

GCC leaders website launched

On the occasion of 41st GCC Summit that was held in Saudi Arabia, a unique GCC leaders website launched by the website of late Majesty Sultan Qaboos may God have mercy and blessings on him. Speaking of the launching, Hamoud Mohammed al Azri, General Supervisor of the website, said, "On behalf of Omani people we are very happy to launch GCC Leader initiative with 41st GCC Summit. As a token of admiration to the leaders, a youngster from the Sultanate has come out with a unique website dedicated to the leaders. **SEE P5**



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ALATTIYAH POSTS BACK-TO-BACK WINS



P15

GOOGLE WORKERS FORM SMALL UNION



P20

THE HORSE STANDS OUT



MUSCAT

OMANIS CAN GO TO 80 NATIONS VISA-FREE

MUSCAT: Oman passport was ranked 62nd in the Henley & Partners Passport Index giving its citizens access to 80 countries visa-free or with electronic travel authorization (eTA). Omanis can access 20 Asian countries, six European countries, 21 African countries, eight Oceanian countries, seven countries in the Caribbean, four in the Americas, and 14 countries in the Middle East. Notable among countries that an Omani passport holder can access include the United Kingdom and New Zealand via eTA. This year's ranking is the highest for the Sultanate in the last 10 years having been ranked 68th, 67th and 64th in the last three years respectively. **SEE P3**

ROP HOLDS GRADUATION

MUSCAT: On the occasion of the Annual Day of Royal Oman Police (ROP), the Sultan Qaboos Academy for Police Sciences on Tuesday celebrated the graduation of a training programme for the 46th batch of university graduate officers, the 43rd batch of diploma holder officers, the 7th batch of limited-service officers and the 47th batch of specialised university officers. As part of the ROP Annual Day celebrations, Lt Gen Hasan bin Mohsin al Shraiqi, Inspector-General of Police and Customs, launched three electronic systems aimed at improving the services provided by ROP to its affiliates. **SEE P3**



INSIDE



GCC states sign solidarity pact

SULTANATE SUPPORTS MARCH OF GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL

AL ULA: On behalf of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, His Highness Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmood al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers, took part in the 41st Summit of GCC Leaders, Saudi Arabia's Al Ula city on Tuesday.

The GCC leaders signed an agreement to end a years-long rift between a Saudi-led bloc and Qatar at their annual summit. Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who chaired the opening session of the summit, said the agreement stressed the need for solidarity and stability "between our peoples and countries."

He thanked Kuwait and the US for their efforts in mediating the agreement.

Qatari Emir Tamim bin Hamad al Thani led his country's delegation to the summit and was warmly welcomed by Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed. Wearing face masks, the two hugged each other at the airport.

Kuwaiti Emir Nawaf Al Ahmad al Sabah, UAE's Prime Minister and Dubai ruler Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktoum and Bahrain's Crown Prince were also in Al Ula summit. — ONA and AFP **SEE ALSO P2**



HH Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmood al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers, signs an agreement on regional "solidarity and stability" at the GCC summit in Al Ula on Tuesday. PHOTO BY MOHAMED AL RASHDI

HM sends message to Saudi King

AL ULA: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik sent a written message to King Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The message deals with the strong bilateral relations binding the two brotherly countries and peoples and

means of promoting them on various spheres. The message was handed over by Sayyid Badr Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, when he met today with Prince Faisal Farhan al Saud, KSA Foreign Minister, on the sidelines of the 41st Summit of GCC Leaders.

The meeting reviewed the fraternal relations and horizons of cooperation between the two countries. It also discussed regional and international issues of common concern, as well as touching on several topics listed on the Summit's agenda. — ONA

Oman reports first case of COVID-19 strain

VINOD NAIR
[@vinot_nair](#)

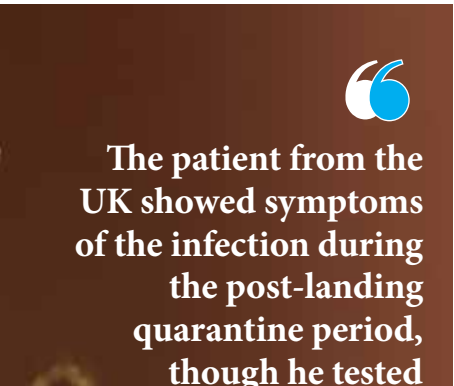
The government on Tuesday warned of an increase in the number of cases as the Ministry of Health reported the first case of the new highly infectious coronavirus strain in the Sultanate. The first case of COVID-19 was reported in Oman last year on February 24.

The new strain was initially found in the UK and later reported in other parts of the world.

MoH said that the genetic mutation of the COVID-19 virus was diagnosed in a resident who came to the Sultanate from the United Kingdom and showed respiratory symptoms while undergoing quarantine.

However, it may be noted that the COVID-19 tests conducted on the person before his arrival and upon his arrival in the Sultanate had turned out to be negative.

Dr Saif al Abri, Director General of Infectious Diseases Control, said that Oman is one of the first countries in the world to be able to provide the vaccine and



The patient from the UK showed symptoms of the infection during the post-landing quarantine period, though he tested negative to COVID-19 before and after arrival. Precautionary public health procedures were applied when dealing with the patient, who is currently in a good health and undergoing home isolation

MINISTRY OF HEALTH

he urged the target groups to take the vaccine. He confirmed that the Pfizer vaccine is appropriate and safe enough according to the available information. Al Abri said that with the discovery of the first case of the new COVID-19 strain, there are chances of an increase in the number of new COVID-19 cases, bringing back the extra load on health institutions.

He said the symptoms appeared in the patient three days after coming to the Sultanate. "As there is a possibility that the patient got the virus from airports or other places, so quarantine is mandatory upon arrival. Around 70 per cent of the cases reported in the Sultanate is related to travel.

So far 10,278 people have taken vaccination in the Sultanate, which is 39 per cent of the target groups.

So far, 3,956 people got vaccinated in Muscat, followed by 1,049 in South Al Batinah, 2,058 in North Al Batinah, 670 in North Al Sharqiyah, 836 in Al Dakhiliyah, 607 in South Al Sharqiyah and 515 in Dhofar.

Royal Decree gives nod to 3rd operator

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on Tuesday issued a Royal Decree No 4/2021, granting first class licence to Oman Future Telecommunications Company (OFT). Article (1) grants First Class Licence to Oman Future Telecommunications Company (OFT) to provide general basic mobile telecom services in accordance with the 'Licence' attached to this decree. Article (2) says that this decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from its day of issue. — ONA

Expat exit scheme extended till March 31

MUSCAT: The grace period for expats to leave without paying fines the Sultanate for good has been extended till March 31, a top official said on Tuesday.

Salim Said al Badi, Director General of Labour Welfare at the Ministry of Labour, urged all those wishing to leave the Sultanate to benefit from the extension of the grace period.

Al Badi said that as many as 57,748 expatriate workers responded to the offer of the ministry. Among these, a total of 12,378 already left the Sultanate. He added that the Ministry is working hard to

12,378

WORKERS LEAVE OMAN

regulate the labour market in the private sector and improve ties with the "the production parties" (employers, employees). The ministry is conducting regular visits to private sector establishments to check their commitment to provisions of the labour law and ministerial decisions, said Al Badi.

He explained that the ministry has a specialised department tasked to study developments in the labour market and their implications. The department also proposes solutions to issues raised in the studies. — ONA

41st GCC summit named after late HM Sultan Qaboos bin Said and late Kuwait Emir Shaikh Sabah Al Ahmad



GCC leaders at the Al Ula city on Tuesday after the summit

On behalf of HM, Fahd attends GCC meeting

AL ULA: On behalf of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, HH Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmood al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers, attended the 41st Summit of GCC Leaders at Maraya Concert Hall in Al Ula on Tuesday. Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud, Crown Prince, KSA Deputy

Prime Minister and Minister of Defence, headed the reception team welcoming HH Sayyid Fahd upon his arrival at Prince Abdul Majeed bin Abdulaziz Airport in the Governorate of Al Ula.

HH Sayyid Fahd was also received by Dr Nayef Falah al Hajraf, GCC Secretary-General, and the deputy head of the

Sultanate’s mission in Saudi Arabia. HH Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmood al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers, gave a statement upon his arrival reading as follows: “On the occasion of convening the 41st GCC Summit in the sisterly Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, I am honoured to head the Sultanate’s delegation on behalf of

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik and to convey His Majesty’s greetings to his brethren, leaders of GCC states, along with his wishes that the summit will meet with success and achieve its goals. Developments in the regional and international arena require the coordination of means

to tackle challenges, secure the region’s interests and achieve the aspirations of its peoples for a better future of stability and security.

The GCC has made many achievements at all sectors, and this requires exerting efforts to safeguard the gains realised since the establishment of the GCC

in 1981. The Sultanate of Oman reaffirms its permanent stance in supporting the GCC march. Oman also expresses its appreciation for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and prays to the Almighty Allah to bestow bounties of progress and prosperity on the brotherly Saudi people and all other GCC peoples.” — ONA

زكاة

لجنة الزكاة بولاية السيب

وزارة الاوقاف والشؤون الدينية

ZAKAT AL-SEEB COMMITTEE

UNDER SUPERVISION OF MINISTRY OF ENDOWMENTS & RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS

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The GCC has made many achievements at all sectors, and this requires exerting efforts to safeguard the gains realised since the establishment of the GCC in 1981

HH SAYYID FAHD BIN MAHMOOD AL SAID

Deputy PM

Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud, Crown Prince, KSA Deputy Prime Minister, welcomes HH Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmood al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers, on Tuesday upon his arrival at Prince Abdul Majeed bin Abdulaziz Airport in the Governorate of Al Ula.

ROP holds graduation, launches e-platforms

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As part of the ROP Annual Day celebrations, Lt Gen Hasan bin Mohsin al Shraiqi, Inspector General of Police and Customs, launched three electronic systems aimed at improving the services provided by ROP to its affiliates. The three e-systems are: electronic training platform, human resources management system (Masar) and the electronic wallet (Riaya).

The electronic training platform is an interactive platform that provides an optimal training environment and enables the trainers to publish information, goals, plans and activities related to the training programmes. It also enables exchange of information and opinions between trainers and trainees thereby contributes to achieving quality training outputs.

The Masar human resources management system is aimed at regulating financial and administrative procedure at all ROP units through the integrated electronic services application.

The electronic wallet ((Riaya) comes within the framework of the ROP leadership's attention to provide social services to the ROP affiliates. It's an electronic wallet connected with the smart card and equipped with an electronic chip that enables police affiliates to avail social service provided to them by ROP. — **ONA**



Lt Gen Hasan bin Mohsin al Shraiqi, Inspector General of Police and Customs, launches three electronic systems aimed at improving the services provided by ROP to its affiliates.

Shura Office discusses Oman Vision 2040



MUSCAT: The Majlis Ash-Shura Office held its 6th regular meeting of the second annual sitting (2020-2020), under the chairmanship of Khalid bin Hilal al Maawali.

The Office discussed the message of the Economic and Financial Committee pertaining to Oman Vision 2040. The committee said that it has taken into consideration the importance of activating the axes of the Oman Vision 2040 that come under the committee's purview namely economy and development; governance and institutional performance.

Among the topics discussed during the meeting were messages submitted by a number of citizens regarding a proposal to transform Nizwa College of Applied Science into a college of education. Additionally, a number

of parliamentary questions were discussed which included a question about the disbursement of end-of-service gratuity for insured employees who have completed minimum five years in service but have not proved inability to work.

Another parliamentary question discussed was related to the opening date of Liwa Plastics Industries Complex (LPIC) and the financial losses resulting from the delay, if any.

The Office reviewed ministerial answers to parliamentary questions raised by the council members including a ministerial reply clarifying the national strategy for upgrading date palm and related industries. The ministerial reply explained that the strategy includes the establishment of Oman Dates Production and Packaging Company.

Oman Air to operate five weekly Dubai flights

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 5

Oman Air will operate five weekly flights to Dubai with service set to start on January 11. Flights to and from Dubai are operating on Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Sunday. Additional information is available at omanair.com.

Oman Air will maintain its comprehensive safety programme throughout all elements of the travel journey to ensure that guests fly confidently. Masks are required when guests are on board the aircraft and in Oman's airports. Guests who are planning to depart from Oman should ensure that they are aware of all pre-departure requirements, which are provided at omanair.com, as well as the requirements at their destinations.

Omanis can travel to eighty countries visa-free

YERU EBUEN
MUSCAT, JAN 5

Oman passport was ranked 62nd in the Henley & Partners Passport Index giving its citizens access to 80 countries visa-free or with electronic travel authorisation (eTA).

Omanis can access 20 Asian countries, six European countries, 21 African countries, eight Oceanian countries, seven countries in the Caribbean, four in the Americas and 14 countries in the Middle East.

Notable among countries that an Omani passport holder can access include the United Kingdom and New Zealand via eTA.

This year's ranking is the highest for the Sultanate in the last 10 years having been ranked 68th, 67th and 64th in the last three years respectively.

The ranking was based on the data collected and released by Henley & Partners Passport Index, the only passport index that is based on IATA data, enhanced by extensive in-house research, supported by expert commentary and updated regularly throughout the year,



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making it the most robust, credible and reliable index of its kind.

The organisation, however, warned that due to coronavirus-related restrictions, travel bans may take precedence over the visa information released.

Without taking temporary restrictions into account, Japan

continues to hold the number one position on the index, with its passport holders able to access 191 destinations around the world visa-free.

This marks the third consecutive year that Japan has held the top spot, either alone or jointly with Singapore. Asia Pacific (APAC) region countries' dominance of the index — which is based on exclusive data from the International Air Transport Association (IATA) — now seems firmly established.

Singapore sits in the second position, with access to 190 destinations, and South Korea holds onto third place alongside Germany, with both having a visa-free/ visa-on-arrival score of 189. Slightly further down but still in the top 10, New Zealand is in the seventh position, with visa-free access to 185 destinations, while Australia is in eighth position, with access to 184 destinations.

There were relatively few high-profile visa agreements between countries during 2020. The notable exception was the UAE, which has continued its remarkable upward trajectory on the Henley Passport Index.

