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OMAN

HM greetings to
Vietnam leader

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Nguyen Phu Trong of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam on the occasion of his country's National Day. In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his sincere greetings and best wishes to President Trong and the friendly people of Vietnam further progress and prosperity. — ONA

INSIDE



ISRAEL REOPENS BORDER CROSSING WITH GAZA FOLLOWING TRUCE

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MASKS THE SUBJECT AS SCHOOLS REOPEN ACROSS EUROPE

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WEATHER TODAY

MUSCAT
MAX: 36°C
MIN: 28°C

SALALAH
MAX: 29°C
MIN: 25°C

NIZWA
MAX: 41°C
MIN: 24°C

SUNRISE 05.49 AM

PRAYER TIMINGS

FAJR: 04:32

DHUHR: 12:12

ASR: 15:39

MAGHRIB: 18:29

ISHA: 19:41



Royal Decree ratifies Sultanate’s joining of CMR

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on Tuesday issued a Royal Decree.

Royal Decree No 114/2020 on the ratification of the Government of Sultanate of Oman’s joining the “Convention on the Contract for International Carriage of Goods by Road (CMR)”, done at Geneva

on May 19,1956, and its Additional Protocol Concerning the Electronic Consignment Note, done at Geneva on February 20, 2008.

Article (1) endorses the Sultanate of Oman’s joining the above-mentioned Convention on the Contract for International Carriage of Goods by Road

(CMR) in accordance with the version attached to this Decree, and declares that the Sultanate is not bound by the provision of Article (47) of the same agreement Article (2) ratifies the Sultanate of Oman’s joining the above-mentioned CMR Convention’s Additional Protocol Concerning

the Electronic Consignment Note in accordance with the version attached to this Decree, and it declares that the Sultanate is not bound by the provision of Article (11) of the same protocol. Article (3) instructs the departments concerned to deposit the joining documents for the

above-mentioned Convention and Additional Protocol in accordance with their provisions, without prejudice to the two reservations stated in Articles (1) and (2) above.

Article (4) says that this Decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced on its date of issue. — ONA

Oman sees decline in
virus infection rate

MUSCAT: The Supreme Committee tasked with tackling developments resulting from coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic held a meeting on Tuesday under the Chairmanship of Sayyid Hamoud bin Faisal al Busaidy, Minister of Interior, Chairman of the committee.

During the meeting, the committee reviewed the updates on COVID-19 epidemiological scenario, which pointed to a decline in infection cases in most governorates of the Sultanate, though occupancy in hospitals, particularly in intensive care units (ICUs) is still very high.

The committee deliberated on the situation elsewhere in the world where an alarming spread of the disease is reported in the wake of re-opening of various activities and due to lack of a vaccine or effective

treatment for the disease so far.

Accordingly, the Supreme Committee strongly exhorted all members of the public to continue to wear face masks, maintain physical distancing and keep hands clean, among other precautions to curb the spread of the virus. Such precautions will lead to protection of individuals, their families and colleagues at workplace from the risks of infection.

The committee also reviewed other related topics and asked specialised departments to study them to help take appropriate decisions in future. The committee reaffirmed that all its decisions stem from the epidemiological data on the pandemic. It also reiterated that it takes keen interest in limiting the negative impacts (of its decisions) on different sectors.

— ONA

Working group to decide on vaccine

MUSCAT: The Minister of Health on Tuesday issued a ministerial decision No 120/2020 forming a working group on COVID-19 vaccine. The decision states that a working group will be formed to follow up global developments in the field of manufacturing a vaccine for coronavirus, and to set up mechanisms to obtain the appropriate vaccine in coordination and follow-up with the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunizations (GAVI), the World Health Organization (WHO) and specialised companies.

The team will be headed by

the under-secretary for Health Affairs and will include the Director-General of Disease Control, Director-General of Medical Supplies, the Director-General of Primary Healthcare, the Director-General of Pharmacy and Drug Control and the Director of the Infectious Diseases Control Department at the Directorate General for Disease Control, experts and specialists.

The decision said that the team will submit a report to the minister with recommendations regarding choosing the appropriate vaccine.

SEE ALSO P3

GOVT MULLS UNIFORM
EDUCATION SYSTEM



TO IMPLEMENT PART OF OMAN VISION-2040

VINOD NAIR
MUSCAT, SEPT 1

The government seeks to develop a sustainable integrated education system for the long-term, and not just for one year, said the under-secretary of the Ministry of Education.

The ministry seeks to implement part of the Oman Vision-2040 by introducing

blended education now.

In an interview with Oman TV, he said: “The ministry will develop an evaluation system in line with the new integrated education that will try to achieve equality among all groups of students in various schools”.

He said there is a training plan which will include all teaching staff through an

electronic programme carried out by a specialised institute for the professional training of teachers.

The ministry will support families which cannot afford computers for their children, and also launch a simple guide to help parents support their wards in e-learning.

TURN TO P2

MAJLIS DISCUSSES JOINT PANEL’S REPORT ON VAT

ZAINAB AL NASSRI
MUSCAT, SEPT 1

The Majlis Ash’shura on Tuesday discussed the verdict of the Shura-State Council Joint Committee on matters of discrepancy on Value Added Tax (VAT) Draft Law.

Earlier, the Council of Ministers have forwarded the VAT Draft Law to Majlis Ash’shura, describing it as an urgent issue, and decided to send back the draft law to the State Council for completion of formalities.

The session was headed by Khalid bin Hilal al Ma’awali, Chairman of Majlis Ash’shura.

The VAT is expected to be implemented from the second

half of 2021. It is the second tax planned to be applied after the selective tax which was (100 per cent) imposed on products such as tobacco, pork, alcohol and energy drinks, in addition to a 50 per cent on soft drinks.

The Economic and Financial Committee of the Majlis had previously proposed application of VAT only in the event of achieving an economic growth rate of not less than 3 per cent provided that social security families and those with limited or low income to be taken into account.

At the same time, the government is working to complete the legislative



procedures for issuing VAT law as the country will continue to implement several financial measures in aspects related to revenues and public spending to achieve a financial balance for the general budget.

VAT is a direct tax on most goods and is levied on the value-added of business operations, that is, the difference between the final price of the commodity and the cost of internal materials and services. The value-added tax shall be collected from the final merchant and shall be borne by the consumer, and it includes all goods and services with some exemptions. It is 5 per cent on all goods and services.

TURN TO P2





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Majlis discusses joint panel's report on VAT



FROM PAGE 1

Fayza al Kalbani, a writer on economic affairs, said: "Everyone should be aware, despite all the challenges, the government has worked hard over the past years to delay the implementation of the tax by finding other alternatives to economic diversification, controlling government spending."

He emphasised, "this steadfastness will not last for long in light of the demands of the International Monetary Fund to impose value-added tax and find alternatives to economic diversification as it sees that VAT will be a major addition to non-oil revenues."



It is noteworthy that the GCC states have signed in 2016 a framework agreement for the application of value-added tax, according to which they agreed on 5 per cent rate and each

country is to determine the date of implementation. Saudi Arabia and the UAE were the first to apply VAT and then Bahrain in 2019.

EDUCATION PROJECT

During the same session, the Majlis endorsed the view of the committee on Education and Research about the project of an agreement on cooperation with the Government of Hungary. The

cooperation agreement, in the field of higher education, was forwarded by the government to the Majlis.

The members also listened to replies sent by ministries about audit instruments proposed earlier

by the Majlis members, including the allocation of certain oil and gas activities as exclusive to Omani firms.

They also listened to queries on procedures taken to repatriate non-Omani manpower, a proposal on developing Arabic language teaching and the suspension of the issue of wood collection and charcoal.

The members listed to a ministerial reply related to the economic and financial status of the mining sector, the challenges posed to this sector and its contribution to the Sultanate's GDP, in addition to the issue of crushers and quarries' mechanism of functioning. (With ONA inputs)



IO. gate ten for marketing

Gate10 Company - The Most Innovative Marketing and Advertising Agency in the Middle East
Gold and Bronze Awards at the 2020 Middle East Stevie Awards

Muscat - Gate10 won two prestigious awards at the Middle East Stevie Awards during the ceremony on Tuesday 25 August. A Gold Award for being the Most Innovative Marketing and Advertising Agency and a Bronze Award for Renewing the Commercial Identity. Gate10 has won ten other international awards in the field of creativity and development of commercial identities in 2019. This distinguished achievement is in line with the Company's vision and objectives aimed at promoting the marketing and advertising sector by setting new standards for the industry in the Sultanate of Oman through combined efforts of the company and its dedicated team.

Eng. Azhar Ahmed Al-Kindi, Chairman of Gate10, stated: "The award is an achievement that reinforces the Company's efforts in marketing and advertising while affirming the continuity of innovation and achievements at the regional and international levels."

Mr. Muneeb Al-Kindi - CEO and Founding Partner of Gate10 - expressed his heartfelt gratitude to the team, stressing that innovation is a fundamental value in their work and that it is the secret of success in marketing. He also expressed his happiness for winning the Gold Award as the Most Innovative Marketing and Advertising Agency in the Middle East. The "virtual" award ceremony honored 153 innovators and winners from 17 countries around the world with a total of 84 Gold, 33 Silver and 36 Bronze Awards, in celebration of innovators across the Middle East.

Stevie Middle East has been a pioneer for 18 years in the field of honoring business achievements such as International Business, Women's Business Awards for competing in innovation on various products and services, Innovation in Management, Websites and Others, based in the middle east. The name of the award is derived from its Greek origin, meaning "crowning".



Sultanate takes part in GCC meeting



MUSCAT: The Royal Oman Police (ROP), the Public Authority for Civil Defence and Ambulance (PACDA) and several government agencies took part in the second meeting of the technical working group of GCC Secretariat General concerned with developing mechanisms for dealing

with regional risks on Tuesday.

The virtual meeting discussed a range of issues related to dealing with regional risks, most notably the discussion of best practices in dealing with coronavirus pandemic and the lessons learned from them. — ONA

FROM **P1**

Govt mulls uniform education system

The ministry has provided two types of learning platforms for students, and a preparation platform for teachers in addition to an electronic library and with the help of telecommunication companies, it will strengthen Internet connectivity, including extended network to schools which are not covered by Internet.

The under-secretary said some changes have been made to the curricula to suit the new integrated education in the current circumstances. "There will be a supplementary curriculum on topics which were not studied due to suspension of studies."

He said the Ministry of Education will ensure the safety of students in the schools and in the event of the finding of COVID-19 cases, the classroom or the school will be closed.

There is a health protocol which was implemented in cooperation with the Ministry of Health, which includes preventative measures, including physical distancing which will be applied in schools to ensure the safety of students.

He said all basic subjects will be taught in the classroom, while other subjects will be taught remotely.

GOVERNOR MEETS CIVIC OFFICIALS



MUSCAT: Sayyid Saud bin Hilal al Busaidy, Minister of State and Governor of Muscat, on Tuesday met Muscat Municipality's directors-general to review the progress of works at the municipality. The meeting was attended by the Chairman of Muscat Municipality. The meeting looked into the missions undertaken by the directorates of the municipality, the projects under construction and future approaches to the execution of projects to ensure they respond to the needs of citizens, as well as Muscat Governorate wilayats' developmental goals. The meeting was in implementation of Royal Decree No. 101/2020 promulgating the System of Governorates and Municipalities Affairs. – ONA

Oman chairs meet on nuclear weapons

CAIRO: The Sultanate chaired the 57th meeting of senior Arab officials "on nuclear arms and other weapons of mass destruction" in Cairo On Monday.

The two-day meeting is being held via videoconferencing. Oman was represented by Badr bin Hilal al Busaidy, Deputy Permanent Representative of the Sultanate at the Arab League. The Sultanate headed the meeting in its capacity as President of the Arab League Council (ALC) at the ministerial level.

Experts and representatives of 15 Arab states participate in the meeting which will discuss preparations for the 64th Annual Regular Session of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), scheduled to be held in Vienna, Austria, from 21 to 25 September 2020.

The ALC will also discuss preparations for "The 2020

EXPERTS AND REPRESENTATIVES OF 15 ARAB STATES PARTICIPATE IN THE MEETING WHICH WILL DISCUSS PREPARATIONS FOR THE 64TH ANNUAL REGULAR SESSION OF THE INTERNATIONAL ATOMIC ENERGY AGENCY (IAEA)

Review Conference of Parties to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)", deferred to next year due to the global outbreak of coronavirus. This is in addition to preparations for the second session of a conference slated for November 2020 on establishing a zone in the Middle East to be free of nuclear arms and other weapons of mass destruction.

– ONA

Working group to find suitable COVID-19 vaccine

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, SEPT 1

The Ministry of Health has formed a working group to select a vaccine for the Sultanate against coronavirus.

It will study global developments in the field of manufacturing and producing a coronavirus vaccine, set up mechanisms to obtain the appropriate vaccine in coordination and follow-up with the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation, the World Health Organization and specialised companies. This was announced by Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Saeedi, Minister of Health, on Monday.

The working group will be headed by the Under-Secretary for Health Affairs. Its members include Director-General of Disease Control, Director-General of Medical Supplies, Director-General of Primary Health Care, Director-General of Pharmacy and Drug Control, and Director of the Infectious Diseases Control Department at the General



Directorate for Disease Control. The team may seek assistance from experts and specialists in order to perform these duties.

The group will submit a report to the Minister of Health with recommendations regarding choosing the appropriate vaccine from among the vaccines produced globally.

206 NEW CASES, 4 DEATHS

The Sultanate reported 206 new cases on Tuesday, bringing the total number

of COVID-19 patients in the Sultanate to 85,928. The total death cases in the country has reached 689 after 4 people died on Tuesday.

A total of 81,024 out of the COVID-19 patients in the Sultanate have recovered, the ministry said.

The MoH said 48 cases were admitted over the past 24 hours, adding that the total number of hospitalised COVID-19 patients stands at 416, of them 154 are in intensive care.

Tender Announcement



The Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn) announces the following RFI:

Document Number	Project Name	Date of Submission	Type of work
ITD-RFI-2020-Q3-01	Providing IT services - Information Technology Governance Management and Information Technology Security Management	16-09-2020	Information Technology Services

Madayn is seeking a response to RFI to gather willingness and eligibility with high-level details of offers from the potential service providers companies. We will subsequently seek RFP/RFQ from shortlisted services provider companies. Interested Companies specializing in such business to participate and obtain the RFI document can request and response, through the following e-mail:

[\(it-dept@madayn.om\)](mailto:it-dept@madayn.om)

Tender Inquiry:

For inquiries about the document: Submit inquiries related to the document via the e-mail shown above, and you can contact by phone via the number +968 24155434

Madayn is not bound to issuing or RFQ/RFP based on the results of the information provided.

