

HM greetings to Senegal president

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Macky Sall of Senegal on the occasion of his country's National Day. His Majesty expressed his sincere greetings along with his best wishes of good health and happiness to the president and the friendly Senegalese people more progress and prosperity. — ONA



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A PILLAR OF THE ADVENTURE SPORTS COMMUNITY



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TUCHEL TELLS WERNER TO STOP WORRYING



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CHINA TELLS H&M TO CHANGE THE 'PROBLEMATIC MAP'



MUSCAT

HM SENDS CABLE OF CONDOLENCES TO EMIR OF KUWAIT

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of condolences to Shaikh Nawaf Al Ahmad Al Jaber al Sabah, Emir of Kuwait, on the death of Shaikha Munira Saud Al Jaber Al Fadhel al Sabah. His Majesty expressed his sincere condolences and sympathy praying to Allah Almighty to rest the departed soul in peace and grant her family patience. — ONA

REVISED TARIFFS DRIVING EFFICIENT ENERGY USE IN OMAN

Tariff revisions that recently came into effect for the first time for residential consumers in the Sultanate are beginning to yield results chiefly in terms of driving energy efficiency in the electricity sector, a top official of the Authority for Public Services Regulation (APSR) — the sector regulator — revealed here on Wednesday. Shaikh Dr Mansoor bin Talib al Hinai, Chairman, said the upward revisions — part of a “price signalling” initiative by Oman’s authorities to reduce the hefty financial burden that the government has long shouldered in subsidising the electricity sector — is pushing consumers to curb their consumption and thereby contribute to efficient energy use. **SEE P17**

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FARMER TASTES SUCCESS WITH SWEET STRAWBERRIES

A farmer in the Wilayat of Bahla has succeeded in cultivating strawberries using a method that guarantees quality of the fruit, controls the temperature and humidity and helps in regulating the irrigation water level. This modern system also maintains the amount of fertilisers, reduces the spread of pests and lowers soil salinity. **SEE P3**

S&P affirms Sultanate’s credit ratings at ‘B+/B’

WASHINGTON: Standard & Poor’s credit rating agency has affirmed the Sultanate’s credit rating at “B + / B” with a stable outlook.

The international credit rating agency expects the economic and fiscal pressure on the Sultanate to recede noting that the fiscal measures taken by the Sultanate’s government will contribute to a fall in the budget deficit.

S&P pointed to the significance that the government carries on with the economic and fiscal measures which will improve the country’s financial position and credit rating. — ONA

Inoculation key to opening of borders for travel: IATA

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Allowing vaccinated people to travel seamlessly without quarantine and PCR tests depends on the WHO’s guidelines and the policies of individual governments, said a top IATA official to the *Observer*.

He added that the authorities in Oman are also open to travel or health pass to reactivate the aviation sector.

Kamil al Awadhi, IATA Regional Vice-President for Africa and the Middle East, spoke during an interactive webinar on airspace opening and travel pass.

Testing and vaccinations will

play a role in opening borders to travel as the pandemic comes under control. Simple, efficient, and harmonised standards for what credentials people will need to travel will boost consumer confidence and strengthen the recovery.

IATA Travel Pass will help to manage health credentials while protecting against fraud conveniently. “With Qatar Airways already piloting IATA Travel Pass and Emirates, Etihad and Gulf Air signed-up for trials, the Gulf is at the forefront of preparations”, said Al Awadhi.

He called on governments in the Middle East to develop

Taking Covid vaccine won’t nullify fasting

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Taking vaccination will not spoil the goodness of fasting during Ramadhan. Taking part in the national drive to save lives is the duty of a believer, said a source at the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs.

Speaking to the *Observer*, a top official of the ministry said, “Islam permits vaccine against a pandemic even if a believer is fasting. The Holy Quran and Hadith, the preachings of Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him), underlines this fact.

“Vaccination won’t break the fast as it is therapeutic, and taking it against a pandemic does not nullify Ramadhan rituals. It is permitted in the religion as well as in the Hadith of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).”

According to him, a believer is free to take the vaccine during night-time, after breaking the fast.

With just ten days left for the holy month, scholars from the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs have cautioned all to strictly adhere to the guidelines of the Supreme Committee on Covid-19, and the Ministry of Health (MoH).

Accordingly, people should take extra care for own protection and protection of others during the fasting days, especially during iftar time, when people tend to gather to break the fast, share food and pray.

The official has urged both citizens and residents to avoid any iftar gatherings, even at homes with outside people in



Moon sighting on April 12

MUSCAT: The Department of Astronomical Affairs at the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs said the sighting of the crescent of Ramadhan will be Shaaban 29, 1442 AH, corresponding to April 12, 2021, where the crescent will remain for around 20 minutes after sunset.

The moon will be in the conjunction phase in Muscat on Monday at 6.31 pm and the sun will set on Monday at 6:27 pm. Therefore, the moon will descend approximately 20 minutes after the descend at 6.47 pm.

The moon will be six degrees away from the sun, and at a height of four degrees from the western horizon.

A BELIEVER IS FREE TO TAKE THE VACCINE DURING NIGHT-TIME, AFTER BREAKING THE FAST

Ramadhan-related activities.

The Supreme Committee has banned mass gatherings in Ramadhan tents and other venues because of the social spread of the Covid-19 variant, besides banning mass prayers.

“The believers can offer prayers individually or just with family members. Any violation of the Covid-19 rules will invite severe punishments”, he said.



Authorities in Oman are open to travel or health pass to reactivate the aviation sector.

re-start plans to safely re-link their citizens, businesses and economies to global markets when the Covid-19 epidemiological situation permits. IATA also called for regional coordination to ensure that the plans can be efficiently implemented and urged governments to remain vigilant about the industry’s financial situation.

IATA data shows January air passenger traffic in the region was down 82.3 per cent compared to January 2019. The ongoing crisis puts over 1.7 million jobs in the Middle East and \$105 billion in GDP at risk.

Customers rush to beat VAT

SAMUEL KUTTY
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With the countdown having begun for VAT (value added tax) rollout, retailers are in a buoyant mood as they see a rise in sales volume despite night closure of commercial activities.

From jewellery to home appliances and automobile to building materials, there have been rush of customers to buy items of their choice to beat the VAT, even though it is just about five per cent.

“From a consumer behaviour perspective, it’s not about the amount. It’s not even about how much one can save; it’s about whether you can save or not,” said Jose Chacko, partner, Crowe Oman.

“Even though 5 per cent is not a big levy, psychologically, people think it is better to buy before its implementation, he said.

VAT will be the second major tax being implemented in Oman following excise tax last year that raised the prices of tobacco products, alcohol and energy drinks by 100 per cent and prices of carbonated drinks by 50 per cent.

VAT in Oman will be levied on most goods and services, with exceptions for essential food items, medical care, education and financial services, according to Oman’s Tax Authority Chairman Saud bin Nassir al Shukaili.

This should raise around RO 400 million each year, which will be equivalent to around 1.5 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP).

“People are buying fridges, ACs and other home appliances. We



expect the purchases to increase in the coming days as the VAT implementation coincides with the beginning of Ramadhan,” said Abu Abdul Salam, sales manager at a home appliance retail shop in Ruwi.

Expensive items such as consumer electronics and appliances would be the most affected by VAT, as consumers are going to be rushing to buy them ahead of April 16, he said.

Demand for building materials, according to retailers in the buzzing Honda Road marker, have registered a substantial rise in the recent days following a revival in the real estate and construction activities.

“There has been a slight recovery in the recent days thanks to the rise in the real estate activities. We expect the sales to increase in the coming days as many of the items are included in VAT,” said Haris Melethu, a retailer.

Demand has been very weak

From jewellery to home appliances and automobile to building materials, there have been rush of customers to buy items of their choice to beat the VAT, even though it is just about five per cent

but people are now actively buying ahead of the VAT so there is a bit of demand,” he said.

Jewellery shops, aided by the recent fall in the prices of gold, too are witnessing rush of customers. Many of them have come out with pre-VAT offers.

“We are witnessing an increase in customer footfall during this pre-VAT period. Gold has always been a preferred form of investment for majority of the people. The demand for gold will continue to increase because of its

value appreciation,” said Najeeb K, Regional Director of Malabar Gold & Diamonds.

As part of the Pre-VAT Savings campaign, Malabar Gold & Diamonds has introduced attractive offers for customers to maximise their savings before the implementation of VAT.

Similarly, some of the automobile dealers too have come out with offers to lure customers.

In a text message to customers, a dealer called on potential customers to “Take advantage of the pre-VAT offers”.

The 5-per cent VAT rate covers the supply of all goods and services in Oman, except for certain exempted categories and cases.

The list consists of 94 customs tariff items to be exempted from the VAT, namely meat, fish, poultry, dairy products, fresh eggs, vegetables, fruits, coffee beans, tea, cardamom, grains, olive oil, sugar, baby food products, bread, bottled water and table salt.

Down syndrome children need careful handling

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 3

The medical and auxiliary medical groups at primary healthcare institutions in Dhofar Governorate were introduced to the latest techniques of handling children with Down syndrome.

The experts know how to provide counselling to such patients, developing some ‘bond’ with them and their families.

“For such patients, one visit to a health institution is not sufficient. They need psychological and medical support, and their families do need counselling to cope up with the situation,” said the experts quoting the Ministry of Health guidelines.

At a virtual workshop to marking the International Day of Down Syndrome (March 21), Dr Mohammed Abdul Rahim, Specialist Pediatrics at Sultan Qaboos Hospital, gave an overview of Down syndrome, clinical features and diagnostic methods.

Dr Maha bint Muhammad al Awadi, Consultant and Head of the Genetic Diseases Department, explained Down syndrome during the workshop.

“British doctor John Down discovered it in 1862,” she said, and added that among the most important symptoms among children include formal ones, such as paralysis of the head, eyes and body.

The internal symptoms are heart functions and mental abilities.

“The symptoms are due to the genetic defects associated with the disease. It is important for the health workers in primary healthcare institutions to under-



stand the categories to address the patients’ needs properly,” she said.

The workshop dealt with the importance of early marriage screening to prevent the spread of some endemic genetic diseases, including hereditary blood diseases.

It dealt with the programme for early marriage screening, its stages of development, and its impact on society. The experts also discussed the types of examinations required for those who intend to marry.