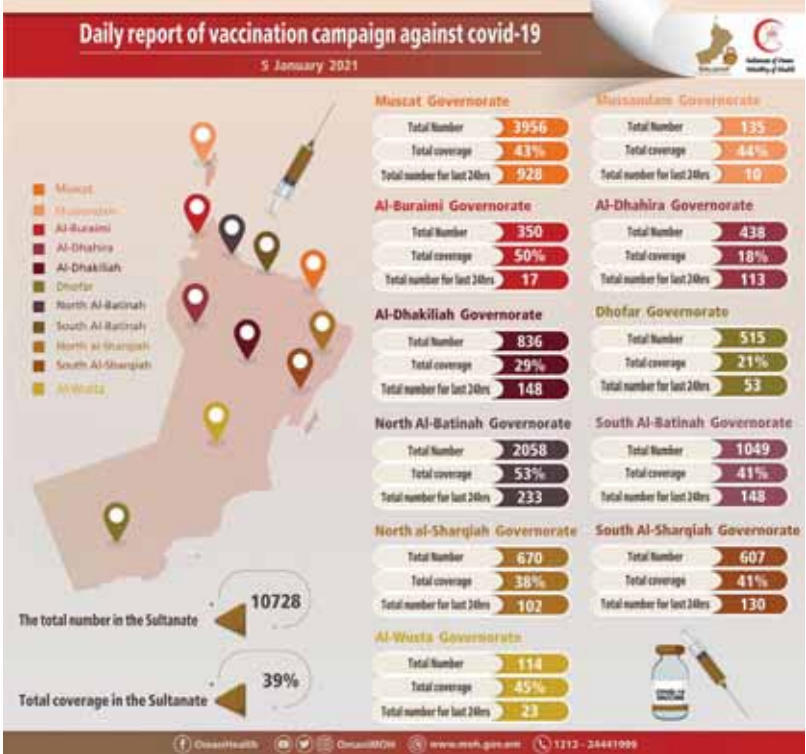
A multitude of hopes in a tiny jab

VACCINE TAKERS SHARE THEIR EXPERIENCE

RAY PETERSEN
NIZWA, JAN 5

Being of ‘mature’ years, and an asthmatic, I was privileged to be in the priority group for initial COVID-19 vaccination and I was vaccinated at the Nizwa Polyclinic on Sunday. It was a simple process, as I registered, signed a consent form and had my jab. It was completely painless... I never felt a thing... me... a needle phobic scaredy-cat. The nurse completed my vaccination card, I sat for ten minutes, and then I could go. No stress, no hassles, just a tiny bruise, no irritation, no pain, no swelling. I know COVID-19 is not over... but I’m on my way. I asked several people their thoughts on the vaccinations. Anwar, a graduate, is totally aware of the process, and is incredibly supportive. Amal, an educational administrator, has had her initial vaccination due to breathing issues and believes “The vaccine is the only way out of this horrible pandemic.” Academic Mila says, “I will definitely get the vaccine. It is wonderful that the government has made it free to expatriates as

well. I just pray for empathy in the social crisis that must surely follow.” Waitress Sunny was adamant though, saying “I haven’t lived a normal life for so long, and I am scared. So I will have it.” Vijay, heavily involved in tourism said, “I’m 100 per cent getting the vaccine. It has been a tough time, and the precautions must stay for a while yet, but we will triumph.” Oilfield Specialist Mohammed saw no reason not to take the vaccine. “I went to Kenya last year and was vaccinated for that. I trust the experts, and we should be better for the vaccines.” Laundry worker Ismael said, “I will just have it, and bless Oman for providing it.” Fisherman Rashid agreed that vaccination was good. “Vaccine will make us safe, and not affect people badly.” Sandy is a positive expatriate housewife. “We had Polio vaccine when we were kids, and generations have benefitted. All the conspiracy theories are rubbish!” Young teacher Nasra is of the opinion that, “The fear of genetic mutations



will continue, but I will be vaccinated.” She added, “If there is a positive to the pandemic, it is that I am now much more self-aware. I know much more of who I am.” Student Asma continued that theme saying, “I have learned to appreciate my family even more, so I will take it even if it is not perfect.” Housewife Yesha

explained that her husband has had COVID-19. “It was a difficult time, and my daughter and I will take it to adapt to the ‘new normal.’ Maybe it’s not 100 per cent safe, but we need to stay safe, and keep others safe.” Expatriate Daniyar has had and recovered from COVID-19 but is adamant that “The older

We didn’t believe in it at first, then we didn’t understand why our science and technology couldn’t stop it, so yes, I will do it

AYOOB
Government employee

community, the risk group, should take it.” Media executive Mohammed said, “The process will succeed, but I suspect the social and psychological consequences will stay.” Graduate student Rawaa fumed, “It’s the worst thing ever, and I feel mentally and physically spent. I don’t think I will get vaccinated because I can’t judge all its aspects, it’s not my ‘cup of tea.” Coordinator Aysha will take the vaccine only if it becomes compulsory. “It’s absurd, but so much about COVID-19 cannot be

explained. I doubt we will be safe again, and I worry.” Recent teaching graduate Nagwa responded uncertainly saying, “I think it will work, but there must be side effects. No?” Some were pragmatic. “I have taken precautions. It has not affected me, so I don’t need vaccine,” said one, while others were angry. “Many people have been deceptive, spreading rumours about it being ‘nothing.’ Just for a little bit of social media fame,” muttered one, while another vented, “Many have died, and many others are ruined financially and psychologically, yet still troublemakers say it is ‘invented. Ugh!” Fear it, loath it, shrink from it, or confront it, know it or not, as Ayoob, a government employee said, “We didn’t believe in it at first, then we didn’t understand why our science and technology couldn’t stop it, so yes, I will do it.” COVID-19 is in our lives, and it is our humanitarian responsibility to keep others safe ahead of ourselves, so when your turn comes, follow the government’s advice... and get that tiny jab!

THIRD OPERATOR KEY TO FUTURE OF TELECOM IN OMAN

Vodafone has recently obtained a first-class licence to establish and operate public telecommunications services in the Sultanate of Oman based on Royal Decree No 4/2021, making the company the third telecommunications operator in the Sultanate of Oman.

Eng Nasser bin Salim al Hosni, Deputy Chairman of the Board of Directors of Vodafone, stated that the Royal Decree No 4/2021 “represents a significant step into the future of the telecommunications sector in the Sultanate, whether in terms of providing cutting edge technologies in this field, or offering more options for the citizens and residents of the Sultanate, affirming that Vodafone Oman will work on providing the most advanced technologies in the field of information and communication, which, in turn, will contribute to the implementation of the government’s strategy represented by Oman Vision 2040”.

Diego Massidda, CEO of Vodafone Partner Markets, added, “The strategic partnership between Oman Future Telecommunications Company SAOC and Vodafone ensures that Vodafone Oman receives the right infrastructure and advanced technologies. Through partnerships and projects, especially with small and medium enterprises, the local community will also benefit from

Vodafone’s global expertise.” Even before the sales operations start running in the market, Vodafone has enabled partnerships between several small and medium enterprises with international companies in the marketing, technology and logistics sectors. Given its global experience, Vodafone believes in supporting local business environments and enhancing investment opportunities in the markets they are entering. Vodafone will also contribute to enhancing the ongoing progress of the telecommunications and

technology sectors in the Sultanate, inspired by the goals of Oman Vision 2040. Vodafone is a leading telecommunications company in Europe and Africa, operating mobile and fixed networks in 21 countries and partnering with mobile networks in 48 more. Pursuant to the partnership between the Oman Future Telecommunications Company SAOC and Vodafone, the third

ROYAL DECREE NO 4/2021 issues a class one licence for “Vodafone” to establish and operate public mobile telecommunication services in the Sultanate

telecom operator will join Vodafone Partner Markets, which provides access to a variety of special Vodafone services. It should be noted that shareholders of the Oman Future Telecommunications Company SAOC include many Omani institutions such as government pensions and investment funds, as well as a group of private investors. For further inquiries, please contact: Lujaina al Kharusi - lujaina.kharusi@vodafone.om



■ MAWALEH CENTRAL MARKET REOPENS



Al Seeb: The Central Market of Vegetables and Fruits in Mawaleh reopened on Tuesday after a gap of five months. The municipality has carried out works to improve all the internal and external service facilities in the market, such as paving market's external areas that accommodate more than 800 parking slots. The market will be open from 1 pm to 6 pm for retail consumers, and from 5 am to 11 am for wholesalers to transport vegetables and fruits to different markets in the Sultanate.

GCC leaders website launched

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Speaking of the launching, Hamoud bin Mohammed al Azri, General Supervisor of the website, said "on behalf of Omani people we are very happy to launch GCC Leader initiative with 41st GCC Summit. As a token of admiration to the leaders, a youngster from the Sultanate has come out with a unique website dedicated to the leaders. The comprehensive website sheds light on the leadership qualities and their personal traits that made the leaders excel in their statesmanship.

"This website attempts to bring to light the importance of the GCC's blessed march and outcomes of the fraternal meetings binding the GCC leaders in achieving further aspirations of their peoples."

The website also brings all GCC leaders in one section showing each leader's personal website so that all visitors will be able to read more about the leaders, Al Azri added. For details, see www.gcc-leaders.com

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Government sports facilities in 2019 stand at 76

MUSCAT: The number of government sports facilities in the Sultanate reached 67 by the end of 2019, serving about 1.2 million people, according to statistics issued by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

The NCSI sports statistics bulletin showed that the largest number of government sports facilities belonged to the 44 sports clubs, which possessed 66 per cent of the total government sports facilities, followed by 12 sports complexes, then 11 sports centres. The number of beneficiaries of the sports complexes in 2019 was 1,191,982 people, of whom 874,038 were men and 317,944 were women, compared to 1,073,989 people in 2018, of whom 809,763 were men and 264,226 were women.

The bulletin indicated that in 2019, sports activity in the Sultanate witnessed about 158 competitions and championships, 78 training sessions, 84 camps, and 12 conferences and seminars. Oman Athletics Federation (OAF) led the sports federations in terms of the number

of medals won by the national teams with 43 medals, followed by Oman Shooting Association (OSA) with 26 medals, Omani Swimming association (OSA) with 22 medals, Oman Tennis Association (OTA) and Oman Camel Racing Federation with 6 medals each, 5 medals for Oman Volleyball Association (OVA) 3 for Oman Hockey Federation (OHF), Oman Equestrian Federation (OEF), Omani Handball Association (OHA) 2 medals each, and one medal for Oman Football Association (OFA). The number of sports activities implemented by the sports committees reached 59.

The total medals achieved by the committees reached 228 medals, including 121 for Oman Weightlifting and Physical Strength Committee (OWPSC), 44 for Oman Paralympic Committee (OPC), Oman Bodybuilding Committee (OBC) and Oman Sailing Committee 13 medals each, 9 medals for Oman Billiards and Snooker Committee (OBSC) and 8 medals for the Oman Bowling Committee (OBC). — **ONA**

Don't cut trees without permission of Environment Authority

ZAINAB AL NASSRI
[@zainabalnasseri](https://twitter.com/zainabalnasseri)

The Environment Authority has reiterated its appeal to save trees and not to indulge in cutting, uprooting, or damaging any tree, shrub, or herb from forests without proper permission.

Indulgence in any such activity would amount to legal accountability. A recent statement came from the authority following the seizure of a vehicle loaded with firewood in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate on Tuesday in violation of the Environmental Protection Law.

The authority said legal procedures against them were being processed.

ILLEGAL CUTTING

Laws of the Sultanate prohibit illegal cutting of trees, which damages green cover. The laws seek to activate programmes to combat desertification in cooperation with international and regional organisations.

In 2018, the number of firewood permits reached about 1,755, the vast majority of which were given in Al Dhahirah Governorate (597 permits).

Article 2 of the law stipulates it is forbidden to export firewood and charcoal. Anyone who violates this will be fined no less than RO 200 and not more than RO 1,000.

The fine is doubled if the violation is repeated. Article 3 prohibits logging activities or burning wood without permission from the Authority. Anyone who violates this will be fined not less than RO 50 and not exceeding RO 500. The fine is doubled when the violation is repeated.

The Authority grants two types of permits – permanent and



Logging activities or burning wood without permission from the Environment Authority is banned. Anyone who violates this will be fined not less than RO 50 and not exceeding RO 500. The fine is doubled when the violation is repeated

allowed to cut green trees.

Also, logging is not allowed near public streets or residential areas keeping in mind public interest. The Nature Conservation Department monitors all sites to prevent people from collecting firewood or cutting wild trees without permission.

The law in Oman helps to regulate the logging process in general because it is one of the activities that negatively affect society, as it causes great damage to the environment.

IMPACT ON HEALTH

Cutting trees reduces the amount of oxygen in the atmosphere, and it also increases the intensity of the dust, as trees work as natural sand barriers.

Among the most harmful impacts of illegal logging can be seen on livestock, because it depends mainly on plants. Thus there is a great loss for the country's economy, which is forced at this time to import meat from abroad. Besides, logging reduces the percentage of groundwater and increases the temperature. It exposes soil to erosion, affects soil fertility, increases air pollution, and consequently causes chest and lung diseases, especially among children in the early stages of life.

temporary. Permanent permits are given to citizens who meet the conditions of social security category status, those who do not have any governmental or private job and age is 30 years and above. Workers or retirees whose monthly salary or pension does not exceed RO 350 also come under this category. The priority is given to those who practice this as a main job and thus have the right to do business.

Temporary permits are granted to those who wish to obtain firewood for personal

purposes such as certain occasions and holidays, provided the permit period does not exceed three days. Any business deal is prohibited in this case.

LOGGING PERMITS

The permits in general are granted based on the availability of firewood in the designated locations and the competent authorities have the right to suspend, cancel, or not renew the permits in the event of a violation.

The permit holder is not



Drones are seen during a large-scale drone combat exercise of Army of the Islamic Republic of Iran, in Semnan, on Monday. — Reuters

Iran tests drones in military exercise

DUBAI: Iran launched exercises featuring a wide array of domestically produced drones on Tuesday, Iranian media reported, days after the anniversary of the US killing of a top Iranian general by a drone strike in Iraq.

Iran's armed forces are to test combat drones used as bombers, interceptors and in reconnaissance missions in the two-day exercises in central Semnan province, the semi-official Fars news agency said.