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#Living_with_COVID19



HOW TO STAY SAFE WHEN YOU RETURN TO GYM

KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, SEPT 1

Is it safe to go to the gym during the coronavirus pandemic? It depends on the precautions you and the gym take. Gyms and yoga centres are high risk areas as COVID-19 shows no sign of decline. While the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends keeping 6 feet between people, exercise causes us to breathe harder so particles can go beyond 6 feet, say experts. While there are no widespread protocols specifically for gyms, the greater distance you can put between yourself and another

person is best. The Ministry of Health has issued guidelines for gym goers and yoga practitioners to cover his/her face at all times. This is in view of the fact that a visor is more comfortable than a mask while doing high-intensity exercises. However, one shouldn't wear a N95 mask while exercising. "Those who go to gyms should observe utmost care and take preventive measures against the potential spread of coronavirus as places as one is highly prone to catch infection through sweat and breathing", Hamed al Wahaibi, Member of the Municipality Board

of Directors, said. Gym owners and trainers advise all those who intend to visit gym measures like carrying one's own kit including two fresh towels, a yoga mat or any other floor mat and a water bottle. "One should not touch facilities like water cooler and mobile phone charging stations and a face cover should be used all the time", Jaison Mathai, a long-time trainer said. "Maintaining social distance at all times is crucial and one should book his appointments online as far as possible and try to go during non-peak hours so that you can maintain

social distancing and gyms shouldn't allow so many people at once". "Gym goers need to clean their hands before they use exercise gear. Disinfectant wipes should be used to clean handles of equipment before and after using it", Rabyab Siddhik, another fitness freak and certified trainer, said. Touching the face, mouth, nose and eyes is something that body people should avoid although it is difficult to refrain from touching one's face while sweating profusely. Instead, a clean towel or tissue can be used to wipe your face in between workouts.

STAY SAFE, STAY HEALTHY

If cases of COVID-19 are poorly controlled where you live, experts say it's best to stay away. But if you live in an area where the spread is being contained, there are ways to minimise risk when going for a workout. To ensure everyone stays at least 6 feet apart, gyms should take steps such as moving machines, blocking off areas and limiting the number of people allowed inside. Avoiding the locker room, bringing your own water bottle and using hand sanitiser also helps reduce risk. Check in online, rather than in person, and pursue activities that are outdoors instead of indoors when possible. Gym staff should clean

exercise machines between uses and regularly wipe down other frequently touched areas with products that kill viruses. And experts say face coverings should be worn at the gym whenever possible. Always keep a backup mask. If the one you're wearing gets really damp with sweat, it might not be as effective. Even for those being careful, gyms pose a risk. Many are indoors, where ventilation is limited and social distancing can be challenging. In an ongoing pandemic, if you can manage to break a sweat without returning to the gym just yet, that's the best option.

ARABIAN LEOPARD SPOTTED IN DHOFAR



The critically endangered Arabian leopard has made a rare appearance in the Governorate of Dhofar, according to the Office for Conservation of Environment (OCE) in the Diwan of Royal Court. The last of the leopards, whose total number in the wild is expected to be less than 200, survive in the mountains of Dhofar and the adjoining areas in Yemen. OCE has released photos of an Arabian leopard and stated that the animal came out to enjoy the magic of nature and the atmosphere of khareef in Dhofar. 'This was because of the extensive protection and conservation efforts of the authorities in Oman', it said. Leopards are active mostly at night and the pattern of rosettes on the body is unique in each individual. Called 'qadhr' locally in the Dhofar mountains, camera-trap studies continue to confirm the presence of leopards in Jabal Samhan in Dhofar.

Omani researcher wins award



MUSCAT: Omani researcher Dr Qusai Hamed al Umairi, PhD in nuclear Medicine, won first place edging out 20 participants at the 4th Annual Meeting of Nuclear Medicine held in India.

His research paper was entitled (Dielectric contrast enhancing properties of chitosan-coated magnetic nanoparticles: In-vivo and In-vitro study).

Al Umairi was awarded in the presence of a number of professors, doctors and researchers from around the world. "To be honoured is not the end of the journey but a step to

excellence. It is an appreciation and commendation for efforts exerted by a person and an inspiration to give the best. It reflects a good impression, for his work has not gone in vain. It also reflects the importance of an achievement on others. In contrast, a person mainly has to work hard for the purpose of raising the name of his country, not just for receiving words of praise and thanks", he said.

Al Umairi had previously bagged a number of prizes in nuclear medicine. He has an outstanding scientific career crowned with success and excellence.

Special Olympics gears up for post-COVID events

KAUSHALENDRA SINGH
SALALAH, SEPT 1

The Dhofar chapter of the Oman Special Olympics Committee discussed the modalities for the future events in line with its readiness for the international events, many of which have been postponed due to COVID-19.

The committee met on Tuesday to discuss its plan of action, including sports, cultural and health programmes for the children with special needs.

"Only a select team of the committee met due to COVID concerns and to ensure that all the parameters suggested by the Supreme Committee on COVID-19 are followed", said Naif Ahmed Said al Shanfari, Chairman of Dhofar Branch of the Omani Special Olympics Committee.

He called for readiness for events and international participation as soon as the pandemic gets over. He exhorted the members and heads of sports, culture and health programme sections of the committee, to draw plans and be in touch with the parents of the special needs children.

"This is a critical time for everyone. I feel for the special children as it is difficult for them and their parents to follow the regular exercise regime due to outdoor restrictions. It is important for them to be safe at the same



time they should be mentally and physically active", he said.

The International Special Olympics, according to Al Shanfari, is a global movement aimed at creating a new world in which the acceptance of each individual without any physical or mental discrimination is assured.

Commenting on Oman's Special

Olympic journey, Al Shanfari said, "Under a ministerial decree of the Ministry of Social Development, the Al Amal Association was formed in 2010 to improve the behavioral, motor and professional skills of people with intellectual disabilities, while Oman became part of the global movement of Special Olympics in March 2016.

He called upon the parents of the special children to keep their wards engaged in some activities and manage a regime of exercise daily. "In a normal situation, we organise activities, but any activity that requires gathering is not possible now... Continuity is a must for them to cope up with the situation", he said.

Promising growth for frozen products in Sultanate: Report

NEW DELHI: A report by Mordor Intelligence expects that the frozen baked products market in the Sultanate will record a compound annual growth rate of 4.69 per cent. The report published by Reportlinker website said that the frozen baked products market in the Sultanate is one of the fastest growing sectors, as retail stores, along with supermarkets and hypermarkets, helped facilitate the sale of such baked products.

It added that development and investment, in addition to product innovations, are leading to the growth of the sector, with the opportunity to reduce costs and consistently provide high-quality baked products throughout the day, thus increasing the consumption of products in the food service outlets.

The report added that food service outlets supply products such as frozen cakes from suppliers, in order to meet market demand,



and the cakes are frozen to preserve their freshness before delivery.

The report pointed out that the increased demand for appropriate food products and the pursuit of

more taste, safety and consistency are among the main factors driving the growth of the frozen baked products market in the Sultanate. The fast lifestyles forced consumers

to accept ready food and products, including frozen baked products, such as croissants, wraps, bread and more.

— ONA

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A Palestinian policeman waves on a truck as it enters through the Kerem Shalom crossing into the Gaza Strip on Tuesday, after a Qatari-mediated deal with Israel to end more than three weeks of cross-border attacks. — AFP

Israel reopens key border crossing with Gaza following truce

TEL AVIV/ GAZA CITY: Israel reopened its only border crossing for goods deliveries to the Gaza Strip on Tuesday, after reaching a ceasefire agreement with the Palestinian Hamas movement. “Following efforts to calm the situation, and as a result of security consultations, a decision was taken to resume the routine activity of the Kerem Shalom Crossing, including the entry of fuel products, Israel’s chief liaison office with the Palestinians, COGAT, said in a statement. In addition, the fishing zone in the Gaza Strip was expanded to 15 nautical miles (around 28 km)

after Israel closed it two weeks ago in response to attacks from Gaza. Hamas announced the ceasefire with Israel on Monday after negotiations mediated by Qatar. The office of Yehya al Sinwar, the head of Hamas in the Gaza Strip, said the ceasefire was contingent upon the start of multiple projects in the Strip to improve the lives of residents and minimise problems caused by the coronavirus. COGAT said if Hamas “will fail to meet its obligations, Israel will act accordingly.” After a lull since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, Palestinian fighters last month stepped up cross-border

attacks from Gaza, including setting ablaze agricultural fields in southern Israel with incendiary balloons. Those attacks prompted Israel to retaliate against Hamas targets and impose restrictions on the territory. Israel has enforced a blockade on the Gaza Strip since 2007, joined later by Egypt, with both citing security reasons. On Monday, Hamas said they had reached a Qatari-mediated deal with Israel to end more than three weeks of cross-border attacks. A Hamas source said there had been “a total halt” to balloon and other attacks against Israel, in agreement

with other factions in the coastal strip, home to some two million people. Sources close to Hamas had said it also wanted other measures to ease living conditions in the territory, including the extension of an industrial zone in the east and an increase in the number of Israeli work permits issued to Gazans once anti-coronavirus restrictions have been lifted. But disagreements over implementation have fuelled repeated flare-ups with the group, which has controlled Gaza since 2007. — dpa/AFP

Sudan’s Bashir trial adjourned to Sept 15

KHARTOUM: Sudan’s trial of ousted president Omar al Bashir over the 1989 coup that brought him to power was adjourned on Tuesday to September 15, the presiding judge said. The session, which was broadcast on Sudan TV, was held amid tight security as Bashir, 76, and other co-accused regime figures stood behind bars in the courtroom. After procedural questions and debate about coronavirus precautions in the courtroom, the presiding judge declared the hearing was “adjourned to September 15”. Bashir came to power in 1989 on the back of a coup that toppled the elected government of prime minister Sadiq al Mahdi. He stayed in power for 30 years before being overthrown on April 11, 2019 after several months of unprecedented, youth-led

street demonstrations amid dire economic hardship. If convicted, Bashir and others could face the death penalty. The trial comes as Sudan’s joint civilian-military transitional government is pushing a wave of political and social reforms and on Monday agreed a peace deal with most rebel groups. The new authorities in February also agreed that Bashir should stand trial before the International Criminal Court on charges of genocide and crimes against humanity. Bashir was indicted by the ICC over the Darfur conflict that erupted in 2003 when ethnic minority rebels took up arms, accusing Khartoum of political and economic marginalisation of their region. The United Nations estimates 300,000 people were killed and 2.5 million displaced in the conflict. — AFP



Omar al Bashir reacts in a defendant’s cage during his trial along with 27 co-accused at a courthouse in Khartoum, on Tuesday. — AFP

Israel strikes on Syria kill 11 including civilian

BEIRUT: Israeli strikes on Syria killed one civilian, three government troops and seven allied foreign fighters, a war monitor said on Tuesday in a new toll. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which had previously put the toll from Monday’s strikes at five, said paramilitary fighters were among those killed in the attack. The Britain-based monitor said the strikes hit Syrian army positions south of Damascus as well as positions belonging to paramilitaries, in the southern province of Daraa. The Observatory said it

could not confirm the identity of those killed. Late on Monday, the Syrian state news agency SANA reported that “the Zionist enemy carried out a strike... on some of our military positions south of Damascus and our air defences confronted them”. “The Israeli attack led to two martyrs being killed and seven soldiers being wounded,” the source said, adding the fire had come from the direction of the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. It later said that one civilian was also killed in the attack.

— AFP

Saudi sacks military commander over alleged corruption

RIYADH: A top Saudi military commander and his son were sacked on Monday over graft allegations, state media said, in the government’s latest anti-corruption purge. Joint forces commander Prince Fahad bin Turki — a senior royal family member — and Abdulaziz bin Fahad, the deputy emir of northern Al-Jouf region, were fired and placed under investigation for corruption, according to the report. Several other officers and civilian employees of the defence ministry were also being probed for corruption, it added, citing a royal decree from King Salman. Prince Fahad served as the commander of the Saudi-led military coalition fighting Ansar Allah fighters in neighbouring Yemen. He was replaced by Mutlaq bin Salim, the deputy chief of staff, on the recommendation of the kingdom’s de facto ruler Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, state media said.

— AFP

HEALING TOUCH



French President Emmanuel Macron hugs a blast victim while attending a ceremony, with French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian (R), to mark Lebanon’s centenary in Jaj Cedar Reserve Forest, northeast of the capital Beirut, on Tuesday. — AFP

Tunisia lawmakers to hold confidence vote on new govt

TUNIS: Tunisian President Kais Saied’s pick for prime minister faced a confidence vote on Tuesday that could approve a new technocratic government or force fresh elections. Saied has designated as premier the former interior minister Hichem Mechichi, who has promised to revitalise the tourism-reliant economy that has been hit hard by the coronavirus pandemic. Mechichi, 46, was named in July to lead the small North African country’s third designated government in less than a year, replacing Elyes Fakhfakh, who resigned over claims of conflict of

interest. His chances rose hours before the crucial vote, expected in the evening, as the Ennahdha party, the biggest bloc in parliament, said it would grudgingly back him “despite reservations”. Political scientist Chokri Bahria, from the think tank Jossour, said “it seems clear that the government vote will pass, with a support base that should allow it a few months of stability”. Tunisia has been praised as a rare success story for the Arab Spring uprisings that swept the region in 2011, bringing down its long-time



Hichem Mechichi (bottom-R), Prime Minister-designate of Tunisia, stands for a prayer, during a parliament session in the capital Tunis on Tuesday. — AFP

president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. But it is now mired in social and economic crisis, with the official unemployment rate at 18 per cent, and in need of new assistance from the International Monetary Fund. Parliament is deeply divided and many lawmakers, even in the president’s camp, are angry that Mechichi bypassed the major political factions in building his cabinet. Mechichi, a lawyer by training, has named judges, academics, public servants and business executives for what the local media has dubbed “the president’s government”.

Ennahdha and others have instead demanded a “political” government that reflects the balance of parties and factions in parliament. If Mechichi fails to win the minimum 109 out of 217 votes, Saied could dissolve the assembly and call new elections for early next year. The chairman of Ennahdha’s advisory board, Abdelkarim Harouni, said the party would back Mechichi “given the difficult situation of the country” but would then seek to “develop and reform this government”.

— AFP

Afghan floods destroy thousands of homes

KABUL: Devastating flash floods across Afghanistan in the past week have damaged more than 4,000 homes, killed at least 190 people and wounded 172 others, the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) said on Tuesday.

More than 1,000 houses were destroyed completely and about 3,000 partially, State Minister for Disaster Management and Humanitarian Affairs Ghulam Bahauddin Jailani said at a press conference.

“Unfortunately, the scale of the floods was vast and unprecedented”, Jailani said. “Floods hit 15 provinces with very little delay”.

