per cent of its vaccine requirements. The first batch of 43,200 doses from AstraZeneca arrived last week and is expected to receive more than 175,000 doses in May and 109,980 doses of Pfizer in June.

The Sultanate is expected to receive 211,530 doses this month, including 48,000 from AstraZeneca (already shipped), followed by 129,600 doses of the same vaccine and 45,000 doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine.

The Sultanate will import about 222,000 doses in April, 550,000 doses in May, and 1.7 million doses in June. It is negotiating an additional 1 million doses of Pfizer to arrive during the months of July, August, and September.



Distributing vaccines quickly and equitably is essential to end this pandemic, restart our economies and begin to tackle the other great challenges of our time, like food insecurity, inequality and the climate crisis, the WHO has reiterated.

Health must be foundational to all development in the post-Covid world and investing in primary health care systems will be key to ending this pandemic, preparing for the next one and delivering on the vision of health for all.

Meanwhile, COVAX partners, which include Gavi, the vaccine alliance, are working on several options to scale up production to meet the goal of delivering two billion doses by the end of the year.

The CEO of Gavi said that there is a need for continued solidarity.

"What we are now beginning to see are supply constraints, not just of vaccines, but also of the goods that go into making vaccines", he said.

New Covid-19 variants spreading at fast pace

FROM PAGE 1

The hospital is looking to expand its operational capacity as it currently includes 100 beds. Still, the lack of necessary medical staff, especially nurses, is among the facility's

challenges.

VACCINATION CAMPAIGN

The Directorate-General of Health Services in Muscat Governorate, represented by Bausher Polyclinic and Al Mawaleh North Health Centre, launched a vaccination

campaign against Covid-19, on Sunday with targeted groups of citizens and residents receiving their first dose of Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine.

The campaign saw a big response by citizens and residents from the Wilayats of

Al Seeb and Bausher. Scouts and guides are providing logistics support at the vaccination centres and making sure that everyone abides by the precautionary measures, wearing masks and observing social distancing.



MUSCAT MUNICIPALITY

Advertisement No. 14/2021

Muscat Municipality invites interested companies to the following tender:

Tender No.	Tender Description	Document Fee	Deadline for Inquires submission	Deadline for Obtaining Tender Docs.	Deadline for Submission Bids
12/2021/MM/HQ-9-Recall-1	Insurance of Muscat Municipality Properties	25/- OMR	24/04/2021	26/04/2021	27/04/2021

Specialized Companies with a valid registration certificate from Tender Board can obtain tender documents from the website through the following link:

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

Starting from the date of this announcement until the end of deadline mentioned above.

Bidders shall submit their offers electronically through the link shown above accompanied with an electronic copy of a bond issued by any local bank in Oman addressed to Muscat Municipality. The details of bond (amount & validity) must be as per tender's terms and conditions in the etendering Website starting from the date of bids submission. The original copy of the bond shall be submitted **at Muscat Municipality Ruwi Building (Main Entrance), located on Capital Market Street.**

Tender not accompanied by a tender bond will be rejected.

Note:

- For any inquiries regarding tenders, please contact us through e-tendering website: (<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>)
- For technical support of e-tendering system, please send an email to (etenderhd@mtc.gov.om) or call (+96824166670).

Website: www.mm.gov.om

■ PREPARING FOR THE HOLY MONTH



Ishaq Kremed, a tamarind juice seller, poses with his ornate brass jug in the covered Hamidiyah market in the old part of the capital Damascus. In a busy market in Syria's capital, 53-year-old Ishaq serenades customers and agilely pours tamarind juice from the ornate brass jug on his back ahead of Ramadhan. The popular street vendor says he usually has more customers during the Islamic month starting this week, during which many favour the drink to break their day-long fast at sundown. But he says his job of more than 40 years has also taken on new meaning since the war-torn country has been plunged into economic crisis. — AFP

Iran reports ‘power failure’ at Natanz N-site

TEHRAN: Iran reported an accident caused by a “power failure” on Sunday at its uranium enrichment plant in Natanz, with one lawmaker blaming the outage on an act of “sabotage”. No one was injured and there was no radioactive release, the official Fars news agency reported, citing the spokesman of the

Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI). The incident came a day after the Islamic republic said it had started up advanced uranium enrichment centrifuges at the site, in a breach of its commitments under a troubled 2015 deal with world powers. AEOI spokesman Behrouz

Kamalvandi said there had been “an accident in part of the electrical circuit of the enrichment facility” at the Natanz complex near Tehran, but that there were “no casualties nor pollution”. “The causes of the accident are under investigation and more details will be released later,” he added. — AFP

70 dead as battle for Marib rages on three fronts

DUBAI: Fierce fighting for Yemen's strategic Marib city has killed 70 pro-government and Ansar Allah fighters over the past 24 hours, with battles raging on three fronts, loyalist military officials said on Sunday.

The Ansar Allah have been trying to seize Marib, the capital of an oil-rich region and the government's last significant pocket of territory in the north, since February.

Two officials from pro-government forces said that the fighters were mounting a concerted push that had left 26 loyalist soldiers dead as well as 44 from Ansar Allah ranks. The fighters rarely disclose their losses.

The new toll adds to 53 killed on both sides in the previous 24 hours, according to loyalist military officials.

One of the officials said on Sunday that the fighters “are launching simultaneous attacks” in the areas of Kassara and Al Mashjah, northwest of the city, and Jabal Murad in the south.

“They have made progress on the Kassara and Al Mashjah fronts, but they have been thwarted on the Jabal Murad front,” he said. The other official said that warplanes from the military coalition, which entered the Yemen conflict to support the government in 2015, launched air strikes that “destroyed 12 Ansar Allah military vehicles, including four tanks and a cannon.”



A fighter with forces loyal to Yemen's government holds a position against Ansar Allah fighters in Yemen's northeastern province of Marib. — AFP

However, the Saudi firepower does not seem to have halted the rebel offensive.

The Ansar Allah in late 2014 overran the capital Sanaa, 120 kilometres to the west of Marib, along with much of northern Yemen. The loss of Marib would be a heavy blow for the Yemeni government, currently based in the southern city of Aden, and for its Saudi backers.

It could also lead to humanitarian disaster, as vast numbers of civilians displaced from fighting elsewhere have sought refuge in Marib.

Around 140 sites have sprung up in the region to provide basic shelter for up to two million displaced, according to Yemen's government.

The fighters have stepped up missile and drone strikes against

neighbouring Saudi Arabia in recent months, demanding the opening of Yemen's airspace and ports. They have rejected a Saudi proposal for a ceasefire.

The United Nations last month condemned the escalation and warned of a looming humanitarian disaster.

The UN Security Council said the fighting “places one million internally displaced persons at grave risk and threatens efforts to secure a political settlement when the international community is increasingly united to end the conflict”.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has warned that the suffering will only end when a political solution is found between the Ansar Allah and the internationally recognised government. — AFP

‘Green Paradise’ brings hydroponic farming to Libya

TRIPOLI: Under a yellow tarpaulin stretched over an arched metal frame, Siraj Bechiya and his partner inspect their hydroponically-grown lettuce, pioneers of the method in mostly-desert Libya where conventional agriculture struggles.

Zip ties, punctured plastic cups as pots and PVC tubing bought in DIY shops hold the precious crops at “Green Paradise” — so dubbed by the two young Libyan entrepreneurs spearheading the project.

But the ad hoc nature of the materials hasn't stopped the plants from thriving, their long white roots nourished by water rich with nutrients and oxygen.

Bechiya and his partner, Mounir, have been working tirelessly on their project for months in the small town of Qouwea,

40 kilometres east of the capital Tripoli, erecting a tunnel-shaped greenhouse surrounded by breeze-block walls on a semi-arid site.

Their hope is to demystify hydroponic farming, which “guarantees a good yield in small spaces”, uses little water and doesn't need pesticides, 20-year-old Bechiya said.

Soilless farming has gained ground in many countries but is still in its infancy in Libya. But in a country whose territory is 90 per cent arid desert, the method could offer a path toward more food self-sufficiency, Bechiya believes.

Agriculture remains a marginal sector in Libya, where the economy is dominated by hydrocarbons, the country boasting the most abundant oil reserves in Africa. Arable land barely makes up three



Siraj Bechiya shows a hydroponically-grown lettuce, in the greenhouse which he runs with his partner Mounir, in Qouwea, east of capital Tripoli. — AFP

per cent of Libya's territory and is under threat, as rapid urbanisation eats up the fertile strip along the

Mediterranean coast. Another major challenge to farming in Libya is the lack of

water where agriculture needs it most.

The Great Man-Made River — a pharaonic project realised by the toppled ruler Muammar Gaddafi more than 30 years ago — carries drinking water pumped from groundwater tables in the south to the northern cities where most Libyans live.

But this resource is not infinite, and the GMMR's network has been heavily damaged in the decade of conflict that has ravaged Libya since Gaddafi's ouster in a 2011 Nato-backed uprising.

In the face of these challenges, Bechiya and Mounir set out to train in hydroponics two years ago in neighbouring Tunisia.

“When we came back, it was imperative that we move from theory to practice,” Bechiya said. “We

started with some vegetables in the house and we were surprised by people's enthusiasm.”

In theory, hydroponics can guarantee higher yields and profits than conventional farming, which is at risk from weather, water shortages and pollution from unregulated pesticide use.

“With more space in the greenhouse, the idea was able to take off. We will continue to develop it... and improve quality,” said Bechiya, as he measured the acidity of the water feeding his young lettuce.

“Libyan consumers don't want produce full of pesticides anymore, but organic produce,” he added.

While not saturated with pesticides, hydroponic products, poo-pooed as bland by detractors, generally are not labelled organic. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

TEHRAN

Iran orders shutdown amid wave of pandemic

Iran imposed a 10-day lockdown across most of the country to curb the spread of a fourth wave of the coronavirus pandemic, state media reported.

The lockdown affects 23 of the country's 31 provinces, health ministry spokesman Alireza Raisi said. Businesses, schools, theatres and sports facilities have been forced to shut and gatherings are banned during Ramadhan that begins on Wednesday.

Iran's coronavirus cases have



surpassed 2 million with a new daily average of over 20,000 infections over the past week, according to the health ministry. It has reported more than 64,000 fatalities. — AFP

ALGIERS

Detained protesters in Algeria go on hunger strike

Twenty-three people detained after taking part in a protest march in the Algerian capital last week have gone on hunger strike, a prisoners' support group said. The CNLD said they launched their action in El Harrach jail, after being detained on charges of “damage to national unity” and holding an “unarmed gathering”, or protest. President Abdelmadjid Tebboune earlier this week warned pro-democracy “Hirak” activists against “non-innocent activities” that “attempt to hinder



the democratic process”.

The Hirak protest movement was sparked in February 2019 over then-president Abdelaziz Bouteflika's bid for a fifth term in office. — AFP

TRIPOLI

Libya launches vaccination drive after delays

Libya's new unity government launched a long-delayed Covid-19 vaccination programme after receiving some 160,000 vaccine doses over the past week, with the prime minister receiving his jab on live television. While Libya is richer than its neighbours due to oil exports, the country's healthcare system has been strained by years of political turmoil and violence, and it has struggled to cope during the pandemic.

Prime Minister Abdulhamid



Dbeibeh called it a “blessed day” in the fight against Covid-19 after receiving his shot, without saying which vaccine he had been given. At least 100,000 of the doses that arrived this week were Russia's Sputnik V vaccine. — Reuters

In brief

■ MANILA



PHILIPPINES, US DEFENCE OFFICIALS HOLD TALKS

Top defence officials from the Philippines and the United States held talks including on the disputed South China Sea, where large numbers of Chinese vessels had been spotted recently. Philippine Defence Secretary Delfin Lorenzana (pictured), and US Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin “discussed the recent massing of People’s Republic of China maritime militia vessels at Whitsun Reef,” a US statement said.