"The fingers of our heroic armed forces are on the trigger, and if enemies commit the slightest mistake, the armed forces will surely respond fiercely," said Mohammad Baqeri, chief of staff of the armed forces, quoted by state media.

Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has said US President Donald Trump may be trying to find an excuse to attack Iran in his last days in office, or Israel might try to provoke a war. Israel rejected the allegation.

The exercises coincided with increased tensions between

The fingers of our heroic armed forces are on the trigger, and if enemies commit the slightest mistake, the armed forces will surely respond fiercely

MOHAMMAD BAQERI

Chief of staff of the armed forces

Iran and the United States, two days after the first anniversary of the killing of Iranian general Qassem Soleimani in a US drone strike at Baghdad airport, and two weeks before President-elect Joe Biden takes office.

Beyond surveillance, Iranian drones can drop munitions and also carry out a "kamikaze" flight when loaded with explosives and flown into a target, according to a US official.

— Reuters

Iran denies seized Korean ship, crew are being held as hostages

SEOUL: Iran denied on Tuesday it was using a South Korean ship and its crew as hostages, a day after it seized the tanker in the Gulf while pressing a demand for Seoul to release \$7 billion in funds frozen under US sanctions.

The seizure of the MT Hankuk Chemi and its 20-member crew near the strategic Strait of Hormuz has been seen as an attempt by Tehran to assert its demands, just two weeks before President-elect Joe Biden takes office in the United States. Iran wants Biden to lift sanctions imposed by outgoing President Donald Trump.

On Tuesday, the US imposed fresh Iran-related sanctions targeting the steel sector, according to the Treasury Department's website, continuing to increase pressure on Tehran. Washington blacklisted more than a dozen entities and one person, according to the website.



This undated picture taken in an unknown location and released on Tuesday by Yonhap news agency in Seoul shows South Korean Navy's destroyer ROKS Choi Young. — AFP

Tehran's critics have long accused it of capturing ships and foreign prisoners as a method of gaining leverage in negotiations. "We've become used to such allegations," Iranian government spokesman Ali Rabiei told a news conference. "But if there is any hostage-taking, it is Korea's government that is holding \$7 billion, which belongs to us, hostage on baseless grounds."

South Korea summoned the Iranian ambassador, called for the ship to be released and said it was dispatching a delegation to Iran to discuss it. Iran says the ship was held over environmental violations. Iran's ability to challenge shipping in the Gulf is one of its main points of leverage in what is expected to be a difficult negotia-

tion when the Biden administration takes office on January 20.

In 2019, Iran held a British tanker for two months. South Korea, like other countries, is required to limit Iran's access to its financial system under the US sanctions, which were imposed by Trump after he abandoned a nuclear agreement reached with Iran under his predecessor Barack Obama.

Iran says the sanctions are illegal and have hurt its economy, including its ability to respond to the worst outbreak of COVID-19 in the Middle East.

Biden aims to revive the nuclear agreement, but any thaw is likely to pose a diplomatic challenge.

Seoul seeks release of ship, 20 crew members

US imposes fresh Iran curbs targeting steel sector

Since Trump abandoned the deal, Iran has taken steps that violate it; Biden says Iran must be fully compliant before the deal can be restored, while Iran says Washington must first lift the sanctions.

On Monday, Tehran announced it had stepped up uranium enrichment at an underground facility, its latest move in violation of the nuclear deal's terms.

CREW 'SAFE'

South Korea's Foreign Minister, Kang Kyung-wha said on Tuesday she was making diplomatic efforts to secure the release of the tanker and had made contact with her counterpart in Tehran. Iran's ambassador in Seoul, Saeed Badamchi Shabestari, asked about the status of the ship's crew before his meeting at the foreign ministry, told reporters "all of them are safe".

In addition to a South Korean delegation expected to go to Iran as soon as possible to try to free the ship, South Korea's Vice Foreign Minister, Choi Jong-kun, is scheduled to visit Iran on Sunday. — Reuters

Lebanese in hunt for hospital beds

BEIRUT: When Rachel Halabi rushed her 85-year-old father to a Beirut hospital a few days ago with COVID-19, the doctor sent them home as intensive care was full.

"The ER doctor told us to go back, get him an oxygen machine and give him his treatment from home," she said from the Lebanese capital. "We went with it for several days, but his condition did not improve."

Halabi herself tested positive for COVID-19, one of the thousands of new cases reported in Lebanon following a holiday season where loosened restrictions let infections

soar. With 192,000 reported cases and almost 1,500 deaths, Lebanon is not among the world's worst hit countries. But its infrastructure is crumbling, and a small surge in infections is enough to take its health sector to breaking point. The health ministry has in recent weeks urged private hospitals to make more room for COVID-19 patients, but the pandemic is spreading too fast.

"The rise in COVID numbers has outpaced the increase in critical beds," said Firass Abiad, the head of a major public hospital battling the virus. — AFP



A nurse pushes a bed on which rests a COVID-19 patient at Rafic Hariri University Hospital Corona ER in Beirut on Tuesday. — AFP

UN opens new Ethiopian refugee camp in Sudan

GENEVA: The United Nations said on Tuesday it had begun moving some of the more than 56,000 Ethiopian refugees in Sudan to a newly-opened camp, with the existing facility nearly full.

UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, said tents to shelter up to 5,000 people have so far been set up at the new Tunaydbah camp. More were to be pitched in the coming days.

Since Sunday, 580 refugees have been transferred to the camp and given a hot meal on

arrival, a UNHCR spokesman told reporters in Geneva.

Refugees are continuing to flee the unrest in Ethiopia's northern Tigray region, with 800 having crossed the border with eastern Sudan since the New Year.

"Latest arrivals tell of being caught in the conflict and being victims of various armed groups, facing perilous situations including looting of their houses, forceful recruitment of men and boys, and sexual violence against women and girls," said spokesman Andrej Mahecic. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

BAGHDAD

US extends Iraq sanctions waiver for 3 months

The US has granted Iraq a three-month extension to a sanctions waiver allowing it to import Iranian gas, an Iraqi official said on Monday. The move represents a welcome reprieve for a country that relies heavily on its neighbour for energy supplies. Iraq buys gas and electricity from Iran to supply about a third of its power sector, worn down by years of conflict and poor maintenance and unable to meet the needs of the country's 40 million population.



The US blacklisted Iran's energy industry in late 2018 as it ramped up sanctions, but granted Baghdad a series of temporary waivers, hoping Iraq would wean itself off Iranian energy by partnering with US firms. — AFP

WEST BANK

Israeli officer shoots Palestinian dead

An Israeli security officer shot a Palestinian who threw a knife towards him in the occupied West Bank on Tuesday, Israel's military said, and Palestinian officials said the man had been killed. The incident occurred at a road junction situated near a cluster of Israeli settlements southwest of the Palestinian town of Bethlehem, the military said in a statement.

"(A) community security officer spotted a suspect approaching the junction.



Following the suspicion, the security officer and an IDF (Israeli military) soldier operated to stop the suspect by firing into the air," the statement said. — Reuters

TELAVIV

Ministry authorises use of Moderna's vaccine

Israel's health ministry has authorised a COVID-19 vaccine developed by US drugmaker Moderna Inc, the company and an Israeli official said, marking the vaccine's third regulatory authorisation and the first outside North America. "Ministry of Health of Israel has secured 6 million doses and first deliveries (are) expected to begin in January," Moderna said in a statement on Monday.

Israeli Health Minister Yuli Edelstein said he had



no knowledge of shipments arriving this month. "To my regret, we will likely only see the company's shipment in two months," Edelstein told reporters. — Reuters

In brief

■ TOKYO



HEALTH EXPERTS CALL FOR EMERGENCY AS CASES SOAR

Public health experts advising Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga called on Tuesday for the swift imposition of a state of emergency in the Tokyo area as daily COVID-19 cases hit a record and some citizens accused the government of dragging its feet. The government's top spokesman, Chief Cabinet Secretary Katsunobu Kato, said a decision would likely come on Thursday on whether to impose the second state of emergency since the start of the pandemic. Japanese media said it would take effect by Friday and last about a month. The government is anxious about the its economic impact. — Reuters

■ HANOI



VIETNAM JAILS JOURNALISTS FOR 'PROPAGANDA'

A court in Vietnam on Tuesday sentenced three freelance journalists known for their criticism of government to between 11 and 15 years in prison, after finding them guilty of spreading anti-state propaganda. Pham Chi Dung, Nguyen Tuong Thuy and Le Huu Minh Tuan were convicted of "making, storing, spreading information, materials, items for the purpose of opposing the state" at a one-day trial in Ho Chi Minh City, the Ministry of Public Security said. Dung established the Independent Journalists Association of Vietnam in 2014, which police said had sought regime change. — Reuters

■ BEIJING



CORONAVIRUS FIGHT IN HEBEI ENTERS 'WARTIME MODE'

The fight to contain the coronavirus in northern China's Hebei has entered "wartime mode", official media reported on Tuesday, after the province surrounding capital Beijing saw its first locally transmitted COVID-19 cases in more than six months. Hebei reported 19 local infections and 40 asymptomatic cases between January 2 and January 4, according to data from the Chinese health authorities. The last time the province recorded locally transmitted infections was in June 2020. Nationally, mainland China reported 33 new COVID-19 cases on January 4. — Reuters

India vaccine makers end spat, vow rollout

TENS OF THOUSANDS OF BIRDS TO BE CULLED OVER AVIAN FLU OUTBREAK

NEW DELHI/BENGALURU: Serum Institute of India (SII) and Bharat Biotech said on Tuesday they would end a public spat and focus on rolling out COVID-19 shots after executives of both Indian vaccine makers clashed over the approval of their rival shots. "Both companies respect the great work being carried out by each other and put behind us the miscommunication

and misunderstanding caused during the past week," SII's Chief Executive Officer Adar Poonawalla and Bharat Biotech's Chairman Krishna Ella said in a joint statement.

India's drugs regulator on Sunday approved for emergency use a vaccine developed by AstraZeneca and Oxford University, which will be manufactured by SII, and another developed domestically by Bharat Biotech. But the approval for Bharat Biotech's COVAXIN, developed with a government research body, faced criticism from industry experts and others as the company has yet to release efficacy and safety data, and it still has a Phase III trial underway.

"Until we get the efficacy result, how do we know that anything works?" Poonawalla said on



Volunteers and health officials are seen during a dry run or a mock drill for the COVID-19 vaccine, at a private hospital in Allahabad on Tuesday. — AFP

Sunday. Ella, however, defended both his firm and the approval for the vaccine in an online press conference on Monday. "I want to say that it hurts as scientists. We

work 24 hours. Do we deserve that type of bashing from the people?" Ella said, adding his firm was being picked on because it was Indian. Ella also took a swipe

at AstraZeneca, which said in November a dosing error had led to promising results in a subset of its trial volunteers.

AVIAN FLU OUTBREAK

Meanwhile, tens of thousands of poultry will be slaughtered after an outbreak of deadly avian influenza was found to have killed scores of birds across the country, officials said on Tuesday.

At least six states have stepped up efforts to contain two strains of bird flu — H5N1 and H5N8 — in recent days after the deaths of thousands of migratory birds, ducks, crows and chickens.

H5N8, an Avian influenza subtype among poultry and wild birds, has spread across several countries since early last year.

— Reuters/AFP

■ ALL MADE OF ICE AND SNOW



People look at ice sculptures at the Harbin Ice and Snow Festival in Harbin, in northeastern China's Heilongjiang province on Tuesday. — AFP

Duterte defends use of unauthorised COVID vaccine by security team

MANILA: The Philippine military on Tuesday called off an investigation into the use of an unauthorised COVID-19 vaccine on soldiers guarding President Rodrigo Duterte, who defended his security team from criticism.

"This comes in the light of the recent pronouncement of President Rodrigo Duterte," who is also commander-in-chief of the armed forces, Major General Edgard Arevalo said.

Arevalo said the military was supposed to hold a fact-finding investigation into the vaccination of some members of the Presidential Security Group (PSG) on Tuesday.

In his Monday night public address, Duterte called on Congress to stop investigations into the inoculation of the PSG members last month, using the COVID-19 vaccine by Chinese company Sinopharm.

"Whatever be your objection, whatever be your criticism, to me, it's a matter of preservation," he said.

"In criminal law, that is the right to self-defence. The enemy is COVID... They have to mix (with other people) for their job, they have to surround me."

"How can they perform that duty when they are in danger of getting COVID?" he added. "I can also get infected." — dpa

Protesters in Quetta seek justice for slain coal miners

QUETTA: Members of the Hazara minority in Pakistan who have blockaded a highway in Quetta with the bodies of slain coal miners said on Tuesday they will not withdraw until Prime Minister Imran Khan meets them and the killers are brought to justice.

IS militants slit the throats of 11 miners in a residential compound near a mine site in Pakistan's Balochistan province on Sunday, filming the entire incident and later posting it online.

Thousands of Hazaras have since staged a protest, arranging the coffins across a highway in the provincial

capital Quetta.

"We have become tired of picking up the bodies of our people," Syed Agha Raza, a Hazara political leader, said.

Masooma Yaqoob Ali said her elder brother along with four other relatives were among those killed.

"Now we have no male member [of our family] to take coffins of our brother and other relatives to the graveyard for burial," she said, shedding tears as she spoke. The protesters are refusing to bury the victims of the attack until demands, which include the resignation of the provincial government, are met. — Reuters



People stage a protest against the killing of miners of the Hazara community, who were killed in an attack by gunmen in the mountainous Machh area, in Karachi on Tuesday. — AFP

Turning pineapple waste into disposable drone parts

BANGI: Malaysian researchers have developed a method to transform the fibre found in normally discarded pineapple leaves to make a strong material that can be used to build the frames for unmanned aircraft, or drones.

The project, headed by Professor Mohamed Thariq Hameed Sultan at Malaysia's Putra University, has been trying to find sustainable uses for pineapple waste generated by farmers in Hulu Langat, an area about 65 km from Kuala Lumpur.

"We are transforming the leaf of the pineapple into a fibre that can be used for aerospace application, basically inventing a drone," he said. Mohamed Thariq said drones made out of the bio-composite



Malaysia's Putra University professor Mohamed Thariq holds pineapple leaves and a drone partially made with pineapple stems, in Jenjarom. — Reuters

material had a higher strength-to-weight ratio than those made from synthetic fibres, and were also cheaper, lighter and easier to dispose of.