The participants were told about the benefits of the programme and the locations of examination clinics in the governorate’s primary healthcare institutions.

Amira bint Ramis Bait Zayed, a Genetic Counselling Nurse, gave a lecture about the genetic counselling programme. She also talked about genetic counselling for children with Down syndrome and how to direct the family to deal with Down syndrome in a child properly.

Dr Ihab Makki, a physician in the pediatrics department, spoke about the role of primary healthcare institutions and the services provided to children with Down syndrome.

ESCWA hails Sultanate’s e-census experience

MUSCAT: The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) praised the National Statistics and Information (NCSI) for its successful implementation of the Electronic Census of Population, Housing and Establishments 2020 depending on administrative registers.

The ESCWA commended the publication of the E-Census 2020 results in record time despite the outbreak of Covid-19.

At a workshop organised by the ESCWA recently, NCSI reviewed its experience and success in conducting the e-census depending on administrative registers.

The workshop’s attendees, representing the statistical departments in the Arab countries and regional and international organisations, voiced their appreciation for the Sultanate’s experience in conducting an e-census.

The participants invited the NCSI to conduct a series of virtual workshops and symposiums to explain each stage of the e-census and the setbacks experienced during the process. — **ONA**

Liwa slaughterhouse all set for opening

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 3

Jusoor Foundation, a non-profit social responsibility foundation in the Sultanate, has announced the handing over of the Liwa slaughterhouse project to the Ministry of Interior, represented by North Al Batinah Municipality.

The abattoir will soon begin its operations and administrative work. It is also preparing to welcome beneficiaries as its official opening is later this year. It is the newest among slaughterhouses and one of the most prominent projects in the Wilayat of Liwa.

The project is fully funded by Vale Oman Pelletizing Company and is part of the sustainable social development initiatives being implemented by Jusoor Foundation in the field of health and environment. It aims to deliver its services to the residents of Liwa and to people in the neighbouring wilayats by organising the slaughter of livestock in this designated area. It also ensures safe disposal of slaughterhouse waste by following healthy practices.

This announcement was made after an inspection visit by the Wali of Liwa, representatives from North Al Batinah Municipality and Vale Oman, along with a project team and employees from the company that will operate the slaughterhouse.

During their visit, the team



explored the facility, discussed its key attributes and ensured the readiness for welcoming beneficiaries by next June.

Constructed over an area of 1,160 sqm, the Liwa slaughterhouse comprises several facilities including the main slaughterhouse building, a slaughter hall fitted with state-of-the-art equipment and machinery, a 302-sqm shaded area for livestock, male and female waiting areas, a prayer room, administrative facilities and offices, parking lot, and 5,000 sqm of interlocked concrete pavements. The total cost of this project is about RO 400,000.

Commenting on the project, Abdullah bin Salim

al Sadi, Corporate Affairs and Communication Manager — Vale Oman, said, “The Liwa slaughterhouse project materialised due to the need of a designated facility for slaughter by those residing in Liwa; one that adheres to the highest standards of safety and health. Today, we are proud to hand over the project to the Ministry of Interior, represented by North Al Batinah Municipalities.

“This project has come to fruition and it will soon commence operations. The slaughterhouse will deliver necessary services to both, citizens and residents, by supplying meat in a safe and healthy manner as well as ensuring that the livestock are disease-free.”

The project’s construction was completed in November 2020. During the past period, North Al Batinah Municipality has worked on appointing the operating company to start the slaughterhouse’s testing phase and ensure its readiness.

The production capacity is expected to reach 50 carcasses per hour for the sheep slaughter line and 15 carcasses per hour for the cows and camels slaughter line.

Established in 2012, Jusoor Foundation is the social investment arm of Sohar Aluminium, Vale Oman and OQ. It works to develop and implement sustainable social projects in communities by understanding the real needs of Omani society.

Oman Air extends complimentary Covid-19 coverage

MUSCAT: Oman Air has extended its complimentary Covid-19 coverage until December 31, 2021. The complimentary coverage is for expenses incurred by medical treatment or quarantine related to the Covid-19, and applies to tickets issued for travel after October 1, 2020 until December 31, 2021.

The coverage is provided to guests who purchase tickets on omanair.com, through the airline’s Call Centre, at Oman Air’s offices or through travel agents after October 1, 2020, and is part of the airline’s efforts to ensure that guests are safe at all times so they can fly confidently. Details are available at omanair.com.

The coverage now includes Oman resident cardholders (expats) who are required to present medical coverage for their destination and return to Oman, if travel is completed within 31 days. Omani and GCC nationals do not require Covid-19 insurance, as per the directive issued by Oman’s Supreme Committee for Covid-19 safety.

Oman Air will maintain its comprehensive safety programme throughout all elements of the travel journey.

BAHLA FARMER REAPS THE

FRUITS OF HIS LABOUR

YAHYA AL SALMANI

MUSCAT, APRIL 3

Faisal al Hinai, a farmer in the Wilayat of Bahla, has succeeded in cultivating strawberries using a method that guarantees quality of the fruit, controls the temperature and humidity and helps in regulating the irrigation water level. This modern system also maintains the amount of fertilisers, reduces the spread of pests and lowers soil salinity.

Faisal al Hinai said he had received technical support from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources which helped him complete his project.

"The story of growing strawberries began when I visited a friend six years ago, and I found him trying to uproot strawberry seedlings because they had begun to wilt in his outdoor garden. Strawberry seedlings were suffering intense heat", he added.

"I asked my friend to bring all the seedlings home, and then I started replanting them in organic soil. It was in March. After a month of nurturing, I could harvest fruits, but in May the production stopped.

"Meanwhile, my father Saeed bin Hilal al Hinai went to the Agricultural Research Centre in the Wilayat of Barka, seeking technical support. Several seedlings were transferred to our farm in the Bilad Sait village," Faisal said.

"Now we have five farmhouses working with modern technology. Each house contains more than 10,000 trees, and we also have other farmhouses for vegetable crops such as cucumbers and tomatoes. The cultivated area is approximately 2,880 square metres", Faisal explained.

One of the major factors that help in reaping success is choosing the right time. Strawberry planting begins in August/September and the trees start bearing fruit in December and the season continues until May.

"Marketing in the beginning was limited to promoting local products,



Faisal al Hinai says he received technical support from the Ministry of Agriculture, which helped him succeed in cultivating strawberries using the modern method



but now we have started tourism marketing. This promotional idea has received the approval of many Omani families who come to take souvenir photos and experience the taste of the rare strawberry fruit at the national level", Faisal added.

Scientific studies confirm that strawberries are of high nutritional value, providing a wide range of health benefits and protection from the risk of many diseases such as cardiovascular problems, cancers and digestive disorders.

Although the health benefits of strawberries are many, excessive consumption could be harmful, as they are on top of the list of fruits and vegetables that carry residues of pesticides, and they contain a high amount of sugar of 8.12 grams per cup and a high potassium level that may cause problems for kidney patients and heart patients.

The benefits of strawberries for diet are multiple and many, as they are called the fruit of fitness, due to their nutritional properties that contribute greatly to losing weight in many ways, including: Low calories in strawberry fruit, as a cup of sliced strawberry contains only 49 calories.

Strawberries contain a high percentage of fibre that helps in a better metabolism, and thus increases the percentage of fat burning, as a cup of strawberries contains 3 grams of fibre, which is more than 10 per cent of the percentage of fibre that the body needs daily.

Every project has its obstacles. "We suffered many difficulties in the beginning of the project, the most important of which were poor agricultural support for this type of fruit, the lack of some fertilisers and pesticides in the local markets, the lack of seedlings and suppliers", Faisal said.

Faisal urges the government to grant him an official permit to dig a well for the farm, due to the scarcity of water resources. Faisal says he also hopes to obtain logistical support to build new agricultural houses that will help in accomplishing the tasks of the project more successfully.

UTAS-Sur students launch awareness campaign on self-employment

SUR: The public relations students at the Department of Mass Communication, University of Technology and Applied Sciences-Sur, have launched 'Khatwa' (step), a public awareness campaign on self-employment and entrepreneurship opportunities. The dean of the university, Dr Salma al Musharaffi, officially launched the campaign in an on-line event.

The online campaign aims to spread awareness on self-employment among the Omani youth with focus on the scope, avenues, and legal procedures for seeking self-employment and entrepreneurship opportunities.

Inaugurating the campaign, Dr Salma said, "There is a qualitative shift in the current economy, the job market is becoming very competitive, and I see this campaign is very ambitious and timely."

"I hope the objectives of the



campaign will inspire and motivate the Omani youth to consider self-employment and entrepreneurship opportunities", she added. The campaign logo was revealed through a video on the occasion.

The campaign's main strategies include social media promotions of the key messages, dissemination of testimonials of young entrepreneurs, and webinar sessions by experts about online business opportunities and freelance jobs.

The initiation and organisation of the online event show that the pandemic has not hindered pub-

lic relations students' competence and motivation to engage in creative learning experiences.

Guests and sponsors attended the launch event and expressed their admiration for this great idea of the campaign which may help many sections of society. One of the sponsors, Samia al Jabriya, said: "As an independent woman, I have experience in entrepreneurship, I think that this campaign will have a significant positive impact on society. And we badly need such awareness campaigns".

Sara al Alawi, a PR student and organiser of the campaign, said, "This campaign allows us to practise the practical skills of the course in the real-life situation and at the same time it is going to provide the opportunity for students to invest their time and effort in the community development.

No tax on salaries by NRIs, clarifies Indian minister

SAMUEL KUTTY

@samkuttyp

Income earned from salaries by non-resident Indians in the Gulf countries will not be taxed in India.

Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman in a clarification said that an amendment in the Finance Act, 2021, has merely incorporated general definition of the term "liable to tax" in the Income Tax Act to provide clarity.

A tweet from the minister's office said on Thursday, "No going back on words. The Finance Act, 2021 hasn't brought in any additional or new tax on hardworking Indian workers in Saudi Arabia, UAE, Oman and Qatar."

The amendment in the Finance Act has not altered the

taxability of salary income earned by non-resident Indian citizens in Gulf countries.

The Finance Act, 2021 hasn't brought in any additional or new tax on hardworking Indian workers in Saudi Arabia, UAE, Oman and Qatar

"Their salary income earned in the Gulf countries would continue to be exempt in India", the Office of Finance Minister tweeted.