In March, more than 200 Chinese militia vessels were spotted by Philippine authorities moored off Whitsun Reef, one of the areas in the South China Sea disputed between Manila and Beijing. — dpa

■ KATHMANDU



MODEST INCREASE IN NEPAL’S ONE-HORNED RHINOS

Nepal’s rhino population has increased by 16.6 per cent in the past six years owing to good conservation efforts, officials said. The number of greater one-horned rhinoceroses in the wild has increased by 107 since the last census — from 645 in 2015 to 752 at present — according to census results released by Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC) on Saturday.

“The census results show that our conservation efforts are paying off,” DNPWC spokesperson Haribhadra Acharya said. — dpa

■ KABUL



US SPECIAL ENVOY MEETS AFGHAN LEADERS

The US special envoy for Afghanistan reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad (pictured), has met Afghan leaders in Kabul ahead of a crucial peace conference in Turkey later this month, Afghan officials said.

Khalilzad separately met with President Ashraf Ghani and the head of the country’s national reconciliation council, Abdullah Abdullah, according to their statements. Khalilzad and Ghani discussed the peace process and preparations for the upcoming talks in Istanbul, the presidential palace said, without giving further details.

The top US diplomat’s trip comes as the reconciliation council is wrapping up the review of peace proposals by the country’s political parties and politicians. — dpa

Myanmar crackdown toll tops 700

YANGON: The number of people killed since the military coup in Myanmar has risen to 700 after new violence over the weekend.

According to the non-profit Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP), at least 701 people have been killed in the violent crackdown by security forces on protesters.

On Friday alone, at least 82 people were killed in the south-eastern city of Bago, AAPP said. Local media reported the military used heavy artillery against civilians.

“The UN in Myanmar is following events in Bago with reports of heavy artillery being used against civilians and medical treatment being denied to those injured,” the United Nations Myanmar office wrote on Twitter, calling for an end to the violence and the wounded to receive treatment.

Since the military on February 1 toppled the civilian government



Activists rally calling on the United Nations to take action to save Myanmar, in Santa Monica, California. — AFP

and put de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest, people have been protesting almost daily despite a brutal crackdown.

Military forces are using live

ammunition against protesters and some 3,000 people have been detained, according to AAPP, with reports of torture.

But the protesters were

undeterred, with people taking to the streets again on Sunday across the country.

Meanwhile, more reports have emerged of an attack on a police station by the Three Brotherhood Alliance militia. The attack in the community of Lashio on Saturday resulted in 15 deaths, according to a local journalist and a report by news portal DVB.

There were also reports about further clashes on Saturday in the northern region of Sagaing, after one student was killed in the town of Tamu, local media including Mizzima news and Irrawaddy wrote.

This reportedly led to students, members of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), which organised the protests, and the insurgent Kuki National Army, an armed group of the ethnic Kuki people, fighting back.

As a result, 18 members of the junta and one other person were killed, according to the reports.

Meanwhile, Myanmar youth are fighting the junta’s Internet shutdown and information suppression with an explosive underground printed newsletter they are secretly distributing across communities.

For 56 days straight there have been Internet outages in coup-hit Myanmar, according to monitoring group NetBlocks.

The country has been in turmoil since democratically-elected leader Aung San Suu Kyi was ousted in a February 1 coup, triggering a mass uprising that has resulted in a brutal security crackdown and more than 700 civilian deaths.

Thirty-year-old Lynn Thant, not his real name, started the underground newsletter and gave it the edgy name Molotov to appeal to young people.

“This is our response to those who slow down the flow of information — and that’s a threat to us,” he said. — AFP

■ FOLK DANCE HERALDS HARVEST FESTIVAL



Sikh youths perform the traditional Punjab folk dance ‘Bhangra’ at a wheat field on the outskirts of Amritsar ahead of the harvest festival of Baisakhi. — AFP

Garment workers owed millions in pandemic severance pay: Study

DHAKA: Tens of thousands of garment workers who were sacked as the pandemic hit factory orders are owed millions of dollars in severance pay, with many struggling to feed their families as they wait, labour rights advocates said.

A study found 31 factories supplying clothes to leading global brands owed 40,000 laid-off workers about \$40 million in severance pay to which they were entitled, the US-based Workers Rights Consortium (WRC) said.

“Some garment workers have waited an entire year for their severance and can’t feed their children,” Liana Foxvog, crisis response director at the WRC and the main author of the report, said in a statement.

“The long-term problem of repeated severance theft in the garment industry has reached a brutal crescendo during Covid-19,” she added.

The report was based on a sample of 400 factories in 18 nations that were either closed or saw mass layoffs during the pandemic. Of those, researchers were



able to investigate and confirm payment violations in 31.

The WRC also found initial evidence that suggested workers in a further 210 factories had not been paid, but was not able to conduct further investigation to confirm non-payment.

Calling its findings “(the) tip of an iceberg”, the WRC estimated that garment workers in factories worldwide could miss out on at least \$500 million in severance during the pandemic.

Manufacturers in major garment-exporting nations are legally required to compensate workers if they are fired without cause,

but campaigners say workers often suffer when brands suddenly scrap orders — as they did when the pandemic hit.

Fashion companies cancelled orders worth billions of dollars last year as the coronavirus outbreak shuttered stores worldwide, leading to wage losses estimated at least \$3.2 billion.

While orders picked up in the second half of 2020, some Western brands demanded price cuts and delayed payments to suppliers desperate for any orders to survive, according to researchers.

— Thomson Reuters Foundation



A health worker puts on full personal protective equipment before going inside a Covid-19 field hospital, set up to combat the spread of the novel coronavirus, on the outskirts of Bangkok. — AFP



The Victoria Memorial as the Union Flag is flown at half-mast from the top of Buckingham Palace in central London two days after the death of Britain's Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, at the age of 99. (Inset) Well-wishers add flowers to the tributes outside Buckingham Palace in central London. — AFP

‘QUEEN ELIZABETH II FEELS ‘HUGE VOID’ AT DEATH OF HUSBAND’

LONDON: Queen Elizabeth II has been left bereft at the death of her husband, Prince Philip, one of the couple's sons said on Sunday, as prayers were said at memorial services across Britain.

Prince Andrew said his 94-year-old mother was “incredibly stoic” but had been hit hard by the death of the Duke of Edinburgh at the age of 99 on Friday.

Last year the couple celebrated 73 years of marriage.

“She described it (his death) as having left a huge void in her life,” Andrew told broadcasters after a church service at Windsor Castle, west of London.

He described his father as “the grandfather of the nation” and said close family were “rallying round” the queen in support.

Younger brother Edward called his father's death “a dreadful shock,” despite his recent illness.

The comments came as the Church of England's highest-ranking cleric led prayers at a memorial service for the Duke of Edinburgh.

“For the royal family, as for every other, no words can reach into the depth of sorrow that goes into bereavement,” said Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby.

The queen is head of the

Church of England.

Other senior faith leaders paid tribute to Philip, whose support for the queen has been said about crucial during her 69-year reign.

The head of the Catholic Church in England and Wales, Cardinal Vincent Nichols, told Vatican Radio the prince had a “cheerful sense of duty” and provided “stability” to queen and country.

The queen's eldest son and heir, Prince Charles, 72, on Saturday paid his own heartfelt tribute to his father, saying he and the royal family missed him “enormously.”

“My dear Papa was a very spe-

cial person who I think above all else would have been amazed by the reaction and the touching things that have been said about him, and from that point of view we are, my family, deeply grateful for all that,” he added.

Prince Philip's death triggered eight days of national mourning, which ends with his funeral at St George's Chapel in Windsor Castle on Saturday.

Well-rehearsed plans for his funeral — codenamed “Operation Forth Bridge” — have had to be hastily revised because of coronavirus restrictions, and to confirm to government guidelines. — AFP

Bavaria's Soeder ‘ready’ to stand for German chancellorship

BERLIN: Bavarian regional leader Markus Soeder on Sunday said he would be open to standing as the German conservative bloc's chancellor candidate in September elections, putting an end to months of flirting with a run at Berlin.

The move sets up Soeder, head of the regional CSU party, against Armin Laschet, the chief of Chancellor Angela Merkel's CDU, in a contest to succeed the veteran leader — even as the centre-right alliance's poll ratings plummet.



Bavaria's State Premier and leader of the Bavarian Christian Social Union (CSU) Markus Soeder. — AFP

“If the CDU were willing to support me, I would be ready,” Soeder said at a crunch meeting of conservative MPs, a source said.

Long-time Merkel ally Laschet, 60, took over as CDU leader in January, and would normally be first choice to lead the CDU and its Bavarian affiliate CSU into the elections on September 26.

But the sister parties' backing is tumbling over their recent handling of the coronavirus crisis, and some are calling for Laschet to step aside in favour of the more charismatic Soeder, 54.

Soeder spent months avoiding any clear show of interest in the top job — while doing little to dispel talk that he wants the chancellorship for himself.

Heading into the Sunday meeting, the *Bild* newspaper declared Sunday's meeting “the weekend of truth” in the race to succeed Merkel.

“We have a great interest in the whole thing moving ahead quickly now,” CDU parliamentary leader Ralph Brinkhaus said before the talks began.

In an interview with weekly *Bild am Sonntag*, Laschet also called for a quick decision given “the mood across the CDU.”

“Unity is very important. It would do the CDU and CSU a lot of good to make the decision together. And very promptly,” he said.

The candidate will most likely be picked behind closed doors, with Laschet telling broadcaster ZDF that the conservatives would choose whoever “best suited our election programme”.

Yet in an interview with *Spiegel*

magazine on Wednesday, Soeder insisted that the candidate needed to be “accepted by the whole population, not just the party”.

The Star Trek fan and fancy-dress loving Bavarian consistently beats Laschet in popularity polls, with a recent survey by public broadcaster ARD showing that 54 per cent of Germans thought Soeder would be a good candidate, compared to just 19 per cent for Laschet.

As leaders of Germany's biggest federal states by population and area respectively, North-Rhine Westphalia premier Laschet and Bavarian chief Soeder have also exchanged blows over their leadership in the pandemic.

Laschet's reputation as the reliable continuity candidate took a hit at the end of March, when Merkel criticised his state's slowness to reimpose restrictions despite rising infection rates.

Soeder jumped on the opportunity, praising Merkel's handling of the pandemic and arguing that the Chancellor should help decide who would be her successor.

“A CDU/CSU candidate without the support of Angela Merkel will not be successful,” he told *Bild* last weekend.

Laschet praised Merkel on Sunday, telling *Bild* her “course and style have done the country good”, but also said a “new era is dawning” for the CDU/CSU. The parties must learn from mistakes made in the pandemic and strive to “reduce bureaucracy, make decisions faster, drive forward the digital transformation of administration and the economy”, he said. — AFP

Kremlin says not moving towards war with Ukraine

MOSCOW: The Kremlin on Sunday said it was not moving towards war with Ukraine as Russia increased its military presence on the border with Ukraine's eastern breakaway territories.

In recent weeks fighting has intensified between Ukraine's army and pro-Russian separatists controlling two regions in the country's east, raising concerns of major escalation in the long-running

conflict.

“Of course, nobody is planning to move towards war and in general, nobody accepts the possibility of such a war,” Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said in a televised interview on Sunday.

President Vladimir Putin's spokesman added that “nobody also accepts the possibility of civil war in Ukraine”.

Peskov insisted that Moscow is not involved in the conflict,

adding, however, that Russia “will not remain indifferent” to the fate of Russian speakers who live in the conflict-torn region.

“Russia is making every possible effort to help resolve this conflict. And we will continue to explain this tirelessly,” Peskov said.