The government and international aid workers are supporting as many as 4,000 families affected by the flooding. Agricultural land and public infrastructure have also been impacted. Search and rescue operations have continued across hard-hit provinces for several days.

Many victims were trapped under debris and collapsed houses. Nearly 100 people died in Parwan province in the north, which has been hit the hardest, officials said last week.

Afghanistan experienced severe flash floods in 2019 that destroyed more than 10,000 houses and affected around 180,000 people, according to the United Nations emergency aid office OCHA. — **dpa**

India's virus surge eases as millions take exams

BENGALURU: India's tally of coronavirus infections surged to nearly 3.7 million on Tuesday, as millions of masked students sat for college admission exams after the government refused to defer them.

India, the world's third most affected country by the pandemic after the United States and Brazil, reported 69,921 new coronavirus infections on Tuesday, the lowest in six days. It took the overall number of cases to 3.69 million, while the death toll from COVID-19 rose by 819 to 65,288.

On Sunday, India reported 78,761 new cases, the world's biggest, single-day tally. More than 2 million masked students filed into exam centres across India on Tuesday to take tests for admission to medical and engineering schools, with physical distancing norms, hand sanitisation stations and temperature checks in place.

The federal government had declined to defer the tests — already postponed twice this year — despite growing pressure from some students and opposition parties who feared rising infections as well as difficulty travelling to exam centres due to virus-linked curbs on transport.

“If (the exam) is delayed, then our whole year will be wasted... we don't have any option,” a student appearing for the tests in the eastern city of Kolkata told the India



Students arrive at an examination centre for Joint Entrance Examination (JEE) Main-2020, in Noida on Tuesday. — **AFP**

India, the world's third most affected country by the pandemic after the United States and Brazil, reported 69,921 new coronavirus infections on Tuesday, the lowest in six days

Today news channel. “So whatever maximum precautions we can take,

which we are all following, I think it's fine”, she said.

In an effort to avert more serious economic damage, India recently relaxed more restrictions and has announced that urban metro trains can resume services from September 7. India's economy shrank by nearly a quarter in April-June, data showed on Monday, much more than forecast and pointing to longer than expected time for recovery.

In the southern city of Bengaluru, thousands of pubs were set to serve alcohol to customers starting from Tuesday following a nearly six-month gap, with strict social distancing norms and 50 per cent seating capacity, a senior excise official said. — **Reuters**

Mainland China reports 10 new COVID-19 cases

BEIJING: China reported 10 new COVID-19 cases on Monday, down from 17 reported a day earlier, the country's health authority said on Tuesday.

The National Health Commission said in a statement that all new cases were imported infections involving travellers from overseas, marking the 16th consecutive day of no local infections.

The number of new asymptomatic cases rose to 34 from 19 a day earlier. China does not count symptomless coronavirus infections as confirmed cases.

The total number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in mainland China now stands at 85,058, while the death toll remained unchanged at 4,634. — **Reuters**

Hong Kong starts mass coronavirus tests

HONG KONG: Hong Kong launched a mass coronavirus testing scheme on Tuesday, but calls for millions to take up the offer have been undermined by deep distrust of the government following China's crushing of the city's democracy movement.

The free voluntary tests are part of an attempt to stamp out a third wave of infections that began in late June and saw the densely populated city reimpose economically painful social distancing measures.

But the programme has been hampered by a limited response due to the involvement of mainland Chinese testing firms and doctors — and swirling public fears of the harvesting of data and DNA as Beijing cracks down on calls for democratic reform.

Since registration began on Saturday, 510,000 people have signed up — around seven percent of the city's 7.5 million population.

About 10,000 people were tested on Tuesday morning, city leader Carrie Lam said, including government ministers.

“It will help Hong Kong emerge from the pandemic unscathed and is conducive to the resumption of daily activities”, she told reporters.

But health experts advising the government have said as many as five million people

might need to be tested to comprehensively uncover hidden transmissions and end the current wave.

Hong Kong has recorded just over 4,800 infections since the virus first hit the city in late January but about 75 per cent of those cases were detected since the start of July.

“I am doing this for myself and for others,” Winnie Chan, a mother in her thirties, told AFP as she entered a test centre. “I am confident and I support the government's policy”.

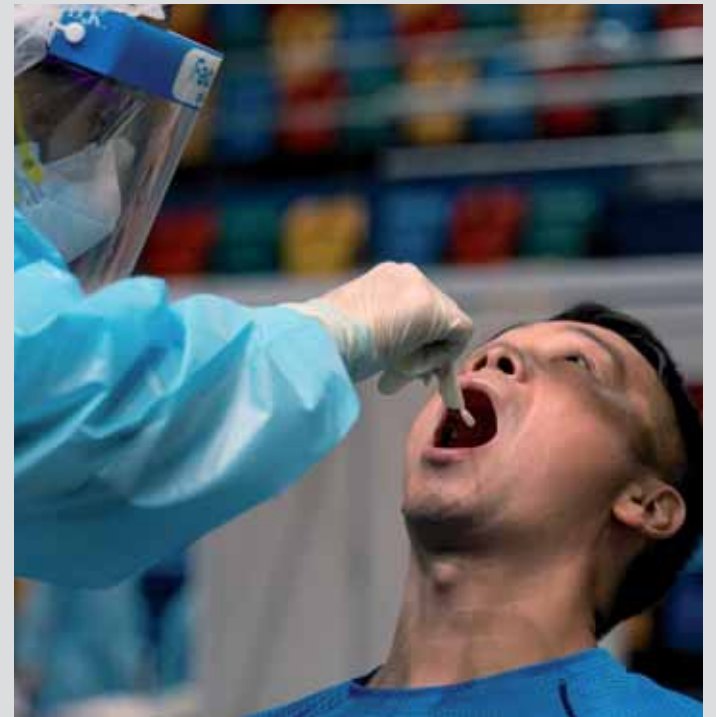
Others said they had no plans to sign up.

“I think it's a waste of time”, local resident Emily Li said. “The government can't convince me in terms of the effectiveness of the testing programme”.

Authorities have billed the scheme as a benevolent public health initiative made possible with Chinese help.

But the involvement of teams and labs from the mainland has sent the rumour mills into overdrive and compounded fears of Beijing's surveillance state, which uses biometric data to monitor its citizens.

Some prominent Hong Kong health experts have questioned the efficacy of a mass testing programme, arguing that more targeted monitoring of at-risk and vulnerable communities would be a better use of resources. — **AFP**



A swab sample is collected from a man by a medical worker at a makeshift testing site for COVID-19 coronavirus infections at the Queen Elizabeth Stadium in Hong Kong on Tuesday. — **AFP**

ADIEU TO MUKHERJEE



Military policemen escort an ambulance carrying the body of former president of India, Pranab Mukherjee, outside his residence ahead of his funeral in New Delhi on Tuesday. Mukherjee, a veteran Congress leader, died on Monday at the age of 84. — **AFP**

Japan's Suga cements frontrunner status in PM race

TOKYO: Japan's chief cabinet secretary Yoshihide Suga on Tuesday cemented his status as the clear frontrunner in the race to become the country's next prime minister, ahead of a vote expected on September 14.

Suga has yet to officially announce he is running for the top job, after Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said last week he would resign over health problems.

But he has nonetheless already become the favourite, with the largest faction within the ruling Liberal Democratic Party throwing its support behind him on Tuesday, local media said.

Two other key factions have also said they will back Suga, who is set to make his candidacy official on Wednesday, when the LDP is expected to confirm the election

date.

Local media said candidates will be required to register their run on September 8 — with campaigning beginning immediately after.

Two candidates, former defence minister Shigeru Ishiba and LDP policy chief Fumio Kishida, have so far officially announced plans to stand.

The LDP election is for the party leadership, with a parliamentary vote for prime minister following on September 16, reports said. Opposition candidates are expected to stand, but the vote is seen largely as a formality that will endorse the ruling party's choice.

A leadership contest would usually poll ruling-party lawmakers and LDP members nationwide. But the LDP has opted for a constrained format, polling only its MPs and



Fumio Kishida, Yoshihide Suga and Shigeru Ishiba. — **AFP**

three representatives from each of the country's 47 prefectures.

The decision has elicited some criticism, but party officials said it would take too long to organise a broader vote.

“The prime minister is sick, his illness has re-emerged. He is working hard under very difficult conditions,” Shunichi Suzuki, chairman of the party's general council, told reporters on Tuesday.

“If we were to hold a full-scale election, it would take two months. With the prime minister's health, two months is very long. We can't take that long”, he said.

3 MAIN CANDIDATES

While several candidates have emerged for the race, Suga appears to have built an insurmountable support base within the party.

The 71-year-old has held his powerful post for years — coordinating policy among ministries and agencies, and serving as the effective face of the government as its chief spokesman.

Considered a pragmatist without strong ideological positions, he is a close Abe adviser who encouraged the prime minister to run again after a disastrous first term in office ended after just a year in 2007.

Former defence minister Ishiba, who announced his run on Tuesday, polls well with the general public but is less popular among party members.

Ishiba once left the LDP — spending time as both an independent and briefly joining another party — and many within the ruling bloc have not forgiven the political dalliance.

LDP policy chief Kishida, a former foreign minister, became the first candidate to jump into the race earlier Tuesday.

He had often been described as Abe's favoured successor, but the outgoing prime minister has said he will not endorse a candidate, and Kishida's limited public profile may pose a problem as he launches a challenge to the likes of Suga.

— **AFP**



Masks the subject as virus-wary schools reopen across Europe

PARIS: Millions of students headed back to class in France, Belgium and England on Tuesday as European schools cautiously reopened amid rising coronavirus cases in several countries, with face masks often mandatory.

Officials have drawn fire from parents and teachers worried that strict social distancing and other protective measures will not be enough to prevent a second wave of COVID-19.

But many governments insist that the greater risk is young people losing out on crucial in-person lessons, and that keeping kids at home for distance learning puts too big a burden on working parents.

“I do not underestimate how challenging the last few months have been, but I do know how important it is for children to be back in school, not only for their education but for their development and well-being,” Britain’s Education Secretary Gavin Williamson said.

The UN’s education agency Unesco warned that just half the roughly 900 million primary and secondary students restarting school from August to October will actually be allowed back in classrooms.

“Several generations are facing the threat of school closures, which concern hundreds of millions of students and have lasted many months,” the agency’s director general



Pupils wearing protective mask arrive in Brequigny high school in Rennes, western France, on Tuesday. — AFP

Audrey Azoulay said in a statement late Monday.

In France, some 12.4 million students returned Tuesday, with masks required for all teachers as well as students over 11.

“It doesn’t bother me to wear a mask, even if it does feel a little weird,” said Marie, who was starting her first year of middle school in the southern

French city of Marseille.

But many teachers were less enthusiastic. “How can we connect with children when half your face is hidden behind a mask?” said Julie Siata, who teaches English at another Marseille school.

Pupils also returned Tuesday in Belgium, which has suffered one of the highest rates of coronavirus deaths

in Europe.

Masks are required for those aged 12 and older, and must be kept in a protective case or pouch.

“You can’t risk having the mask contaminated when taking it off to eat,” said Martin, soon to be 13, as he headed to school in Brussels, adding that he was “stressed” about the new protective measures. — AFP

‘REBELLION’ FOR CLIMATE



Activists from the climate protest group Extinction Rebellion wear PPE (personal protective equipment) as they perform during a march through central London on Tuesday, at the start of their new season of “mass rebellions”. Climate protest group Extinction Rebellion will target Britain’s parliament as part of “mass rebellions” starting from September 1. Other actions will take place around the country. — AFP

Sanofi says Kevzara drug fails as possible COVID-19 treatment

PARIS: The rheumatoid arthritis drug Kevzara has failed as a COVID-19 treatment, French drugmaker Sanofi said on Tuesday following a similar flop of a Roche product. Sanofi said Kevzara — which it produces with partner Regeneron — had failed as a COVID-19 treatment after the latest set of trials in patients across the world showed adverse effects, and would be dropped for studies in this field.

Sanofi said the trials had led in some cases to COVID-19 pneumonia infections and even death in a few cases. The two companies do not anticipate conducting further clinical studies of it, Sanofi added. Trials had shown that the drug did not help patients with less severe COVID-19, the companies had said in July.

“Although this trial did not yield the results we hoped for, we are proud of the work that was achieved by the team to further our understanding of the potential use of Kevzara for the treatment of COVID-19,” said Sanofi’s global head of research and development, John Reed. — Reuters

Russia says Belarus sanctions ‘unacceptable’

MOSCOW: Russia on Tuesday denounced sanctions against ally Belarus as “unacceptable” and voiced support for strongman Alexander Lukashenko’s proposal of constitutional reforms.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Western countries were “delivering verdicts” on events in Belarus, following weeks of protests against Lukashenko’s claim to have won a sixth presidential term in an August 9 election.

Moscow considers this “to be unacceptable in the modern world,” Lavrov said in a televised address to students at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), one of the country’s top schools.

“We are convinced that the Belarusian people have all the possibilities to solve this problem by themselves,” he said.

On Monday, EU members Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania banned Lukashenko and 29 other high-ranking officials over the election, which critics say was rigged, and a harsh crackdown on demonstrators.

The European Union as a whole is also drawing up a list of individuals to hit with asset freezes and travel bans.

Lavrov singled out Lithuania for particular criticism, accusing its government and Lukashenko’s election rival Svetlana Tikhonovskaya of using “not quite democratic” political methods.

“In my opinion, our Lithuanian neighbours have gone beyond the pale,” Lavrov said.

After the controversial election, Lithuania granted Tikhonovskaya refuge and has been a vocal supporter of Belarusian protesters. — AFP

US police shoot and kill another black man

LOS ANGELES: US police have shot dead another black man, who they said had a handgun but had dropped it during a violent altercation in Los Angeles, triggering fresh outrage as tensions soar over racism and police brutality.

The man, named in local media as 29-year-old Dijon Kizzee, was riding his bicycle when Los Angeles County Sheriff’s deputies tried to stop him for an unspecified vehicle code violation on Monday afternoon.

He fled on foot, and when officers caught up with him he punched one deputy in the face, dropping some items of clothing he was carrying, police said.

“The deputies noticed that inside the clothing items that he dropped was a black semi-automatic handgun, at which time a deputy-involved shooting occurred,” Lieutenant Brandon Dean told reporters.

It was not clear if the man was reaching for the gun when he was shot. Dean said officials had yet to interview the deputies involved.

“So, he did not have the gun in his hand, it had already dropped to the ground, so when he was actually shot, he was unarmed at that point?” a reporter asked during the televised press conference. — AFP

City of London reviews monuments linked to slavery

LONDON: The City of London Corporation, which runs the British capital’s historic financial district, launched a public consultation on Tuesday on whether to remove or re-label monuments with links to slavery.