Earlier in the day, Trinamool Congress Member of Parliament Mahua Moitra had tweeted a picture of an amendment in Finance Bill, 2021, saying the complicated words in the

amendment is in reality a Special Gulf workers tax.

"FM going back on her words. Hardworking Indian workers in Saudi/UAE/Oman/Qatar to be taxed EXTRA," Moitra tweeted.

Sitharaman said that drawing conclusions without comprehending the facts is worrying. "Further, putting out the conclusion on a social media platform not only misleads but also creates unwanted panic among people," the minister's office tweeted.

India's 2020 budget has proposed to tax Indians who are not tax residents in India but are neither tax residents in any other country. The budget proposed changes in the income tax law to make such individuals deemed tax residents of India.

KAUSHALENDRA SINGH
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The spike in the number of infected people with the virus has dashed everyone's hope of normalcy after one full year of suffering. The roll-out of vaccines had some silver lining. Still, the number of cases everywhere has brought the situation back to square one.

It is true, however, that only roll-out out of the vaccines is not the solution. People have to come out and take the vaccine. They should not pay attention to the rumours and wrong information being spread about the vaccines.

The World Health Organization has a clear message for the world to get away from the situation. That is fool-proof prevention and vaccination. The disease is there till the condition is there. Under the current circumstances, it will not go till the last man develops immunity. Vaccines are the safest way to fight the pandemic.

"No one is safe until everyone is safe", Dr Tedros Adhanom, Director-General of the World Health Organization, has rightly summarised today's pandemic situation.

'Vaccine equity' is equally important. The WHO has called for vaccine equity, describing it not merely as 'the right thing to do' but 'the smart thing to do.'

The WHO has also called for cooperation among the countries to manage the pandemic in the earliest possible manner.

"The longer it takes to suppress the virus everywhere, the more opportunity it has to change in ways that could make vaccines less effective, an opportunity to mutate.

We could end up back at square one. More vaccines are being developed, approved and produced. There will be enough for everyone, but for now, vaccines are a limited resource. We must use them as effectively as we can", the WHO Director-General said.

A proactive medical professional and expert in internal medicine, Dr Harish Kumar, calls awareness the most important tool to handle the current situation.

"Take the vaccine if it is available and wait with adherence to all preventive measures until your turn comes... No compromises with the safety norms. The disease is very much there. New mutants have developed. It is time for extreme caution", he said.

He came out heavily on a section of people who are in total denial of the disease. "It is happening just because the current generations have never seen a pandemic of this enormity. For the first time in human memory, a pandemic has affected everyone — physically, economically or mentally. Since no one has seen a pandemic of this enormity, those who are denying it, do not believe it."

He called for all out awareness drive for prevention and vaccination.

BACK TO SQUARE ONE

THE ROLL-OUT OF VACCINES AGAINST COVID-19 HAD SOME SILVER LINING. STILL, THE NUMBER OF CASES EVERYWHERE HAS BROUGHT THE SITUATION BACK TO SQUARE ONE

Suez Canal shipping backlog ends

CAIRO: All ships stranded by the grounding of the giant container ship *Ever Given* in the Suez Canal in March had passed through the canal by Saturday, ending the backlog that built up during the blockage, the canal authority said.

The last 61 ships, out of 422 ships that were queuing when the vessel was dislodged on Monday, passed through the vital trade artery on Saturday, the Suez Canal Authority (SCA) said. International supply chains were thrown into disarray when the 400-metre-long *Ever Given* ran aground in the canal on March 23, with specialist rescue teams taking almost a week to free her after extensive dredging and repeated tugging operations.

In total, 85 ships had been



A container ship sails at the Suez Canal in Ismailia, Egypt. — Reuters

due to pass through the canal on Saturday including 24 ships that arrived after *Ever Given* was dislodged, the SCA said.

An SCA investigation began on Wednesday into what caused the vessel to run aground in the canal and block the waterway for six days, the canal authority's chairman, Osama Rabie, told the MBC Masr private TV late on Friday.

The 400-metre-long *Ever Given* is now anchored at the Great Lakesarea, a wider section of the canal, for technical inspection and investigations.

Rabie said the probe was going well, but did not give details.

"As long as the investigation is going on, we have stopped talk on damages," he said, referring to compensation claimed for losses resulting from the vessel grounding and resulting traffic jam.

The blockage cost the canal operator \$13 million to 14 million in losses per day, according to SCA officials. The Suez Canal, which connects the Mediterranean to the Red Sea, provides the shortest shipping route between Asia and Europe. — Reuters/dpa

"The investigation is going well and will take two more days, then we will announce the results," he added.

A total of 361 other vessels have already sailed through the canal since its reopening on Monday, according to Rabie.

"In two days' time, traffic will have completely returned to normal," he told the privately owned MBC Masr television.

270 migrants off Italy in critical state

ROME: Around 270 migrants trying to cross the Mediterranean are in "critical" shape after passing merchant ships refused to rescue them, a migrant charity said on Saturday.

"The situation of the 270 people at sea is still critical," tweeted Alarm Phone, a volunteer-run Mediterranean rescue hotline.

"They have all been abandoned at sea for many hours at risk of drowning. We don't want another Easter tragedy!" the group posted.

The three boats — two with approximately 110 people on board each, and the other carrying around 60 — were within or near the confines of Malta and Italy's search-and-rescue zones, according to Alarm Phone.

Yet Malta's armed forces and the Italian coast guard had refused to assist or coordinate rescue by passing merchant vessels, the group said — an account that could not immediately be verified. Neither authority immediately responded to requests for comment by telephone and e-mail. — AFP

ANNOUNCEMENT



This is to inform that **Mr. Rajesh Debnath** (picture here) holder of Indian Passport No. L4908812 and Resident Card No. 75722727, who has been working as Asst. Sales Manager in our Company is terminated from the service from 28th March 2021.

Therefore, we request all the concerned parties to stop dealing with him henceforth with respect Baabood LLC. If anyone dealing with him will be doing at their own risk and Company will not take any responsibility hereafter. If anybody has any claim, he/she should report to the company within next **10 days** of this advertisement, to the name listed below.

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MUSCAT MUNICIPALITY

Advertisement No. 12/2021

Muscat Municipality invites interested companies to the following tenders:

Tender No.	Tender Description	Document Fee	Deadline for inquires submission	Deadline for Obtaining Tender Docs.	Deadline for Submission Bids
19/2021 /MM/PA-4	Provide Cleaning Labor for Muscat Municipality	75/500 OMR	14/04/2021	13/04/2021	18/04/2021
20/2021 /MM/HQ-16	Supply of Road Signs and Street Name & Way no. Plates, House number Plates for Addressing Sections	25/- OMR	25/04/2021	10/05/2021	13/05/2021

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

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

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

Bidders shall submit their offers electronically through the link shown above accompanied with an electronic copy of a bond issued by any local bank in Oman addressed to Muscat Municipality. The details of bond (amount & validity) must be as per tender's terms and conditions in the etendering Website starting from the date of bids submission. The original copy of the bond shall be submitted at **Third floor at The Directorate General of Quantity Surveying & Contracts in Muscat Municipality, Head Office, Darsait.**

Tender not accompanied by a tender bond will be rejected.

Note:

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

Website: www.mm.gov.om

Electronic Tender(s)

Majan Electricity Co. (SAOC) Announces the Following E-Tenders

Tender No.	Description	Grade	Last date for buying	Submission date	Tender price R.O.
52/2021	REINFORCEMENT OF (11/0.433 KV) 2021, PHASE (2) IN AL BURAIMI.	C	8/4/2021	20/4/2021	25 /=
53/2021	SUPPLY OF SERVERS, COMPUTERS, SWITCHES AND HARDWARE ACCESSORIES	Specialized	8/4/2021	13/4/2021	44 /=
54/2021	EXTENSION OF POWER SUPPLY TO THE AGRICULTURE POLT'S AT THE VARIOUS LOCATION IN IBRI, YANQUL & DHANK (DHAHIRAH GOVERNORATE)	C	8/4/2021	20/4/2021	25 /=
55/2021	EXTENSION OF POWER SUPPLY TO THE AGRICULTURE POLT'S AT THE VARIOUS LOCATION IN AL-KHABOURAH, SAHAM, SOHAR, LIWA & SHINAS (NORTH AL-BATINAH GOVERNORATE)	C	11/4/2021	20/4/2021	25 /=
56/2021	PROVISION OF IN-HOUSE SERVICES FOR MAINTENANCE OF SCADA EQUIPMENT'S AT MJEC SUBSTATIONS	Specialized	13/4/2021	20/4/2021	25 /=

Interested Firm having relevant experience in the similar nature of services and registered with Tender Board and Distribution Code Review Panel (DCRP) for electrical work, may register and obtain the tender documents from **E-Tendering Site <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>** against online payment of non-refundable fees mentioned above for each tender.

The Tenderers should enclose a copy of Bank Guarantee issued by any registered bank in the Sultanate of Oman for a value of (1%) of the submitted bid value valid for a period of (90) days from the date of Submission, and addressed to The Chairman of the Tender Committee. The original Bid Bond to be delivered in sealed envelope, and the tender number and title of project only are to be mentioned on the envelopes. The place of submission the original bond would be at MJEC Contracts & tenders office at Muscat in Al Mubailah- opposite to the industrial Area beside to Bank Suhar, before 10 A.M. according to the assigned date of submission of the tender. Any Submission of original tender bond after the time and date mentioned in the advertisement will not be accepted and tenderer offer will be rejected.

The Completed signed and sealed commercial and technical offer with all tender documents should be submitted and uploaded online into the above mentioned E-Tendering website. The Hard copies of the tender document are not accepted.

For more information please contact Tel no.: 24051501- 26944266

For any technical assistance please contact

Helpdesk: +968-24166670

E-mail: etenderhd@ita.gov.om

Preference of awarding the tender will be given to those bidders who achieved a higher percentage of purchasing from Local Products & and have a High level percentage of Omanization.

The Company is not bound to consent the lowest Bid or any other Tenders.

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Majan Electricity Company S.A.O.C

P.O Box 286, Sohar

PC 311, Sultanate of Oman

Tel: +968 2694 4444 | Fax: +968 2694 4222

Information@majanco.nama.om | www.majanco.co.om

Swiss hold virtual candlelight vigil

GENEVA: Swiss President Guy Parmelin was among the first on Saturday to take part in a virtual candlelight vigil in memory of nearly 9,700 people who have died from Covid-19 in the country.