Ukraine has accused Russia of amassing thousands of military personnel on its northern and eastern borders

as well as on the annexed Crimean peninsula.

The Kremlin has not denied the troop movements but insisted that Moscow does not intend to threaten anyone.

The White House this week said the number of Russian troops at the border with Ukraine was now greater than at any time since 2014, when the conflict erupted after Russia's annexation of Crimea from Ukraine. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

TAIPEI

Taiwan lowers death toll of train derailment

Taiwan has revised the death toll of a fatal derailment from 50 to 49 after conducting DNA profiling, the Central Emergency Operation Center (CEOC) said. The April 2 derailment of the Taroko Express train in eastern Hualien County involved a maintenance truck which slid from a slope near a construction site.

The front of an eight-carriage train with nearly 500 people on board travelling from Taipei to eastern Taitung County hit the vehicle shortly before entering



the second tunnel.

Hualien chief prosecutor Chou Fang-I said that the DNA analysis suggested that some tissues samples of the bodies, which were previously unidentified, belong to known victims. — dpa

ROME

Pope celebrates mass of ‘mercy’ with refugees

Pope Francis made a rare Sunday outing from Vatican grounds to celebrate a mass on “divine mercy” with prisoners, refugees and health workers.

The service was held in a church just off St Peter's Square, in front of a reduced congregation of about 80 people, due to coronavirus restrictions.

Among them, there were inmates of two Roman prisons and one youth detention centre; refugees from Syria, Nigeria and Egypt; and nursing staff



from a nearby hospital. In his homily, the leader of the world's 1.3 billion Catholics stressed the importance for Christians of serving others. — AFP

ZAGREB

Slovenia, Serbia to ease anti-coronavirus rules

Slovenia and Serbia are preparing to ease some anti-coronavirus measures starting on Monday. In Slovenia, the rule that citizens may only leave their region in exceptional circumstances will be lifted, as well as a nightly curfew between 10 pm and 5 am.

Kindergartens and primary schools are reopening, as well as some services like hair salons and car workshops, but also galleries and museums. Infections numbers have slowed in Slovenia. The seven-day incidence rate of infec-



tions per 100,000 people in one week stood at 301 on Saturday, authorities said. Daily infection numbers and occupied hospital beds are the benchmarks for tightening in the country of 2.1 million people. — dpa

Join forces to fight the counterattack

When starting a fight, you may have to fight the same battle more than once as things could always be better, but they could also be worse.

So does with coronavirus pandemic. The world had to fight over and over to combat it... The world's battle with this mysterious pandemic is not over yet and does not seem to be round the corner soon. It is just about one has to always stay alert and vigilant, especially in a fight where one's turn could come anytime!

As it has been said that a war is a trick, so is our fight against Covid-19, which has lasted over a year so far. What made it even worse is the counterattack that the pandemic has brought to the world recently. As 2021 kicked off, people have seen a sign of 'game over' at the end of the tunnel by the announcement of a gradual return to normal life. People and businesses have started recovering from the aftershock of the year-long pandemic. Back to normalcy has been taking place slowly with so thoughtful step going forward.

That was a positive spark after the storm! Accordingly, people had learned the lesson, gained the hard-hitting experience and all have been gearing up for the new normal. Regardless of what had happened over the past year to individuals, society, nations and the entire world, humanity was aspiring



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WHAT MADE
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RECENTLY

for the new post-pandemic future in 2021. Undoubtedly, coronavirus attack has changed people's lifestyle and attitude too. Futurists have been predicting how the new normal would look like, dreaming of a prosperous and brighter future.

Announcing the discovery and approval of different vaccines for Covid-19 raised the bar of human's hope to get back to normal life. The way to make their dreams come true was even closer as a stone's throw away. The vaccines have been rolled out in different parts of the world including the Sultanate. Thus, getting people vaccinated brought a double dose of hope to them as life is going back to normal. Countries have opened up almost all business activities and economies started recovering after the slump.

On the contrary and out of a sudden, the world experienced a counterattack of the pandemic. With respective emergence, unexpected rounds of hits from the virus have harshly been attacking the world. This marked a big shock to nations, governments, healthcare sectors and individuals alike! The virus has started attacking different countries affecting the whole world in different ways, urging vaccine producing companies to accelerate their production,

striving to combat the rapid spread of the virus. With an insufficient amount of vaccines in the world, the situation is getting worse.

On the local front, the number of confirmed positive cases is scarily climbing up every day with the number of fatalities also hitting high. With an average of 7-10 or more deaths on a day, the situation is alarming and urging collective cooperation of government and individuals to strictly comply with the precautionary measures. The recent local records show that the number of overall positive coronavirus cases has exceeded 168,000, with more than 1,700 deaths since the first case of infection was reported in the Sultanate in February 2020.

In view of this, the Supreme Committee has been sparing no effort to keep pace with the latest developments on the virus. Likewise, is efficiently running the vaccination campaign all over the Sultanate. Further, it is working on getting more vaccines to complete vaccinating the targeted segments of the society by year-end. On top of that, it keeps track of the overall pandemic situation in the country, while issuing various directives and decisions, striving to have balance of day-to-day life and keep things under control in the Sultanate.

WRITE FOR US

Oman Daily Observer welcomes original contributions for publication in its opinion page. The newspaper reserves the right to publish or edit the article accordingly. The article's length must not exceed 550 words. Please send the articles to opinion@omanobserver.om

DEATH, PAIN AND GRIEF

Italy's old pay high price for vaccine lottery

CRISPIAN BALMER AND ANGELO AMANTE

Agostino Airaud, 86, died of the coronavirus on March 21. Ninety minutes earlier he had received an SMS telling him that, after weeks of waiting, he had got an appointment for a vaccine. Ten days later, his 82-year-old wife Michela also died of the disease.

Unlike many other European countries, Italy did not give automatic precedence to its army of pensioners when it launched its inoculation campaign in December, even though they were bearing the brunt of the disease.

“With what conscience does someone jump the line knowing that they are leaving a person who is over 75 or fragile exposed to the real risk of dying?”

MARIO DRAGHI
Prime Minister

The failure to provide swifter protection has cost thousands of lives, experts say, and stoked anger about a fragmented health system under which regions take most of the decisions and the central government has struggled to impose a clear strategy.

“People could have been saved,” said Giorgio Airaud, the son of Agostino and Michela, and the head of Italy's powerful FIOM metalworkers' union in the northern region of Piedmont.

“As soon as the vaccines arrived, there was no justification for not giving priority to fragile people and the elderly...,” he said by telephone.

“But this did not happen. The government made suggestions and each region did as they pleased.”

More than 110,000 people have died of Covid-19 in Italy, the world's seventh-highest tally. Their average age was 81, and 86 per cent of them were 70 or over; data from the ISS national health institute shows.

Many countries, including Britain and the United States, vaccinated old people first, recognising their great vulnerability.

Italy's government also said the over 80s should get priority, but a haphazard rollout has allowed professionals including lawyers, magistrates and university professors to move to the head of the queue in many places.

As the death rate has fallen in much of Europe thanks to the early impact of the vaccines, Italy's has stayed stubbornly high, and its average daily toll of 431 during the past week was the highest on the continent, according to Reuters data.

Acknowledging the problem, Prime Minister Mario Draghi — the epitome of measured calm during his eight-year stint as head of the European Central Bank — on Thursday made an impassioned plea to fellow Italians to wait their turn. “With what conscience does someone jump the line knowing that they are leaving a person who is over 75 or fragile exposed to the real risk of dying?” Draghi told reporters. — AFP

FINISHING LINE

Two years on, Notre-Dame awaits long path to pre-fire glory

JEAN-LOUIS DE LA VAISSIERE

On the evening of April 15, 2019, France and the world watched transfixed in horror as flames ravaged Notre-Dame cathedral in Paris, fearful that the heritage landmark could be lost to humanity forever.

While the spire collapsed and much of the roof was destroyed, the efforts of firefighters ensured the great mediaeval edifice survived the night. Yet the road to restoration has been long and arduous and it is only expected to return to its former glory in April 2024, five years after the fire.

The cause of the blaze remains a subject of uncertainty, although investigators are so far rejecting any idea of foul play and focusing on a short-circuit or even a dropped cigarette as possible explanations.

With at least two TV dramas and one feature film in the pipeline about April 15, the drama of that night and the race to save the 850-year-old building looks set to be further graven in the public memory.

It was President Emmanuel Macron who set the five-year restoration target in the immediate aftermath of the fire, which would mean the cathedral could be visited again when Paris hosts the 2024 summer Olympics.

“We are on course to return the cathedral for worship in 2024. But there is still a lot of work,” Jean-Louis Georgelin, the straight-talking former general handpicked by Macron to lead the restoration efforts, said last month.

The actual restoration work has



In this file photo taken on November 24, 2020 workers on the roof of Notre-Dame work to remove the burnt scaffolding in Paris. — AFP

THE INTERIOR OF
THE CATHEDRAL
IS TODAY MARKED
BY A WEB OF
SCAFFOLDING,
SURROUNDED
BY NETS AND
TARPAULINS

yet to begin. Time up until now has been spent on securing the building, including the painstaking task of removing 40,000 pieces of scaffolding calcified in the fire.

This should be finished in the summer, allowing the full restoration works to begin early next year.

The aim is to celebrate the first full service in the restored cathedral on April 15, 2024, despite delays caused by the pandemic and the lead that filtered out during the blaze.

The drive is helped by some 833 million euros (\$991 million) collected

in a national and international donation campaign launched immediately after the fire, although this alone may not be enough to push the restoration over the finishing line.

Of that 70 million euros (\$83 million) came from abroad, half of that sum from the United States.

Already, some 1,000 specially-selected oak trees are drying out to reconstruct the spire — which Macron had been tempted to replace with a modern touch but will now be rebuilt as it was — and the crossing of the transept. — Reuters

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Paris Saint-Germain's Kylian Mbappe reacts during the French L1 match against Strasbourg. – AFP

MBAPPE

STRIKES AS PSG KEEP PRESSURE ON LILLE

PARIS: Kylian Mbappe’s goal set Paris Saint-Germain on their way to a 4-1 win at Strasbourg on Saturday as Mauricio Pochettino’s side moved back to within three points of leaders Lille in the Ligue 1 title race.

Pablo Sarabia and Moise Kean also scored in the first half while Leandro Paredes netted the fourth from a free-kick as PSG made short work of a trip to Alsace in between the two legs of their Champions League quarterfinal tie against Bayern Munich.

Youngster Moise Sahi pulled a goal back for Strasbourg but the defending champions bounced back from losing at home to Lille last weekend and closed the gap on the leaders who triumphed 2-0 at Metz on Friday. “It’s an important victory for us because the three points put us in the race for the title, but it’s not about pressure or being anxious,” former Tottenham Hotspur boss Pochettino told Canal Plus.

“Today we showed real fight

all together. We want to be more consistent but we are fighting in three massive competitions. The team showed massive faith and belief and today was a very good game for us.”

Mbappe had netted twice in PSG’s stunning 3-2 win away to Bayern on Wednesday which gave them the upper hand before the return leg in Paris this coming Tuesday.

Pochettino made seven changes to his team from the match in Germany, with Neymar one of the players dropping out as he began a two-game domestic ban following his red card against Lille.

Captain Marquinhos also missed out after coming off injured in midweek, but Mbappe kept his place and played 88 minutes. “The best way for Kylian to be ready is to play. If he feels something is wrong he will be the first one to stop,” said Pochettino, dismissing suggestions he might have rested the World Cup-winning forward.

“It’s an important victory for us because the three points put us in the race for the title, but it’s not about pressure or being anxious

MAURICIO POCHETTINO
PSG manager

“We would not take a risk with any player. We are all professional and we always want to take the best decision for the team. That is football. We can’t make everyone happy but Kylian is a player who is happy when he is on the pitch.”