If the drone was damaged, the frame could be buried in the ground and would degrade within two weeks, he said. The prototype drones have been able to fly to a height of about 1,000 metres (3,280 ft) and stay in the air for about 20 minutes, he added.

Ultimately, the research team hopes to create a larger drone to accommodate bigger payloads, including imagery sensors, for agricultural purposes and aerial inspections.

"Our role here is to help the industry, the farmers, to increase

their yield and make their jobs much easier," said William Robert Alvisse of the Malaysian Unmanned Drones Activist Society, a non-governmental group helping to design the drone and advising on the project.

Before the project launched in 2017, pineapple stems were discarded after the once-in-a-year harvest period, but farmers hope the drones project will encourage more innovation to find uses for the waste and boost incomes.

"With the health issue, the economy problem due to COVID-19, the society is desperate and there is no alternative to increase income," said pineapple farmer Irwan Ismail. — Reuters

Georgia votes in Senate polls set to shape Biden govt

ATLANTA: Voters headed to the polls for runoff elections in the southern state of Georgia on Tuesday that will determine control of the US Senate for the first years of Joe Biden's presidency.

The 78-year-old Democrat, who takes office on January 20, and outgoing president Donald Trump both visited the Peach State on Monday to make last-ditch appeals for their candidates.

Polls opened at 7:00 am (1200 GMT) and start closing at 7:00 pm (0000 GMT). A record three million-plus people have voted early amid the coronavirus pandemic, election officials say, and final results may not be known for several days.

"It's the most important election in my lifetime," said Robert Lowe, a 74-year-old retired improv comedian, after casting his ballot for the Democrats on the ticket, Jon Ossoff and the Reverend Raphael Warnock.

If Republicans retain control of the Senate there will be "continued obstruction" in Washington, Lowe said after casting his ballot at the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in Atlanta.

Georgia has been reliably



Supporters of President-elect Joe Biden hold signs with Jon Ossoff and Stacy Abrams as they wait for his arrival outside Center Parc Stadium in Atlanta, Georgia, on Monday. — AFP

Republican but Biden beat Trump in the state by nearly 12,000 votes in the November 3 presidential election and polls have the pair of Senate races neck-and-neck.

Republicans hold 50 seats in the Senate and a victory in just one of the runoff races would give

them a majority and the ability to thwart Biden's agenda.

A Democratic sweep would result in a 50-50 split with Democrats holding the tie-breaking vote in Vice President Kamala Harris.

Harris has also been campaigning for Ossoff, a

33-year-old television producer, and Warnock, the 51-year-old African-American pastor at the Atlanta church where Martin Luther King Jr once preached.

"Your vote is your voice, and your voice is your power," Harris tweeted on Tuesday morning.

One state — one state! — can chart the course, not just for the next four years but for the next generation

JOE BIDEN

"Now is the time to stand up, speak out, and vote for a better future."

LAST LINE OF DEFENCE

The Republican and Democratic parties have made Georgia their political ground zero, with thousands of volunteers leaving no door unknocked and the candidates barnstorming the state.

Ossoff is running against David Perdue, a 71-year-old business executive who was elected to the Senate in 2014.

Warnock is facing off against Kelly Loeffler, 50, a businesswoman who was appointed to the Senate in December 2019 after the serving senator resigned for health reasons.

The pair of Senate races are the most expensive congressional runoffs in US history — according to the Center for Responsive Politics a staggering \$832 million has been spent including on the primaries and general election, where no candidate cleared the 50 per cent threshold required for victory.

If Democrats flip both seats they would effectively hand Biden all the levers of political power in Washington and enable him to enact his ambitious legislative agenda.

"One state — one state! — can chart the course, not just for the next four years but for the next generation," Biden told a rally in Atlanta on Monday.

Republicans argue that keeping Senate control would serve as a check on the incoming Biden administration.

"The stakes in this election could not be higher," the 74-year-old Trump told a rally in Dalton, Georgia, where he appeared on stage with Loeffler. "Make sure your vote is counted."

Tuesday's runoffs are "your last chance to save the America that we love," he said. — AFP

France vows faster COVID-19 vaccine rollout after criticism

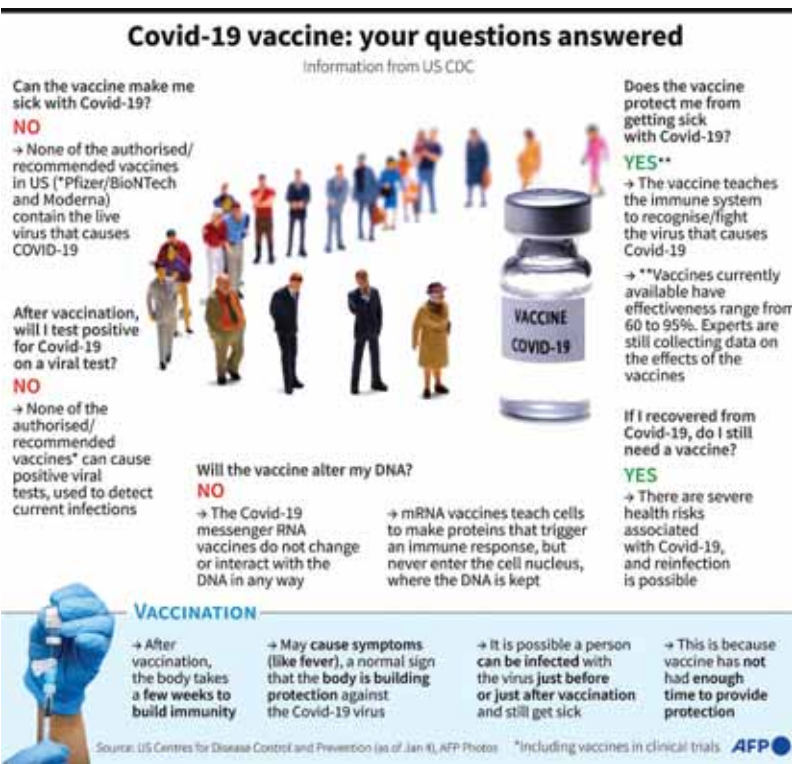
PARIS: France promised on Tuesday to speed up COVID vaccinations, but failed to silence critics who accused the government of "amateurism" over the slow start to its inoculation campaign.

Health Minister Olivier Veran, under intense pressure for lagging behind EU neighbours in dispensing vaccinations, said his government would soon catch up with the likes of Germany.

He said more than 2,000 people in total had been vaccinated by Monday — compared with roughly 264,000 in Germany by the same day — and that the "cruising speed of vaccinations will catch up with our neighbours in the coming days."

The German vaccination total had risen to more than 316,000 by Tuesday. The French government has been playing catch-up with some of its neighbours since the start of an EU-wide vaccination drive on December 27.

"Why don't we just vaccinate, like the Israelis, the British and Germans," asked a group of doctors in an opinion piece in *Le*



Parisien newspaper, calling for all willing health workers and people over 65 to be inoculated immediately. A satirical cartoon in *Le Monde* newspaper on Tuesday showed a masked President Emmanuel Macron sitting atop a

snail and holding the reins. The French leader met officials including Prime Minister Jean Castex on Monday to discuss the logjam.

"By Thursday we will increase numbers in a major way," Veran told RTL radio, saying that "we

will be on an exponential curve".

France would now "amplify, accelerate and simplify" its vaccination strategy, he said. Veran said vaccinations for over-75s who are not in care homes would be authorised by the end of January, covering five million people.

TELL US THE TRUTH

He said the campaign would also be widened to include firefighters and home helpers over 50.

France was currently taking delivery of 500,000 doses of a vaccine developed by Pfizer and BioNTech per week, Veran said.

Once it is approved for the EU, 500,000 doses of a vaccine created by Moderna would be added every month, he said.

But opposition politicians were far from satisfied with Xavier Bertrand, president of the northern Hauts-de-France region, saying: "I want the government to tell us the truth: Exactly how many doses have been ordered by France?" Bertrand, a former health minister, said he had "the unpleasant impression that there is a lack of vaccines". — AFP



People queue outside a coronavirus disease (COVID-19) testing centre in Liverpool, Britain on Tuesday. — Reuters

UK enters third lockdown

LONDON: Britain began its third COVID-19 lockdown on Tuesday with citizens under orders to stay at home and the government calling for one last major national effort to stem the virus before mass vaccinations turn the tide.

Finance minister Rishi Sunak announced a new package of business grants worth 4.6 billion pounds (\$6.2 billion) to help keep people in jobs and firms afloat until measures are relaxed gradually, at the earliest from mid-February but likely later.

Britain has been among the countries worst-hit by COVID-19, with the second highest death toll in Europe and

an economy that suffered the sharpest contraction of any in the Group of Seven during the first wave of infections last spring.

More than a million people in Britain have already received their first dose of a COVID-19 jab, but this is not enough to have an impact on transmission yet.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced the new lockdown late on Monday, saying the highly contagious new coronavirus variant first identified in Britain was spreading so fast the National Health Service risked being overwhelmed within 21 days. — Reuters

SHORT TAKES

BRUSSELS

EU vows to 'redouble efforts' to save Iran deal

The European Union pledged on Tuesday to try to salvage the Iran nuclear deal after the UN's watchdog confirmed Tehran has started the process of enriching uranium to 20 per cent.

EU spokesman Peter Stano said Brussels noted the steps taken by Iran "with deep concern" and that they represent "a significant departure from Iran's nuclear commitments" under the pact.

But he also insisted that "the strict verification and



transparency measures remain in place" under the deal. "We will redouble our efforts to preserve the agreement and return to its full implementation by all parties," Stano said. — AFP

LONDON

UK premier Johnson cancels India visit

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson on Tuesday cancelled a planned trip to India later this month, citing the need to oversee the pandemic response at home.

"The prime minister spoke to (Indian) Prime Minister Modi this morning, to express his regret that he will be unable to visit India later this month as planned," a Downing Street spokeswoman said.

"In light of the national lockdown announced last night, and the speed at which the new



coronavirus variant is spreading, the prime minister said that it was important for him to remain in the UK so he can focus on the domestic response to the virus." — Reuters

GOMA

Suspected rebels kill 22 civilians in Congo

Armed men, suspected to be ADF rebels, killed 22 civilians and looted the locality of Kyavikere, in the territory of Beni in the North Kivu region of the Democratic Republic of Congo. The incident occurred at 7 pm on Monday, local leaders Ruwenzori Bozy Sindiwako and Iteni Muvunga Kimwele said by telephone on Tuesday, adding that the rebels used machetes and bladed weapons to carry out a massacre and systematically loot the settlement. "These repeated



killings ... are causing massive displacements of the population of this sector towards secure [areas], including, in particular, the city of Beni," Bozy Sindiwako said. — dpa

Online scams surge as slow rollout of COVID-19 vaccine frustrates

TINA BELLON

As millions of people await their turn to get a COVID-19 vaccine that could be months away, scammers online, in emails and on messaging apps are luring victims with claims they can deliver shots within days for as little as \$150. COVID-19 vaccine scams are on the rise, according to European and US government officials who are warning the public of fraudsters out for money and personal data.

A Reuters search online, in dark web forums and on messaging app Telegram found seven different offers for alleged COVID-19 vaccines. Scams include emails promising entry to supposedly secret lists for early vaccine access and robocallers impersonating government agencies. Message boards on the so-called dark web have added COVID-19 vaccines to more traditional illicit goods for sale. The US FBI and Interpol, among others, have warned of emerging pandemic-related fraud schemes, saying false cures and vaccines advertised on fake websites could pose cyber threats and a significant risk to peoples' health, or even lives.

Website domains containing the word vaccine in combination with

SCAMS INCLUDE
EMAILS
PROMISING
ENTRY TO
SUPPOSEDLY
SECRET LISTS FOR
EARLY VACCINE
ACCESS AND
ROBOCALLERS
IMPERSONATING
GOVERNMENT
AGENCIES

COVID-19 or coronavirus more than doubled since October to roughly 2,500 in November, when the first legitimate vaccines were nearing regulatory approval, according to cybersecurity firm Recorded Future, which is tracking COVID-19 fraud online. "So far a lot of these domains just appear to be opportunistic registrations, but some are going to be used for phishing attempts to have people click on (malicious) links", said Lindsay Kaye, Director of Operational Outcomes at Recorded Future.

Kaye said her team, which also scours the dark web, so far has not come across any legitimate vaccine diverted from healthcare facilities or national stockpiles. The scams are preying on concerns about the far slower-than-promised rollout of vaccines to protect against the virus that has claimed more than 1.8 million lives worldwide so far.

Most people will likely have to wait well into the spring, or even summer, to get their shot. In the United States, only about 4.5 million people had received their first shot as of Monday, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported. That is a fraction of the 20 million who were

supposed to have been vaccinated by the end of 2020, according to earlier government forecasts.

VACCINES, GUNS AND MONEY

On dark web forum Agarthia, fake COVID-19 vaccines were offered next to cocaine, opioid medication, "super high quality fake money", hand guns and gift cards. Posts showed stock photos of vaccines and offered vials for \$500 and \$1,000, or the equivalent in Bitcoin. On another dark web site, a seller claiming to be from the "Wuhan Institute of Science" offered COVID-19 vaccines in exchange for a donation, and asked buyers to provide their medical history.

On Telegram, several channels claimed to offer COVID-19 vaccines, accompanied by stock images. One user offered supposed Moderna Inc vaccines for \$180, and claimed the vaccine from Pfizer Inc and BioNTech SE could be had for \$150 and AstraZeneca's for \$110 per vial. Asked how the vaccines would be shipped, the account creator said they were transported in "regulated temperature packs" and ice packs within a few days, or overnight for an additional charge.

— Reuters

CASTE DISCRIMINATION

Dalit women confront bias on Indian village councils

ANURADHA NAGARAJ

When Priya Periyasamy was elected to lead her village council in southern India a year ago, her parents warned that she would face hostility as a low-caste Dalit woman, but nothing prepared her for the constant abuse she receives. Periyasamy is among at least 16 women village council leaders in Tamil Nadu state who have filed complaints in the last six months over discrimination for being Dalits — considered India's lowest caste in an ancient social hierarchy.