In a video message, Parmelin lit a red wax candle, comparing it to a "glimmer that we are starting to see on the horizon in this crisis".

And then he lit a virtual candle as part of a nearly two-month-long online vigil organised by Swiss churches of various denominations to coincide with the period between the eve of Easter and White Sunday — a Christian feast celebrated 50 days after Easter.

Just a few hours into the vigil, more than 800 virtual candles had been lit, creating flickering dots of light in various colours sparking across a darkened map of Switzerland. — AFP

EXTENTION OF TENDERS PERIOD

Al Ghubrah Power and Desalination Company (GPDC) and Wadi Al Jizzi Power Company (WJPC), invite the specialized companies to participate and submit their best offers for the tenders below;

TENDER NUMBER	TENDER NAME	LAST DATE FOR COLLECTION OF TENDER DOCUMENTS	TIME & LAST DATE FOR PROPOSAL SUBMISSION	TENDER FEE (OMR)-EXCLUDED TRANSFER CHARGES
GPDC/2021/01	Sale of Desalination Inventory Spare Parts in GPDC	08 April 2021	25 April 2021	100/-
WJPC/2021/01	Dismantling of Common Plant Equipment and Buyback (Purchase) of Scrap and Equipment in WJPC	08 April 2021	25 April 2021	100/-

- Bids shall be submitted in a single envelope and sealed with red wax addressed to the "Chairman of the Internal Tender Committee" and must write on the envelope the tender name & number.
- 3 separate envelopes shall be included inside the single sealed envelope, and each of these 3 envelopes must be marked with a tenderer name & tender No. as per the below:
 - Commercial Proposal
 - Technical Proposal
 - Bid Bond
- Bids should be dropped in the tender box at the Nama Holding reception before 02.00 pm, time of the Sultanate, on Sunday 25 April 2021.
- Each bid should be accompanied with a temporary insurance, in the form of a bank guarantee or a cheque certified from one of the banks operating in the Sultanate, covering (1%) of the total bid value and valid for a period of (90) days from the last date for submission of offers, addressed to the "Chairman of the Internal Tender Committee of GPDC" / "Chairman of the Internal Tender Committee of WJPC". Tenders that do not include the required temporary insurance will not be considered.
- GPDC / WJPC is not obliged to accept the lowest or any other bid.
- Interested party to deposit the Tender Fee (Non-Refundable) on: Account Name: Al Ghubrah Power and Desalination Company, Bank Muscat: 0423011069510017 (Bidder name and Tender Number to be clearly mentioned). Tender Documents will be received by email.
- Interested party to deposit the Tender Fee (Non-Refundable) on: Account Name: Wadi Al Jizzi Power Company, Bank Muscat: 0423010776530017 (Bidder name and Tender Number to be clearly mentioned). Tender Documents will be received by email.
- The deposit at the last day of purchasing should be before 02.00 pm.
- In the event of receipt of the tender document on behalf of another company, the interested purchasers in the above tender document should provide details of the person's name and the company details.



Nama Holding

In Beach One Building, 3rd Floor (Units 305 & 307), Shatti Al Qurum
P.O Box 850, Post Code 116, Sultanate of Oman.
Phone Number: +968 24559200 / 217
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Iran rejects ‘step-by-step’ lifting of sanctions

TEHRAN: Iran’s government wants the United States to lift all sanctions on its country and rejects any “step-by-step” easing of the restrictions, Iranian state broadcaster Press TV reported on Saturday.

The two countries said on Friday they would hold indirect talks in Vienna from next week as part of broader negotiations to revive the 2015 nuclear deal between Tehran and global powers. The US State Department said the focus would be on “the nuclear steps that Iran would need to take in order to return to compliance” with that agreement.

Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said on Saturday that Tehran was opposed to any gradual easing of sanctions.

“No step-by-step plan is being considered,” Khatibzadeh told Press TV. “The definitive policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is the lifting of all US sanctions.”

The aim of the talks in the Austrian capital is to reach an agreement within two months, according to a senior official with the European Union, the coordinator of the deal.

Former US president Donald Trump pulled out of the nuclear pact in 2018 and reimposed sanctions on Iran, prompting Tehran to breach some of the accord’s nuclear restrictions.

Trump’s successor Joe Biden wants to revive the agreement but Washington and Tehran have been at odds over who should take the first step.

Iran, China, Russia, France, Germany and Britain — all parties to the 2015 deal — held



Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh

virtual talks on Friday to discuss the possible return of the United States to the accord.

Meanwhile, Iran is optimistic about the further course of negotiations of a nuclear deal with world powers, which are to be continued in Vienna next week.

“We are about to get out of the impasse,” said Iran’s nuclear chief Ali Akbar Salehi, the news portal Entechab reported on Saturday.

He added that the reason for this is that the agenda of the negotiations is no longer being pursued politically, but technically and objectively.

On Friday, there was a video conference between Iran and the five remaining parties to the 2015 Vienna nuclear agreement — China, Germany, France, Britain and Russia.

All six parties agreed that negotiations to save the nuclear deal and a possible return of the United States would continue.

Teams of experts will meet

in Vienna on Tuesday. US representatives will also take part in the negotiations, at least indirectly.

“If we were to discredit the agreement, we would only shoot ourselves in the foot,” said Salehi.

Former US president Donald Trump left the agreement — aimed at preventing Iran from creating a nuclear weapon — in May 2018. Iran has been violating conditions of the contract since 2019, including a higher uranium enrichment and uranium metal production.

Trump’s successor Joe Biden has promised a return to the treaty, but is first demanding that Iran fully comply with the requirements. Tehran would be ready to do so, but is calling for the US to return to the nuclear agreement in advance and, accordingly, for the sanctions to be lifted immediately. Otherwise, according to Iran, negotiations are purposeful and the agreement itself is worthless. — Reuters

IMF grants \$174m emergency loan to South Sudan

JUBA: The IMF has approved \$174 million (€148 million) in emergency assistance to South Sudan, the country’s central bank governor said on Thursday, as floods and depressed oil prices rattle its economy.

South Sudan ran out of foreign exchange reserves last year as oil prices fell sharply due to the coronavirus pandemic, depriving the fragile government in Juba of much-needed revenue and sending its currency into freefall.

Devastating flooding has deepened the economic pain and magnified a humanitarian crisis in the world’s youngest country, which is enduring its worst levels of hunger since independence a decade ago. Central Bank Governor Dier Tong Ngor said the loan would help correct “distortions” in exchange rates and pay overdue wages to public servants.

“We have agreed with the IMF that half the amount will be used for budget support to pay salary arrears, and the other half will remain with the central bank” to cover urgent balance of payment needs, he told reporters.

The money would be repaid without interest under the terms agreed with the IMF, he said.

South Sudan is emerging from five years of civil bloodshed that left 380,000 dead and shattered its economy, which is almost entirely dependent on oil.

When it split from Sudan to the north in 2011 following a decades-long war of secession, it took over



three-quarters of the oil reserves.

But years of civil conflict after independence, including for control of key oil fields, deprived the country of vital income and the chance to diversify its economy.

The coronavirus pandemic drove oil prices sharply downward, gutting state coffers for a fragile new unity government that took office in February 2020 at the end of a tortured peace process.

In August, the government announced it was out of foreign reserves and unable to pay its civil servants.

The following month President Salva Kiir sacked the finance minister, the head of the tax authority and the director of the state-owned petrol company as inflation soared and the economy teetered. — AFP

■ ARTISTIC DESPITE THE PANDEMIC



A woman holds an artistic accessory made of beads by Palestinian girls, amid the coronavirus disease pandemic in Ramallah the Israeli-occupied West Bank. — Reuters

Covid overwhelms intensive care units in Syrian capital

DAMASCUS: Inside the emergency room of a hospital of the Syrian capital, an elderly woman with Covid-19 waited for a bed at an intensive care unit packed with coronavirus patients. Sitting on a wheelchair barely an arms-length from another patient, the woman in her 70s tilted her head back as a doctor wedged between them covered her face with an oxygen mask.

“We receive many cases who need a ventilator, and there are many patients who need intensive care,” said the doctor, Asma Sbayni of Mouwasat Hospital, one of the largest in Damascus.

“Unfortunately, there are many

critical cases who die in front of us... We can’t do anything for them” the 26-year-old said, only her eyes visible beneath a veil and two masks.

In mid-March, a health ministry official said intensive care units (ICUs) dedicated to coronavirus patients had reached full capacity across the capital for the first time since coronavirus swept into Syria.

The latest virus surge which many are referring to as a “third wave” has overwhelmed hospitals to the extent that Covid-19 patients are being transferred outside the city for treatment, according to the health ministry.



Syrians suspected of being infected with Covid-19 receive treatment at Mouwasat Hospital in Damascus. — AFP

“It’s a very regrettable situation... I am worried

AKJEMAL
MAGTYMOVA

WHO Syria representative

Authorities have responded by urging compliance with safety measures but stopped short of imposing a strict lockdown, which could aggravate Syria’s economic crisis.

Jotting down vitals on a

small note pad, Sbayni said she had already attended to at least 10 Covid-19 patients that day with more expected to follow. “Sometimes we get more than 40 Covid-19 cases per day and this is more than we can handle,” she said, an oximeter tied around her neck.

The government has recorded 19,000 Covid-19 cases, including more than 1,200 deaths, in the two thirds of war-battered Syria under its control. But the real number is likely higher especially due to limited testing capacity and the prevalence of asymptomatic cases, according to the United Nations humanitarian coordination office, OCHA. — AFP

ATHENS

Greek PM on landmark Libya visit, reopen embassy

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis will hold a landmark visit to Libya next week and reopen the country’s embassy after over six years, Athens said. Mitsotakis will travel to Tripoli on Tuesday “to normalise and restore relations,” Greek government spokeswoman Aristotelia Pelsoni told reporters.

Accompanied by Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias, the prime minister is to meet with the head of the presidential council, Mohammad Younes



Menfi, and interim prime minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah, Pelsoni said.

The visit will “signal the Greek Embassy’s immediate reopening”, she said. — dpa

RAMALLAH

Palestinians get Chinese Covid vaccine doses

The Palestinian Authority received 100,000 doses of the Chinese Sinopharm jab, the largest single batch of coronavirus vaccines yet to reach the Palestinian territories. The PA’s vaccination campaign was launched this month after the delivery of thousands of vaccines through the Covax programme which is meant to ensure an equitable access to Covid-19 jabs.