The corporation that runs the so-called Square Mile, which includes the Bank of England and St Paul’s Cathedral, said it wanted people’s views on “which landmarks they think are a problem and what action they would like to see taken”.

There have been nationwide calls to remove monuments linked to Britain’s colonial past following the toppling of a statue of Bristol slave trader Edward Colston during an anti-racism protest in the southwestern city in June.

It was one of many demonstrations around the world against discrimination and social injustice, sparked by the death in US police custody of an unarmed black man, George Floyd. The City of London Corporation’s three-month consultation is being promoted by its new Tackling Racism Taskforce, set up in June at the height of the Black Lives Matter protests.

It is seeking views from across Britain on landmarks, plaques, statues and street names, which will then be considered by a committee.

“We know that historical symbols continue to have an impact today and we want to understand how people feel about this aspect of our cultural history and whether such landmarks should be re-sited, reinterpreted or retained as they stand,” said taskforce co-chairman Andrien Meyers. — AFP

N Jersey and California allow indoor dining to resume, with limits

CALIFORNIA: New Jersey and California on Monday took a big step toward letting businesses resume their pre-pandemic lives, by allowing restaurants to begin limited indoor dining, as coronavirus cases abated nationwide even as some new hotspots emerged. Most states have already lifted restrictions on indoor, according to the National Governors Association.

New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy said restaurants and movie theatres could open for indoor service on Friday for the first time since the coronavirus shutdown began in March. But they must limit indoor patrons to 25 per cent of their capacity, and space seating between groups in accordance with social-distancing rules, Murphy said at a news conference.

“Masks are required to be worn at all times in the theater unless you’re pulling it down to put away a handful of popcorn,” Murphy said. In California, where overly optimistic reopening plans were rolled back as cases spiked

this summer, business owners worried that the pandemic would continue to impact them despite the loosened restrictions.

“It’s been an emotional roller-coaster from the get-go,” said Jeff Rossman, a chef who owns two restaurants in San Diego. Rossman, president of the San Diego Restaurant Association, does not plan an immediate opening for his eateries, Terra American Bistro and Bunz Gourmet Burger Joint, in part because he’s not sure enough customers will come back to justify the cost of remodeling interiors to meet coronavirus restrictions and hiring staff to serve customers indoors.

The company had been breaking even by offering food only to go during the tightest pandemic restrictions and participating in a state programme that provided restaurant meals to seniors, Rossman said. Opening up for patio service when that was allowed added to expenses and made it more challenging to keep the company in the black, Rossman said.



A customer carries take-out food from the TK Burger restaurant, as authorities encourage social distancing to prevent the spread of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in Huntington Beach, California. — Reuters

California’s new rules allow indoor dining in 19 counties, including San Diego, where transmission rates have begun to ease. Gyms, houses of worship and movie theaters in those counties are also open for indoor activities, with capacity restrictions. While indoor dining bans are still in effect in the California counties where most residents live, hair salons were allowed to reopen statewide on Monday, with modifications, under a system unveiled last week by Governor Gavin Newsom.

It’s illustrative of the two steps forward and one step back that has characterised attempts by states to manage the global pandemic. “There are a lot of lingering concerns, because we’ve been here before and had to shut back down,” said Jerry Sanders, president of the San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce. In New York City, once the epicenter of the US outbreak, Mayor Bill de Blasio ruled out a resumption of indoor dining anytime soon. — Reuters

Take care of each other, and never stop learning

W

ith almost nine months into a year that is earmarked as the worst year in the 21st century, the reality is that the novel coronavirus is still in charge and people are confounded by doubts despite reassurances from governments of a recovery from the pandemic.

Most people in the world have been affected directly or indirectly with heightened uncertainty over the economy, employment, finances, relationships, and of course, physical and mental health. They are stressed, anxious, and powerless over what tomorrow may bring.

None of us know exactly how and when this pandemic will end. Many infected people are still dying and their numbers are increasing incessantly amid questions about when it will end. This is the question that is constantly asked by every individual, family, community,

society and nation. Life has become volatile.

Even after three quarters of the year passed and the reason behind the breakout of the pandemic is still unknown, I think our immediate focus should be on strategies that will be a pathway to start the coming year afresh.

We should not forget the fact that despite our scientific and technological prowess and the unfathomable resources at our disposal, a virus invisible even to the naked eye has massively halted our normal life. So it should be seen as a reminder to further challenges in the future even as we keep making progress in science and research.

Health experts were quick to act on the outbreak of the coronavirus along with authorities to help stop the spread of infection and flatten the curve. Scientists who identified the virus immediately

Policymakers in Oman are prioritising their actions in order to be effective and efficient. The Sultanate's long-standing investment in promotion and support for entrepreneurship and its focus on creating a tech-savvy society looks to be paying dividends during the pandemic

suggested physical distancing, wearing masks, and quarantine as the ways to fight the microbe in the absence of a cure or vaccine.

Against this background and amidst

this global health crisis, policy makers should emphasise on the need for cutting-edge research and science education that are crucial in how we respond to future threats. Science-literate next generations could literally save us.

Science matters and we can see it in the care that our loved ones receive, in the skill of our healthcare providers, and in every aspect of our economic engines.

Policymakers in Oman are prioritising their actions in order to be effective and efficient. The Sultanate's long-standing investment in promotion and support for entrepreneurship and its focus on creating a tech-savvy society looks to be paying dividends during the pandemic.

Oman has set up a COVID-19 research programme with a clinical and public health scope covering areas including telemedicine, therapeutics and

diagnostics, as well as environmental impacts of the virus. All funded projects are planned to be executed in the coming months, aiming to produce applied and practical results.

No doubt, we will ultimately win the fight because our experts all over the world are working overtime to find a solution. In order to better prepare for the future, we should focus on what could happen if the unexpected, like the present COVID-19 situation arises.

The COVID-19 pandemic is forcing us to reconsider our hierarchy of values. Our need to be safe and healthy is preeminent because without these things we are not able to pursue our future needs.

While our endeavour should be to promote science and technology, stay safe and healthy, take care of each other, and never stop learning!



SAMUEL KUTTY

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Trump to visit city where police shot black man sparking violent protests

US president Trump to meet police in Kenosha, Wisconsin, on Tuesday as anti-racism protests continue across the United States

► Sunday August 23

Jacob Blake was seen in video being shot 7 times in the back at point-blank range by a white Kenosha police officer as he gets into his car containing his three children. A knife was later found in the car

Protesters set alight vehicles and damage county courthouse

► Monday Aug 24

National Guard deployed. Police fire teargas during confrontation with protesters outside Kenosha Court House



► Tuesday Aug 25

Blake's mother, Julia Jackson, calls for calm as her lawyer says her son may be permanently paralyzed
2 people shot dead, third wounded after groups clash during third night of protests

► Wednesday Aug 26

17-year-old arrested on murder charges over fatal shootings.
NBA basketball players, tennis star, Naomi Osaka, baseball and soccer players pull out of fixtures in protest. NBA matches postponed

► Thursday Aug 27

7 major league baseball games, Western & Southern Open tennis matches in New York, called off

► Saturday Aug 29

Daytime protest rally in Kenosha with family of Jacob Blake

► Tuesday Sept 1

President Trump to visit Kenosha and meet with police



Photos: AFP/Stephen Maturen

AFP

EU microplastics ban needs to aim smaller

KATE ABNETT

A draft EU ban on microplastics would allow industry to use even smaller particles in cosmetics, detergents and paints, which could be more damaging than the tiny pieces of plastic already clogging up the natural world, campaigners and some EU advisers say. The Commission, the EU executive, will next year seek a ban following a proposal from EU agency the European Chemicals Agency (ECHA) to prevent the addition of microplastics to certain products sold in Europe.

ECHA originally sought to prohibit microplastics with a minimum size of 1 nanometre (nm) for particles and 3 nm for fibres. But after input from expert groups and industry, it increased the minimum size for particles by 100 times to 100 nm.

Analysis by the non-profit network European Environmental Bureau (EEB), published on Tuesday, said this would allow companies to use smaller nanoplastic particles.

"It gives manufacturers a perverse incentive to switch production from micro to nanoplastic, which may be more harmful to human and animal health because it can more easily get inside and harm living cells," the EEB said.

ECHA said it increased the size limit to ensure the restriction could be enforced, after industry groups said it is not possible to monitor the smallest particles. European chemicals industry group CEFIC is among those seeking the exclusion of smaller nanoplastics from the ban.

"In many cases, the lower sizes are impossible to measure, which compromises the ability to implement and enforce the restriction," CEFIC said in an email. Most intentionally added microplastics are bigger than 100 nm, although smaller particles are added to some cosmetics and laundry detergents.

The Committee for Risk Assessment, an expert group advising the Commission, said there is a "significant knowledge gap," but research suggests smaller particles are more toxic and can penetrate deeply into the cells of marine life. Not banning these smaller particles "may lead to regrettable substitution to particles with smaller size," it said.

In Europe, around 42,000 tonnes of intentionally-added microplastics are released into the environment annually. Microplastics, which are also created when bigger pieces of plastic litter break up over time, have been found in almost all environments investigated, including polar sea ice and the deepest ocean trenches. — Reuters

Macron in high-stakes Lebanon reform drive

JEROME RIVET

F rench President Emmanuel Macron pressed his "risky" drive for political change in Lebanon on Tuesday, as the former French mandate marked its centenary while teetering on the brink of the abyss.

Macron has set an ambitious goal for his second visit since a deadly August 4 explosion ravaged Beirut: to press for change without being seen as a meddler.

He kicked off his trip on Monday, not by visiting political leaders, but by spending more than an hour with singing legend Fairuz, who at 85 is a rare unifying figure in Lebanon. Macron ticked off more symbols to mark 100 years on Tuesday since French mandate authorities proclaimed the creation of Greater Lebanon.

In the Jaj forest northeast of Beirut, he planted a cedar tree -- Lebanon's national symbol -- to express "confidence in the future of the country," his office said in a statement.

The French air force flew overhead leaving a trail of red, white and green smoke -- the colours of the country's flag.

Lebanon "will be able to rise again," Macron later said in a post on Twitter.

Macron then returned for a second visit to Beirut port, ground zero of the colossal blast that killed more than 180 people, wounded at least 6,500 others and laid waste to entire districts of the capital.

He oversaw the distribution of aid from the French helicopter carrier Tonnerre which arrived in Beirut on August 14.

Macron also met with some 400 French soldiers working with the

Lebanese army to clear thousands of tonnes of debris from the port, vital for a country whose food is 85 per cent imported.

The Beirut explosion compounded Lebanon's worst economic crisis since the 1975-1990 civil war, with a UN agency warning on Sunday that more than half of the population risk a food crisis by the end of the year.

It caused up to \$4.6 billion worth of damage and a blow to economic activity of up to \$3.5 billion, according to a World Bank assessment. On August 9, the international community pledged around \$300 million in emergency aid during a video conference jointly organised by France and the United Nations.

Macron said on Tuesday that he is ready to host a second aid conference for blast-hit Lebanon next month.

"I am ready for us to organise, maybe around mid or late October, another international support conference with the United Nations," he said after meeting UN representatives and local aid groups in Beirut.

Later, Macron will meet with under-fire political leaders widely blamed for the explosion, which was caused by a stockpile of ammonium nitrate fertiliser that had languished in the port for years.

Macron, who upon arriving on Monday called for a so-called "mission government", has said his position towards Lebanon's political establishment "is unchanged: demanding without interfering".

This is why he said it was not his place to "approve" of Monday's designation of Mustapha Adib as prime minister.

But Adib, a little known 48-year-old

diplomat who since 2013 had served as Lebanon's ambassador to Germany, "has to be given all the tools to succeed... so he can implement reforms" long demanded by the international community, Macron said on Tuesday.

Adib was named on Monday by political leaders widely seen as inept and corrupt by demonstrators who have taken to the streets in mass protests since October 17 against the entire political class.

The protest camp has already rejected the choice of Adib as premier, charging that he is too close to established political circles.

"No cabinet by or with the murderers" said posters brandished by demonstrators who waited for Macron outside Fairouz's home.

After a lunch with Aoun in the presidential palace on Tuesday, he will meet with representatives of the country's top nine political blocs in the second such talks since the blast.

Representatives of the Hezbollah movement will be among those meeting Macron.

The French president has justified his openness to "talk with everyone", including Hezbollah, by saying the group is "a political force that is represented in parliament".

With the protest camp warning against giving another lease of life to a hereditary ruling class that will only pay lip service to reform, Macron admitted in an interview that his brokering drive was a gamble.

"It's a risky bet I'm making, I am aware of it... I am putting the only thing I have on the table: my political capital," he told *Politico*. — AFP

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Miami Heat forward Jimmy Butler (22) shoots over Milwaukee Bucks center Brook Lopez (11) and forward Khris Middleton (22) during the fourth quarter in game one of the second round of the 2020 NBA Playoffs at The Field House. – USA Today Sports

BUTLER

shines as Heat shock top seeded Bucks

LOS ANGELES: Jimmy Butler seized control down the stretch, scoring a career-playoff high 40 points as the Miami Heat beat the Milwaukee Bucks in the opening game of their second round NBA playoff series on Monday.

Butler was a one-man wrecking crew, scoring 13 of Miami's final 16 points in the NBA's quarantine bubble in Orlando, Florida. He scored 27 of his 40 points in the second half.

Butler warned his teammates not to expect any passes with the game on the line.

"I told my teammates I probably wasn't going to pass the ball. I made a couple of shots and they said, 'That's fine with me,'" Butler said.

Butler is just the third player in Heat history with a 40-point game in the playoffs, joining LeBron James and Dwyane Wade.

"I took it up a level in the fourth. If that's what needs to happen every game, I have got to do it," he said.

Game two of the best-of-seven Eastern Conference series is



Milwaukee Bucks guard Pat Connaughton (24) dribbles against Miami Heat guard Goran Dragic (7) during the third quarter in game one of the second round of the 2020 NBA Playoffs at The Field House. – USA Today Sports

Wednesday in Orlando.

Goran Dragic added 27 points as he helped the Heat clamp down defensively which set the stage for Butler's offensive heroics.

With 52 seconds left, Dragic made a clutch defensive play by stealing the ball from Bucks star Giannis Antetokounmpo to preserve Miami's seven-point lead, 111-104.

Bam Adebayo had 12 points and 17 rebounds and rookie Tyler Herro tallied 11 points for the Heat, who swept the Indiana Pacers in the previous round.

Fifth seeded Miami found a way to contain reigning NBA most valuable player Antetokounmpo, who was limited to just 18 points.

It was the Greek superstar's fewest points in a playoff game since he was held to 12 by the Toronto Raptors in game three of the NBA semi-finals last season. He also missed eight of 12 free throws against the Heat.