"Since I was elected, other members of the council wouldn't even greet me", Periyasamy, 24, said by phone from her village of Mannampandal. The last straw came when she was lambasted for sitting on a new chair in the council office — prompting Periyasamy to go on strike and stage a sit-in protest to highlight the daily discrimination and insults she faces. "Initially, I told myself I should focus on learning the job and ignored it. But then the office was being renovated and I decided to replace the old chair with council's consent. I was abused for sitting on the revolving chair", she said.

Rights campaigners say her experience is all too common in India, where elected Dalit women face a double discrimination in a country with low rates of female representation despite gender quota laws in village council, or panchayat, elections. Under the legislation, Indian states

reserve at least half of their village council posts for women, including those from lower castes — giving women like Periyasamy a chance of running. India banned discrimination based on caste in 1955, but a patriarchal mindset and deep social biases still make it difficult for Dalit women to have their voices heard — even if they win elected office, advocates say. "Not allowing a person of a lower caste to have an identity has got normalised in a deep way", said Edwin, trustee of the charity Human Rights Advocacy and Research Foundation (HRF), which trains women panchayat leaders on governance issues. "And for a woman, being poor and from a low caste are multiplying factors that make it impossible for an elected Dalit woman sarpanch (village council president) to work", added Edwin, who goes by one name.

SITTING ON THE FLOOR

India was one of the first countries to have a female head of state, but more than five decades later there are few women in politics. Those who do run for office often face sexual harassment and character assassinations. While the panchayat quota laws have led to the election of more than one million female village councillors in the nation of 1.3 billion people, similar proposals for state and federal elections have stalled for two decades. But even being elected as president of their village councils has not shielded some Dalit women from humiliating treatment — with some forced to sit on the floor during meetings or stopped from unfurling the national flag on Independence Day.

Many are reluctant to confront their fellow councillors about such abuse, but increasing numbers are speaking out — leading to several police investigations and arrests in Tamil Nadu.

— Thomson Reuters Foundation

INTERNAL SNIPING

Virus-hit Italy gripped by political crisis

ALVISE ARMELLINI

Italy's Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte has more than enough on his plate as he deals with a raging coronavirus pandemic, but also faces the more immediate challenge of staying in office.

Despite a soaring COVID-19 death toll and with a deadline looming to come up with a credible plan to spend billions of euros in EU recovery funds, the government has been consumed for weeks by internal sniping from former premier Matteo Renzi.

Renzi has threatened to withdraw his small but pivotal Italia Viva (Italy Alive) party from the centre-left coalition that Conte heads, which would force its collapse.

"The situation is, in technical terms, a disaster", the politician, who led Italy from 2014 to 2016, said in an interview with the Rete 4 channel broadcast late on Monday.

Asked about the chances of Conte keeping his job, he said: "We'll see."

Renzi has complained about slow progress in rolling out coronavirus vaccinations and delays in school reopenings, and has lambasted Conte for seeking to concentrate power in his hands.

This includes setting spending priorities without enough consultation for the 196 billion euros (\$240 billion) Italy expects to receive as part of a post-virus EU recovery plan, which is due to be submitted to Brussels by mid-April.

Italy has recorded more than 75,000 deaths from coronavirus, the highest toll in Europe, and the associated lockdowns and restrictions have hit the economy hard.

The leaked draft spending plan includes more than 50 priorities, with



Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, a once obscure law professor who has never himself been elected, has so far proved surprisingly adroit at navigating the choppy waters of Italian politics. — AFP

THE GOVERNMENT
HAS BEEN
CONSUMED FOR
WEEKS BY INTERNAL
SNIPING FROM
FORMER PREMIER
MATTEO RENZI

only nine billion euros for Italy's cash-strapped health system.

"This cannot work, there's too much money on handouts and too little on investments", Renzi said.

The showdown with Conte is expected to come to a head in the coming days, when ministers meet possibly as early as Wednesday to discuss the EU plans.

GOVT WITHOUT CONTE

Conte could try to placate Renzi with a cabinet reshuffle, either by persuading some ministers to step down or by resigning himself to seek a new mandate from President Sergio Mattarella with a revised list of cabinet

ministers.

But this option is, of course, fraught with risks.

Once Conte resigns, Renzi could insist that the ruling coalition — which includes the populist Five Star Movement (M5S), the centre-left Democratic Party (PD) and the leftist Free and Equals (LeU) — can survive only under a new prime minister.

However, there are no obvious alternative candidates. Former European Central Bank President Mario Draghi is often mentioned as a possible saviour for the country, but he has shown no appetite for a political career, at least in public.

— AFP

SPORT

OMAN OBSERVER
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13-TIME WINNER PETERHANSEL CONSOLIDATES OVERALL LEAD WITH THIRD AL ATTIYAH POSTS BACK-TO-BACK WINS

WADI AD-DAWASIR, Saudi Arabia: Qatari driver Nasser al Attiyah won the third stage of the Dakar Rally in Saudi Arabia on Tuesday, holding off the challenge of French arch-rival Stéphane Peterhansel.

The three-time winner of the Dakar sped through a 403 km loop around Wadi AD-Dawasir, the gateway to the Empty Quarter, a vast sand desert that covers much of the southern Arabian Peninsula, in 3hr 17min 39sec to take the victory.

Already winner of the prologue and Monday's second stage, Al Attiyah finished 2:27 ahead of Toyota teammate Henk Lategan of South Africa.

"I'm quite happy," said Al Attiyah, also an Olympic bronze medallist in the skeet at the 2012 London Games.

"Today we really pushed a lot and Mathieu (Baumel, co-pilot) did the navigation well. Everything is working very well like we need it to.

"I'm really quite happy with the pace, because to open and to win the stage is good."

Peterhansel, a 13-time Dakar



Toyota's driver Nasser al Attiyah of Qatar and his co-driver Mathieu Baumel of France compete during Stage 3 of the Dakar Rally 2021 around Wadi AD-Dawasir, in Saudi Arabia, on Tuesday. – AFP



Australian rider Toby Price in action during the 2021 Dakar Rally. – AFP

PRICE REELS IN BENAVIDES

Two-time winner Toby Price clocked 3hr 33min 23sec in winning the motorbike category for his 13th Dakar stage win, the Australian KTM rider tracking down Argentinian Kevin Benavides (Honda) in a gripping race.

Price, winner of the Dakar in 2016 and 2019, finished just 1:16 ahead of Benavides — later extended by a 2min penalty for the Argentine — and now sits third in the overall

standings behind new American leader Skyler Howes and Frenchman Xavier de Soultrait.

"So far, it's been up and down. It's quite frustrating to be in front one day and then at the back the next," said Price.

"The difficulty of the navigation means it's hard to open the road. I'm going to have to do it tomorrow, but I hope there'll be a bit of respite and that it will be a day that's less complicated on the navigational

front." Price added: "It's been a good day for me. The bike's working well, I didn't fall and I didn't have any fuel problems like yesterday.

"Everyday is going to count right up until the last one, but so far there have been no major problems."

Wednesday's fourth stage from Wadi AD-Dawasir to Riyadh, at 813 km the longest of this Dakar if the link sector is included, sees competitors racing a 337 km special.

— AFP

DAKAR RALLY THIRD STAGE RESULTS

AUTO

1. Nasser al Attiyah/Matthieu Baumel (QAT/FRA/Toyota) 3hr 17min 39sec, 2. Henk Lategan/Brett Cummings (RSA/RSA/Toyota) at 2:27, 3. Stéphane Peterhansel/Edouard Boulanger (FRA/FRA/Mini) 4:05, 4. Yasir Seaidan/Alexey Kuzmich (KSA/RUS/Century) 7:09, 5. Sheikh Khalid Al Qassimi/Xavier Panseri (UAE/FRA/Peugeot) 12:31, 6. Sébastien Loeb/Daniel Elena (FRA/MON/Brx) 13:14, 7. Martin Prokop/Viktor Chytka (CZE/CZE/Ford) 13:42, 8. Mathieu Serradori/Fabian Lurquin (FRA/BEL/Century) 16:05, 9. Wei Han/Min Liao (CHN/CHN/Smg) 17:49, 10. Cyril Despres/Michael Horn (FRA/SUI/Peugeot) 19:05

Overall standings

1. Stéphane Peterhansel/Edouard Boulanger (FRA/FRA/Mini) 10hr 39min 02sec, 2. Nasser al Attiyah/Matthieu Baumel1 (QAT/FRA/Toyota) at 5:09, 3. Mathieu Serradori/Fabian Lurquin (FRA/BEL/Century) 26:21, 4. Carlos Sainz/Lucas Cruz (ESP/ESP/Mini) 33:34, 5. Jakub Przygonski/Timo Göttschalk (POL/GER/Toyota) 44:22. (penalty: 2:00.), 6. Sebastien Loeb/Daniel Elena (FRA/MON/Brx) 45:49, 7. Henk Lategan/Brett Cummings (RSA/RSA/Toyota) 47:25. (penalty: 4:00.), 8. Yasir Seaidan/Alexey Kuzmich (KSA/RUS/Century) 51:50. (penalty: 2:00.), 9. Sheikh Khalid Al Qassimi/Xavier Panseri (UAE/FRA/Peugeot) 52:08, 10. Martin Prokop/Viktor Chytka (CZE/CZE/Ford) 56:30 (penalty: 1:00.)

Moto

1. Toby Price (AUS/KTM) 3hr 33min 23sec, 2. Kevin Benavides (ARG/Honda) at 3:16. (penalty: 2:00.), 3. Matthias Walkner (AUT/Ktm) 4:36. (penalty: 2:00.), 4. Skyler Howes (USA/Ktm) 7:16. (penalty: 1:00.), 5. Sam Sunderland (GBR/Ktm) 8:24, 6. Xavier De Soultrait (FRA/Husqvarna) 8:50, 7. Franco Caimi (ARG/Yamaha) 10:04, 8. Daniel Sanders (AUS/Ktm) 11:22, 9. Rui Goncalves/Rui Jorge Goncalves Dias (POR/POR/Sherco Factory) 12:19, 10. Jose Ignacio Cornejo Florimo (CHI/Honda) 13:09

Overall standings

1. Skyler Howes (USA/Ktm) 12hr 05min 48sec (penalty: 1:00.), 2. Xavier De Soultrait (FRA/Husqvarna) a 28, 3. Toby Price (AUS/Ktm) 52, 4. Kevin Benavides (ARG/Honda) 1:33 (penalty: 2:00.), 5. Sam Sunderland (GBR/Ktm) 4:27, 6. Ross Branch (BOT/Yamaha) 6:14, 7. Luciano Benavides (ARG/Husqvarna) 6:56 (penalty: 1:00.), 8. Joan Barreda Bort (ESP/Honda) 8:02, 9. Adrien Van Beveren (FRA/Yamaha) 8:09, 10. Jose Ignacio Cornejo Florimo (CHI/Honda) 8:24

“Today we really pushed a lot and Mathieu (Baumel, co-pilot) did the navigation well. Everything is working very well like we need it to

NASSER AL ATTIYAH
Qatari driver

winner, consolidated his lead in the overall standings with a third-placed finish, 4:05 off the pace.

The Frenchman, whose previous Dakar victories came seven times in a car and six on a motorbike, said a mixed terrain including big rocks, sandy canyons, dunes and a fast plateau had made it “a really complete stage”.

“The result is not perfect because of the puncture,” he said in reference to an early incident.

“But I'm really happy with the job done by Edouard Boulanger, my co-pilot. In the complicated places, he did a really good job. I'm happy with the car and I'm happy with the co-pilot, so it's good for the next day.”

In brief

MUSCAT



PRAN-ARTT TENNEX CRICKET TOURNAMENT

ARTT will host one of the most competitive tennex ball cricket tournament on January 8 from 10 am to 5 pm. The event is by invitation only and only the top 16 tennex ball cricket teams have been given slots to enter.

Reputed brand PRAN Foods has tied up with ARTT to come up with one of the biggest tennex ball cricket tournament in Oman.

Marketing Manager of PRAN Foods in Oman SK Firoz Ahamed said: "With Oman qualifying for the T20 World Cup 2021 and with Oman getting status to host Test cricket, we see big prospect in further development of this sport among the youth and locals."

Ahmed Khan, co-owner of Team ARTT, said the top 16 tennex cricket teams will compete in a knock-out format for this prestigious trophy.

SYDNEY



INDIA'S RAHUL OUT OF AUSTRALIA SERIES WITH SPRAINED WRIST

India's injury-hit squad suffered a further blow on Tuesday when experienced wicketkeeper-batsman KL Rahul was ruled out of the rest of the series against Australia with a sprained left wrist.

The right-hander hurt himself while batting in the nets at the Melbourne Cricket Ground during a practice session on Saturday after India won the second Test by eight wickets. India's cricket board said he will "not be available for the remaining two Tests of the Border-Gavaskar Trophy as he will need about three weeks time to recover completely and regain full strength".

The 28-year-old, who has played 36 Tests but was left out for both the Adelaide and Melbourne Tests, will head to the National Cricket Academy in Bengaluru to recover. — AFP

MELBOURNE



AUSTRALIA COACH SAYS WARNER 'VERY LIKELY' FOR THIRD TEST

Australia coach Justin Langer has all but confirmed David Warner will return for the third Test against India and said uncapped opener Will Pucovski is available for selection after clearing concussion protocols.

Regular opener Warner has been racing to be fit for the Sydney Cricket Ground (SCG) test starting on Thursday after missing the first two matches in Adelaide and Melbourne with a groin strain.

Warner admitted last week he was unlikely to be fully fit but Langer said on Tuesday the lefthander was "very, very, very likely" to play at the SCG where Tim Paine's Australia will hope to take a 2-1 lead in the four-match series. — Reuters

South Africa sweep Sri Lanka series

JOHANNESBURG: South Africa completed a sweep of their two match series against Sri Lanka as they strolled to a 10-wicket win on the third day of the second Test on Tuesday.

South Africa knocked off a target of 67 runs without loss as openers Dean Elgar (31 not out) and Aiden Markram (36 not out) saw them to victory at the Wanderers Stadium — with two and a half days of the contest still remaining.

Success in Johannesburg followed a convincing innings and 45-run triumph in the first Test in Pretoria last week and turns around a poor run of Test form over the last year.

Sri Lanka were bowled out for 211 in their second innings, surviving only 95 minutes of Tuesday's morning session. They resumed their second innings at 150-4 overnight with a tenuous five-run lead but with captain Dimuth Karunaratne not out on 91 and hoping to set the home side an imposing target to chase in the fourth innings.