The Palestinian vaccine rollout has lagged well behind that of Israel, which has faced criticism



for excluding most Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and the Gaza Strip from its world-beating vaccination drive.

— AFP

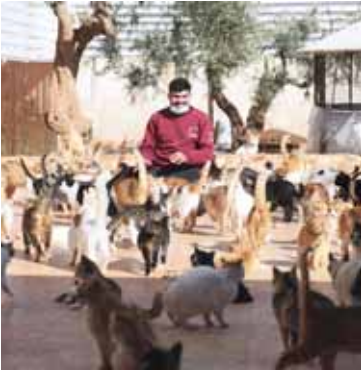
IDLIB

Idlib sanctuary offers cats a refuge from war

When Syria’s war forced Alaa al Jaleel to close his cat sanctuary in Aleppo in 2015 and head north to the rebel stronghold of Idlib, he took around 100 animals with him and reopened it there.

Now his successors at Ernesto’s Sanctuary care for more than 1,000 — and feeding time tends to be loud and chaotic.

“Most of the animals are injured because of the war and because their owners had to leave them when they left their homes. We gave (the cats)



shelter, medical care and food,” its current manager, Mohamad Wattar, said. — AFP

In brief

HANOI



VIETNAM ASKS FOR SUPPORT IN PROCURING VACCINES

Vietnam has appealed to diplomats from the US, European Union and Japan to help it secure supplies of Covid-19 vaccines, as part of efforts to acquire the 150 million doses needed to cover its adult population. Vietnam has received about 930,000 doses of AstraZeneca's vaccine so far but wants to procure doses from Pfizer, Johnson & Johnson, Moderna, China's Sinovac and Russia's Sputnik V shot.

Health Minister Nguyen Thanh Long asked Japan's Embassy for help with technology transfer for vaccine production and testing in Vietnam, the ministry said.

KABUL



ROADSIDE BOMB KILLS 5 CIVILIANS IN AFGHANISTAN

A roadside bomb has killed five civilians in Afghanistan's southern province of Helmand. The incident took place on a highway in the provincial capital city of the province, Lashkargah, according to provincial governor spokesman Omar Zwak and provincial councilor Ataullah Afghan. The victims were the driver of the vehicle and four passengers, the officials said.

In the meantime, officials also said seven civilians were wounded when a roadside bomb went off in the Kushk-e Rabat Sangi district of western Herat province. — dpa

PHNOM PENH



CURFEW IN CAMBODIAN CAPITAL AS OUTBREAK CONTINUES

Residents of Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh, face a two-week curfew as the country battles a worsening Covid-19 outbreak.

Phnom Penh authorities on Thursday announced that business activities and social gatherings would be banned in the city of more than 2 million people between 8 pm and 5 am, from Thursday until April 14.

The order prohibits any travel during those hours except for emergencies, cargo deliveries, people travelling to work and other activities that have been approved by authorities. Exemptions have been granted for gatherings of family members who share a residence, approved funerals, and for the work of healthcare workers and officials. — dpa

India braces for Covid curbs as infections hit 6-month high

MUMBAI: India's biggest cities braced for stricter lockdowns and other Covid-19 curbs on Saturday as infections hit a six-month high, as a month-long surge continued in the country third-worst hit by the pandemic. India's richest state, Maharashtra, accounted for more than half of the 89,129 new cases reported by the national health ministry in the last 24 hours, with a record 47,827 infections.

The state's chief minister warned citizens of a lockdown if cases

continued to rise at their current rate, saying medical infrastructure would be inadequate in a couple of weeks.

In the southern state of Karnataka, home to India's tech capital Bengaluru, authorities ordered gyms to be closed, barred functions at religious places and told cinema halls, bars, pubs and restaurants to limit the number of people allowed in.

India's capital, New Delhi recorded more than 3,500



cases, its highest this year, but its chief minister ruled out another lockdown for now. Daily coronavirus cases have surged from around 15,000 in early March to 88,000 or so at the start of April.

The south Asian nation recorded 89,129 new infections and 714 deaths, the ministry said. That was the biggest daily rise since September 20 and the most deaths since October 21, according to a Reuters tally. — Reuters

US, Japan, S Korea show united front on N Korea

WASHINGTON: The United States, Japan and South Korea showed a united front on Friday on concerns about North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes as President Joe Biden completes a review on the way forward.

Jake Sullivan, Biden's national security adviser, held a rare in-person meeting jointly with his counterparts from South Korea and Japan, Suh Hoon and Shigeru Kitamura, at the US Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland.

The three officials said in a joint statement that they "shared their concerns about North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile programmes" and promised "concerted trilateral cooperation towards denuclearisation."

"They agreed on the imperative for full implementation of relevant UN Security Council resolutions by the international community, including North Korea, preventing proliferation and cooperating to strengthen deterrence and maintain peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula", the statement said.

Addressing other key priorities for Biden, the security officials also discussed the fights against Covid-19 and climate change, and ways to restore democracy in Myanmar.

The meeting came as a review by the Biden administration on how to deal with North Korea is in its final stages, following Donald Trump's unusually personal diplomacy with strongman Kim Jong Un.

The former president held



US Secretary of State Antony Blinken (L) before addressing the media beside National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan following the closed-door morning talks between the United States and China upon conclusion of their two-day meetings in Alaska. — AFP File Photo

The security officials also discussed the fights against Covid-19, climate change, and ways to restore democracy in Myanmar

three meetings with Kim, with whom Trump said he "fell in love", in a diplomatic overture that eased tensions but did not lead to a permanent agreement.

Biden has sharply criticised Trump's meetings, saying he legitimised one of the world's most ruthless leaders, but has also said he is open to diplomacy.

Biden administration officials are widely expected to support a resumption of lower-level talks

rather than high-stakes, high-drama summits.

Biden has also warned North Korea of consequences for violations of UN Security Council resolutions after Pyongyang recently tested what US officials judged to be ballistic missiles.

A US official said Sullivan was also speaking to Japan and South Korea about the global shortage of semiconductors, as supply chains have been disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The lack of semiconductors has forced some automakers to curtail production and appears to be spreading to a wide range of electronic items.

The Annapolis talks mark rare in-person diplomacy for the Biden administration amid the pandemic and Sullivan's first trilateral since taking office. — AFP

Taiwan mourns after deadliest train disaster

HUALIEN: Taiwanese prosecutors have sought to detain a construction site manager whose truck is believed to have caused a train accident that killed at least 50 people, as authorities warned on Saturday more bodies could be found in the wreckage.

Friday's crash, Taiwan's worst rail accident in seven decades, occurred after an express train hit a truck that had slid down a bank next to the track from a construction site. The manager of the construction site is suspected of having failed to engage the brake properly.

The train was carrying almost 500 people on its way from Taiwan's capital, Taipei, to Taitung on the east coast, when it derailed in a tunnel just north of Hualien.

Ministry of Justice Department of Prosecutorial Affairs Director-General Lin Jinn-tsun told



Members of Tzu Chi Foundation offer condolences to an injured victim at a funeral a day after a deadly train derailment in a tunnel north of Hualien, Taiwan. — Reuters

The Taiwan government declared flags should be flown at half mast for three days in a show of mourning

reporters on Saturday that prosecutors had applied to the court to detain the manager on charges of causing death by negligence and forged documents. "Prosecutors will certainly step up investigation and understanding of the crimes or of other suspects involved in the case", Lin said.

He said he expected the court to approve the detention on Saturday.

Yu Hsiu-duan, head of the Hualien prosecutors office, said prosecutors were at the scene collecting evidence. — Reuters

Millions face Easter under virus curbs as US logs 100m shots

ROME: Millions of Christians around the world prepared on Saturday to spend another Easter weekend under restrictions because of coronavirus surges, but there was good news from the hard-hit United States, which crossed the milestone of 100 million vaccinations.

There have been worrying spikes in infections in many parts of the world, even as vaccine rollouts gather pace, forcing the reimposition of deeply unpopular restrictions including in European nations. Italy began a strict Easter lockdown on Saturday, with the entire country considered a high-risk coronavirus “red zone” during a time when families usually hold reunions.

At the Vatican on Good Friday, a handful of onlookers caught a glimpse of Pope Francis presiding over the “Way of the Cross” ceremony in an empty St Peter’s Square, with Covid-19 restrictions preventing large gatherings there for a second year in a row.

New restrictions also came into force on Saturday in France, where authorities are scrambling to deal with a dramatic rise in cases that has overwhelmed hospitals in the capital Paris.

Curbs had been already intensified in other European nations such as Belgium, and Germany — where the government scrapped plans for a strict Easter lockdown — saw Chancellor Angela Merkel urge people to limit their social contacts ahead of the break.

“Doctors and nurses are doing everything they can,” Merkel said on Thursday, warning that hospitals were filling up with



A water cannon is being used to disinfect the St John's Cathedral Church as a preventive measure against the coronavirus on the eve of Easter in Peshawar. — AFP

younger people.

“We shouldn’t leave them alone, but instead support them through our own actions... That means it should be a quiet Easter celebration, in a small circle, with strongly reduced contacts.”

Across the Atlantic in Canada, similar restrictions were imposed ahead of Easter in Ontario and Quebec, the country’s two most populous provinces.

But there was a step towards normal in Jerusalem’s Old City, where a lockdown dampened Easter last year.

There was a modest crowd this year as most major sites opened thanks to Israel’s successful vaccine rollout.

“Last year, it was very hard. We

The pandemic has claimed more than 2.8 million lives worldwide with no end in sight

felt like the city was dead,” said Lina Sleibi, a Palestinian Christian who sings at church services in the nearby West Bank holy city of Bethlehem. Now, “you feel alive again”.

The pandemic has claimed more than 2.8 million lives worldwide with no end in sight.

But the United States, the nation hardest-hit by Covid-19, became the first nation to administer at least one shot to more than 100

million people — around half of its adult population. President Joe Biden has vowed to cover the vast majority within weeks.

But infections remain on the rise in parts of the country. Despite the success of the vaccine rollout, Biden urged Americans to keep wearing masks and taking other precautions. “I plead with you. Don’t give back the progress we’ve all fought so hard to achieve,” he said in a brief address. “We need to finish this job.”