Khris Middleton scored 28 points and Brook Lopez had 24 for the Bucks,

who also lost the opening game of their first round series before winning four straight to beat the Orlando Magic in five games. The Bucks came into the contest after setting a trend in the final week of the first round by staging a strike in order to draw awareness to police brutality and racial discrimination in America.

The Bucks' actions led to the NBA coming to an agreement with players on engaging in social justice initiatives.

After falling behind in the first quarter Miami stormed back, cutting Milwaukee's lead to 63-60 at halftime. The Heat took a 82-80 lead into the fourth quarter and then Butler carried them to the finish line.

Butler's 40 points came on 13-for-20 shooting and 12-for-13 shooting from the charity stripe. His previous playoff high was 36 points for Philadelphia against Brooklyn last season.

The winner will face either the defending champion Raptors or the Boston Celtics in the NBA's final four.

— AFP

Omani referees participate in virtual meeting of IKF

MUSCAT: Oman's international karate referees participated in the distance virtual meeting through video meeting platform which was conducted by the international karate federation on Saturday 29 August 2020.

The following international Referees participated:

Ahmed al Zakawani , Salim al Qutaiti, Hilal al Abdali, Suleiman al Hinai,Yusuf al Siyabi and Nesma Wnas.

The meeting was opened by Antonio Espinos the president of the International Karate Federation in presence of Khafiere Escalanti the head of Referees committee under the International Federation and the

participation of 300 international referees from 95 countries.

The president welcomed the attendees and wished them good luck in their Referring endeavour.

After that, they explained the procedures to be followed by everybody while dealing with COVID-19 which has spread recently. Khafiere Escalanti, the head of the Referees Committee, explained a number of points concerning registration procedures and renewing the international Refereeing license. Finally, they answered all inquiries and the attendees questions related to the international Refereeing Rules implemented from the beginning of January 2020.





OTTA EXPLAIN PRECAUTIONARY MEASURES BEFORE RESUMING TT SEASON

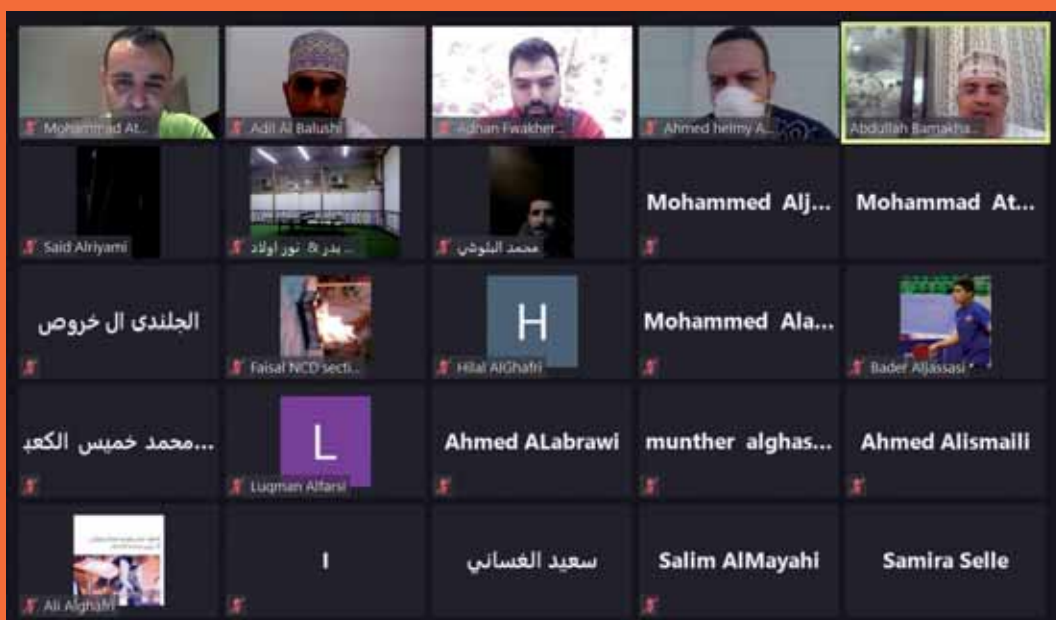
ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, SEPT 1

The Oman Table Tennis Association (OTTA) presented the medical protocol and the precautionary measures that should be implemented by all players after resumption of the table tennis activities through official government entities. The webinar which organised through "Zoom" platform on Monday featured participation of the OTTA board members, players, coaches, referees and junior player's parents.

Abdullah BaMukhalef, the chairman of OTTA, commenced the webinar with a welcoming note to all the attendees. "It is a great pleasure to see you all through this online communication channel and we hope everyone is under good health condition during this tough time. I congratulate table tennis family in Oman for the recent formation of Oman Table Tennis Association and we are looking forward to continue in our journey of development the sports in the Sultanate and boost it into top level.

The prepared medical protocol by our team is a significant subject where we would like everyone to pay full focus and attention with full implementation to avoid spreading of the COVID-19 after restarting the table tennis season in the coming period," OTTA chief said.

During the webinar, OTTA representatives said the medical protocol is in full compliance to the precautionary guidance of the International Table Tennis Federation (ITTF) and the domestic health sector in the Sultanate. They mentioned that the safety of players and all the related personnel in table tennis is the main priority by OTTA. Accordingly, the officials at OTTA are recommending all staff to follow the guidelines and



directives in all the table tennis venues including the sports clubs, junior talented centres and academies and convey the messages to the players.

The educational online workshop was explained to all the participants that the instructions and guidance's classified into three levels including the period of before, during and after the trainings or tournaments. In the next few days and weeks, the representatives of OTTA will do a full sanitising for all the table tennis equipment including the tables, balls, event barriers and the related items. Moreover, another round of sanitising should be implemented after completion of the training session or the tournaments. Besides that, the venue of the event will feature different awareness posters with samples on the proper way of doing the exercises and training without transferring the virus to others.

OTTA technical members advised all the players and coaches to avoid the double category trainings.

The recommendation was to the team members to ensure implementation of the social distancing even during the coach instructions to the player in the matches and tournaments. OTTA requested all the technical staff and team members to bring their own bags and advised them not to share the personal items to their colleagues including the towel and rest of the equipment.

The media representatives and photographers are advised to register their names and details at the organising committee prior to covering the event. Meanwhile, all the journalists and media members requested to follow all the precautionary measures including the social distancing and wearing the masks during the interviews.

Kohli says didn't miss cricket much during long coronavirus break



India's Virat Kohli reacts after losing his wicket. – Reuters

NEW DELHI: India skipper Virat Kohli has said he did not miss cricket as much as he expected during the months-long break caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

Kohli, who also captains Indian Premier League side Royal Challengers Bangalore, recently started training in the United Arab Emirates for the virus-delayed start of the glitzy Twenty20 tournament on September 19.

"When I had our practice session yesterday, it is (when) I realised how long it has been," Kohli said during an interview posted on RCB's YouTube channel on Tuesday.

"When I was heading towards the practice session, I felt nervous, bit jittery, but I was OK. Honestly, I didn't miss the game as much as I thought I might.

"Maybe because I'd been going on for nine, 10 years before that and this was the only break I was ever going to get (which was) that long."

Kohli and his wife Anushka Sharma, a Bollywood star, recently announced they were expecting their first child in January.

"The best thing was Anushka and myself were at home. We never got so much to spend together since we started seeing each other (in 2013)," Kohli said.

"Just being in your own home with the one you love, you couldn't ask for anything better. We just made the most of the whole time."

Kohli, one of the top batsmen in the world in all formats of the game, will remain in a bio-bubble with his Bangalore teammates throughout the 53-day tournament.

The competition is expected to be played behind closed doors, and Kohli said it will be an unusual setting.

"It is going to be strange, it is going to be new. Just the echo of (the) ball hitting the bat, I haven't experienced that since Ranji Trophy cricket back in 2010," the 31-year-old said, referring to India's domestic first-class championship.

But Kohli appeared confident that the players would adapt rapidly to the situation.

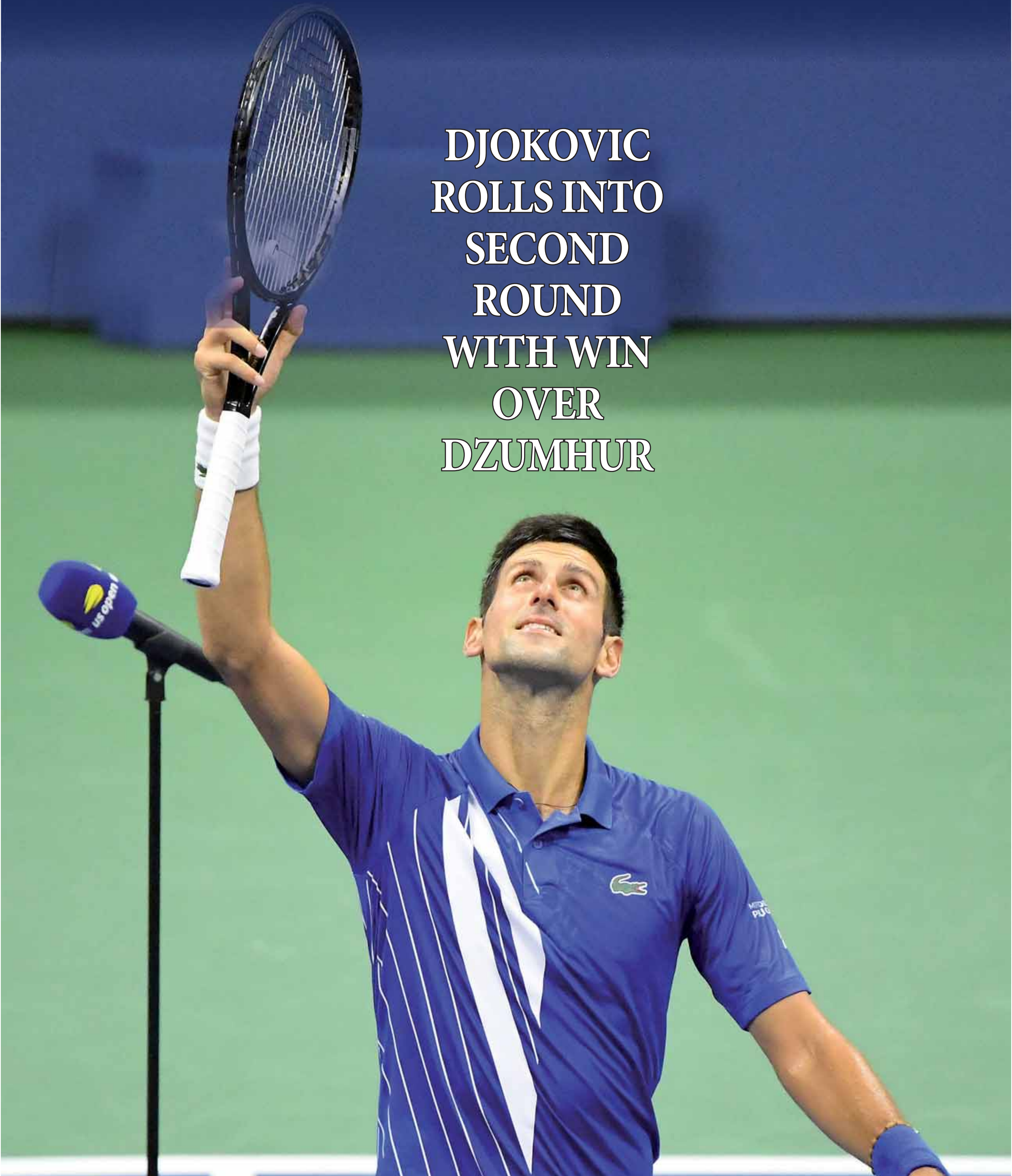
"We are... on the field doing what we do best," he said.

"So I think the instincts will kick in and the crowd factor will diminish quite quickly once we get into the action." — AFP

sport



DJOKOVIC ROLLS INTO SECOND ROUND WITH WIN OVER DZUMHUR



NEW YORK: Novak Djokovic got his campaign to win a fourth US Open, and 18th Grand Slam title overall, off to a flying start on Monday by beating Damir Dzumhur 6-1 6-4 6-1 to advance to the second round.

Djokovic broke Dzumhur's serve for a seventh time to seal the win in the first night match on Arthur Ashe Stadium court, which, due

to COVID-19, was missing the thousands of rowdy New York tennis fans that usually flock to Queens every year. After a dominant start, Djokovic struggled in the second set and lost his temper even after closing it out.

"I thought I started very well, a set and a break (up) then things got complicated," a masked Djokovic said in court-side interview.

"I lost my focus, he started missing less and he put some good variety in the game ... he came up with some good shots and it was anybody's game midway through the second set."

In the end Dzumhur, who hails from Bosnia and Herzegovina, had no answer to the world number one's blistering serve and stout defence in a match that lasted just under two

hours. The 28-year-old did not make it easy on himself, committing 41 unforced errors and eight double faults to fall to 0-3 lifetime against Djokovic.

With the win the Serbian, who won his fourth title of the year at the Western & Southern Open on Saturday, improved to 24-0 on the season. Djokovic's health had been a question coming into Monday's

match after he needed treatment on his neck at the Western & Southern Open but he said he had recovered.

"I feel fine, to be honest I did struggle a bit in the semis and final back-to-back but I had 48 hours to recover," said Djokovic, who resigned as head of the ATP's Player Council at the weekend and announced the formation of the Professional Tennis Players Association. — Reuters

business

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E-MARKETPLACE FOR OMANI SMES RECEIVES GOOD RESPONSE P14

MAERSK TO CUT JOBS IN MAJOR REORGANISATION P15

SOFTBANK DIVESTITURES SET STAGETO SHOP AGAIN SOON P16

Australian mining firm acquires major stakes in Omani copper blocks

INVESTMENT APPETITE: UK-registered Savannah Resources divests interests in copper-rich Blocks 4 and 5 in favour of Australia’s Force Commodities

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, SEPT 1

The UK-registered mineral resource development firm Savannah Resources has announced the complete divestment of its stakes in two copper-rich blocks in the Sultanate in favour of Force Commodities, an Australian listed firm.

However, a share purchase agreement reached by the two sides guarantees seller Savannah Resources exposure to the upside once the Omani copper projects enter into production.

London-headquartered Savannah, whose shares are listed on the Alternative Investment Market (AIM) of the London Stock Exchange, announced on Tuesday that its move to divest from the Sultanate follows the completion of a “strategic review”, the upshot of which was a decision to focus on its flagship lithium mining project in Portugal.

The divestment, once formalised and approved by regulatory authorities, will result in the acquisition by Force Commodities of Savannah’s rights to Blocks 4 and 5 covering an area of over 1,000 sq kilometres spanning the copper-

As part of the divestment transaction, Force Commodities will issue 50,000,000 new ordinary shares (deemed issue price of 1 cent per Force share), as well as make a preferential payment of AUD\$3,500,000 of an existing loan from cash flow from production

rich Semail Ophiolite region. The belt is known to host clusters of moderate to high-grade copper deposits associated with gold and other metallurgical ores, according to experts.