Karunaratne reached his 10th Test century off 123 balls as the visitors began in aggressive fashion, but a misjudged pull shot saw the Sri Lanka skipper top edge Anrich Nortje to be caught by Wiaan Mulder in a major blow to their hopes, just 20 minutes into the day's play.



South Africa's Lutho Sipamla (L) celebrates with team-mates after the dismissal of Sri Lanka's Dushmantha Chameera during the third day of the second Test at the Wanderers Stadium in Johannesburg. — AFP

He was dismissed for 103. "We wanted to turn the pressure over onto South Africa but unfortunately they bowled really well", Karunaratne said afterwards.

Niroshan Dickwella, who scored 36, followed in the next over as Lungi Ngidi (4-44) took another crucial wicket, setting off an end to the resistance among the lower order. Lutho Sipamla cleaned up the tail

with three wickets in 12 balls, including bowling Wanindu Hasaranga for 16, to finish with figures of 3-40.

Sri Lanka, who won the toss and elected to bat, scored 157 in their first innings and South Africa replied with 302, with Elgar top scoring on 127.

"We wanted to get the new year off to a good start, and it was good to see our experienced batsmen among the runs as well

as our young bowling line-up putting up their hands", said winning captain Quinton de Kock.

South Africa now look ahead to their first visit in 14 years to Pakistan, where they will play two Tests and three Twenty20 internationals later this month, while Sri Lanka return home to host England in two Tests in Galle. The first starts on January 14. — Reuters



South Africa's captain Quinton de Kock holds the series trophy. — AFP

SCOREBOARD

Sri Lanka, first innings	157
South Africa, first innings	302
Sri Lanka, second innings	
D Karunaratne c Mulder b Nortje	103
K Perera b Ngidi	1
L Thirimanne c De Kock b Ngidi	31
K Mendis c De Kock b Ngidi	0
M Bhanuka c Maharaj b Nortje	1
N Dickwella c Bavuma b Ngidi	36
D Shanaka c Sipamla b Mulder	8
W Hasaranga b Sipamla	16
D Chameera c De Kock b Sipamla	0
V Fernando not out	1
A Fernando b Sipamla	0
Extras: (b9, lb2, nb2, w1)	14
Total: (56.5 overs)	211
Fall of wickets: 1-1, 2-86, 3-92, 4-109, 5-176, 6-181, 7-190, 8-209, 9-210	
Bowling: Ngidi 15-5-44-4, Nortje 19-2-64-2, Mulder 13-3-52-1, Sipamla 9-5-1-40-3	

South Africa, second innings	
A Markram not out	36
D Elgar not out	31
Total: (0 wkts, 13.2 overs)	67
Bowling: V Fernando 4-0-23-0, A Fernando 4-1-20-0, Hasaranga 2-2-0-16-0, Shanaka 3-1-8-0	

Williamson's 238 leaves Pakistan in trouble

CHRISTCHURCH, NEW ZEALAND: Kane Williamson underscored his ranking as the world's premier batsman with a masterful double century as New Zealand took control of the second Test against Pakistan on Tuesday.

In between the showers at Hagley Oval in Christchurch, Williamson was in classic form, batting for nine hours 33 minutes for his 238 and leading New Zealand to an imposing 659 for six declared to lead Pakistan by 362.

At stumps on day three, the tourists were already in trouble at eight for one, with Kyle Jamieson adding to his five-wicket haul in the first innings by removing Shan Masood for a duck.

It was a relentless performance from Williamson who became only the second New Zealander after Brendon McCullum to score four double centuries.

Daryl Mitchell, who wondered if he would ever get a bat while Williamson was at the crease, described his skipper as "a freak who's set us up with a chance to win".

Williamson delayed the declaration until Mitchell completed his maiden century and the all-rounder said despite his unbeaten 102 off 112 balls it remained a good pitch for the bowlers and should produce a result.

"If we put it in the right areas and bang those hard lengths, there is a lot of pace there and hopefully we can put Pakistan under some pressure and see what happens", he said. — AFP



New Zealand's captain Kane Williamson plays a shot in the air for a successful catch out by Pakistan's Shan Masood off Faheem Ashraf. — AFP

SCOREBOARD

Pakistan 1st innings	297	5-452, 6-585
New Zealand 1st innings		Bowling: Afridi 35.5-8-101-2, Abbas 34-11-98-2, Shah 26-2-141-0, Ashraf 28-4-106-2, Masood 2-0-17-0, Gohar 32-0-159-0, Sohail 1-0-2-0
T Latham c Sohail b Afridi	33	
T Blundell lbw Ashraf	16	
K Williamson c Masood b Ashraf	238	
R Taylor c Masood b Abbas	12	
H Nicholls c Shah b Abbas	157	
B Watling c Sohail b Afridi	7	
D Mitchell not out	102	
K Jamieson not out	30	
Extras: (b27, lb8, w17, nb12)	64	
Total: (six wickets; 158.5 overs)	659	
Fall of wickets: 1-52, 2-52, 3-71, 4-440,		Pakistan 2nd innings
		S Masood c Southee b Jamieson
		0
		Abid Ali not out
		7
		M Abbas not out
		1
		Total: (one wicket; 11 overs)
		8
		Fall of wicket: 1-3
		Bowling: Southee 6-4-5-0, Boult 3-2-2-0, Jamieson 2-1-1-1

Ings lobs Southampton past listless Liverpool

SOUTHAMPTON: A superb second-minute lob by Danny Ings gave Southampton a surprise 1-0 home win over Premier League leaders Liverpool, with the Reds' attack looking rudderless as they were held scoreless for the second game in a row.

With the injury-hit champions fielding a makeshift centre-back pairing of Jordan Henderson and Fabinho, striker Ings, who joined Southampton on loan from Liverpool in 2018 before making the transfer permanent a year later, was able to exploit some confusion at a set piece to secure the win. The victory lifted Southampton to sixth in the table on 29 points, behind Tottenham Hotspur and Manchester City on goal difference. Liverpool stay top on 33 points ahead of Manchester United, who have a game in hand, on goal difference.

As Henderson called his players to shore up the middle, James Ward-Prowse floated a free kick down the left that Trent Alexander-Arnold failed to deal with, and Ings pounced to send a

deft left-footed lob over Alisson into the net. Liverpool did not manage a single shot on target in the opening 45 minutes, with their best chance headed just over the bar by Mohamed Salah during the first-half stoppage time. They dominated the second half, but once again a concerted effort by the massed ranks of Southampton's defence kept them out, and coach Ralph Hasenhuetl fell to his knees at the final whistle as his players celebrated. "He (Hasenhuetl) is very passionate and he brings that passion into the game, and it's great for us to see that", goal-scorer Ings told Sky Sports. Liverpool Manager Juergen Klopp, whose side were held to a goalless draw by Newcastle United in their last outing, was disappointed with the display. "They (Southampton) put a lot of work in. Our decision-making was just not good, that is how it is when you don't have momentum. We should have had much more chances", he said.

— Reuters



Southampton's Danny Ings scores against Liverpool at St Mary's Stadium, Southampton. — Reuters

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MSM30 Index declines 8.10 pc in 2020

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 5

The MSM30 Index closed 2020 down by 8.10 per cent year-on-year (YoY) at 3658.77, mirroring sharp declines in most stock markets across the world, said leading investment services firm Ubhar Capital (U-Capital).

While most stock markets were on fire post-Government announcements of unprecedented economic support packages, the MSM30 Index continued on its sideways pattern, staying roughly between the lowest level seen this year at 3383.54 and the highest level seen at 3780.75 after COVID-19 was categorised as a pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO), the publicly listed firm noted in a report.

“It was an especially challenging year for the local stock market.

The MSM30 Index closed 2020 down by 8.10 per cent year-on-year (YoY) at 3658.77, while the MSM Total Return Index was down by 1.6 per cent to close the year at 4175.48,” U-Capital stated.

Amongst the sub-indices, the Industrial Index as the only one that closed up YoY by 2.13 per cent. The Services Index closed down by 16.07 per cent and the Financial Index closed down by 11.0 per cent. The MSM Shariah Index ended down by 2.33 per cent.

The Omani government’s quick response to the pandemic in its early stages was widely appreciated, as the country moved into a swift lockdown while many countries all over the world were still struggling to come to grasp with the enormity of the situation.



The first two cases of coronavirus were reported in Oman on February 24, 2020. By that time, the MSM30 Index had already gained about 5.2 per cent on year-to-date (YTD) basis. However, the index started falling from thereon (when the first cases were reported) and reached the year’s lowest point by early-April, according to the report.

The year kicked off with the announcement of the State General Budget, resulting in slight support to the index followed by a volatile period. Corporate results, which were better in 2020 than in 2019, also provided respite to the market.

During the 1Q20, the MSM30 Index witnessed the effects of “The Great Lockdown”, when most economic activities came to a halt as the country and the world prepared itself for the effects of an unknown virus which was spreading like wildfire. The country announced full lockdown at the end of March, with suspension of passenger flights

to and from Oman. Even though the market started the year on a positive note, it rapidly declined during March and closed the first quarter (1Q20) down by 13.8 per cent.

The second quarter witnessed the lowest point of the Index for the year in early-April. However, it began to see slight recovery on positive news like vaccine trials and government initiatives to control the spread of the virus.

Many companies, in a historic first move, held their delayed Annual General Meetings on online platforms during this quarter and moved on with dividend approvals that usually take place in March of each year for most companies. While the world struggled to understand the economic and social repercussions of nation lockdowns, the IMF came forth with its World Economic Outlook in April 2020, which slashed Oman’s GDP growth forecasts, as was true for many other countries given the pandemic situation.

KEY INDICATOR:
The MSM Total Return Index was down by 1.6 per cent to close the year at 4175.48

This was further followed by a generally low-turnover season because of fewer working hours during the Holy Month of Ramadhan. Hence, the quarter saw limited movement in the stock market index, with the index improving 2.4 per cent during the quarter.

In the third quarter, the MSM30 Index gained about 7.2 per cent on the back of revival of trading activity and improvement in investor sentiment which materialise don vaccine trial announcements and re-opening of economic activities.

Oman Arab Bank also completed takeover of Alizz Islamic Bank during the third quarter. The country published its Public-Private Partnership legislation in order to attract foreign investment.

The fourth quarter saw an increase of about 2 per cent in the index, mostly on lack of negative triggers. Mass inoculation procedures began in Oman in December, which proved slightly positive for the Index as a whole as sentiment improved, in general.

Foreign inflows

For the sixth year, foreigners continued to exit the market. Eight weeks out of the total in the year witnessed positive flows while the remaining ended in net foreign outflows. The year ended with net

foreign outflows of approximately \$105 million.

IPOS AND LISTINGS

During the year only one IPO materialised which was Oman’s first REIT i.e. Aman REIT. The IPO offered 50 per cent of the RO 20 million fund of the country’s first REIT, divided into 100 million investment units at a price of 100 Baisas per unit, plus Offer expenses of 2 Baisas per unit. Aman Reit IPO was undersubscribed and ultimately the Company was listed on March 15, 2020.

During the year, Oman Arab Bank (OAB) saw its transformation into a public joint-stock company by listing its shares on the Muscat Securities Market (MSM) on July 6, 2020.

The total number of shares listed was 1.67 billion, at a listing price equivalent to RO 0.213 per share, with a total value equivalent to RO 355.6 million.

Bonds and sukuk

During the year, there were three Government Development Bond listings, i.e. Issue 63 to Issue 65 amounting to RO 550 million, higher than the three bonds issued worth RO 400 million in 2019. Oman also issued three Sukuk during the year worth RO 433.1 million.

The total issuance value of corporate bonds and Sukuk that got listed on the Muscat Securities Market in 2020 stood at RO 4.2 million, down by about 98.20 per cent compared to total issuance value of bonds and Sukuk in 2019. Hadiqah Almadina Sukuk formed the highest share at 72 per cent of the total value.

[Courtesy: U-Capital]

Government Treasury Bills worth RO 74m issued



MUSCAT: A tender for Government Treasury Bills (Issue 109) worth RO 74 million was announced this week. The total value of the allotted Treasury bills amounted to RO 74 million, for a maturity period of 28 days, from January 6, 2021 until February 3, 2021.

The average accepted price reached 99.951 for every RO 100, and the minimum accepted price arrived at 99.950 per RO 100. The average discount rate and the average yield reached 0.63769 per cent and 0.63801 per cent respectively.

The interest rate on the repo operations with the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) is 0.5 per cent while the discount rate on the Treasury Bills Discounting Facility with CBO is 1 per cent.

Treasury Bills are short-term highly secured financial instruments issued by the Ministry of Finance, and they provide licensed commercial banks the opportunity to invest their surplus funds. The Central Bank of Oman (CBO) acts as the Issue Manager and provides the added advantage of ready liquidity through discounting and repurchase facilities (repo). — ONA

UK offers extra \$6.2 bn to firms to soften new COVID-19 recession

LONDON: Britain offered a £4.6 billion (\$6.2 billion) support package for businesses on Tuesday to soften an expected recession caused by a surge in COVID-19 cases that has prompted a third national lockdown.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced the lockdown on Monday, saying a highly contagious coronavirus variant risked overwhelming the health service within 21 days.

Most people must work from home and schools have closed for almost all pupils. Hospitality venues must stay shut, as well as non-essential shops.

Britain’s economy now looks likely to tip back into recession — shrinking in the final quarter of 2020 and the first quarter of 2021 — after suffering a record 25 per cent fall in output in the first two months of lockdown in 2020.

The new downturn is expected to be far smaller, with most businesses now much better adapted to working remotely and construction sites and factories expected to stay open. But economists at J P Morgan still predicted a hefty 2.5 per cent fall in output for the first three months of 2021.

Finance minister Rishi Sunak has previously announced emergency help for



Finance minister Rishi Sunak

the economy worth £280 billion including a massive job protection scheme that will run until the end of April.

Under Tuesday’s additional measures, retail, hospitality and leisure companies will be able to claim one-off grants worth up to £9,000 to get them through the coming months, costing up to £4 billion in total, along with £600 million of grants for other businesses.

“This will help businesses to get through the months ahead — and crucially it will help sustain jobs, so workers can be ready

to return when they are able to reopen,” Sunak said.