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has updated its guidance to say that fully vaccinated people can travel without observing quarantines, although they should still wear masks. — AFP



Police and members of the National Guard block a street near the US Capitol after a vehicle drove into US Capitol police officers in Washington, DC. — AFP

Police officer killed in vehicle attack on US Capitol

WASHINGTON: A motorist rammed a car into US Capitol police on Friday and brandished a knife, killing one officer and injuring another and forcing the Capitol complex to lock down in an attack that police said did not appear to be terrorism-related.

Police shot and killed the suspect.

Yogananda Pittman, acting chief of the US Capitol Police, said the suspect drove into the officers, then hit a barricade and got out of the vehicle, lunging at them with a knife.

“It is with a very, very heavy heart that I announce one of our officers has succumbed to his injuries,” she told a news conference, her voice choked with emotion.

Police identified the slain officer as William “Billy” Evans, an 18-year veteran of the force and father of two children. Officials said the other officer was in a stable and non-life threatening condition.

“It does not appear to be terrorism-related but obviously we’ll continue to investigate,” said Robert Contee, acting chief of the Metropolitan Police Department of Washington.

President Joe Biden said he was heartbroken by the attack and ordered flags at the White House be lowered to half-staff. In a statement, he said he was being briefed on the investigation.

Multiple media organisations, citing anonymous sources, named the suspect as Noah Green, 25, of Newport News, Virginia. Green’s brother told the *Washington Post* that his sibling struggled with drug use and paranoia and his family worried about his mental state. According to media reports, Green spoke on Facebook about the “end times”, the anti-Christ, and government “mind control”. He also said he was unemployed after leaving his job, “partly due to afflictions”, and praised Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan. — Reuters

Hundreds join ‘Kill the Bill’ rallies across Britain

LONDON: Hundreds of demonstrators joined marches and rallies across Britain on Saturday as part of a “national weekend of action” against a proposed new law that would give police extra powers to curb protests.

The Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts bill would toughen measures officers can take to disperse demonstrations, such as imposing time and noise limits, which campaigners and activists fear would be used to curb dissent.

Since the bill was brought before parliament last month, there have been sporadic protests, notably in Bristol, southwest England, where demonstrations

Since the bill was brought before parliament last month, there have been sporadic protests

turned violent with officers and a police station bombarded with bricks and glass bottles and police vehicles set on fire.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson criticised what he described as “disgraceful attacks” on officers, but protesters have accused police of using heavy-handed tactics.

On Saturday, climate change



A demonstrator taking part in a ‘Kill the Bill’ protest against the Government’s Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill is seen with ‘Kill the Bill’ written on her face at Hyde Park in central London. — AFP

group Extinction Rebellion (XR) and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement joined other activists for “Kill the Bill” rallies in London and other towns and cities, including Manchester, Sheffield, Leeds and Brighton.

“The government are trying to curtail protests — especially BLM and XR — that is what this bill is all about. We want the clauses in this bill about protests quashed,” said Mark Duncan, one of a crowd of more than 500 marching through central London, banging drums and chanting.

Days of protests by Extinction Rebellion paralysed parts of London in early 2019, action

which fuelled calls from some politicians for the police to be given the tougher powers to prevent excessive disruption.

Demonstrations had not been permitted while a coronavirus lockdown was in place, but restrictions were eased this week, meaning organised rallies can go ahead providing they are “Covid secure”.

In London, police warned, “enforcement action will be taken, if needed, in the interests of public health”. Some senior officers have said the “Kill the Bill” tag was deliberately provocative as “the bill” is a nickname in Britain for the police. — Reuters

SHORT TAKES

BARCELONA

Beach partygoers in Barcelona defy restrictions

Dozens of partygoers danced on a popular beach near central Barcelona, some without wearing masks or observing social distancing in defiance of Covid-19 restrictions, police said.

The impromptu party took place on Barceloneta beach and police said they had advised revellers they were breaking health regulations.

“Barcelona is the perfect place to party, but this is a big problem — the police — they are stopping people enjoying themselves,” a



British reveller who gave only his first name Liam, 32, and who was wearing a mask, said. Meetings of more than six people in public areas are banned in Spain’s northeastern region of Catalonia and offenders can face fines of 300 to 600 euros, police said.

RIGA

Latvia to boost vaccination rate with city hubs

Latvia on Saturday opened 10 large Covid-19 vaccination centres in an attempt to speed up one of the slowest inoculation campaigns in the European Union. The Baltic state has been hampered by slow deliveries of doses as well as low trust in vaccines, particularly in the ethnic Russian community which makes up around a quarter of the population.

“Those who have applied to get the vaccine and are on the priority list can get their vaccine



immediately,” Health Minister Daniels Pavluts told the LETA news agency. “It is good that they can already get the vaccine during the Easter holidays, making their families safer.” — AFP

MOGADISHU

Dozens killed in Somalia attacks on military bases

Dozens of people have been killed in pre-dawn attacks on two military bases in Somalia. Two car bombers struck two army positions in the district of Awdhegle and Bariire village in the volatile Lower Shabelle province.

“Al Shabaab attackers carried out a complex attack on two military bases in Lower Shabelle province this morning,” government spokesman Ismael Mukhtar said on Saturday in Mogadishu. Shortly after the



bombings, the heavily-armed insurgents tried to storm the army bases.

Gunfire was exchanged until the morning, when the Somali armed forces initially said they had killed 19 militants in both attacks. — dpa

Covid is here to stay: Can World Cup science be part of Plan ‘B?’

In some parts of the world, over the last year friends and families have met, socialised, attended sporting and cultural events, schools have remained open, and lived pretty much a ‘normal’ life, without masking or social distancing, due to the imposition of strict lockdowns and travel restrictions at the outset of Covid-19, and the complicity of the entire populations.

No, it is not a dream or a fantasy, and the Australian and New Zealand experiences demonstrate what is truly possible in adversity. So, we may well ask, if we do the same, with our own Covid-free strategy, can we, and the world, also achieve ‘normality’ through a vaccination programme?

Scientists are pessimistic, with a recent survey by *Nature* magazine finding 90 per cent of epidemiologists believe Covid-19 is here to stay, and can never be truly eliminated, with Michael Osterholm, of the University of Minnesota saying, “Eradicating this virus right now from the world is a lot like trying to plan the construction of a stepping-stone pathway to the Moon. It’s unrealistic.” And ironic really, as the Head of World Health Organization Emergency Programs Dr Mike Ryan has described global vaccination elimination of Covid-19 as only hopeful, a “moonshot!”

Only, it seems, in a fantasy world can we ever return to the same way of life, the same freedoms we experienced before 2020, and to think we thought Wall Street crashes, and



Ray Petersen
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OVER TIME
COVID-19 COULD
BECOME A
DISEASE FIRST
ENCOUNTERED
IN EARLY
CHILDHOOD,
WHEN IT WOULD
TYPICALLY CAUSE
MILD INFECTION
OR NONE AT ALL

the oil price shocks were bad... this abomination has changed us forever, as “The virus becoming endemic is likely,” says Angela Rasmussen, from Georgetown University, her opinion confirmed by Christopher Dye of the University of Oxford, saying, “COVID will be eliminated from some countries, but with a continuing risk of reintroduction from places where vaccine coverage and public-health measures have not been good enough.”

In the prestigious *British Medical Journal*, Jennie Lavine from Emory University writes, “Over time Covid-19 could become a disease first encountered in early childhood, when it would typically cause mild infection or none at all.” She went on to caution however that It could take decades for enough of the population to have sufficient immunity.

Even the World Health Organization warned as far back as December, through Professor David Heymann, the chair of the WHO Strategic Advisory Group. “The world hoped for herd immunity, that transmission would be decreased if enough were immune. However, it will continue to mutate as it reproduces, especially in areas of intense admission. Fortunately, we have tools to save lives, and these will permit us to learn to live with Covid-19.” Now that’s not what we want to hear... is it?

Thinking outside the box then, should we look at this in a different way? Should we be looking at static, or

venue-based eradication of the virus as a means of recovering a semblance of normality, sanity, and generating economic recovery. It was the genius Einstein, who may have been referring to masking, social distancing, and lockdowns, when he commented on ‘the insanity of doing the same things and expecting different results,’ so we need to get off the hamster wheel, don’t we?

Intrigued to discover that the 2022 Fifa World Cup in Qatar have put their faith in American PlasmaGuard technology to keep teams, officials, fans, and residents safe during the global event next year, Oman-based David Mallinson has secured the same technology for the Sultanate, explaining, “HVAC in-duct,’ technology can eradicate 99.99 per cent of airborne and surface pathogens, removing viruses, and germs from schools, hospitals, hotels, or restaurants. The ministries, and industry sectors need to get involved, but it offers the prospect a return to sustained economic recovery we can hardly ignore, doesn’t it?”

Mired in the global politics and bureaucracy of global Covid-19 responses, is it possible that a genuine option has emerged? Amidst this economic and social malaise, within a society that deems pandemic restrictions culturally paradoxical. could this be the light at the end of the tunnel... or are we happy to just go on, as we are?

YOUR TRUE VOICE

The power of silence

DR KHALFAN HAMED AL HARRASI

Naturally, we tend to talk more than we listen, albeit we are created with only one mouth but two ears! We want to be heard. We seek to prove our point! We interrupt and intercept at conversation. We monopolise discussions. Indeed, we live in a world of perpetual sound and in a culture that is hostile to silence because it is usually equated with lack of confidence, shyness, introversion, insecurity, and to a certain extent with incompetency and inefficiency. For others, sound (listening/talking to others, listening to music) domesticates the “monkey mind” from jumping around ruminating over sad moments by keeping at bay loneliness, negative sensations and emotions.

Muteness of oral output, absence of sound or noise, can help muster up creativity, reflection, communication efficiency, and enhance relationships with others around us! Silence could yield more productivity than we think. Silence is not merely muting our oral output but also freeing our body and mind from external aural input, allowing the body to relax and the mind to settle.