MARSEILLE DRAW

After Adrien Thomasson crashed an early shot off the post for Strasbourg, Mbappe

opened the scoring in the 16th minute, collecting a Paredes pass and cutting into the box from the left before placing his shot through the legs of goalkeeper Matz Sels from a tight angle.

It was Mbappe’s 21st Ligue 1 goal of the season and his 33rd in all competitions in 39 games.

Sarabia was handed a rare start and the Spaniard took advantage to make it 2-0 before the half-hour mark, controlling Danilo Pereira’s pass on the edge of the box and slotting low into the corner.

Italian striker Kean added another on the stroke of half-time, firing home from Mbappe’s pass for his 18th goal since signing on loan from Everton.

Malian youngster Sahi pulled one back for Strasbourg within moments of coming on for just his second Ligue 1 appearance shortly after the hour mark.

His near-post finish beat Sergio Rico who was a half-time replacement in goal for Keylor

Navas. However, Argentina midfielder Paredes secured PSG’s victory from a 79th-minute free-kick given for a foul on Mbappe.

Lille’s win at Metz was secured thanks to second-half goals by Turkish duo Burak Yilmaz and Zeki Celik after goalkeeper Mike Maignan saved a penalty by Aaron Leya Iseka. Third-placed Monaco host bottom side Dijon on Sunday before Lyon, in fourth, face Angers.

Marseille missed the chance to move into fifth and the last European place as they drew 3-3 at Montpellier in Saturday’s other game. Andy Delort gave Montpellier a first-minute lead before Arkadiusz Milik levelled and Pape Gueye put Marseille ahead at the break.

Gaetan Laborde made it 2-2 and Marseille then had Dujie Caleta-Car sent off but Lucas Perrin looked to have won it for them in the 72nd minute.

However, Laborde’s stoppage-time header made it 3-3. — AFP

FRENCH LIGUE 1 TABLE AFTER SATURDAY’S MATCHES (PLAYED, WON, DRAWN, LOST, GOALS FOR, GOALS AGAINST, POINTS):

Lille	32	20	9	3	53	19	69
Paris SG	32	21	3	8	71	23	66
Monaco	31	19	5	7	64	38	62
Lyon	31	17	10	4	60	31	61
Lens	31	13	10	8	47	43	49
Marseille	32	13	10	9	43	39	49
Montpellier	32	12	10	10	52	53	46
Rennes	31	12	9	10	39	35	45
Nice	31	12	6	13	41	42	42
Metz	32	11	9	12	36	38	42
Angers	31	11	8	12	34	44	41
Reims	31	9	12	10	38	38	39
Bordeaux	31	10	6	15	34	41	36
Strasbourg	32	10	6	16	41	50	36
Saint-Etienne	31	9	9	13	32	46	36
Brest	31	10	5	16	43	54	35
Lorient	31	8	8	15	37	54	32
Nimes	31	8	5	18	30	58	29
Nantes	31	5	13	13	32	48	28
Dijon	31	2	9	20	20	53	15

FRENCH LIGUE 1 RESULTS

On Saturday
Strasbourg 1 (Sahi 63) Paris Saint-Germain 4 (Mbappe 16, Sarabia 27, Kean 45, Paredes 79)
Montpellier 3 (Delort 1, Laborde 47, 90+3) Marseille 3 (Milik 43, Gueye 45+2, Perrin 72)
On Friday
Metz 0 Lille 2 (Yilmaz 60, Celik 89)



Lampard turns down ‘flattering’ offers after Chelsea sacking

Former Chelsea boss Frank Lampard has received some “flattering” offers to return to management since his dismissal by the London side in January, but the 42-year-old said he will wait until the right opportunity comes along. Lampard has been linked with the job of coaching the England Under-21 side and Crystal Palace.



‘Outstanding’ Alexander-Arnold has nothing to prove

Liverpool manager Juergen Klopp believes Trent Alexander-Arnold has nothing to prove to England boss Gareth Southgate after the right back rounded off a roller-coaster week with a stoppage-time winner against Aston Villa on Saturday. Alexander-Arnold curled home a stunning strike from the edge of the box.



Pant-led Delhi thrash Dhoni’s Chennai

MUMBAI: Captain Rishabh Pant won the battle of wicketkeepers as Delhi Capitals trumped the Mahendra Singh Dhoni-led Chennai Super Kings in the Indian Premier League on Saturday.

Delhi rode on a 138-run opening stand between Shikhar Dhawan (85) and Prithvi Shaw (72) to chase down their target of 189 with eight balls and seven wickets to spare in Mumbai.

The 14th edition of the popular Twenty20 tournament is being played behind closed doors with the country witnessing a surge in the Covid pandemic.

The 23-year-old Pant, who was once an understudy to Dhoni and has now cemented his role as India’s premier wicketkeeper, hit the winning runs in his first outing as T20 captain.

“It was good, once you win the match everything is good,” Pant said after the win.

“In the middle, I was under pressure, but good job from Avesh (Khan) and the bowlers.”

On walking out to toss with Dhoni, Pant said, “Actually, it was special for me captaining in the IPL and toss with MS. I have

learnt from him and he’s my go-to man. Good feeling.”

Returning Chennai batsman Suresh Raina, who left the team due to personal reasons ahead of last year’s edition in the United Arab Emirates, top-scored with 54 as Chennai posted 188-7 after being put into bat first.

Dhoni was bowled for a second-ball duck but England players Moeen Ali (36) and Sam Curran (34) contributed with the bat for three-time champions Chennai. Fast bowlers Chris Woakes and Avesh Khan claimed two wickets each.

The 21-year-old Shaw, likened to Indian batting great Sachin Tendulkar, exploded for last year’s runners-up Delhi to extend his red hot form.

Shaw, who made 72, recently topped the batting chart in India’s 50-over domestic competition with 827 runs in 8 matches for winners Mumbai. Shaw survived two dropped catches and finally fell to Dwayne Bravo after hitting nine fours and three sixes in his 38-ball blitz. Dhawan departed after smashing 10 boundaries and two over the fence hits in his 54-ball knock. — AFP

SCOREBOARD

CHENNAI SUPER KINGS

R Gaikwad c S Dhawan b C Woakes5
Faf du Plessis lbw Avesh Khan0
M Ali c S Dhawan b R Ashwin36
Suresh Raina run out (C Woakes)54
A Rayudu c S Dhawan b T Curran23
R Jadeja not out26
MS Dhoni b A Khan0
S Curran b C Woakes34
Extras (Ob 7lb 1nb Open 2w)10

Total (20 overs)188-7
Fall of wickets: 1-7, 2-7, 3-60, 4-123, 5-137, 6-137, 7-188

Bowling: Chris Woakes 3-0-18-2, Avesh Khan 4-0-23-2, R Ashwin 4-0-47-1, Tom Curran 4-0-

40-1, Amit Mishra 3-0-27-0, Marcus Stoinis 2-0-26-0

DELHI CAPITALS

P Shaw c M Ali b D Bravo72
S Dhawan lbw S Thakur85
R Pant not out15
M Stoinis c S Curran b S Thakur14
Extras (Ob 0lb 1nb Open 3w)4

Total (18.4 overs)190-3

Fall of wickets: 1-138, 2-167, 3-186

Bowling: Deepak Chahar 4-0-36-0, Sam Curran 2-0-24-0, Shardul Thakur 3-4-0-53-2, Ravindra Jadeja 2-0-16-0, Moeen Ali 3-0-33-0, Dwayne Bravo 4-0-28-1

RIZWAN STEERS PAKISTAN TO T20 WIN

VISITORS POST HIGHEST WINNING RUN CHASE

JOHANNESBURG: Mohammad Rizwan took inspiration from team-mate Fakhar Zaman and steered Pakistan to their highest winning run chase as they beat South Africa by four wickets in the first Twenty20 international at the Wanderers Stadium in Johannesburg on Saturday.

Rizwan made an unbeaten 74 as Pakistan chased down a target of 189 with one ball to spare. Their previous highest T20 chase was 188 against Australia in Harare in 2018.

Rizwan said the pitch was tricky at the start of the chase but he and captain Babar Azam got the side off to a quick start before Babar was out with the total on 41 in the fifth over. He was then joined by Fakhar, who scored an astonishing 193 not out in the second one-day international on the same ground six days earlier.

Fakhar made 27 off 19 balls before he was caught on the boundary off left-arm spinner Tabraiz Shamsi, who took two for 29. But Rizwan said he modelled his innings on the way Fakhar played in the one-day game.

“Fakhar’s innings was on my mind today, the way he played on this surface,” said Rizwan.

“I was taking my time knowing I could score later on.”

With a succession of power hitters in the side, Rizwan said he got a message from his team’s dug-out that he must keep batting until the end.

Rizwan, who scored only 42 runs in three innings in Pakistan’s 2-1 one-day series win, was back in the form which earned him man of the series awards in both Test and T20 series against South Africa in Pakistan earlier in the year.

He hit nine fours and two sixes. The match swung in the last four overs of the two innings.

South Africa could score only 29 in their last four overs, while Pakistan thrashed 52 off the last 3.5 overs.



Pakistan’s Mohammad Rizwan plays a shot during the first Twenty20 against South Africa at the Wanderers stadium. — AFP

South Africa captain Heinrich Klaasen rued the poor finish to his side’s innings.

The slide started when he was caught at short leg off Hasan Ali off the second ball of the 17th over after he had raced to 50 off 28 balls.

“We were ten to 15 runs short,” said Klaasen.

South Africa went into the match with a second-string team.

Five players were missing because of Indian Premier League commitments and Klaasen was a stand-in captain after Temba Bavuma was one of three players to miss out because of injuries.

Opening batsman Aiden Markram, who made 51, was a late inclusion after regular T20 opener Reeza Hendricks took paternity leave and South Africa’s

team had three new caps and only four players with more than ten appearances.

The inexperience showed in the closing overs as bowlers missed their lengths.

Beuran Hendricks picked up

three wickets but was hit for 4,6,4 off successive full tosses in the 18th over, which cost 16 runs.

Two catches went down in a frantic last over before Pakistan scored the winning run off an overthrow. — AFP

SCOREBOARD

SOUTH AFRICA

J Malan lbw Nawaz24
A Markram c Rizwan b Nawaz51
W Lubbe c S Afridi b Hasan4
H Klaasen c Fakhar b Hasan50
P van Biljon c Nawaz b S Afridi34
G Linde lbw Haris6
A Phehlukwayo not out9
S Magala not out9

Extras (lb1)1

Total (6 wickets, 20 overs)188

Fall of wickets: 1-31, 2-36, 3-98, 4-159, 5-168, 6-171

Bowling: Shaheen Shah Afridi 4-0-45-1, Mohammad Nawaz 4-0-21-2, Hasan Ali 4-0-28-2, Usman Qadir 3-0-38-0, Haris Rauf 3-0-37-1, Faheem Ashraf 2-0-18-0

PAKISTAN

M Rizwan not out74
B Azam c Williams b Hendricks14
F Zaman c Malan b Shamsi27
M Hafeez st Klaasen b Shamsi13
Haider Ali lbw Hendricks14
M Nawaz c Klaasen b Hendricks0
F Ashraf b Williams30
Hasan Ali not out9

Extras (lb2, nb1, w5)8

Total (6 wickets, 19.5 overs)189

Fall of wickets: 1-41, 2-86, 3-110, 4-132, 5-132, 6-180

Bowling: Linde 3-0-31-0, Williams 3.5-0-39-1, Hendricks 4-0-32-3, Magala 3-0-35-0, Shamsi 4-0-29-2, Phehlukwayo 2-0-21-0

Patel has ended Bangalore’s death-overs woes: Kohli

CHENNAI, India: Royal Challengers Bangalore captain Virat Kohli believes Harshal Patel has solved the team’s death-overs woes in the Indian Premier League (IPL) following the seamer’s bowling masterclass in Friday’s victory against champions Mumbai Indians.