Government forecasters in November predicted almost £400 billion of borrowing this financial year, equivalent to 19 per cent of GDP - a peacetime record but one that, at least for now, can be financed at record-low interest rates.

The Bank of England is buying government debt and in November ramped up its asset purchase programme to almost £900 billion with the intention of using it throughout 2021.

However, the British Chambers of Commerce said Sunak’s “drip-feed approach” to support for businesses would see many go to the wall as they would not qualify for sufficient assistance.

“While this immediate cashflow support for business is welcome, it is not going to be enough to save many firms,” BCC director general Adam Marshall said. Britain suffered the most severe contraction of any Group of Seven economy in the second quarter of 2020 and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development has estimated Britain’s recovery by the end of this year will be the slowest of all its member countries except Argentina.

— Reuters

EXTENSION OF TENDER SALES ANNOUNCEMENT

Nama Holding would like to inform the specialized manufactures that the tender sales have been extended for the tenders below;

TENDER NUMBER	TENDER NAME	LAST DATE FOR COLLECTION OF TENDER DOCUMENTS	TIME & LAST DATE FOR PROPOSAL SUBMISSION	TENDER FEE (OMR)
NG/2020/01	FRAMEWORK AGREEMENT FOR THE SUPPLY OF ELECTRICITY TRANSFORMER PRODUCT FOR NAMA GROUP	11 Jan 2021	14 Feb 2021	2000/-
NG/2020/02	FRAMEWORK AGREEMENT FOR THE SUPPLY OF ELECTRICITY SWITCHGEAR PRODUCT FOR NAMA GROUP	11 Jan 2021	14 Feb 2021	2000/-

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Financial services settlement with EU may not be easy

FORMER UK Prime Minister Theresa May has severely criticised Boris Johnson's Brexit trade deal with the EU for not including provisions on financial services. May said that her failed deal (when she was PM) was 'a better deal' than Prime Minister Johnson's and said she was 'disappointed' his trade agreement does not have a wide-ranging services agreement.

The deal, which came into place on January 1, as the UK left the EU's customs union and single market, does not include an EU-wide arrangement for services, with UK firms instead of having to negotiate a patchwork of individual EU nations' regulations.

May said that not getting a post-Brexit financial services agreement was a massive blow to

the UK economy.

"In 2018, I said that we wanted to work to get financial services deal in the future treaty arrangement and that it would be truly ground-breaking. It would have been, but sadly it has not been achieved," she said.

She added: "We have a deal in trade which benefits the EU, but not a deal in services that would have benefited the UK. The arrangement treaty is clear that future negotiation on these points is possible and I hope the government will go to the negotiations with alacrity and vigour, particularly on financial services."

The only way the UK financial services industry can have EU access is if Brussels grants regulatory equivalence. This is a classification that will only be given if Brussels deems that the UK will stay roughly within the



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THE ONLY WAY THE UK
FINANCIAL SERVICES
INDUSTRY CAN HAVE EU
ACCESS IS IF BRUSSELS
GRANTS REGULATORY
EQUIVALENCE

EU's regulatory orbit for financial services.

The post-Brexit trade deal has outlined plans to set up a dialogue between the UK and EU to discuss a potential equivalence deal, with March set as a rough deadline.

A senior member of the UK's Brexit negotiating team said that progress could be made in this area within the coming few months.

One of the world's largest law firms has expressed doubt on claims by the UK that it can negotiate a post-Brexit financial services settlement with the EU within the next three months.

US firm Baker McKenzie – the fourth largest law firm in the world by revenue and the top firm for multinational mergers and acquisitions – has said the EU's equivalence assessments will continue well into next year.

UK financial services will, for now, have to rely on a mixture of regulations from individual member states. Brexit trade deal included plans to arrange formal talks between the UK and EU to discuss a potential equivalence deal, aiming to be decided within three months. Mark Simpson, a partner in Baker McKenzie's financial services unit, said this timeframe was very unlikely to yield results.

He said: "The EU has not yet finished its equivalence assessments, and has expressed concern about the UK's plans for its future regulatory framework and the degree of divergence from the EU regime this might entail. It is likely that the Commission will continue its assessments well into 2021."

He added: "Equivalence is not as straightforward as either the EU or UK might otherwise

indicate, with the EU taking a technical, 'detailed and granular' forward-looking approach to equivalence and regulatory divergence, while the UK remains focused on outcomes-based assessments through determinations.

However, the UK's Brexit negotiating team felt, with some degree of confidence, that progress could quite possibly be made within the time frame.

"The best thing is if we understand each other and understand what underpins equivalence decisions when they're going to be taken," they said.

Adding: "We believe it's a meaningful commitment and we expect it to move forward quite quickly."

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

First Omani appointed head of Sharia audit at Alizz Islamic Bank

MUSCAT: Alizz Islamic Bank has announced the appointment of Issa bin Salem Al Riyami (pictured) as the Head of the Sharia Audit & Compliance unit at Alizz Islamic Bank.

Al Riyami is the first Omani to be appointed to this position in a full-fledged Islamic bank in the Sultanate.

In his capacity as head of the unit, Issa Al Riyami will oversee, review products and documents, comment, correct and submit them to the Sharia Board after ensuring that they adhere to the principles of Islamic Sharia.

His role is to also ensure the implementation of the Sharia guidelines of the Central Bank of Oman, represented by the Supreme Sharia Supervisory Board.

He will also oversee the



Islamic Banking educational campaigns conducted by Alizz Islamic Bank, both internally and externally; and raise awareness about Islamic banking and its products, in order to assist the public to choose products that fall in line with their requirements, with complete transparency.

Al Riyami possesses a bachelor's degree in Islamic law from the College of Sharia and Law (currently the College of Law) and has an extensive work experience of 18 years, where he worked in

the government sector for 11 years in the Ministry of Justice and the Administrative Affairs Council of the Judiciary.

He then moved to work in the Islamic banking sector in the Meethaq Islamic Banking window of Bank Muscat in 2013 as the Head of the Sharia Audit Unit and then the Head of the Sharia Compliance Unit.

In 2016, Al Riyami became a Certified Sharia Supervisor and Auditor approved by the Accounting and Auditing Organisation for Islamic Financial Institutions (AAOIFI).

He is also the first Omani to hold the position of Head of Sharia Audit and Compliance in a full-fledged Islamic bank after fulfilling the requirements of the regulatory framework for Islamic banks by the CBO.

PRESS RELEASES

BANKDHOFAH'S SAVINGS ACCOUNT SCHEME GRAND DRAW OFFERS RO 500,000 CASH PRIZES

BankDhofar's Savings Account Scheme Grand Prize Draw awaits two lucky winners, who will take home RO 250,000 each. The Savings Account Scheme, which reiterates BankDhofar's keenness to spread the culture of saving among the community, rewarded customers throughout the year and provided chances for all family members to win valuable cash prizes.

Commenting on the upcoming grand prize draw, Dr Tariq Taha, Chief Retail Banking Officer, BankDhofar says: "In addition to providing best services and products to our customers, we are keen to instil saving habits among the community. We are glad with the success of 2020 Savings Account Scheme, in which we introduced new categories to ensure providing chances to win for all family members, including: children, youth, and ladies.

"In addition to the guaranteed prizes for every branch, with bigger prizes and more winners ensuring more customers are included in the scheme. We have also dedicated major prizes for our Priority Banking customers. We wish all the best for our customers in the coming Grand Prize Draw, in which 2 lucky customers will get the chance to win RO 250,000 each."



BANK MUSCAT OPENS 4 MORE NEW GREEN SPORTS FIELDS IN N AL SHARQIYAH

Bank Muscat continues to open new sports fields across the Sultanate as part of its flagship Green Sports programme. The bank recently opened four new sports fields in North Al Sharqiyah Governorate in line with the bank's commitment to community development and promoting Oman as a sporting nation.

The opening of the Al Nojoom team's stadium in the Wilayat of Wadi Bani Khalid was attended by Khamis bin Masoud Al Saifi, Chief Financial Officer of the team. The bank also inaugurated Al Arabi team's stadium in the Wilayat of Bidiyah, in the presence of Salem bin Eid Al Balushi, Vice-President of the Team.

Another field was handed over to the Al Ittifaq Sports Team in the Wilayat of Al Mudhaibi at an event attended by Hamoud bin Saif Al Shabibi, chairman of the team.

Key cyber threats estimates for 2021 in ME region

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 5

The world didn't just change in 2020. It transformed—so much so that it's been hard to keep up. And, as any cybersecurity expert will tell you, when the external world transforms — cyberspace transforms with it.

These same experts will also tell you that cyberspace isn't ubiquitous. Every region must content not only with global trends but also country-specific developments. In other words, true comprehensive security comes when a global perspective is supplemented with a regional one.

Here are some local developments in the Middle East, Turkey and Africa (META) region that experts from Kaspersky are urging IT users to keep an eye on in the coming year:

#1 Increase in advanced persistent threat intrusions in the Middle East and Turkey

Main driver: Increasing geopolitical tension across the

board influencing an increase in the espionage-based cyber offensive. Geopolitics has been historically the primary contributing factor – among other factors such as economic, tech and foreign affairs – to influence cyber intrusions with an objective to steal sensitive data for national security purposes.

Despite the current pandemic situation affecting the globe, geopolitical tension has significantly increased in the Middle East and Turkey at least since January 2020 and likely continued till the end of 2020.

#2 Growth of cybercrime attacks in META at-large, especially in Africa

Main driver: Economic turbulence and impact of COVID-19. Every country globally has had its own issues with varying impact since the pandemic started. Economic turbulence stormed many countries and had the most affection on countries who had weak economy prior to the pandemic.

Traditionally, weak economies lead to unemployment, social inequality, corruption and more, and this leads to an increase in traditional crime. The cyber domain has somewhat similar effects, and cybercrime will likely increase as an effect of weak economies. With that said, the increase will vary between a country and another depending on the average wealth, age, country-wide digitization and so on.

#3 Increase in data breaches in META at-large

Main driver: To cope with social distancing and fighting the pandemic, more companies are exposing their systems online with availability in mind to maintain their "business as usual" status, but without adequate security controls, leaving some type of databases and systems open to intruders. Data breaches occur when computer systems are left unpatched or improperly configured, at a corporate environment or at a cloud hosting



provider.

#4 More hackers-for-hire/cyber mercenaries groups' activities targeting SMBs and financial institutions

Main driver: Increasing economic uncertainties globally and in the META region mandates

that businesses understand their competitive marketplace to navigate the current and upcoming foggy situation. This estimate is especially true for the Middle East region. In addition, this situation could lead to bankruptcy and an increase in

legal disputes in courts.

These factors are just what cyber-mercenaries are hired for; digging sensitive private information for legal disputes to win court ruling or steal business trade secrets and provide business or competitive intelligence to the highest bidder.

#5 At least one disruptive cyberattack in the Middle East to come

Main driver: Symmetric warfare is more likely to happen due to the global pandemic, to respond to geopolitical, economic, and security threats without causing major direct conflicts and at a significantly lower cost compared to traditional warfare.

Cyberwarfare is known for its low cost, high impact, and hard attribution. These factors make this type of modern warfare the preferred go-to method to sabotage and disrupt countries' critical infrastructure and corporates' infrastructure at minimum cost, in these tense times of geopolitics in the Middle East.



In brief

■ PARIS

**AIRBUS BEAT 560-PLANE DELIVERY GOAL FOR 2020**

Airbus delivered more than 560 aircraft in 2020, according to tracking data and airline industry sources, putting it on course to beat arch-rival Boeing to be the world's largest planemaker for a second consecutive year.

The European aerospace group reached an informal target of 560 handovers, based on numbers that remain subject to auditing, the sources added.

Airbus, which is expected to announce 2020 orders and deliveries in the coming days, declined to comment ahead of their formal publication.

Total Airbus deliveries are expected to have fallen by about a third this year. — **Reuters**

■ SINGAPORE

**INDONESIA'S GOJEK, TOKOPEDIA IN \$18 BN MERGER TALKS**

Indonesian ride-hailing and payment firm Gojek and e-commerce leader Tokopedia are in advanced talks to seal a \$18 billion merger ahead of potential stock market listings in Jakarta and the US, people with knowledge of the matter said.

The talks come as the decade-old start-ups seek profitability by offering a bouquet of services as varied as grocery shopping and hairdressing appointments under a single platform. The pair have also been benefiting from virus-busting stay-home policies which have stoked demand for food delivery and e-payments in the archipelago's fast-growing e-commerce market. — **Reuters**

■ NEW YORK

**MC WANTS A BITE OF CHICKEN MARKET WITH NEW SANDWICHES**

McDonald's Corp is hoping 2021 is the year it cracks the crispy chicken sandwich by rolling out three different versions in the United States, as it takes on chains such as Restaurant Brands International's Popeyes for a share of the growing market.

The world's biggest burger chain confirmed to Reuters it plans to launch its crispy chicken sandwich in "classic", "deluxe" and "spicy" versions on February 24. All will contain a new crispy white meat chicken fillet served with crinkle-cut pickles on a toasted, buttered potato roll.

The new McDonald's strategy is founded in part on the long-term popularity of Chicken McNuggets. — **Reuters**

Google workers form small union, eyeing more protests over working conditions



A man walks past a logo of Google in front of at an office building in Zurich. — Reuters File Photo

OAKLAND: More than 200 workers at Google and other Alphabet Inc units on Monday formed a labour union for US and Canadian offices, building on years of protests over working conditions and business practices but falling far short of the support needed to force the tech giant to the bargaining table.

Backers believe the "Alphabet Workers Union", which evolved from an informal group of activist employees, will better shield members from firings or other forms of retaliation.

It will also enable the group to collect dues to hire support staff and attack the company more aggressively than in the past, internal leaders and outside labour experts said.

The union will be part of the Communications Workers of America labour group, which also represents employees from Verizon Communications Inc and AT&T Inc. Alphabet members will pay dues of 1 per cent of their total compensation.

Kara Silverstein, Director of People Operations at Google, said in response on Monday that the

company supports its employees' "protected labour rights" and will "continue engaging directly with all our employees."

Unlike traditional labour unions in the US, the Alphabet group is a so-called "minority union" that will not be able to force the company to collectively bargain over wages or other issues.