Productive silence to daydream and reflect will help energise your mental health and revive your cognitive abilities as you disengage from external stimulation and slip into undivided concentration of neural processing

Prolonged and excessive noise or sound has been proved to have detrimental effects of overtaxing the brain rendering it less productive. To the contrary, according to the National Library of Medicine, absence of aural/oral input (i.e. silence) for 2 uninterrupted hours a day helps the brain produce new cells in the hippocampus, the brain region

related to the formation of memory, involving the senses. Science (such as the study published in the *Psychological Science* journal on the relocation of Munich’s airport — Vol 13, No 9) shows that constant high levels of auditory input can cause profound physical effect by triggering the brain to release stress hormones.

Without going completely “cold turkey” from the noisy world around us, carving out just 15-20 minutes every day for productive silence to daydream and reflect will help energise your mental health and revive your cognitive abilities as you disengage from external stimulation and slip into undivided concentration of neural processing.

Practicing silence doesn’t require creation of it as it is your natural default state of being! It is a journey of inner self-realisation and transformation. Set a daily time for silent moments. Sit away from external sensory stimuli, and take deep conscious breathing as you find refuge from anxiety and stress. Engaging in such meditation regulates our nervous system by bringing home our sattva (our natural state of inner self-realisation, creativity and compassion) depriving our noisy world, even though for just minutes, of provoking our rajas (a state of restless) and tamas (a state of dullness). Silence helps regulate our hormones and blood pressure, boost our immune system, and enhance our creativity and self-awareness.

Through the power of silence, we strengthen relationships by enhancing our communication skills, teaching us to be patient listeners, to give turn, to change the focus from the feeling of obligation to constantly and instantly react, refute, convince to fully and calmly receive, appreciate, and evaluate messages before speaking or taking action, allowing clear separation of the real from the perceived. So, simply relax, rest, reflect and keep silent!

NEW TENSIONS BETWEEN KIEV AND MOSCOW

Biden vows US backing for Ukraine

DOINA CHIACU AND
ILYA ZHEGULEV

US President Joe Biden used a first official phone call with President Volodymyr Zelenskiy on Friday to offer staunch support in Ukraine’s standoff over Russian troops near its border.

Washington has been Ukraine’s most powerful ally since Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 but ties were overshadowed by Ukraine’s unwilling involvement in events leading to the impeachment trial of Biden’s predecessor Donald Trump.

The conversation came after Western nations and transatlantic military alliance Nato voiced concern over Russian troop movements near the eastern Donbass region where Ukrainian troops are in conflict with Russian-backed forces.

“President Biden affirmed the United States’ unwavering support for Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity in the face of Russia’s ongoing aggression in the Donbass and Crimea,” a US statement said.

The call lasted about 50 minutes, according to Zelenskiy’s chief of staff.

“We discussed the situation in Donbass in detail. President Biden assured me that Ukraine will never be left alone against Russia’s aggression,” the Ukrainian president said in a video statement afterwards.

Russia said this week that an escalation in Donbass could “destroy”



Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy talks to servicemen during his working trip to the Joint Forces Operation area in Donetsk Region. – Reuters

UKRAINE, WESTERN
COUNTRIES AND
NATO ACCUSE
RUSSIA OF SENDING
TROOPS AND HEAVY
WEAPONS TO
PROP UP PROXIES
IN DONBASS WHO
SEIZED A SWATHE
OF EASTERN
UKRAINE IN 2014

Ukraine and warned against any Nato deployment.

‘SHOULDER TO SHOULDER’
Ukraine, Western countries and Nato accuse Russia of sending troops and heavy weapons to prop up proxies in Donbass who seized a swathe of eastern Ukraine in 2014. Russia says it only provides political and humanitarian support to separatist fighters in what it casts as an internal conflict.

“We stand shoulder to shoulder when it comes to preservation of our

democracies,” Zelenskiy wrote on Twitter after the call.

Biden, a point person for Ukraine when vice-president for Barack Obama, also stressed Washington’s support for Zelenskiy’s anti-corruption and reform agenda.

Trump was impeached in 2019 over what White House aides described as an effort to withhold nearly \$400 million in aid and a coveted White House visit unless Ukrainian officials announced investigations into Biden.

— Reuters

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sport



THE 25-YEAR-OLD HAS MANAGED JUST TWO GOALS IN 31 GAMES FOR CLUB AND COUNTRY AND MISSED OPEN GOAL IN SHOCK LOSS TO NORTH MACEDONIA

TUCHEL TELLS MISFIRING WERNER TO STOP WORRYING

LONDON: Thomas Tuchel wants Timo Werner to stop worrying about his goal drought after the Chelsea forward's glaring miss contributed to Germany's shock loss against North Macedonia.

Werner's failure to tap into an open goal in the 2-1 loss to North Macedonia was crucial to Germany losing a World Cup qualifier for the first time since 2001 on Wednesday.

The 25-year-old has managed just two goals in 31 games for club and country since a brace in Germany's 3-1 win over Ukraine on November 14.

With Werner's first season at Chelsea after his move from Leipzig turning into a disaster, Chelsea boss Tuchel said he banned the forward from extra finishing practice on Thursday to protect his fragile morale.

"This guy has scored goals since he was five years old, and he never stopped, so he can trust that his brain and his body remembers to do that because it is absolutely usual for him to score," Tuchel said on Friday.

"So it will come back; it is just a matter of time. But it is much easier said than done because for me this is the moment not to think about it and not to read about it, and not even to train extra.

"Yesterday I sent him in from training because he wanted to do some finishing with us. I just sent him in.

"I said 'you don't need that, your body, your brain knows how to score; you did it since you were five years old so don't worry, it will come.'"

'THE GOALS WILL COME'

Despite 10 games without a goal for club and country, Tuchel

confirmed Werner will start Chelsea's Premier League clash with West Bromwich Albion at Stamford Bridge on Saturday.

Making an unusual analogy with dating, Tuchel offered support for his misfiring star.

"If a woman does not want to go out with you to dinner, you cannot force her to, you just step a little bit back and maybe she will call you up. So the goals will come," Tuchel said.

"But of course he needs to do something for it, and the best thing to do is not to think about and work hard.

"Work hard against the ball, work hard, be reliable with the ball, do your runs, don't hesitate and be fearless.

"This is how I see it. He will start tomorrow and here we go."

Werner's only goals in 2021 came against Morecambe in the FA Cup and Newcastle in the Premier League.

But Tuchel urged him to ignore criticism on social media and any nagging doubts in his own mind.

"It's enough to talk about Timo Werner, but then people blame Timo Werner, but the truth is he did not start three times for Germany," he said.

"It's an easy solution at the moment to point the finger at Timo which I cannot fully understand, and I will not accept.

"I'm happy that he's back here, because here he's protected. We demand a lot from him and we get a lot from him.

"Yes, he is in a moment where he lacks confidence, where things are not too easy.

"The ball simply does not work out like it usually works out, but he works hard for us." — AFP



This guy has scored goals since he was five years old, and he never stopped, so he can trust that his brain and his body remembers to do that because it is absolutely usual for him to score

THOMAS TUCHEL
Chelsea coach



In brief

■ MADRID



NO BLAME ON SPAIN FOR RAMOS INJURY, SAYS ZIDANE

Real Madrid coach Zinedine Zidane said he does not blame Spain for captain Sergio Ramos's latest injury ahead of the season's run-in. Central defender Ramos picked up a calf injury while doing warm-down exercises with Spain after their 3-1 victory over Kosovo on Wednesday. He came on as an 86th-minute substitute in the World Cup qualifier. The 35-year-old looks set to be absent for both legs of the upcoming Champions League quarterfinal meeting with Liverpool, as well as next Saturday's Clasico against Barcelona.

■ LONDON



LEICESTER'S MADDISON TO RETURN FROM INJURY

Leicester City received a major boost ahead of Saturday's Premier League game at home to Manchester City with midfielder James Maddison returning to the squad after being out for more than a month due to a hip injury. Maddison, who has eight goals and five assists for Leicester in the Premier League this season, last played in their 2-1 win away to Aston Villa on February 21. "He's back in training and he will be available for the weekend, so that's great news for us," manager Brendan Rodgers said.

■ MUMBAI



AXAR TESTS POSITIVE FOR COVID-19 AHEAD OF IPL

Delhi Capitals spinner Axar Patel has tested positive for Covid-19 ahead of the start of their Indian Premier League campaign next week, the team said on Saturday. Delhi, coached by Australian batting great Ricky Ponting, said the 27-year-old Axar had checked into the team hotel in Mumbai on Sunday with a negative report. "His report from the second Covid test, came positive," the 2020 IPL finalists said. "He is currently in isolation at a designated medical care facility."

Babar sets up Pakistan's last-ball win over SA

VAN DER DUSSEN'S MAIDEN CENTURY GOES IN WAIN



Pakistan's captain Babar Azam (C) celebrates after scoring a century during the first one-day international (ODI) match against South Africa at SuperSport Park in Centurion. — AFP

55 for four inside 15 overs.

He hit 123 not out, his maiden international century, to enable South Africa to score 273 for six.

South African captain Temba Bavuma admitted the loss of early wickets disrupted South Africa's aggressive intent.

"We didn't help ourselves with our batting effort in the first ten overs," he said.

The win gave Pakistan an important advantage in the three-match series, with South Africa set to lose five key players to the Indian Premier League after Sunday's second match in

“There was a little bit of pressure but we will learn from that

BABAR AZAM,
Pakistan captain

Johannesburg.

Nortje, one of those who will depart for India, conceded 31 runs in his first spell of five overs but came back strongly, dismissing Babar and Iman in successive

overs before having new cap Danish Aziz caught behind off a vicious, lifting delivery.

When Asif Ali was caught off a top-edged pull, South Africa were right back in the game. Nortje finished with four for 51.