Patel claimed three wickets in four balls in the dramatic 20th over and conceded only one run to help restrict a star-studded Mumbai to a modest 159-9.

His 5-27 was also the first five-wicket haul any bowler has managed against five-time champions Mumbai, the most successful team in the Twenty20

league’s history. “The last six overs for us, probably the best we’ve ever had,” Kohli told broadcaster Star Sports after Patel scored the winning run to secure their narrow victory in Chennai. “I think his spell was the difference in containing those 20-25 runs at the end. He is going to be (Bangalore’s designated death bowler), and he’s relishing the responsibility.”

Among Patel’s victims were Hardik Pandya, Ishan Kishan and Kieron Pollard who form the league’s most destructive middle order. “The wickets that he got weren’t fluke wickets,” Kohli said.

“He actually wanted the guys to hit where they ended up getting



caught. That was the hallmark of his game, he was very clear in what he wanted to do.”

Patel, who troubled batsmen with his clever mix of yorkers and slower deliveries, said being told early about his role helped his preparation. “When we gathered for the first camp there was a very clear instruction to me that I’m going to bowl at least two overs at the death,” the 30-year-old said after collecting the man-of-the-match award. “That gave me a lot of clarity and confidence to work on my skills and develop plans against the batters I’m going to face in the death-overs in various teams.” — Reuters

MATSUYAMA IN CONTROL OF MASTERS

JAPANESE
GOLFER ON
BRINK OF
HISTORIC
TITLE



THIRD-ROUND SCORES (USA UNLESS NOTED, PAR-72):
205 - Hideki Matsuyama (JPN) 69-71-65
209 - Xander Schauffele 72-69-68, Marc Leishman (AUS) 72-67-70, Justin Rose (ENG) 65-72-72, Will Zalatoris 70-68-71
210 - Corey Connors (CAN) 73-69-68
211 - Jordan Spieth 71-68-72
212 - Brian Harman 69-69-74
213 - Tony Finau 74-66-73
214 - Robert MacIntyre (SCO) 74-70, Kim Si-woo (KOR) 71-69-74, Bernd Wiesberger (AUT) 74-66-74
215 - Patrick Reed 70-75-70, Kevin Na 75-70-70, Henrik Stenson (SWE) 73-71-71, Stewart Cink 74-69-72, Viktor Hovland (NOR) 73-70-72, Ryan Palmer 74-68-73, Cameron Smith (AUS) 74-68-73, Justin Thomas 73-67-75
216 - Phil Mickelson 75-72-69, Francesco Molinari (ITA) 74-73-69, Webb Simpson 70-76-70, Joaquin Niemann (CHI) 75-71-70, Scottie Scheffler 73-72-71, Jon Rahm (ESP) 72-72-72, Shane Lowry (IRL) 71-73-72, Mackenzie Hughes (CAN) 72-72-72
217 - Matt Wallace (ENG) 74-72-71, Charl Schwartzel (RSA) 74-71-72, Martin Laird (SCO) 74-71-72, Bubba Watson 74-70-73, Matthew Fitzpatrick (ENG) 74-70-73, Tommy Fleetwood (ENG) 74-70-73, Matt Jones (AUS) 74-69-74, Collin Morikawa 73-69-75, Cameron Champ 72-68-77
218 - Sebastian Munoz (COL) 74-73-71, Jason Kokrak 71-76-71, Louis Oosthuizen (RSA) 76-70-72, Harris English 74-71-73, Bryson DeChambeau 76-67-75

AUGUSTA, United States: Japan's Hideki Matsuyama stormed home in style to put himself in position to become the first Asian golfer to win the Masters as he held a four-shot lead after the rain-interrupted third round at Augusta National on Saturday.

Matsuyama, who began the day three shots behind overnight leader Justin Rose, played eight holes after a 78-minute weather delay and went a sizzling six under over that stretch for a seven-under-par 65 that brought him to 11 under. "Before the horn blew I didn't hit a very good drive, but after the horn blew for the restart I hit practically every

shot exactly how I wanted to," Matsuyama, whose last PGA Tour win came in 2017, said through an interpreter.

"This will be a new experience for me being a leader going into the final round in a major. I guess all I can do is just relax tonight, prepare well and just do my best tomorrow."

Rose (72), seeking his first Green Jacket after a pair of close calls, was in a four-way share of second place with Xander Schauffele (68), Australian Marc Leishman (70) and Masters debutant Will Zalatoris (71).

World number 25 Matsuyama stormed through

“
Before the horn
blew I didn't hit a
very good drive, but
after the horn blew
for the restart I hit
practically every shot
exactly how
I wanted to

**HIDEKI
MATSUYAMA**
Japanese World No 25

Amen Corner with a pair of birdies and then started to pull away from the field with an eagle at the par-five

15th to grab the outright lead following a magnificent approach.

Matsuyama then birdied the next two holes before capping the first bogey-free round of the week with a par to set a target nobody could catch as he became the first player from Japan to lead after any round of the Masters.

It also marked Matsuyama's best round in his 10 Masters appearances by one shot.

Rose, seeking his first Masters victory after a pair of runner-up finishes, had been in control all week and led by two shots moments after play resumed but was out of sync and unable to take advantage

of rain-softened conditions.

The 40-year-old Englishman made a birdie-birdie start to build an early three-shot lead but then made consecutive bogeys from the par-three fourth before the inclement weather moved in while he was playing the seventh hole.

Rose returned and mixed one birdie with a bogey at the par-three 16th and then made a clutch 17-foot par save at the last hole where he sent his drive into the pine straw right of the fairway before missing the green with his second shot.

"I didn't play well enough today, simple as that really," said Rose. — **Reuters**

Kudermetova, Kovinic reach Charleston WTA final

MIAMI: Veronika Kudermetova ended the fairytale run of Paula Badosa in Charleston on Saturday, booking a final showdown with Danka Kovinic in the WTA clay court tournament.

Kudermetova, the 15th seed from Russia, overcame her nerves to beat Badosa 6-3, 6-3 and reach her second final of the season.

She fell to Aryna Sabalenka in the title match at Abu Dhabi in January.

Montenegro's Kovinic defeated Tunisian Ons Jabeur 6-3, 6-2 to give herself a chance at a first WTA crown.

Spain's Badosa, ranked 71st in the world, had reached the semi-finals with a 6-4, 6-3 upset of world number one Ashleigh Barty of Australia.



Danka
Kovinic

It was just the second win of her career over a top-20 player, the first coming in the second round against 12th-ranked Swiss Belinda Bencic.

But Kudermetova, ranked 38th in the world, fired 28

winners — two more than her 26 unforced errors — and converted four of her six break chances to beat Badosa, who was able to take advantage of just one of her five break point opportunities.



Veronika
Kudermetova

"Today, I tried to play more aggressive than I played in Abu Dhabi," said Kudermetova, who needed three sets to get past Badosa in the third round there on the way to the final.

"It was a good match for me

because I was really nervous. I showed a lot of emotion — I crushed my racquet — but I like this match."

Russia's Kudermetova, who hasn't dropped a set this week, closed out the contest with

back-to-back aces.

Kovinic, ranked 91st in the world, is in her first final in almost five years and her first at the 500 level.

After labouring almost three hours to beat Yulia Putintseva on Friday she needed just 78 minutes to beat 28th-ranked Jabeur.

"I feel wonderful right now, to be honest," Kovinic said on court after converting her third match point.

"Even though I'm a little bit tired, I gave my best on the court today to make it through. I was very decisive today."

Sunday's final will be the first main-draw meeting between Kudermetova and Kovinic. Kudermetova beat Kovinic when they met in the Shenzhen qualifiers in 2019. — **AFP**

features



Making aquaponics accesible to urban homes in Oman

The world is reaching a period where ocean resources are getting depleted making food sustainability a real issue we have to contend with sooner rather than later. To address this issue, Waleed al Maawali through his startup company iLab Marine has introduced two products that will allow urban people to grow their own plants and raise their own fish at the comfort of their balcony... **P14**

INSIDE STORIES

ENVIRONMENT



SHRINKING SEA MEADOWS STORE MORE CARBON THAN FORESTS

Hundreds of miles from the nearest shore, ribbon-like fronds flutter in the ocean currents sweeping across an underwater mountain plateau the size of Switzerland... **Story on P16**

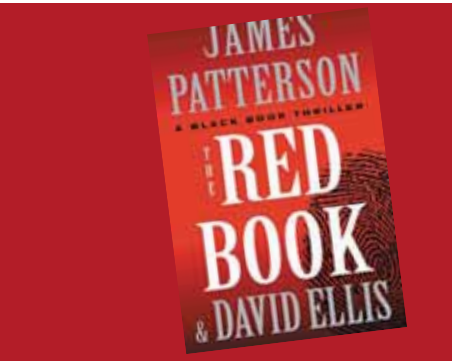
TRAVEL TALES



MYKONOS, GREECE OPENS ITS DOORS AND BEACHES TO VISITORS

Following the recent government announcement, Grece will open its borders in May, bringing a beacon of hope that travel will resume considering all European health measures and regulations... **Story on P15**

READ



THE RED BOOK BY JAMES PATTERSON AND DAVID ELLIS

The second book in the Black Book thriller series. Chicago detective Billy Harney investigates his own past.

HUMAN INTEREST



ORPHANED AND DISABLED, BABY ALPACA WALKS AGAIN WITH HER OWN SET OF WHEELS

When Ronja Pohl first saw the disabled baby alpaca at a friend's farm, her heart melted and she resolved to give the tiny orphan a home – and a special wheeled harness for walking with... **Story on P15**

DISCOVERY



BULGARIAN CAVE REMAINS REVEAL SURPRISES ABOUT EARLIEST HOMO SAPIENS IN EUROPE

DNA extracted from remains found in a Bulgarian cave of three people who lived roughly 45,000 years ago is revealing surprises about some of the first Homo sapiens populations to venture into Europe... **Story on P14**



Making aquaponics accessible to urban homes in Oman

BY RUQAYA AL KINDI

Fisheries resources are depleting. This is based on the statistics reported by FAO who pointed out that 75% of the commercial fish stock has collapsed or has been over-used.

To address this issue, one of the promising solutions is to encourage people and companies to invest in aquaculture which has been expanding in the GCC in the last five years.

iLab Marine is an Omani start-up company that has entered the market to revolutionise the sustainable use of the environment and fisheries sectors in Oman.

"We are working on introducing reliable monitoring and measurement solutions to increase productivity in aquaculture, as well as utilising fish farming side products in farming," Waleed al Maawali said, CEO of the company.

"Aquaculture, however, is still an industrial activity which needs huge investments," Al Maawali pointed out.

Al Maawali's startup is a promising one because the world suffers from food sustainability challenges especially with arid land and limited water resources. Farming manpower is also declining. According to the World Bank, 80 million people are transitioning from the village to urban cities every year.

"Hence, we need to re-envision

farming in urban cities as the future of food sustainability," Al Maawali said.

The startup's main product is "Rayhan", an aquaponic farming unit that would enable micro-sustainability for families.

"Rayhan allows people to farm fish along with growing premium organic vegetables, such as Basil, Lolo lettuce, and Kale. Rayhan provides a complete healthy "Mediterranean diet" by providing a sustainable source of vitamins and protein for the whole family," he said.

For those who are not familiar with the subject, aquaponics is the act of cultivating fish and plants in one system (basically, crop farming and fish farming together).

"Fish waste is rich in nutrients that help plants grow faster. Fish waste is first being filtered before transferred to the plants, where they absorb and purify water for the fish in a water-recycling system," Al Maawali explained.