Prior to its divestment Savannah held a 65 per cent interest in Block 5 via its shareholding in Al Fairuz Mining, and a 51 per cent stake in Block 4 via its shareholding in Al Thuraya Mining. Located within easy access of the Port of Sohar, Block 5 has a current Indicated and Inferred Mineral Resource of 1.7 metric tonnes (Mt) at 2.2 per cent copper (Cu), split between the Mahab 4 deposit (1.51Mt at a grade of 2.1 per cent Cu) and the



(Image for illustration only)

Maqail South deposit (0.16Mt at a grade of 3.8 per cent copper).

The Mahab 4 deposit also includes a high-grade zone of 0.5Mt at 4.5 per cent Cu. Mining licences for the development of the blocks are still awaited from the Ministry of Energy and Minerals.

As part of the divestment transaction, Force Commodities will issue 50,000,000 new ordinary shares (deemed issue price of 1 cent per Force share), as well as make a preferential payment of AUD\$3,500,000 of an existing loan from cash flow from production. Force has also pledged a payment of a 1 per cent net smelter royalty

on future metal sales, thereby ensuring that Savannah retains exposure to the economic success of the two blocks.

In a statement, David Archer, Savannah’s CEO said: “With the Company’s focus moving to the further development and subsequent commercialisation

of the Mina do Barroso Lithium project in Portugal, which continues to increase in significance from a European battery value chain perspective, an opportunity has arisen to divest our Omani Copper Projects to Australian listed company Force Commodities. The divestment allows us to retain exposure to the upside of the Projects through the shareholding in Force, together with a loan and royalty payable when the Projects go into production.

Simon Pooley, Force’s CEO added: “The acquisition of the (Omani) projects is a major milestone in cementing Force’s position as a multi-commodity exploration and development company and represents the first step in our strategy of establishing the Company as a copper producer. The transaction provides Force with exposure to one of the most prospective Ophiolite belts in the world.”

“We believe that with the application of systematic exploration and further commercial transactions, the opportunity exists in Oman to become a significant mid-tier copper producer,” he stated.

Model villages to catalyse fisheries activities on Oman’s east coast

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, SEPT 1

Two model Fishermen’s Villages being developed with the support of the Ministry of Agricultural Wealth, Fisheries and Water Resources promise to catalyse fisheries activities at promising locations along Oman’s South Al Sharqiyah and Duqm coasts.

The first such project is under construction at Al Sayadin in the Wilayat of Duqm in Wusta Governorate. Covering an area of 4,573 sq metres, the village will provide a base for about 500 fishermen from the governorate operating full-time.

According to the Ministry, the decision to locate the model village at Al Sayadin stems from the abundance of fisheries in the coastal waters off Duqm Wilayat, as well as the importance of fishing as a year-round activity not limited to a particular season. Besides shrimp, the coastal waters are also rich in kingfish and sardine, among other species. Fish production from Al Wusta totalled RO 74.961 million in value last year.

A second village is under construction on Masirah Island in South Al Sharqiyah Governorate. Set on an area of 4,537 square metres, the



model village will capitalise on the area’s rich fisheries resources.

Both villages will be equipped with all of the requisite essential infrastructure and amenities, including fully serviced residential buildings and mosque. A third site is being assessed for the establishment

of another Fishermen’s Village in the Wilayat of Mahout, also in South Al Sharqiyah Governorate.

The model villagers are designed not only to provide a safe working haven for Omani fishermen from the east coast, but also exploit the rich fisheries potential of these coastal waters. The initiative also seeks to deter unlicensed expatriate workers from working in the fisheries sector in these areas. — ONA

Euro zone inflation turns to negative in August

BRUSELS: Euro zone consumer prices fell in August, official data showed on Tuesday, with inflation in negative territory for the first time since May 2016 as a result of plummeting demand due to the coronavirus crisis.

The EU’s Eurostat data agency said inflation fell to negative 0.2 per cent in August, a steep drop from a positive 0.4 per cent in July and even further off the official target of near two per cent.

The descent into deflationary territory comes despite historic stimulus measures by the European Central Bank to stimulate prices and breathe life into the European economy.

The ECB, led by Christine Lagarde, has pumped in 1.35 trillion euros as well as cut interest rates to negative levels in order to keep borrowing costs low and boost demand.

“The data released today put the ECB’s challenge in stark relief,” said Jack Allen-Reynolds,

Senior Europe Economist at Capital Economics. “Monetary policy in the Euro zone will need to remain extremely loose for many more years to come,” he added.

The step into deflation puts even more pressure on governments to increase public spending to restore demand and the economy.

Some European capitals have already opened the money taps, with the German government leading the way in efforts to jump start its coronavirus recovery.

EU leaders agreed on a huge recovery plan for Europe but this would not kick in until early next year at the earliest, with the details yet to be worked out.

Eurostat also said that in July, the unemployment rate stood at 7.9 per cent compared to 7.7 per cent in June, but it stressed that its method of calculation does not fully account for the consequences of the virus-related confinement. — AFP

The ECB has pumped in 1.35 trillion euros as well as cut interest rates to negative levels in order to keep borrowing costs low and boost demand



Al Amerat officials
visit Haya Water
sewage system



MUSCAT:
Suleiman bin
Khamis al Qasbi
(pictured),
Haya Water
Acting CEO,
met with Shaikh
Mohammed
bin Humaid al

Ghabshi, Wali of Wilayat Al Amerat, Municipality Affairs Committee members and the Assistant Director-General of Al Amerat, in the presence of Haya Water’s general managers and officials.

The meeting is aimed at briefing them on the sewage project progress in this wilayat, as well as the services provided by the company. They also discussed the treated water drainage which is streaming in Wadi Al Amerat.

They also paid a site visit to Al Amerat Sewage Treatment (STP), pumping stations and the treated water drainage system in the area.

Shaikh Mohammed bin Humaid al Ghabshi said, “I am pleased to come along with the Municipal Affairs Committee members to know more about the sewage projects status in the Wilayat. Moreover, we discussed with the Haya Water’s official the way forward to increase the afforestation in the wilayat through using the treated water.

Al Ghabshi extended his sincere thanks to the Acting CEO and Haya Water officials for their cooperation and listening to the wilayat representatives’ opinions, as well as discussing the practical solutions that are expecting to enhance the sewage system in the wilayat.

Suleiman bin Khamis al Qasbi, Acting CEO, said: “This meeting comes to consolidating trust between the company and the wilayat’s residents by explaining to them the company’s projects and services. We had listened to their opinions and views regarding the current and the future projects.

E-marketplace for Omani SMEs
receives good response

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, SEPT 1

Souqmazoon.com, an e-marketplace launched recently to primarily support SMEs and Omani products, has registered positive success after receiving an encouraging response from the local market.

Offering immense value to shoppers in Oman, Souqmazoon has recorded encouraging growth in its customer base within a month of launching the platform. Souqmazoon has also achieved an increase of SMEs registrations by 60 per cent.

While the Souqmazoon app has achieved an increase in downloads, the e-marketplace has evoked growing traction on social media platforms too. With a varied selection of products that are mostly sourced and produced in Oman, the portal souqmazoon.com is devised to cater to the discerning taste of the evolving online shoppers.

Souqmazoon works with a number of Omani organisations coming together to provide a seamless ecosystem that supports the souq’s operations, delivering a secure and efficient selling and buying experience.

Key stakeholders include Asyad Express (Logistics), Bank Muscat (Payment Gateway), Oman Data Park (Hosting) and Qaid Al Ard Modern Projects LLC (Technology Partner).



Yaqob Salim al Rawahi, owner of Karak Baitna which offers different flavours of karak chai and is one of the vendors on Souqmazoon says, “During these modern times, SMEs must keep abreast of the latest technology and adopt its efficacy to grow in their business. I am proud of being a part of this electronic platform which has Omani products, and which promotes local SMEs.

As for my experience with Souqmazoon goes, I have been

able to save time and effort in the sales and management side of the business. I appreciate the team at Souqmazoon for being in touch with us always and would like to thank them for the same. I would like to invite all local vendors to join Souqmazoon and experience their professionalism.”

Jaffer Nasser al Sawafi, a customer of Souqmazoon said, “I prefer online shopping because it is convenient and easy. You can order

from the comforts of your home and is of great help especially during the current COVID-19 situation.

Having shopped through Souqmazoon I must say it offers an easy to navigate, seamless, professional, and user-friendly shopping experience. It has a wide range of products and offers fast delivery and amazing customer service.”

Lauding Souqmazoon, Shatha Abdullah al Jabri, Marketing

With a varied selection of products that are mostly sourced and produced in Oman, the portal souqmazoon.com is devised to cater to the discerning taste of the evolving online shoppers.

Director at Meshan Date Sweets, one of Souqmazoon vendors said, “I am delighted to be part of the impressive e-marketplace which offers buyers a safe interface for viewing and purchasing our products.

The portal helps SMEs to save on costs and reach out to customers across the country. The impact of COVID-19 has made online shopping more popular and we are fortunate to be part of a proficient and dependable platform which provides ease to customers and opportunities to SMEs.”

With a broad range of Omani products, Souqmazoon encourages shoppers to buy locally sourced products. The platform approach is built on the strong belief that supporting local products and businesses will have a significant positive economic and societal impact and add to the diversity of products and services available to the community.

Omran Group’s W Muscat receives ‘LEED Gold’ certification



BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, SEPT 1

W Muscat, owned and developed by Omran Group, has recently received the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED Gold) — certification by the US Green Building Council. The luxury property secured a Gold Certification for incorporating sustainable approach in various construction aspects, including water efficient landscaping, utilisation of environmental-friendly materials and innovative water usage technology.

W Muscat is the fifth project in Omran Group’s portfolio across the country to hold a LEED certification. This accreditation was previously achieved by Alila Jabal Al Akhdar Resort, Atana Musandam

Resort, Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre (Package Two — Exhibition Centre) and the Crown Plaza Hotel Muscat, OCEC.

“W Muscat is an architectural masterpiece as it brings a new definition to the word ‘luxury’. Omran Group is proud to have set a new benchmark that reflects its promise of delivering an experience so premium that our guests are awestruck,” said Stuart Ingram, Senior Vice President of Development Management at Omran Group. “

Sustainability is at the fore of any project Omran undertakes. All developments of Omran adhere to stringent environmental and HSE guidelines to limit the negative impact on the Sultanate’s natural resources and reduce the

carbon footprint. The LEED Gold Certification serves as a testament of our commitment to creating a sustainable tourism infrastructure and future for the Sultanate,” he added further.

“It is becoming more important than ever for us to consciously assess our business practices from a sustainability point of view. Our key priority is to ensure W Muscat positively contributes towards the preservation of our environment and the ecosystem we function in.

Living in a country like Oman, with such natural beauty, we are inspired to continue doing more everyday in the area of sustainability through our fruitful collaboration with Omran Group,” said Gerald Chevasson, General Manager of W Muscat.

BUSINESS ALERT

Catch the excitement with
your favourite Toyota

MUSCAT: Own a Toyota and benefit with stylish exteriors, comfortable interiors, advanced technology, leading safety and more. Every Toyota vehicle, serves as an inspiration for quality, durability and dependability. Besides, they are also packed with a range of advanced features and technologies making them an absolute delight for a memorable ownership period.

Indeed owning a Toyota is a joy unlike any other. If you are looking forward to owning a Toyota, then don’t miss the excitement across the range at any Toyota showroom.

All-new Highlander: Toyota Highlander, a sophisticated 7-seater SUV brings a new level of bold, distinctive design to a foundation built on safety, comfort, quality, durability and reliability. Highlander amplifies all qualities while taking on a dramatic new design direction that combines a powerful SUV presence with sophisticated detailing. The Highlander is equipped with Panoramic Moonroof, 8” Navigation System, 7” Multi Information Display, Leather Seat Material with Front Seat Air Conditioner, Toyota Safety Sense, Power Back Door and more.



National Bank of Oman ties up with
Alshaya Group to offer customers more

CONTINUING to make banking rewarding, National Bank of Oman (NBO) has tied up with Alshaya Group to offer its customers 25 per cent off at their favourite stores. Up until September 12, 2020, customers paying using their NBO debit, credit, or Badeel prepaid card, can take advantage of the offer, simply by spending a minimum of between RO 35 and RO 65. Participating stores include Debenhams, Foot Locker, American Eagle, Next, Mothercare and Justice.

Maha al Raisi, Head of Card Business at NBO, said, “At NBO we are always trying to find ways to make banking more rewarding for our customers, while benefiting their everyday lives. Our latest partnership with Alshaya Group which offers an unparalleled choice of well-loved international brands, is an added value to our services and products. The best part is, customers don’t even have to bank with NBO to benefit, as long as they are using an NBO Badeel prepaid card.”

One of the leading banks in Oman, NBO continues to add to its growing portfolio of local and international partnerships, while reinforcing its commitment to offer solutions that meet the ever-evolving needs of its customers.



Sohar International wins Best Performing
Bank in Oman award by Banker magazine

IN a resounding endorsement of its stellar leadership and lofty growth ambitions, Sohar International has been awarded the prestigious ‘Best Performing Banks’ in Oman Award by the UK based Financial Times monthly publication — The Banker, in the Top 100 Arab Bank 2020 Awards. In recognition of the 2019 financial performance, the bank also ranked 3rd in Oman for Tier 1 Capital, 2nd in Oman for Capital Assets, and 58th in the Middle East for Tier 1 Capital.

Ahmed al Musalmi, Chief Executive Officer of Sohar International, said: “We are delighted to be recognised as the Best Performing Bank in Oman by the Banker (Financial Times) which attests our leadership within the banking sector in Oman. At Sohar International, every decision we take is supported by market insights, diligent research, and strategic direction. This award is a true testament to our resilient growth strategy that strongly aligns with our brand vision — positioning Sohar International as a world-leading Omani service company that helps customers, communities and people to prosper and grow. Though this recognition comes at a time when economic conditions are challenging, Sohar International has weathered the storm and continues to emerge strong.”



IN BRIEF

Unemployment in Germany stabilises in August



A man exchanges a drill in a miller at the training workshop of Ford Motor Co in Cologne. — Reuters

FRANKFURT: German unemployment held steady in August, official data showed on Tuesday, as Europe's largest economy adapted to life after lockdowns imposed to curb the coronavirus pandemic.

The jobless rate ticked up slightly to 6.4 per cent from 6.3 per cent in July, the BA federal labour agency said, signalling a plateau after a marked rise in unemployment in the early period of the pandemic.