Under US labour law, Alphabet

can ignore the union's demands until a majority of employees support it.

In addition, the union plans to represent third-party contractors, a class of workers whose demands Alphabet also may ignore. Union leaders acknowledge that widespread support is unlikely soon.

Well-paying jobs, with perks

such as free meals and gyms, mostly have kept unionisation out of the tech industry. But labour activism is creeping into the tech industry as workers and regulators grapple with the power of sprawling internet companies including Alphabet.

Chewy Shaw, the Alphabet Union's Vice Chair, said small fractions of the workforce

Google has been under fire from the US labour regulator, which has accused the company of unlawfully questioning several workers who were then terminated for protesting company policies and trying to organise a union

successfully protested in recent years over workplace equity and ethical business practices.

Those actions helped prompt Google to introduce new policies around workplace investigations and to drop a drone software project with the US military. The union aims to mount similar campaigns, with the new funding and structure lending greater legitimacy and resources, Shaw said.

Google has been under fire from the US labour regulator, which has accused the company of unlawfully questioning several workers who were then terminated for protesting company policies and trying to organise a union. — **Reuters**

Electric cars rise to record 54pc market share

OSLO: The sale of electric cars in Norway overtook those powered by petrol, diesel and hybrid engines last year, with German auto-maker Volkswagen replacing Tesla as the top battery-vehicle producer, new data showed on Tuesday.

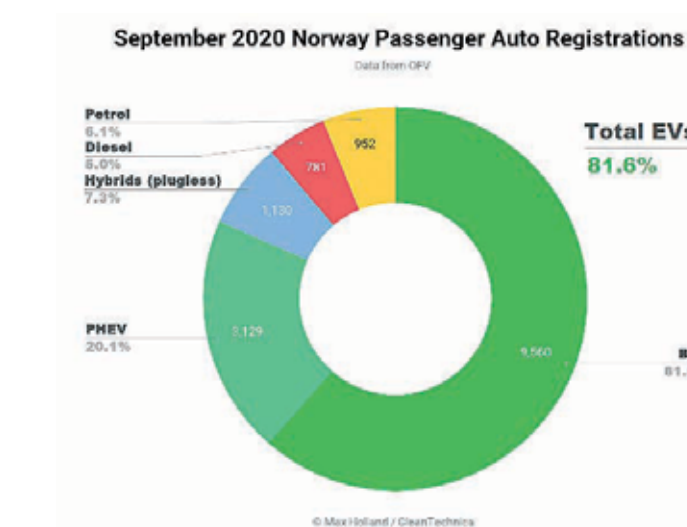
So-called battery electric vehicles (BEV) made up 54.3 per cent of all new cars sold in the Nordic country in 2020, a global record, up from 42.4 per cent in 2019 and from a mere 1 per cent of the overall market a decade ago, the Norwegian Road Federation (OFV) said.

Seeking to become the first nation to end the sale of petrol and diesel cars by 2025, oil-producing Norway exempts fully electric vehicles from taxes imposed on those relying on fossil fuels.

The policy has turned the country's car market into a laboratory for automakers seeking a path to a future without internal combustion engines, vaulting new brands and models to the top of bestseller lists in recent years.

While the sale of BEVs had broken the 50 per cent-mark in individual months, 2020 was the first time that fully electric cars outsold the combined volume of models containing internal combustion engines for a year as a whole.

"We're definitely on track to reach the 2025 target", OFV Chief Executive Oeyvind Thorsen told a news conference. BEV sales accelerated in the final months of 2020, hitting its highest level for any single month in December, with a 66.7 per cent share of the



car market. Volkswagen's Audi brand topped the 2020 leader board with its e-tron sports utility and sportsback vehicles as the most sold new passenger cars in Norway last year, while Tesla's mid-sized Model 3, the 2019

winner, was relegated to second place.

Electric vehicle sales are set to continue to soar in 2021, industry analysts and car distributors said, as more models are brought to the market. — **Reuters**

Pandemic overshadows Japan's New Year tuna auction



A wholesaler walks along the lined up frozen tuna ahead of the New Year's auction at Toyosu fish market in Tokyo. — AFP

TOKYO: Tokyo's annual New Year tuna auction ended on Tuesday without the usual jaw-dropping bidding war, with the country's "Tuna King" holding back on gunning for the top fish, citing the pandemic woes affecting the restaurant industry.

The most expensive fish of the day — a 208 kilogramme bluefin caught off the northern Aomori region of Japan, known for its quality tuna — was bought by another bidder for 20.84 million yen (\$202,000).

That is just a fraction of the millions of dollars that sushi businessman and self-proclaimed "Tuna King" Kiyoshi Kimura has shelled out in recent years to secure the bragging rights that come with buying the auction's top tuna.

Last year, Kimura paid \$1.8 million for a 276 kilogram bluefin, and in 2019 he paid a record \$3.1 million for a 278-kilogram fish.

But Kimura said he wanted to show restraint this year as the raging pandemic has caused so

much suffering to restaurants and other businesses.

"I didn't go for the highest bid this year because this is the time for self-control", Kimura told journalists who gathered to see him after the pre-dawn auction at

the Toyosu fish market.

"I didn't think it was appropriate to go all festive this time", he said.

Kimura usually uses his purchases to secure national news coverage for himself and his successful sushi chain.

Normally, after winning the annual bidding war and taking his expensive investment back to one of his restaurants, he fillets the fish with a sword-like blade, creates sushi out of it and serves it to customers at no extra charge, all in front of an army of television cameras.

The most expensive tuna this year was acquired jointly by a famous wholesaler named Yukitaka Yamaguchi, a frequent guest on television shows who supplies top sushi restaurants, and a major food business, according to local media. — **AFP**

NYSE says will not delist 3 Chinese telecom firms

NEW YORK: The New York Stock Exchange said it no longer intends to delist three Chinese telecom giants that have been targeted by US President Donald Trump's outgoing administration, in a shock reversal of an announcement made only last week.

The exchange said in a statement it had made the decision "in light of further consultation with relevant regulatory authorities."

It had said on Thursday it would delist China Mobile Ltd, China Telecom Corp Ltd and China Unicom Hong Kong Ltd following US government moves to block investment in 35 firms deemed to be owned or controlled by the Chinese military.

Hong Kong-listed shares in the firms surged on the announcement, with China Unicom up 6.7 per cent, while China Mobile and China Telecom each gained 5 per cent.

"(It) shows how little light there is in that set of regulatory guidance so far, especially around the time the US is changing administrations", said Tariq Dennison, Managing Director at GFM Asset Management in Hong Kong.

Dennison's funds hold China Mobile shares in both Hong Kong and New York, but he has largely unwound New York positions recently, partly to find US clients investments that are less exposed to Sino-US tensions which will probably persist.

"I don't think Biden will magically de-escalate anything", Dennison said.

— **Reuters**

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features



A journey into the artist's imagination

The beauty is created by Allah. The harmony of colours is just like a symphony. We play with them as we wish... **P18**

INSIDE STORIES

YOUTH ZONE



THE HORSE STANDS OUT

"My extraordinary love to horses left me in a spot where I travel around to shoot only horses, and to focus on equestrian sports. The real start was in 2014 when I attended the equestrian Festival that... **Story on Page P20**

LIFESTYLE



ON THIN ICE? POLES GET CREATIVE TO SKATE AROUND CORONAVIRUS RULES

A skating rink owner in the Polish city of Szczecin believes he has found a way to keep his business open despite coronavirus restrictions — operate as a flower shop instead. His plan is simple — the customer... **Story on Page 19**

READ



THE LION, THE WITCH AND THE WARDROBE

BY C S LEWIS

The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe is a fantasy novel for children, published by Geoffrey Bles in 1950. It is the first published and best known of seven novels in The Chronicles of Narnia (1950–1956). Among all the author's books, it is also the most widely held in libraries.

ROYAL



TABLEWARE FIT FOR A QUEEN GOES UP FOR AUCTION

Miniature tableware designed for a royal doll's house at Britain's Windsor Castle went up for auction on Tuesday along with a full-sized dinner service made for French emperor Napoleon Bonaparte... **Story on Page 19**

AROUND THE WORLD



FIVE-POUND COIN TO BE ISSUED IN HONOUR OF QUEEN'S 95TH BIRTHDAY

A special coin worth five pounds (6.70 dollars) is to be issued in Britain ahead of the 95th birthday of Queen Elizabeth II, the Royal Mint announced on Monday.



BY MAI AL ABRI

Chatting with the Omani artist Naila al Maamariyah generates good feeling as she utters positive words about the universe and life. An artist who is filled with all this positivity will surely paint bright cheerful artworks. Her personal exhibition "God's Dominion" included 30 artworks inspired by the surrounding and the environment around her to gain a true beauty from colour and form which reflects the power of Allah almighty in his creations.

"The beauty is created by Allah. The harmony of colours is just like a symphony. We play with them as we wish," she commented.

When planning for this exhibition, Al Maamariyah said: "I started with butterflies but I wasn't much convinced because the butterfly formation requires a unique method that I wasn't planning for. I was looking for diversity. I chose birds because their body structure can result in numerous paintings.

"I choose the abstract art to focus on colours only without involvement on the tiny details. From each bird, I chose a particular part to sovereign. Sometimes, the viewers of my paintings would not understand from the first glance that this part is of a bird. They might think it is a desert or a hill, however, a close look at the painting would give the whole idea".

I focus on geometric forms since my journey in art started and I continued using these forms until now. The circle means the continuity, the vertical lines means the integrity, while the horizontal lines mean the stability.

Some works contain dots. The dot is the first element of fine art that has no geometric element. It is a code but the body of the bird contains these dots. I just shaped them in my own way to give the work more aesthetic features.

Reflected in her eyes, etched in her mind and stored in her hearing, saying with the loudest voice through her work, Allah is the greatest creator and the creative photographer. That's what the artist had in mind, the colour beauty of the creatures and the hues of their beautiful colours, and the differences in their forms and colour harmony tell the human mind clearly that it is only by God's miracle. He can only bring it with great power.

The artist took the element of birds as a colour study to enjoy the sound of the birds chirping and the variety of their types and shapes that gave her enough imagination and positive energy for expression. "As I have seen from the charms of nature centred in birds, they are in themselves a natural art that grasps the artist attention, along with the realisation of colour beauty as an artistic value in the works. She expressed this with meditation and took the colours of the birds and painted them in its abstract style and its own technique with a wondrous colour consistency in all of her paintings and artistic strokes.

My message to art students is "look around and contemplate at the creatures of Allah, you will see marvelous colours and extraordinary life. Not just mixing of colours, as we are taught in schools".

It is worth noting that her exhibition was launched under the auspices of Sayyid Said al Busaidy, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, for Culture. It will run until January 21 in the headquarters of the Omani Society of Fine Arts.

A journey into the artist's imagination





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ON THIN ICE?

Poles get creative to skate around coronavirus rules

A skating rink owner in the Polish city of Szczecin believes he has found a way to keep his business open despite coronavirus restrictions — operate as a flower shop instead. His plan is simple — the customer has to purchase access to the flower “warehouse”, then chooses from a box of flowers in the middle of the rink. “You can jump, crawl or go on all fours... you don’t have to wear skates,” Tomasz

Fornalski, owner of the Lodogryf skating rink said, which showed skaters holding pink roses as they circled the rink. His plan emerged as Poland imposed a three-week lockdown closing hotels, ski slopes, skating rinks and other businesses from December 28 to stem the coronavirus. Poland weathered the first wave of the pandemic well compared to Western Europe, but faced a new spike in October and November. Officials said the current national quarantine was

aimed at preventing a major third wave in coming months just as the country has started vaccinating people. Officials in Szczecin say Fornalski is breaking the rules. “A decision has been taken and communicated to the owner to stop this activity, and this decision is immediately enforceable,” said Malgorzata Kaplan, a spokeswoman for Szczecin’s sanitary services. Fornalski said he had yet to receive a formal notification. “Until we receive the administrative decision

to halt our service, we will continue to operate,” he told the broadcaster. Fornalski is not the only one getting creative. A ski slope in the resort of Szczyrk is also continuing to operate its chair-lift for sledders instead of skiers in an attempt to get around the restrictions. TVN footage showed a slope full of sleds at the Skrzyczne ski resort, with even a few skiers going down the hill. Skrzyczne did not immediately respond to requests for comment from Reuters. — Reuters

ROYAL

Tableware fit for a Queen goes up for auction



MINIATURE TABLEWARE designed for a royal doll’s house at Britain’s Windsor Castle went up for auction on Tuesday along with a full-sized dinner service made for French emperor Napoleon Bonaparte. The sale, by the British company that created the items, also includes glassware celebrating the coronations of Queen Elizabeth II, George VI

for the doll’s house state dining room, nursery and kitchen. Thomas Goode & Co, who have been selling tableware across Europe for nearly 200 years, made a spare for its archive at the time - 1922; that is the set now being auctioned with a price estimate of 20,000 pounds to 30,000 pounds (\$27,000-\$40,000).



and even Edward VIII, who abdicated before his coronation shortly after the glass was engraved. The tiny collection of 76 porcelain plates, tureens, bowls and platters was commissioned for Queen Mary, the grandmother of current Queen Elizabeth II, and included three dinner services

The dinner service made for Napoleon I and hand-painted in the royal porcelain factory in Sevres near Versailles comes with a George III mahogany table and a St Louis chandelier. The assembly is estimated at up to 450,000 pounds in the online auction, which will conclude on January 8, 2021. — Reuters



THE HORSE STANDS OUT



“My extraordinary love to horses left me in a spot where I travel around to shoot only horses, and to focus on equestrian sports. The real start was in 2014 when I attended the equestrian Festival that was under the auspices of the late HM Sultan Qaboos bin Said, Peace be upon his soul” says Ahmed al Saeedi, an Omani photographer.

“Then, I deeply focused on this field to reach professionalism. Many events I covered since then added more value to my work and experience. I invested my time and efforts to allow myself to attend all related festivals and events”.

Following the trends in the social media, Ahmed says: “I allocated a special account for this purpose in Instagram where I tried to showcase a decent content. It was a successful attempt as the works are admired by international and local followers and gave me a super incentive to continue”.

On his future ambitions, he hopes “I wish to cover international events in equestrian sports where I will have a chance to meet international photographers in the field. The target is not impossible, though it seems difficult to reach at the time.