Al Maawali said that through aquaponic, we can, as a society, conserve fish stock and transform dull polluted towns into green vibrant gardens.

Walid shared that the product is very important for many reasons. "Rayhan conserves land and water resources as it requires 90% less space and water than traditional farming practices, hence fits balcony in an apartment. It also provides 100% organic sustainable source of premium food for the family, saving the family 80% money when buying the same items from the

grocery store," he shared.

"Urban people also can now practice gardening without having to worry about the availability of soil or space in their backyard. To add, gardening as an activity has been proven to relieve stress and bring mental joy during lockdown and quarantine," he added.

He noted that the product requires specific circumstances that consumers should take into consideration.

"Since Rayhan is an outdoor gardening unit, it's recommended to use it outdoor in a shaded area. Avoiding direct sunlight during the afternoon. It's also advised to grow leafy greens, as they require less maintenance and can adapt quickly in the unit. The unit requires daily feeding of fish, weekly dose of iron, and monthly cleanup of the whole system. With proper usage, the system can produce 15-25 kg of lettuce within one month," he recommended.

The product has many features that make it a reliable choice for consumers. "The products are fully organic; it does not rely on chemical fertilizers nor pesticides to cultivate plants. We also understand that this is a new field for many people, thus we train and guide our clients step-by-step through the aquaponics process and provide all equipment they need to start growing. Our customer support team is always welcoming constructive feedback and listening to each client needs," he explained.

The product has been formally

approved and proven and is now available in the market for commercial production.

"Rayhan has been supported by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Water Resources. The government entity credited our product by testing it to convey best practices in aquaponics. Also, they provided us consultancy as well as open access to greenhouses to conduct experiments with the unit," he said.

Rayhan is available in the market with two variations. "Rayhan-30 allows people to farm 30 plants and Rayhan-50 allows the farming of 50 plants. Rayhan-30 is available for 89 OMR and Rayhan-50 for 159 OMR. Both versions are accompanied by fish and plants, as well as one-month technical support," he shared.

The product is available to order from the company's website: www.ilabmarine.com/rayhan as well as our Instagram account (@rayha.ilab) and Whatsapp (+968 94448480).

In the future, "we plan to develop our product further by making it smaller and suitable for indoor farming, specifically to grow kitchen herbs and flowers. We are calling this unit "Viola"; the Italian synonym of "purple". We already started gathering pre-orders "Viola" through our website," he said.

"We hope to spread the word of sustainability, healthy lifestyle, and how practising organic smart farming can help to restore our ocean resources!" he said.



DISCOVERY

Bulgarian cave remains reveal surprises about earliest Homo sapiens in Europe



DNA EXTRACTED from remains found in a Bulgarian cave of three people who lived roughly 45,000 years ago is revealing surprises about some of the first Homo sapiens populations to venture into Europe, including extensive interbreeding with Neanderthals and genetic links to present-day East Asians.

Scientists said on Wednesday they sequenced the genomes of these three individuals - all males - using DNA obtained from a molar and bone fragments discovered in Bacho Kiro Cave near the town of Dryanovo, as well as one female who lived roughly 35,000 years ago at the same site.

Our species first appeared in Africa approximately 300,000 years ago and later trekked to other parts of the world, sometimes encountering Neanderthals - our close cousins - already inhabiting parts of Eurasia. The three Bacho Kiro Cave males represent the oldest securely dated Homo sapiens individuals from Europe.

They had 3% to 3.8% Neanderthal DNA, and had Neanderthal ancestors about five to seven generations back in their family histories, evidence of interbreeding, said geneticist Mateja Hajdinjak of the Francis Crick Institute in London, lead author of the study published in the journal Nature.

Interbreeding, known as admixture, between Homo sapiens and Neanderthals before the extinction of Neanderthals some time after 40,000 years ago has been previously shown, with present-day human populations outside Africa bearing a small percentage of Neanderthal DNA.

The prevalence of this interbreeding and the relationship and power dynamics between Homo sapiens and Neanderthals has been harder to understand - including any role our species played in the demise of the Neanderthals. The new study suggests interbreeding was more common than previously known for the first Homo sapiens in Europe.

It is an "amazing observation" that all three individuals had Neanderthal ancestors in their recent family history, said geneticist and study co-author Svante Pääbo, director of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Germany.

"This makes it likely that the earliest modern humans frequently mixed with Neanderthals when they met. It may even be the case that part of the reason Neanderthals disappeared is that they were simply absorbed into larger modern human groups. It may be just part of the reason they disappeared but the data support such a scenario," Pääbo said.

The researchers detected a genetic contribution among present-day people from the group that included these three, but unexpectedly it was found particularly in East Asia, including China, rather than Europe. This suggested that some people from this group eventually headed east.

"This study shifted our previous understanding of early human migrations into Europe in a way that it showed how even the earliest history of modern humans in Europe may have been tumultuous and involved population replacements," Hajdinjak said.

The notion of population replacement was illustrated by the fact that the 35,000-year-old individual from Bacho Kiro Cave belonged to a group genetically unrelated to the site's earlier inhabitants.

Another study published on Wednesday in the journal Nature Ecology & Evolution shed more light on Europe's early Homo sapiens populations.

Scientists sequenced the genome of a Homo sapiens female using DNA extracted from a skull found at a site southwest of Prague in the Czech Republic. She is believed to have lived more than 45,000 years ago, though radiocarbon dating efforts to determine a firm date were unsuccessful.

This woman carried 3% Neanderthal ancestry and bore genetic traits suggesting she had dark skin and dark eyes, said geneticist Kay Prüfer of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, the study's lead author.

"Her skull shows evidence of gnawing by a predator, possibly a hyena," Prüfer said.

Her group, distinct from the one in Bulgaria, appears to have died out without leaving genetic ancestry among modern-day people. — **Reuters**



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HUMAN INTEREST



Mykonos, Greece opens its doors and beaches to visitors

Following the recent Government announcement, Greece will open its borders in May, bringing a beacon of hope that travel will resume considering all European health measures and regulations.

The island of Mykonos is home to many pristine hotels and resorts, including the luxury brand Kenshō Mykonos that is ready to welcome guests again this summer, and with two exquisite properties to choose from with a plethora of offerings, it's not hard to see why it's a preferred choice among travellers.

Kenshō Ornos is a beautiful boutique paradise that offers 10 suites and 25 picture-perfect rooms, just south of Mykonos town, yet in complete privacy. Think star-lit turquoise pools, state of the art décor inspired by Cycladic her-

itage and dusted with a modern twist, a tranquil and somewhat magical underground cave spa, unparalleled fine dining, juicy cocktails, glamour, elegance, calmness and care. It's a little slice of heaven on this island.

During the day, visitors can bask under the warm sun on their private terrace with a hot tub. Or, they can treat themselves to an afternoon at the heavenly cave spa.

Southeast of Mykonos town, is the most breathtaking clear-sea and sandy beach, home to Kenshō Psarou, the elite retreat. A newcomer to the island, but the crème de la crème nonetheless, Kenshō Psarou is sure to "wow" even the most discerning traveller.

The rich and famous come to 'flock and dock' their yachts, to soak up the Grecian sunshine, whilst enjoying the finest hospitality one could ask for. Psarou is in a league

of its own, with awe-inspiring décor from sought after designers, an award-winning top-class chef, chilled vibes, soft sexy beats, shisha and impeccable service - Psarou really is, a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

The hotel, which is still in its infancy, is a dream destination for design lovers and artists. Every one of the 31 luxury rooms has an independent infrastructure and is home to a bespoke design. Pieces by distinguished designers such as Patricia Urquiola, Paola Navone and Kenneth Cobonpue fill each carefully allocated space. Stylish aesthetics and soothing shades of cream white to sea blue flow into the hotel's affluent restaurant area, where handmade tables, chairs and alcoves with suspended ceilings appear to float in mid-air, creating an exceptional ambience for fine dining.



Orphaned and disabled, baby alpaca walks again with her own set of wheels



WHEN RONJA Pohl first saw the disabled baby alpaca at a friend's farm, her heart melted and she resolved to give the tiny orphan a home - and a special wheeled harness for walking with.

Named Marie, the animal's two back legs were left severely damaged by a traumatic birth that killed her mother and her sister.

"She was hopping around as if she wanted to show everyone she has a strong character and wants to live even if two of her legs are injured," 20-year-old Pohl said.

After bringing her new pet home to the farm near Frankfurt where she works, Pohl took

Marie to a veterinarian, who amputated one back leg and put her in touch with a company that makes wheelchairs for animals.

Marie, strapped in to her bespoke wheeled frame and harness, now totters happily around Pohl's barn, learning the ropes of social interaction with baby lamb Schlufine and greeting other animals en route.

"She solves a lot of problems herself. If she falls over, she will get up on her own - if she feels like it," Pohl said.

"As soon as she is able to carry weight on her third leg, she will get an artificial limb and join my boyfriend's alpaca herd to live a normal alpaca life." — **Reuters**



Shrinking sea meadows store more carbon than forests



SAYA DE MALHA BANK, Indian Ocean: Hundreds of miles from the nearest shore, ribbon-like fronds flutter in the ocean currents sweeping across an underwater mountain plateau the size of Switzerland.

A remote-powered camera glides through the sunlit, turquoise waters of this corner of the western Indian Ocean, capturing rare footage of what scientists believe is the world's largest seagrass meadow.

Human activity is helping destroy the equivalent of a soccer field of these seagrasses every 30 minutes around the world, according to the UN Environment Programme (UNEP). And scientists are now racing to take stock of what remains.

"There are a lot of unknowns — even things as simple as how much seagrass we have," said Oxford University earth observation scientist Gwilym Rowlands, who is helping the Seychelles government map the island nation's seagrass and estimate how much carbon it stores.

"If you look at the map data for seagrass, there are huge holes" in what we know.

Seagrasses play a large role in regulating ocean environments, storing more than twice as much carbon from planet-warming carbon dioxide (CO₂) per square mile as forests do on land, according to a 2012 study in the journal *Nature Geoscience*.

Countries that hope to earn credit towards bringing down their CO₂ emissions could tally their seagrasses and the carbon they store, a first step towards accrediting carbon offsets for eventual trading on an open market.

The grasses also curb the acidity of surrounding waters — an especially

important function as the ocean absorbs more CO₂ from the atmosphere and becomes more acidic.

But seagrasses provide some buffer from acidification, which can damage animals' shells and disrupt fish behaviours. In one study published on March 31 in the journal *Global Change Biology*, scientists at the University of California, Davis, found that seagrasses dotted along the California coast could reduce local acidity by up to 30 per cent

national waters face increasing incursions from shipping and industrial fishing.

In March, scientists from institutions including Britain's Exeter University travelled with Greenpeace on an expedition to collect some of the first field data on the area's wildlife, including its little-studied beds of seagrass.

With the boat bobbing for days above the plateau, the researchers gathered bits of grass floating in the water, tweezerz them into bottles

improve seagrass tracking using satellite imagery and other data. That effort has been helped by recent advances in cloud computing and data storage, he said. "We are in such an exciting period."

Seagrass meadows are believed to be retreating around 7 per cent per year globally, according to the most recent seagrass census published in a 2009 study in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. It notes the estimate was based on incomplete data available at the time.

The more closely studied areas illustrate the harm human activity can cause. Pollution from mining and damage by fisheries may have helped to eliminate 92 per cent of mainland Britain's seagrasses in over a century, according to a March 4 study in the journal *Frontiers in Plant Science*.

If still intact, these could have supported around 400 million fish and stored up to 11.5 million tonnes of carbon — equivalent to 3 per cent of Britain's CO₂ emissions in 2017, the study said.

This year, Seychelles began assessing its coastal seagrass carbon stock for the first time, and at least 10 countries have said seagrasses would play a part in their climate action plans, according to UNEP.