Before the coronavirus struck, unemployment had hovered at around five per cent, record lows since reunification. In August 2019, unemployment was 5.1 per cent.

The BA blamed the summer break for the rise in unemployment in August.

"Unemployment rose at the usual rate in August, meaning there was no additional coronavirus-related increase in unemployment from July. Nevertheless, the effects of the pandemic on the labour market are still very clearly visible," said Detlef Scheele, Chairman of the labour agency. Unemployment may continue to rise as companies restructure and the post-corona economy takes shape. German carrier Lufthansa, Europe's largest airline by passengers, said it may cut 22,000 jobs and tour operator giant TUI says it will lay off 8,000 workers. — AFP

Geely Auto seeks \$3 billion Shanghai STAR Market listing



A building of the Geely Auto Research Institute is seen in Ningbo, Zhejiang province, China. — Reuters

SHANGHAI: Geely Automobile Holdings plans to raise 20 billion yuan (\$2.93 billion) from a public share sale on Shanghai's Nasdaq-style STAR Market to invest in new car models and technologies, exchange filings showed on Tuesday.

China's highest-profile automaker, thanks to parent group investments in Daimler AG and Volvo Cars, has set its sights on bolstering its global credentials with plans to revamp factories at home and abroad using manufacturing platforms developed with Volvo Cars.

It also aims to start European exports this year of sport-utility vehicle 01 under its premium Lynk & Co brand.

The Hangzhou-based automaker, controlled by billionaire chairman Li Shufu, posted first-half net profit down 43 per cent at 2.3 billion yuan as sales slumped by 19 per cent to 530,446 vehicles, hit by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Geely is targeting full-year sales of about 1.32 million vehicles, down 3 per cent from 2019, helped by a second-half recovery in demand after the easing of coronavirus lockdowns.

Under merger talks that were suspended in July, Geely's parent group had planned to merge the automaker with affiliate Volvo Cars and list the combined business in Hong Kong and possibly Stockholm.

Geely's Hong Kong-listed shares trade at 22 times trailing earnings, compared with STAR Market's average earnings multiple of 96.

Its Shanghai listing plan could also boost the company's Hong Kong-traded shares. — Reuters

Big Oil's patchy deals record casts shadow over green makeover

LONDON: As major oil companies prepare to spend billions on renewable energy assets to stay relevant in a low-carbon future, the industry's patchy track record on takeovers is a red flag for some investors.

Ten years ago, the world's top energy companies were spending billions of dollars on major oil and gas assets and costly drilling programmes in remote parts of the world in a relentless drive to produce more.

Fast forward through an oil price crash in 2014 followed by the fallout from the coronavirus pandemic this year and some big oil companies are counting the cost of the spending spree — as are their shareholders.

When Shell bought BG Group for \$54 billion in 2016 in the midst of the price crash, Chief Executive Ben van Beurden made a compelling case to investors: The deal would support Shell's dividend under almost any imaginable oil price scenario.

Four years later, with the world gripped by an unexpected global pandemic, the Anglo-Dutch company has slashed its dividend for the first time since the Second World War and suspended what was the world's biggest share buyback programme.

For investors, the deal crowned a decade of disappointing takeovers, from Exxon Mobil's \$30 billion acquisition of North American natural gas producer XTO in 2009 to Repsol's \$8.3 billion takeover of Canada's Talisman Energy just months before the 2014 crash to Occidental Petroleum's ill-timed \$38 billion bet on shale producer Anadarko last year.

Now, with European policymakers cracking down on greenhouse gas emissions, the region's major oil companies have promised to reinvent themselves as low-carbon power suppliers that would thrive in a world of clean energy.

To hit their goals in time, though, they will almost inevitably have to chase a relatively small pool of renewable energy assets in competition with big utility



An oil field is pictured in Kern County, California. — AFP

Ten years ago, the world's top energy companies were spending billions of dollars on major oil and gas assets and costly drilling programmes in remote parts of the world in a relentless drive to produce more

companies at a time valuations are going through the roof.

And some investors worry that history will repeat itself.

"The majors have been poor capital allocators for the better part of the past 20 years", said Chris Duncan, an analyst at Brandes Investment Partners which has shares in several European oil firms. "I'm nervous... usually when companies transition to a different market the transition is not a profitable process".

BP and Total will present details about their new strategies to investors this month. Repsol will hold its strategy day in November

and Shell's will be in February.

The collapse in oil prices since COVID-19 struck has also forced the big companies to wipe billions of dollars off the value of their assets and it has also hit revenue to the point they've taken on more debt to keep up payments to shareholders.

Shell, for example, cut \$16.8 billion off the value of its assets, which included a big chunk of the flagship QCLNG liquefied natural gas (LNG) plant in Australia it acquired through the BG deal.

All told, the world's top energy companies have booked asset writedowns totalling \$60 billion this

year following the slide in oil prices and demand during the coronavirus pandemic.

And since 2005, the combined debt of the top five global oil majors, which include Shell, BP and Total, has risen five fold to \$370 billion. That means much of the cash they will generate in the coming years will probably go towards cutting debt.

So oil companies chase renewable assets such as wind, solar and hydro, which generally have lower returns than oil and gas — or invest in green projects from scratch — they'll be starting from an already highly leveraged position.

Some analysts said that with record debts, an uncertain outlook for oil prices and a weak deal-making record, the big oil companies face a tough task getting investors on board.

"The European majors in particular will have to earn the right to invest more in renewables, and convince investors they will not make the same mistakes again, and again", said RBC Capital Markets analyst Biraj Borkhataria.

"When Shell acquired BG Group, a key quote from Shell's Chief Executive stuck with us: 'Bold, strategic moves shape our industry'. Unfortunately, many of the 'bold' moves from management teams in recent years have proven to destroy value over the long term for shareholders", he said. — Reuters

Shipping giant Maersk to cut jobs in major reorganisation

COPENHAGEN: Maersk will cut jobs in a major shake-up that will affect a third of the shipping giant's staff as it seeks to integrate its seaborne container and in-land logistics businesses, it said on Tuesday.

Maersk, which handles about one in five containers shipped worldwide, has been under pressure from investors to speed its transformation from an unwieldy conglomerate but has proved resilient in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Cost cuts and its reinstatement of more upbeat guidance last month have helped to double its share price since March and the shares were trading 0.9 per cent up at 9,652 crowns by 0835 GMT.

The company sold its oil and gas assets in 2017 to Total as part of its efforts to become a more streamlined company focused on its container and in-land logistics business for large customers such as Walmart and Nike.

Under the shake-up, its Damco freight-forwarding business and Africa-focused carrier Safmarine will be integrated into Maersk by the end of the year and their brands will cease to exist, Maersk said in a



The MV Maersk Mc-Kinney Moller container ship arrives at the harbour of Rotterdam, in this file photo. — Reuters

The company sold its oil and gas assets in 2017 to Total as part of its efforts to become a more streamlined company focused on its container and in-land logistics business for large customers

statement on Tuesday.

"Simplifying the organisation

will regrettably impact jobs due to duplicate roles and roles that will no longer be needed", Chief Commercial Officer Vincent Clerc said earlier in an internal email sent to Maersk employees.

A Maersk spokeswoman said that between 26,000 and 27,000 employees out of Maersk's total headcount of 80,000 will be affected by the restructuring.

The company did not say how many would be laid off and the internal email also gave no detail on the number of job cuts. — Reuters

Euro heads for \$1.20 as dollar sell-off gathers pace

LONDON: The euro neared the \$1.20 mark after it scaled another 28-month high and the dollar slipped to a multi-year low as investors bet the Federal Reserve's policy framework meant US rates would stay low for longer.

The euro reached \$1.1997 in Asian trading hours, its strongest since May 2018, taking its gains to 7.5 per cent in three months.

The Fed's announcement last week that it would tolerate periods of higher inflation and focus more on average inflation and higher employment has encouraged traders to sell the dollar.

US political uncertainty ahead of November's presidential election and concerns about US economic recovery have also weakened the greenback, with the euro the biggest beneficiary.

Euro zone flash inflation data for August was lower than expected as energy prices fell sharply but it did not reverse the euro's gains.

ING analysts said "no imminent response from the ECB (European Central Bank)



is likely and as the US dollar outlook remains unappealing, the bias remains for higher EUR/USD this week". The euro was last up 0.3 per cent at \$1.1976.

The dollar index — which measures the US currency against a basket of rivals — was down 0.3 per cent at 91.917 at 1020 GMT after earlier hitting its lowest since April 2018.

PIMCO money managers said the dollar was "set to decline further" as the Fed keeps rates very low for years.

In previous depreciation cycles, they said the real trade-weighted dollar had fallen some 15 per cent to 20 per cent relative to current levels but even then the dollar would only be "marginally undervalued". — Reuters



✱ QUARTERLY DECREASE

UK jobs fall by largest number since 2009 crisis

It's leading up to a major jobs crisis in the UK with employment dropping by the largest amount, in the second quarter, since the aftermath of the global financial crisis, according to the Office for National statistics (ONS). Employment decreased by 220,000 on the quarter, in what was the largest quarterly decrease since May to July 2009. There were 730,000 fewer people on company payroll in July compared with March, before the COVID-19 lockdown.

The ONS said: "The decrease in employment on the quarter was the largest quarterly decrease since May to July 2009 with both men and women seeing decreases on the quarter. This decrease in employment was also driven by workers aged 65 years and over, the self-employed and part-time workers. Meanwhile full-time employees largely offset the decrease".

A large number are estimated to be

THE SURVEY SHOWS EMPLOYMENT IS WEAKENING AND UNEMPLOYMENT IS LARGELY UNCHANGED BECAUSE OF INCREASES IN ECONOMIC INACTIVITY, WITH PEOPLE OUT OF WORK BUT NOT CURRENTLY LOOKING FOR WORK

temporarily away from work, including approximately 7.5 million on furlough in June, with more than 3 million of these being away for three months or longer. "The survey shows employment is weakening and unemployment is largely unchanged because of increases in economic inactivity, with people out of work but not currently looking for work", the ONS said.

Senior labour market adviser for the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), Gerwyn Davies, said the figures were "disappointing in many respects". He said: "The sharp fall in employment highlights a dramatic deterioration for the employment

prospects of young people, part-time workers and older workers in particular". Until now, huge drops in unemployment had been masked by the government's Job Retention scheme. Debapratim De, senior economist at Deloitte, said that the "furlough scheme has continued to keep the UK's unemployment rate in check". However, with the emergency COVID-19 support coming to an end in October, another surge of job cuts could be imminent. Davies warned that the "real concern" is that this was just the "first wave of bad news for the job markets".

Davies said: "The fact that reduced hiring rather than increased firing of

permanent staff is the main cause of the jobs showdown to date bodes ill for the coming months if more employers turn to redundancies as a last resort". Peter Schaffrik and team, analysts at RBC Capital Markets, said in a note recently: "From July onwards the government's furlough scheme is beginning to be wound down so these labour market indicators should deteriorate further in coming months."

CIPD released a survey of 2,000 businesses that found a third of UK businesses plan to cut jobs from July to September. The level of cuts is likely to be more severe in the private sector, the report found, with twice as many private-sector employers expecting to make redundancies, compared with the public sector.

Among the most significant recent announcements of job cuts were from retail giants Marks & Spencer and Debenhams who plan to reduce staff by

7,000 and 2,500 respectively. NatWest Bank plan to cut 550 jobs with intentions of moving away from branches to a more digital strategy. The bank will be looking for branch managers and personal bankers to leave voluntarily. "We have to respond to changing customer behaviour and the rising customer demand for digital banking services", a spokeswoman for the bank said.

She added: "We have taken the decision to invite applications for voluntary redundancy and will support those colleagues who apply with a comprehensive support package. There will be no compulsory redundancy as a result of this announcement. Our ways of working had been evolving, even before the coronavirus pandemic. We have been reviewing our London property strategy to better reflect how we will work in the future".

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



ANDY JALIL
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✱ OFFICE RETURN



A woman wearing a face mask crosses a bridge in front of One Canada Square in Canary Wharf, in London.

– Reuters

Why bank branches may get a new lease of life

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the shift to online banking in Europe, but it has also given some suburban branches an unexpected new purpose — as alternative office spaces for staff reluctant to commute to big HQs in city centres.

Lenders have been slowly cutting the number of often unprofitable branches for years, but opposition from unions and politicians over leaving people without access to a physical outlet meant many were unable to cut on the scale they wanted.

Some are now looking to speed up closures to cut costs and better weather the crisis, including Credit Suisse and Commerzbank.

But others are changing tack. They are looking to take advantage of part of their networks of physical outposts to help adapt their businesses to the new reality.

"Banks will try to change them rather than just closing a huge number of unprofitable branches", said Daniel Dawson, an associate at banking research firm RBR.

In Britain, Virgin Money said it was identifying branches where office staff who live locally could work rather than travelling into city centre offices, while Santander's UK unit said it was exploring a similar approach.

Lloyds, the UK's biggest domestic bank, said it would launch "experiments" to test "how, where and when" its more than 60,000 employees could work from October.

"There's a lot of conversations (within banks) about well-being, particularly in the winter months. The branch network can play a really vital role if it's a safer environment to commute to", said Sarah-Jane Osborne, a partner at property consultancy Arcadis, who has been advising banks.

The number of bank branches in the European Union fell from around 238,000 in 2008 to 174,000 at the end of 2018 according to the European Banking Federation.

The decline is likely to continue, as the overriding trend in banking is customers increasingly moving online — and this has only quickened during the pandemic.

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Yet for some lenders, the new challenges posed by the pandemic are giving pause for thought.

"I think COVID-19 presents a new lease of life for branches specifically", said John Cronin, banking analyst at Goodbody, who said he knew of several British banks considering allowing office staff to work from branches.

In Britain, banks have disclosed plans to close around 265 branches so far this year, according to data from consumer group Which?, well short of the peak of 868 in 2017.

The COVID-19 crisis is also accelerating some banks' plans to remodel their branches.

RBR's Dawson predicts, for example,

that other lenders could follow the example of TSB, part of Spanish bank Sabadell, in phasing out lower-grade frontline positions, and look instead to bring in more advisory services.

"Doing less basic transactions allows branch staff to concentrate on other things like advice and sales which are more profitable for the banks", said Dawson, adding banks could roll out more automated or video services that allow customers to withdraw large amounts of cash or get a replacement debit card.

In Germany, regional lender Volksbank Stuttgart is now planning to repurpose eight — about a tenth — of its branches, with half offering only advisory services, and the others becoming self-service centres without any staff.

"Customers are changing their behaviour and it's an open secret that banks are making changes", said board member Michael Huppert.

Oldenburgische Landesbank in northern Germany has accelerated plans to bundle customer support services into larger locations, while transforming smaller branches into self-service facilities or closing them.