Seychelles and Mauritius, which have joint jurisdiction over the Saya de Malha's seabed, should count up and care for the wealth of seagrass on their shared doorstep, said James Michel, who served 12 years as president of the Seychelles until 2016.

"Then we'll be in a better position to know how to not only preserve it, but also to manage it to ensure that it is protected for the future."

— Reuters

Seagrass meadows are believed to be retreating around 7 per cent per year globally, according to the most recent seagrass census published in a 2009 study in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. It notes the estimate was based on incomplete data available at the time.

for extended periods.

The plants also help clean polluted water, support fisheries, protect coasts from erosion, and trap microplastics, said the study's lead author Aurora Ricart.

"What is even cooler is that these habitats are present everywhere," she said.

SEAGRASS AS CLIMATE ALLY

While most seagrasses fringe coastlines around the world, the shallowness of Saya de Malha allows sunlight to filter to the seabed, creating an aquatic prairie in the Indian Ocean that provides shelter, nurseries and feeding grounds for thousands of marine species.

The bank's isolation has helped protect it from coastal threats, including pollution and dredging. But even such remote stretches of inter-

for analysis back on shore.

Data on seagrass meadows are patchy, but research so far estimates the grasses cover over 300,000 square km (115,000 square miles), distributed across all continents apart from Antarctica, according to UNEP. That would be an area the size of Italy.

It is not yet known how much carbon is locked into Saya de Malha, but globally the tangled roots of seagrasses are estimated to trap over 10 per cent of the carbon buried in ocean sediment per year.

"This has massive implications for the (world's) climate change mitigation efforts," said Dimos Traganos, lead scientist on a German Aerospace Center project developing software to



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Agreement signed for RO 17 million industrial cluster in Khazaen



BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 11

An agreement was signed on Sunday for the establishment of an industrial cluster at Khazaen Economic City with an investment totalling around RO 17 million.

Eng Salem bin Sulaiman al Dhuhli, CEO of Khazaen Economic City, signed the lease agreement with Ibtisam bint Khamis al Jashmiyah, Executive Partner of Seventy Group, an Omani business house with a presence in construction, marketing, modern technology, tourism and food security.

Khazaen will allocate around 100,000 square metres of land for the establishment of a cluster of projects for the manufacture and assembly of, among other things, greenhouse products, smart home equipment, solar panels, fish food, and crucially, an eco-friendly electric vehicle assembly plant as well.

Muscat bourse begins new life as MSX

NEW MILESTONE: Launch of Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) represents a qualitative shift for the capital market and the wider national economy: CMA

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 11

Oman's sole stock exchange transacted business in its new avatar as Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) on Sunday – a milestone celebrated by top officials of the Capital Market Authority (CMA) led by Abdullah bin Salem al Salmi, Executive President.

The inauguration of MSX under its new brand follows the completion of its transformation from the Muscat Securities Market to Muscat Stock Exchange, and its conversion into a closed joint-stock company wholly owned by Oman Investment Authority (OIA) as decreed by Royal Decree 5/2021.

Speaking at the inauguration, Al Salmi described the revamped stock exchange as a qualitative shift for the capital market and the wider national economy. With its establishment and operationalisation, Oman's stock exchange is now broadly in alignment with those of bourses around the globe, he noted.

In a statement to ONA, the Executive President voiced hope that the reinvigorated stock exchange would play an energetic role in financing the development of economic projects in Oman.



بورصة مسقط MSX		مؤشرات بورصة مسقط Muscat Stock Exchange index	
الرمز الدولي existing code	الرمز السابق previous code	الرمز الدولي existing index symbol	الرمز السابق previous index symbol
MSX30	MSM30	MSX 30 Index	MSM 30 Index
MSXTR	MSMTR	MSX Total Return Index	MSM Total Return Index
MSX50	MSM50	Shariah Index	Shariah Index

With its establishment and operationalisation, Oman's stock exchange is now broadly in alignment with those of bourses around the globe

He noted, in particular, the possibility that affiliates of OIA, the integrated sovereign wealth fund of Oman, would consider listing on the bourse, thus boosting liquidity and trading activity that will attract local and overseas investors.

For its part, the CMA will continue to regulate the bourse and the capital market. One of its first tasks is to issue a license to MSX to operate in the Sultanate, he said,

adding that he looking forward to new IPOs and the development of the secondary market in the wake of these developments.

Dr Hatem bin Bakhit al Shanfari, member of the Board of Directors of the new bourse, said the creation of MSX in its new form would open up new opportunities for listings, besides fuelling new investment activity and driving new levels of efficiency in the securities market.

In particular, the role of OIA – the biggest investment institution in the Sultanate – as the parent organisation bodes well for the growth of the capital market, attracting new investment inflows, and supporting economic diversification in generation.

Sohar Freezone Phase 2 targets plastics, auto parts, steel investments

HEALTHY APPEAL:
New 5-million sq metre site earmarked for investments pertaining to plastics and food processing, iron and steel, mineral processing, vehicle parts manufacturing, and renewable energy projects

CONRAD PRABHU
[@conradprabhu](https://twitter.com/conradprabhu)

Having already secured tenants for a sizable part of Phase 1 of its sprawling development, Sohar Freezone has opened up a new phase for investment, this time with an eye on businesses that will capitalise on an array of mega projects operating at the adjoining industrial port.

Sohar Port currently hosts large-scale chemical, petrochemical, refining and metal industries, in addition to a nascent agro-foods cluster, that collectively open up wide



opportunities for investment in downstream processing and value-added activities within the nearby free zone.

Phase 1 of the free zone development has so far attracted a total of 44 investments across smelting, manufacturing, warehousing and logistics, cold storage, and office solutions. By the end of 2020, as much as 63 per cent of Phase 1's five million sq metre development had already been leased to tenants, according to *Duqm Economist*, the quarterly newsletter of the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ).

Phase 2, which has since been launched, offers a further 5 million sq metres for development. The primary focus for investment, however,

will be activities pertaining to plastics and food processing, iron and steel, mineral processing, vehicle parts manufacturing, and renewable energy projects, the report said.

Significantly, Sohar Freezone has already been tipped to host an ambitious-scale Solar Energy Project potentially for the generation of clean energy as an alternative to gas-based electricity that currently fuels heavy industries in the port.

An added objective is the production of 'green hydrogen' from surplus solar power capacity for local industrial application and potential for export in the future as well.

Last November, OPAZ announced that it was coordinating with

government bodies the allocation of a dedicated cluster within the free zone for solar energy-related investments. The ultimate goal, it noted, was to secure a place for the Sultanate in the global green hydrogen production ecosystem.

Buoying hopes for healthy investment inflows into the free zone is a One-Stop-Shop (OSS) that serves as a single window for investors seeking permits and approvals to operate in any of the country's network of SEZs and free zone developments.

Royal Decree 105/2020 grants OPAZ the mandate to issue licenses, approvals and permits with minimum delay or bureaucratic red tape and thereby enhance the appeal of Oman's business and investment environment.

Separately, a secure bonded corridor was established at Sohar Freezone last year, enabling tenants to clear customs and move their containerised cargo speedily from the port – a move that contributes to enhanced operational efficiency, particularly with regard to the clearance of perishable goods, the report added.

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Energy Development Oman, with its substantive mandate, will enhance value creation from Block 6's hydrocarbon resources and play a strategic role in renewable energy development, says HE Salim Al Ruti

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CMA hosts workshop on Anti-Money Laundering and Financing Terrorism

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 11

The Capital Market Authority organised a workshop titled 'Highlighting Anti-Money Laundering and Financing Terrorism Law', in collaboration with the Public Prosecution via Zoom. Presented by Khalfan bin Said al Mawali, Chief Prosecutor, Public Funds Management, the workshop was attended by employees of licensed companies in the capital market and insurance sector in Oman.

The workshop covered a number of topics including an



introduction to the Anti-Money Laundering and Combating Terrorism Law promulgated by Royal Decree No 30/2016, the powers and responsibilities of regulators and the measures and penalties under the law. It also dealt with due diligence

measures required by the licensed companies in the capital market and insurance sector.

The workshop is part of a series of workshops related to combating money laundering and terrorism financing executed by the CMA represented by the Anti-Money Laundering and Combating Financing Terrorism Department (AML/CFT) which was created recently within the CMA to help create a safe investment environment through the issuance of legislation, strengthening surveillance and inspection, and consolidating the efforts of various units of the governments working against

these phenomena.

The workshop was attended by compliance officers and employees of regulated companies in the capital market and insurance sectors.

Majid bin Mohammed al Kiyoumi, Director of AML/CFT, concluded the workshop emphasising the role of compliance officer in putting in place the due diligence measures and training the employees in combating money laundering and terrorism financing adding that reporting of suspicious cases shall be directly to the National Centre for Financial Information.

Lulu announces second draw winners of Dream Drive 2021



MUSCAT: Lulu Oman announced the lucky draw winners of its second Dream Drive 2021 promotion draw. The winners were picked through the eRaffle draw held at Lulu Hypermarket, Darsait, recently. Like the previous years, the registration and draws are completely digital and the winners are selected through the eRaffle Winner Management System under the supervision of the officials from the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion.

Lulu's initiative to go digital demonstrates its social responsibility towards the community and the environment. To be part of this promotion, customers need to just purchase products worth RO 10 at any of the Lulu outlets. With every single receipt of RO 10, customers become eligible to be part of lucky draws to win a brand new Nissan Patrol 4WD and a range of attractive products from Ikon.

Muzna al Balushi was the lucky winner of the second Nissan Patrol 4WD. In the current draw, five other winners also took home amazing gifts from Ikon. Shawqi Kalaf won the Ikon 55 Smart TV; Animole Thomas won the Ikon Double Door Refrigerator; Joji Varghese won the Ikon Cooking Range; Anvarsha Sulaiman took home the Ikon Washing Machine, and Sunil Kumar Rajan Kurup won the Ikon Freezer.

NHI's Gulf Chef School holds competition



MUSCAT: The quarterly chef competition from Gulf Chef School at National Hospitality Institute (NHI) took place earlier this week amid much excitement. The competition required the competitors to open a mystery box of ingredients and design a three-course meal around them.

They then had about three hours to prepare four plates, two of which went to real customers sitting in the Classroom Restaurant at the NHI while the others were presented for judging and display.

Robert Maclean, NHI Principal, said the event was aimed at junior level chefs and designed with the purpose of inspiring and motivating young chefs to come forward and compete with their peers.

NHI is committed to the hospitality community in the Sultanate and sees this as another way of helping the community to raise standards and learn from the experience of competition.



Own a Lexus ES for amazing experiences

MUSCAT: The Lexus ES continues the expression of the brand's design direction and commitment towards crafting vehicles with heightened excitement, emotion and passion, expanding that vision of the brand's future to a broader audience.

The Lexus ES line-up includes the ES300h, a Hybrid Electric model, which combines two power sources consisting of a petrol engine and two electric motors with zero-fuel consumption and carbon emissions producing a combined system output of 215 hp.

The class-leading hybrid electric model's batteries comes with 8 years/160,000kms warranty and is automatically charged either by petrol engine or during braking or decelerating, eliminating the need to plug in a power cord.

Furthermore, it hosts number of advanced technologies, yet drives like any other conventional car and does not require special fuel. The ES300h offers an impressive 24.1 km/L mileage.

Lexus ES350 F Sport model, further enhances the driving excitement so that drivers can enjoy a sense of oneness with the car, born of its ability to respond immediately to driving enthusiasts' intentions in various situations. In addition to a thrilling exterior that highlights its bold and aggressive personality, the Lexus ES350 F Sport features numerous such as a retuned suspension, 19-inch wheels and tyres, and unique aluminium interior trim that gives the machine a more dynamic look and feel.

Commodity markets consolidate with one eye on inflation

OLE S HANSEN

The commodity sector remains in consolidation mode with the Bloomberg Commodity index trading close to unchanged for a third week. After peaking at a three-year high in late February, following a 50-per cent surge on vaccine and growth optimism, it has since seen a modest correction as the dollar and Treasury yields strengthened while extended lockdowns have prevented a further recovery.

In energy, Brent crude oil continues to consolidate in a \$60 to \$65 range following the March reversion above \$70/b.

The prospect for stronger global economic growth, upgraded to 6 per cent by the IMF this week, currently helping to offset the impact of a resurgent coronavirus just as Opec+ prepares to add supply over the coming months.

Financial flows into commodities have as a result also slowed with hedge funds turning net sellers for the past five weeks. During this time, a record net long across 24 major commodity futures has been cut by 18 per cent and, while impacting all sectors, the bulk of the reduction has hit the metal sector, especially HG copper.

Industrial metals, which led



by copper surged higher by more than 40 per cent during the past year, have also reached a consolidation phase on easing supply tightness as exchange-monitored copper inventories in London and Shanghai have risen, as well as concerns that rapidly rising factory output prices in China could see the world's second-largest economy slam the brakes and tighten monetary policy conditions.

China's March PPI, or factory gate prices, beat analyst expectations to rise 4.4 per cent, their fastest annual pace since July 2018. Most of the strong rise can be explained by surging commodity prices, and with this in mind we know there is more to come over the coming months.

The crude oil will continue to add upside pressure, not only to Chinese PPI but global inflation in general, as the year-on-year

impact of last year's price surge will be felt at least until next January.

These developments have raised concerns that China, despite gathering economic momentum, could see the country's central bank tighten monetary policy and thereby dampening the flow of money into financial markets.

Metals: Investors' confidence in precious metals received a knock during the first quarter with gold and silver being two of the worst performing commodities. Gold lost almost 10 per cent while silver managed slightly better given its link to better-performing industrial metals.

However, what became clear was the metals' inability to find a defence against rising bond yields and a stronger dollar. Being the most interest rate and dollar sensitive of all commodities, the weakness was perhaps not

The prospect for stronger global economic growth, upgraded to 6 per cent by the IMF this week, currently helping to offset the impact of a resurgent coronavirus just as Opec+ prepares to add supply over the coming months

that surprising as the dollar rose and bond yields spiked higher amid a stronger-than-expected recovery in global and especially US growth.

Having slumped almost 20 per cent from the August peak, gold has during the past month twice managed to find support in a critically important area below \$1680, and during the past week the yellow metal, supported by a dovish US Federal Reserve, managed to recover to a five-week high and almost challenge the equally important area of resistance around \$1765.

Although, in his comments Jerome Powell, the Fed chair, also played down the risk that inflation could get out of control, gold may suffer further losses if the market accepts his view and Treasury yields continue to rise on raised growth instead of higher inflation prospects.

[The writer heads Commodity Strategy at Saxo Bank]

PRESS RELEASE

EXPERIENCE ELECTRIFYING MOMENTS WITH TOYOTA'S HYBRID ELECTRIC VEHICLE RANGE

Toyota has long pioneered Hybrid Electric technology that is self-charging and doesn't not compromise on powerful performance and fuel-efficiency. In Oman, Toyota Hybrid Electric vehicle range includes Corolla, C-HR, Camry, RAV4 and Highlander.

Corolla HEV is a hybrid electric model which combines two power sources consisting of a petrol engine and electric motor with a combined power of 121 hp. It is also paired to an Electrically Controlled Continuously Variable Transmission, which provides an outstanding fuel consumption value of 27.6km/L



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MALABAR GOLD & DIAMONDS PLEDGES OVER 1.1 MILLION MEALS THIS RAMADHAN

The holy month of Ramadhan is at our doorsteps and millions of people around the world are getting ready to welcome this holy month with acts of service, charity and prayers.

As in previous years, Malabar Gold & Diamonds, one among the largest jewellery retailer, strengthens its CSR activities in the GCC, Far East and USA this Ramadhan.

Malabar Gold & Diamonds has planned month-long CSR activities in association with embassies, associations, and like-minded organisations to benefit the needy. The group plans to distribute food kits to deserving labourers and



families who are still recovering from the economic and social consequences brought about by Covid-19 pandemic. This initiative is expected to benefit a large section of the society across all countries in which it operates.

The food kits contain essential supplies, including staple, lentils, oil and spices.

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ECB must accept no further delay in lifting inflation



FRANKFURT: The European Central Bank should accept no further delay in lifting inflation back to its target as the current outlook is unsatisfactory and persistent misses risk damaging the economy, ECB board member Fabio Panetta (pictured) told Spanish newspaper *El Pais*.

The ECB has already undershot its nearly 2 per cent target for eight years and its projections indicate that it will continue to miss for years to come as the bloc struggles to absorb the slack left behind a pandemic-induced recession.

With stimulus already near its limits, some policymakers argue that the ECB must simply accept a slower rise in price pressures instead of trying to do even more but Panetta rejected this argument, warning that the costs outweigh the benefits.

“The argument that we could extend the horizon to meet the aim is not a convincing one,” *El Pais* quoted him.

“The ECB has failed to reach its aim for too many years already.” “Waiting will be even more costly,” Panetta argued. “It would make it more difficult to re-anchor inflation expectations and we would risk a permanent reduction of economic potential.” — **Reuters**

With US stocks at record highs, investors look to upcoming earnings

WALL STREET
WEEK AHEAD

NEW YORK: Wall Street is kicking off a crucial reporting season as US companies provide quarterly results a year after the coronavirus pandemic crippled the economy and as investors look for reasons to support a stock market at record highs.

Results begin in earnest next week with major banks. Overall S&P 500 earnings are expected to have jumped 25 per cent in the first quarter from a year ago, according to IBES data from Refinitiv.

That would be the biggest quarterly gain since 2018, when tax cuts under former President Donald Trump drove a surge in profit growth.

With the S&P 500 index at record highs, valuations are stretched heading into the season, leaving some investors looking to earnings for further support.

“We’ve seen earnings estimates go up, but... when you look at the market price as a multiple of those forward earnings, it has stayed pretty steadily at around 22 times,” said Brad McMillan, chief investment officer at



A man wearing mask walks past Wall Street logo in New York. — Reuters

Commonwealth Financial Network.

“If we’re going to see significant moves going forward, it’s going to come from earnings.” The S&P 500 was trading at 22.3 times forward earnings as of Friday compared with a long-term average of about 15, based on Refinitiv’s data.

With the S&P 500 index at record highs, valuations are stretched heading into the season, leaving some investors looking to earnings for further support

Early quarterly results have been strong. Strategists say that bodes well for the rest of the season, and it could be a sign that results may exceed already high expectations.

The 20 S&P 500 companies that reported earnings as of Thursday topped analyst estimates by 11 per

cent on average, said Nick Raich, chief executive of The Earnings Scout, an independent research firm.

That is about 1.5 times the average for those companies over the last three years and about triple the longer-term average, he said. Another positive sign is that estimates overall have been rising heading into the earnings period.

Estimates typically drop ahead of a reporting period after companies give conservative outlooks. At the start of March, analysts expected first-quarter S&P 500 earnings growth of 22 per cent, based on Refinitiv data.

Still, some fear that investors will be disappointed after the sharp run-up in earnings expectations, which could dent stock prices after a months-long rally led by economically sensitive groups including energy and financials. Investors have bet that these stocks are the most likely to benefit from the reopening of the US economy.

For all of 2021, S&P 500 earnings growth is expected to be 26.5 per cent versus a decline of 12.6 per cent last year. — **Reuters**

England’s shops hope for end-of-lockdown shopping spree

LONDON: After more than three months of enforced closure due to the Covid-19 pandemic, non-essential stores in England reopen their doors on Monday, hoping that the escape from lockdown will fuel a trading boom.

Industry lobby group, the British Retail Consortium, estimates UK stores have lost 27 billion pounds (\$37 billion) in sales over three lockdowns, while 67,000 retail jobs were shed in 2020 alone.

Some 17,532 chain store outlets vanished from high streets, shopping centres and retail parks across the UK last year, according to data compiled by researcher the Local Data Company for accountancy firm PwC.

But with more than half of the UK’s adult population having



A woman carrying a shopping is seen walking in Chelmsford, Britain. — Reuters

received at least one of the vaccine’s two doses, analysts do not think shoppers will hold back.

Market researcher Kantar is forecasting that consumers will

spend 3.9 billion pounds (\$5.3 billion) on the high street in the first week of reopening.

“There was definitely a bounce at the end of the lockdown

There was definitely a bounce at the end of the lockdown last year (in June), I would be surprised if the same thing didn’t happen again

SIMON WOLFSON
CEO, Next

last year (in June), I would be surprised if the same thing didn’t happen again,” Simon Wolfson, CEO of fashion retailer Next, said.

Many shopping areas will look very different from their pre-

pandemic state.

A raft of chains, including fashion retailers Topshop, Topman, Burton, Oasis and Laura Ashley, which had been fixtures for decades, will not be there — high profile casualties of a crisis that has hammered the sector.

Eight John Lewis department stores will not reopen and Debenhams stores will only reopen to hold final closing sales. England’s non-essential stores have been closed since January 4 when Prime Minister Boris Johnson imposed a third lockdown to stem a surge in Covid-19 cases.

Non-essential retail will also reopen in Wales on Monday, though Scotland’s shops will have to wait until at least April 26.

— **Reuters**

South Korean battery companies agree to settle US trade dispute



Visitors look at an electric car during a dedication ceremony for LG Chem’s car battery plant in Cheongwon, South Korea, in this file photo. — AFP

WASHINGTON: South Korean battery makers LG Chem and rival

SK Innovation Co have agreed to settle a trade secrets dispute that

has threatened a key Georgia plant and the electric vehicle plans of Ford Motor Co and Volkswagen AG, three sources said.

The Biden Administration through the US Trade Representative’s Office (USTR) faces a Sunday night deadline on whether to take the rare step of reversing a US International Trade Commission decision.

The ITC in February sided with LG Chem after the company accused SK of misappropriating trade secrets related to EV battery technology and issued a 10-year-import ban, but it allowed SK to import components for batteries for Ford’s EV F-150 program

for four years, and Volkswagen’s North American EVs for two years.

SK vowed to walk away from its \$2.6 billion Georgia battery plant under construction if the ITC decision was not overturned.

Volkswagen of America CEO Scott Keogh wrote in a LinkedIn post on Wednesday that if the ITC decision were left in place, it could “reduce US battery capacity and delay the transition to electric vehicles.” The administration has been pushing the two companies in recent days to try to reach a settlement, as have VW and Ford, the sources said. — **Reuters**

EU proposes 6-month tariff freeze with US

BERLIN: The European Union has suggested that it and the United States suspend tariffs imposed on billions of dollars of imports for six months, EU trade chief Valdis Dombrovskis was quoted as telling Germany’s *Der Spiegel* on Saturday.

That would go beyond a four-month suspension agreed last month, and send a signal that Brussels is seeking compromise in a 16-year-old dispute over aircraft subsidies.

“We have proposed suspending all mutual tariffs for six months in order to reach a negotiated solution,” Dombrovskis told the news

magazine. “This would create a necessary breathing space for industries and workers on both sides of the Atlantic,” he added.

In March, the two sides agreed on a four-month suspension covering all US tariffs on \$7.5 billion of EU imports and all EU duties on \$4 billion of US products, which resulted from long-running WTO cases over subsidies for planemakers Airbus and Boeing.

“Our goal is to push for procurement markets that are as open as possible all over the world,” he told *Der Spiegel*.

— **Reuters**