"The coronavirus pandemic has affected the timing of the conversion for a few branches", said Svenja-Marie Gnida, who sits on the bank's supervisory board.

In September, the bank is opening a new adviser centre in Oldenburg that will house several hundred staff for video, telephone, app and online services.

André Hasken of ZEB Consulting said the pandemic had focused lenders' minds on how to squeeze the most business out of branches.

"Banks are basically asking themselves how they want to design the branch of the future", he added. — Reuters

✱ BOLD QUEST

SoftBank divestitures set stage to shop again soon

Masayoshi Son's latest quirky results presentation drew on lessons from Japanese military history. Although unicorns might have been more representative of the SoftBank founder's cavalry charges than horses, as one analyst noted, the broader point was to illustrate the cash his Japanese tech and technology company was raising to shore up defences. The question is how long before Son embarks on another bold quest for investments.

Since unveiling plans in March to dispose of up to \$41 billion of assets, SoftBank has been moving apace. Offloading a slug of wireless operator T-Mobile US and selling down Alibaba raised some \$37 billion. SoftBank is now arranging to sell a 22 per cent stake, valued at some \$14 billion, in its eponymous Japanese mobile carrier.

That will take it well past the target. And a divestiture of chip designer Arm — purchased in 2016 for \$32 billion — is on the cards, too.

That harvest, plus accompanying stock buybacks and debt reduction at the urging of pushy hedge fund Elliott Management, helped SoftBank's share price more than double. Cash on hand matters in times of economic strife, too.

It's a tactical manoeuvre for an aggressive buyer like Son, but none of the deals suggest any change in his longtime, overarching strategy of backing entrepreneurs promising to change the world.

He must be getting itchy, especially as the giant Vision Fund he oversees is also cleaning up its portfolio with exits and internal restructurings. Deploying over \$10 billion into big, publicly traded technology companies such as Facebook, as SoftBank has announced, hardly seems likely to satisfy his ambition. That notion is underscored by the company's declaration last month that it considers operating profit "not useful" as a measure and wants to focus instead on valuations.

In that case, SoftBank's challenge will be to outperform the market. Its recent 107 per cent stock price gain outpaced the 25 per cent delivered by the benchmark Topix index and 72 per cent from the tech-heavy Nasdaq Composite.

Over one, two and five years, however, Nasdaq-tracking investors would have come out better than SoftBank's, including on a total return basis. If Son is primed to start charging into heavy investing again, as history suggests he will, shareholders may want to consider their own tactical retreat. — Reuters



Japan's SoftBank Group Corp Chief Executive Masayoshi Son attends a news conference in Tokyo, in this file photo. — Reuters



Scaled-down Venice film festival hopes to shake off virus gloom

VENICE, Italy: Fewer Hollywood stars will grace the red carpet and there will be no fans clamouring for autographs.

But for all the COVID-19 restrictions, director Alberto Barbera says the very fact that the Venice film festival is going ahead in front of live audiences this week sends a positive message.

"We think that it's time to restart for cinema," Barbera told Reuters on the eve of the festival, which runs from Sept. 2-12 and is now in its 77th year.

"We need to reopen the theatres. We need to distribute new films. We need to start shooting new films again and I hope that the festival will be a sign of solidarity and encouragement for everybody involved with the film industry."

The world's oldest film festival, regarded as a showcase for Oscar contenders as awards season approaches, is the first such international event to take place since the movie world ground to a halt due to the pandemic.

The world's biggest - Cannes film festival - was cancelled.

With coronavirus cases rising again in Italy and elsewhere, a strict safety protocol has been put in place.

Anyone attending from outside Europe's Schengen area will have to test for COVID-19 before departure and once on

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the Lido, the long, narrow island in the Venetian Lagoon where the annual festival is held.

Temperatures will be checked and every second seat in the cinemas will be left empty. Seats will have to be reserved online, audiences will be required to wear a face mask and fans will not be allowed near the red carpet.

The restrictions are similar to those being imposed in cinemas

around the world, including Italy, where only big venues have reopened and viewers are seated apart and encouraged to wear masks at least in the foyer area.

Among the stars expected to make the trip are Australian actress Cate Blanchett, who will lead the jury, US actor Matt Dillon and Spanish director Pedro Almodovar. British actress Tilda Swinton is also expected to attend to receive a life achievement award.

The main competition lineup for the Golden Lion award for best film includes 18 titles, compared to 21 last year. Just two are US studio productions: "Nomadland", a road drama by US-based Chinese director Chloe Zhao starring Frances McDormand, and "The World to Come", with Casey Affleck.

They will compete against works by Israel's Amos Gitai and Russia's Andrei Konchalovsky, and four Italian films, including Gianfranco Rosi's "Notturmo", about the Syrian conflict.

Titles screening out of competition include "The Duke", a crime comedy from "Notting Hill" director Roger Michell starring Helen Mirren, and "Greta", a documentary portrait of Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg.

More than 50 countries are participating - at least four titles were added at the last minute to the out of competition line-up, some of them filmed and edited in record time after the easing of lockdowns. — **Reuters**



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MOVIES



Zimbabwe suspects elephants died from bacterial infection

HARARE: Eleven young elephants found dead near Zimbabwe's biggest game park may have succumbed to a bacterial infection, the country's parks agency said on Tuesday, after it ruled out poaching and cyanide poisoning.

The elephant carcasses were discovered last Friday in Pandamasuwe Forest in western Zimbabwe, between Hwange National Park and Victoria Falls.

The mysterious deaths came after Botswana reported the death of more than 200 elephants in June.

Columbus Chaitezvi, principal veterinary officer at the Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority (Zimparks) said that, following preliminary tests, the agency suspected the elephants could have contracted a deadly bacterial infection while searching for food.

As the country enters the hot summer season, food becomes scarce and younger elephants tend to eat grass and burrow into the soil, exposing themselves to bacteria, he said.

"So far the laboratory indication is that it's a bacteria infection but we don't know what kind of bacteria it is," Chaitezvi said.

Zimparks spokesman Tinashe Farawo said the dead were aged between five and six years and less than 18 months.

"You can see that those young ones can't reach for tree tops, so they end up eating anything, which in some cases can be poisonous," said Farawo.

Chris Foggin, whose Victoria Falls Wildlife Trust laboratory is helping with testing samples and also previously tested samples from Botswana, said so far there were no similarities between the elephant deaths in the two countries.

At least 200 elephants have died in Zimbabwe's wildlife parks due to lack of food and water, along with scores of buffalo and antelope, since a devastating drought in 2019.

Zimparks officials say the biggest threat to Zimbabwe's elephants is overpopulation and that lower rainfall this year could again leave the animals facing starvation.

Zimbabwe is home to some 80,000 elephants, around a fifth of Africa's total, conservationists estimate. Overall numbers have declined sharply in recent years, mostly due to a combination of poaching, illegal hunting and drought. — Reuters

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BTS score a first for Korean band on Billboard chart with 'Dynamite'



LOS ANGELES: K-Pop band BTS roared to the top of the Billboard Hot 100 singles charts in the United States on Monday, becoming the first Korean pop act to debut at No. 1.

"Dynamite," the first all-English language single from the seven-member boy band, notched 33.9 million US streams and 300,000 sales in its first week, according to Nielsen Music data. The band also scored the biggest digital sales week in nearly three years since Taylor Swift's "Look What You Made Me Do" in September 2017.

The band took to Twitter to thank their fans, and in response to a congratulatory statement from South Korea's President Moon Jae-in, said the song was aimed at helping rejuvenate cities around the world.

"It's a difficult time, but I hope our songs can give you a little comfort and positive energy," the group said in a Korean language response to Moon on Twitter.

Moon said the group is "writing a new chapter in K-pop history", and that the song was all the more meaningful as a message of comfort and hope to people around the world who are struggling with COVID-19.

The Billboard Hot 100 singles chart combines US streaming, radio air-play and sales data.

Formed in 2013, BTS has spearheaded the K-Pop drive into the United States over the past three years with catchy, upbeat music.

South Korean solo artist PSY reached a No. 2 Hot 100 best with his viral hit "Gangnam Style" in 2012.

Although the band had previously broken into the top 10 on the Billboard Hot 100, reaching the No. 4 spot with its March release "On," Monday marked the first time it made its debut at No. 1.

The band on Sunday performed at the MTV Video Music Awards show for the first time and won four trophies, including best group and best pop group.

— Reuters



Best of Oman's tourism and service industries compete at the Oscars of Travel

Your votes will help Oman win in these categories!

YERU EBUE

It's known as the Oscars of Travel and now in its 27th year, the World Travel Awards is more coveted than ever especially after the economic slump brought about by the challenging coronavirus pandemic.

While the travel industry has been severely affected, the prestigious award-giving body is not letting the economic slump get in the way of recognizing key players in the global tourism industry.

Now, WTA has announced the nominees and are handing the decisions to tourism professionals and travellers like us through votes that have to be made online. The casting of votes can be made on <https://www.worldtravelawards.com/vote> and after a quick registration, one can go through the Middle East category.

These awards can help boost the efforts being made to re-invigorate the deeply-challenged travel and tourism sector of Oman once travel is already allowed.

In the Middle East, Oman is competing against very strong contenders against established brands with the majority of the nominations dominated by the hospitality and travel players from the United Arab Emirates.

Overall, Oman has 6 nominations in major awards categories, 10 nominations in airline-related awards and 16 nominations in the hotels and resorts category.

Muscat International Airport, Oman has been nominated as the Middle East's Leading Airport 2020.

Under the Middle East's Leading Cultural Destination award, Oman is competing against Abu Dhabi, Jordan and Qatar and is also short-listed as Middle East's Leading Destination 2020 competing against 11 others across different Middle Eastern countries.

Oman Ministry of Tourism is also competing against 7 other tourism boards for the prestigious Middle East's Leading Tourist Board 2020.

Under the Middle East's Leading Adventure Tourism Destination

2020, Oman is competing against Dubai, Fujairah, Ras Al Khaimah and Saadiyat Island, Abu Dhabi.

Oman's imposing Royal Opera House Muscat is also competing against UAE's Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, Qatar's The Museum of Islamic Art, Abu Dhabi's Louvre Museum, and UAE's Qasr al Watan as Middle East's Leading Cultural Tourist Attraction.

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Port Sultan Qaboos, Muscat has also been nominated to become the Middle East's Leading Cruise Port for 2020 vying against Qatar's Doha Port, Saudi Arabia's Jeddah Islamic Port, Bahrain's Khalifa Bin Salman Port, Dubai's Mina Rashid and Jordan's Port of Aqaba.

In the airlines' category, Oman Air has been nominated in the categories of Leading Airline - Business Class, First Class, Economy Class, Leading Airline, Leading Airline Brand and Leading Airline Inflight Entertainment and Leading Cabin Crew with Oman Air - Sindbad programme qualifying

for Middle East's Leading Airline Rewards Programme and Wings of Oman (Oman Air) as Middle East's Leading Inflight Magazine 2020.

Under the hotels and resorts category, Six Senses Zighy Bay was nominated as Middle East's Leading Resort, Leading Beach Resort, Leading Boutique Resort, Leading Green Hotel, Leading Lifestyle Resort, Leading Luxury Hotel Villa, Leading Luxury Villa Resort, Leading Retreat and Middle East's Most Romantic Resort.

The Chedi Muscat was nominated as Middle East's Leading Beach Resort, Leading Luxury Resort and Most Romantic Resort.

Competing with seven other hotels, Alila Jabal Akhdar is the only nominee from Oman for Middle East's Leading Boutique Hotel. It is also vying for Middle East's Leading Green Resort 2020 against five of UAE's leading hotels and two from Jordan.

Desert Nights Camp, Oman is competing from four of UAE's best desert resorts for Middle East's Leading Luxury Desert Resort.

Other nominations included Kempinski Hotel Muscat for the Middle East's Leading Hotel Dining & Entertainment Experience, JW Marriott Muscat competing from Qatar and the UAE's strong 7 for Middle East's Leading New Hotel, Dolphin Village Muscat for Middle East's Leading Residential Resort and Al Baleed Resort Salalah by Anantara as Middle East's Leading Retreat.

In the past awards, the UAE always snatches many of the major awards and even in today's nominations, are dominating the numbers games.

The World Travel Award undergoes a rigorous vetting process and has been known to be the most prestigious comprehensive program in the global travel industry. In the past, selection of the best of the best includes hosting of world-wide galas before regional winners are given a chance to compete in their respective categories. Once the nominees are shortlisted, the voting process is handed down to tourism professionals, consumers and the travelling public.



Oman's imposing Royal Opera House Muscat has been nominated for the Middle East's Leading Cultural Tourist Attraction.



Muscat International Airport has been nominated as the Middle East's Leading Airport 2020.



Port Sultan Qaboos has been nominated for the Middle East's Leading Cruise Port for 2020.

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Best of Oman's tourism and service industry compete at the Oscars of Travel

Oman has 6 nominations in major award categories, 10 nominations in airline-related awards, and 16 nominations in the hotels and resorts category of the 2020 World Travel Awards also known as the Oscars of Travel and your votes can help take the awards home... **P19**



LOCAL TRAVEL

One of Oman's luxurious hotels, Al Bustan Palace, reopens doors with staycation packages

RECENTLY NAMED one of the top 5 hotels in Travel + Leisure's Top 5 Resorts in North Africa and Middle East, Al Bustan Palace, a Ritz-Carlton Hotel is once again welcoming guests with an irresistible staycation offers with the whole family in mind.

Enhanced by the warm hospitality and attentive service that is its signature of the Ladies and Gentlemen, Al Bustan Palace, a Ritz-Carlton Hotel is the ideal place to get away this summer.

Katrin Herz, General Manager of Al

Bustan Palace, a Ritz-Carlton Hotel, said, "We're thrilled to have this opportunity once again to be able to take excellent care of our guests, and we have come up with new and exciting ways for them to enjoy the resort. One of the greatest pleasures of life is to have the chance to relax with loved ones in beautiful surroundings with all the amenities you could wish for at your feet, and Al Bustan Palace, a Ritz-Carlton Hotel is really such a wonderful place to experience that. We want our guests near and far to know that,

whenever they're ready to travel, their warm welcome awaits."

A Resort Staycation can be purchased from just OMR 70 + taxes per night and includes access to the hotel's recreational facilities. Savour an indulgent floating breakfast, try a culinary workshop, or simply relax by the pool, all while basking in the picturesque beauty of the resort. Kids are also taken care of with complimentary swimming classes and engaging Ritz Kids activities.

In line with directives from local authorities and ongoing efforts to safeguard public health, Al Bustan Palace, a Ritz-Carlton Hotel has enhanced its cleaning and safety measures to ensure that the hotel remains a comfortable and safe environment for guests. For enquiries or reservations, call +968 24799 666 or WhatsApp +968 98090 333 (Staycation packages). Alternatively, email