Rizwan, who was man of the series in both Tests and Twenty20 clashes against South Africa in Pakistan earlier in the year, again showed a calm temperament as he and Shadab took their side close to victory. But Rizwan and Shadab both perished to over-ambitious shots against the medium-paced Phehlukwayo as the match went

SCOREBOARD

SOUTH AFRICA

A Markram c F Ashraf b S Afridi 19
Q de Kock c B Azam b S Afridi 20
T Bavuma c S Afridi b M Hasnain 1
H van der Dussen not out 123
H Klaasen c M Rizwan b F Ashraf 1
D Miller c M Rizwan b H Rauf 50
A Phehlukwayo c S Khan b H Rauf 29
K Rabada not out 13
Extras (lb2, nb1, w14) 17
Total (6 wkts, 50 overs) 273
Fall of wickets: 1-34, 2-41, 3-43, 4-55, 5-171, 6-235
Bowling: Shaheen Afridi 10-1-61-2, Mohammad Hasnain 10-2-52-1, Faheem Ashraf 9-0-25-1, Haris Rauf 10-0-72-2, Shadab Khan 8-0-45-0, Danish Aziz 3-0-16-0

PAKISTAN

Imam-ul-Haq c Rabada b Nortje 70
Fakhar Zaman b Rabada 8
Babar Azam c De Kock b Nortje 103
M Rizwan c Rabada b Phehlukwayo 40
Danish Aziz c De Kock b Nortje 3
Asif Ali c Phehlukwayo b Nortje 2
Shadab c Van der Dussen b Phehlukwayo 33
Faheem Ashraf not out 5
Shaheen Afridi not out 0
Extras (nb1, w9) 10
Total (7 wkts, 50 overs) 274
Fall of wickets: 1-9, 2-186, 3-193, 4-198, 5-203, 6-256, 7-271
Bowling: Rabada 10-1-51-1, Ngidi 10-1-65-0, Nortje 10-0-51-4, Phehlukwayo 10-0-56-2, Shamsi 10-0-51-0

down to the last ball.

Van der Dussen and David Miller (50) revived South Africa's innings earlier with a fourth-wicket stand of 116. Van der Dussen and Phehlukwayo (29) then added 64 for the sixth wicket.

The 32-year-old Van der Dussen had been dismissed three times in the nineties — twice in one-day internationals and once in a Test match — since making his debut two seasons ago.

He took 80 balls to reach his fifty but lifted the tempo of his innings to finish with 10 fours and two sixes off 134 balls. — AFP

Sri Lanka stand firm to draw second Test

NORTH SOUND, Antigua and Barbuda: Sri Lanka's top-order batting held firm to ensure a draw and a drawn series against the West Indies on the last day of the second and final Test at the Sir Vivian Richards Stadium in Antigua on Friday.

Set the daunting target of 377 and resuming at 29 without loss, the tourists reached 193 for two with a topscore of 75 by captain Dimuth Karunaratne and an unbeaten 66 by Oshada Fernando leading the resistance.

After managing just 16 runs in three previous innings, Karunaratne's 25th Test half-century spanned over four hours.

He faced 176 deliveries and struck nine fours before being trapped lbw by seam bowling all-rounder Kyle Mayers just before the end of the post-lunch period.

"I am really happy the way we played in this series, especially the bowlers and particularly Suranga (Lakmal)," said Karunaratne in paying tribute to the man of the series for his 11 wickets in the two matches.

"We need to improve on our batting though, especially in building partnerships. That's a concern for me going forward."

Karunaratne put on 101 for the first wicket with Lahiru Thirimanne who battled through



Dimuth Karunaratne (R) of Sri Lanka hits a four as Joshua de Silva (L) of West Indies looks on during the fifth and final day of the second Test at Vivian Richards Cricket Stadium in North Sound, Antigua and Barbuda. — AFP

to the afternoon period before he eventually fell for 39, edging a full delivery from fast bowler Alzarri Joseph for Rahkeem Cornwall at first slip.

Thirimanne ended the series with a tally of 240 runs, the most on either side and putting him three runs ahead of the leading West Indian, captain and fellow opening batsman Kraigg Brathwaite.

"None of our players ever gave up. Everyone tried really, really

hard all the way through," said Brathwaite, reflecting on 10 days of Test cricket and especially the final day of the series when they struggled for any potency on a placid surface.

"We are heading in the right direction and once we keep that discipline and commitment we will be a team to reckon with."

Brathwaite's innings of 126 and 85 made him the obvious choice as man of the match.

While the home skipper

exhausted every bowling option available to him, Fernando ensured there was to be no late stumble in the final session in partnership with former captain Dinesh Chandimal.

As well as he played though in nearly three hours at the crease, Fernando again seemed vulnerable to the gentle swing bowling of Mayers.

Dismissed in his previous two innings by the Barbadian, he needed the benefit of television

replay technology and a successful DRS referral to have a leg-before verdict against him off Mayers overturned.

Sri Lanka's task was made easier by the absence of Shannon Gabriel for most of the afternoon.

West Indies' fastest bowler left the field in his sixth over with what appeared to be a hamstringing injury.

That injury would have only worsened Gabriel's mood after he saw wicketkeeper Joshua da Silva spill a leg-side catch offered by Thirimanne at the start of the day when the opener was just on 17.

Early-morning rain delayed the start of play by just over an hour, effectively ending any distant hope the Sri Lankans would have entertained of launching a run-chase. — AFP

SCOREBOARD

West Indies 1st Innings – 354
Sri Lanka 2nd Innings – 258
West Indies 2nd Innings 280-4 decl
Sri Lanka 2nd Innings (target 377)
L Thirimanne c Cornwall b Joseph 39
D Karunaratne lbw Mayers 75
O Fernando not out 66
D Chandimal not out 10
Extras (lb1, nb1, w1) 3
Total (79 overs, 2 wkts) 193
Fall of wickets: 1-101, 2-146
Bowling: K Roach 12-2-33-0, J Holder 10-3-24-0, R Cornwall 26-4-8-53-0, S Gabriel 5-2-2-20-0, A Joseph 10-2-33-1, J Blackwood 6-1-17-0, K Brathwaite 3-0-7-0, K Mayers 6-4-5-1

Soccer fraternity dissatisfied over OFA decision

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, APRIL 3

Oman's football coaches, players and lovers expressed their dissatisfaction over the Oman Football Association (OFA) decision to cancel the domestic competitions of the 2020-2021 season due to Supreme Committee move to suspend the sporting activities over rapid rise of positive cases of COVID-19.

Many of top officials stated in social media on the cancellation of the footballing competitions including Sayyid Khalid bin Hamed al Busaidy, Chairman of Oman Olympic Committee (OOC), who tweeted: "the OFA

should not have cancelled the Omantel League and the first division league. It was better to postpone the competitions and resume later after the situation eases as in the previous season. This would be good to maintain the football leagues and the national team. The remaining rounds of the league are few and could be completed ahead of the start of the next season."

The head coach of Dhofar club, Rasheed Jaber, expressed in a explicit statement on twitter: "Cancellation of Omantel League is a top failure in football management. Who will judge the excellence of those who worked hard to accomplish their desired



targets and some of them were near to reach the objectives. Solving of the issue was postponement of the league, not termination of the

league. Unstudied decisions will not serve football?"

Dr AbdulRahim al Droushi, reviewed the reasons for the OFA

decision, on his twitter account. "I can see some weakness in OFA announcement to cancel the footballing competitions of the 2020-21 season. What is the clash of first division league clubs with the scheduled team's external assignments and national team's preparation plan? What is the point in cancelling the remaining weeks of the league as the matches are few and could finish within a month's time."

"What is the meaning of linking the Women's Futsal League with the national team plan and scheduled overseas assignment? The international participation of the national team was affected last year due to the Covid-19

pandemic. Will the cancellation of 2020-21 league provide better technical preparation? Will we see exceptional cases for national team plans? Absence of the league and camps will make the players and officials idle and seriously affect the game in the country," he added.

The former board member of OFA, Khalid al Rawas, tweeted that the OFA decision indicated weakness to find a proper solution. The board should have better management during the crises. The Supreme Committee decision was very clear on suspension of the sporting activities not cancellation. We expected OFA to take steps to solve the issues but was shocked with the outcome."

SINNER ADVANCES TO FACE HURKACZ IN FINAL

ITALIAN ENSURES ATP'S TOP 25 SPOT NEXT WEEK



Hubert Hurkacz (L) of Poland and Italy's Jannik Sinner (R) celebrate after their semifinals in the Miami Open at Hard Rock Stadium. — USA Today Sports



MIAMI: Italian teen Jannik Sinner rallied past Spanish seventh seed Roberto Bautista Agut at the Miami Open on Friday to book a meeting with Hubert Hurkacz in the biggest final of his young career.

Sinner, who reached last year's French Open quarterfinals, defeated Bautista 5-7, 6-4, 6-4 to become only the fourth teen to reach the men's final in the 36-year history of the ATP Miami Masters. Poland's Hurkacz, seeded 26th, won his second straight match over a top 10 player, beating Russian fourth seed Andrey Rublev 6-3, 6-4.

Coming off a quarterfinal win over second-seeded Stefanos Tsitsipas, Hurkacz became the first player to take a set off Rublev at the tournament.

It's the first time he has earned two top 10 wins in the same tournament.

Sinner, 19 and playing only his third Masters 1000, joined 1990 champion Andre Agassi, 2005 runner-up Rafael Nadal and 2007 winner Novak Djokovic as Miami teen finalists.

"Today we both showed great tennis," Sinner said. "It was not easy. It was a little bit windy as well. I'm very happy about my performance today."

Sinner took his eighth career triumph over a top-20 rival and ensured he will rise into the ATP's top 25 next week, although he nearly smashed a racquet in

Hurkacz hammered eight aces and broke Rublev's serve three times while being broken just once in their one hour, 27 minute match

a tense second set. "Sometimes you get the frustration going but just trying to stay calm, which is how I am normally," he said. "Sometimes you have to scream or do something else, but don't break racquet. Please let me don't break racquet."

Sinner seeks his third career ATP title after last year at Sofia and February in an Australian Open tuneup at Melbourne.

As excited as he was at reaching the final, he kept a long-term perspective about what it meant for his career.

"This kind of stuff can help you a lot. It's good to be in finals here but it doesn't mean anything," Sinner said. "The road is very long and I want to improve day after day and we'll see what's coming."

Bautista, who ousted Russian top seed Daniil Medvedev in the quarterfinals, missed out on his second career ATP Masters 1000 final after 2016 at Shanghai, where he lost to Britain's Andy Murray.

KEEPING IT SIMPLE

Bautista broke Sinner to open then saved two break points and held for a 2-0 lead. But Sinner broke back at love in the sixth game to level at 3-3.

The Spaniard broke again for 6-5 when Sinner netted a backhand and he held to claim the set on his second ace after 51 minutes.

Bautista broke at love for a 2-1 lead in the deciding set, but Sinner roared back to claim the victory and ensure himself a place in next week's ATP top 25.

"I tried to stick with my serve after the second set, maybe a little bit deeper," Sinner said. "Trying to keep my game simple and make it in the best possible way so I'm very happy today."

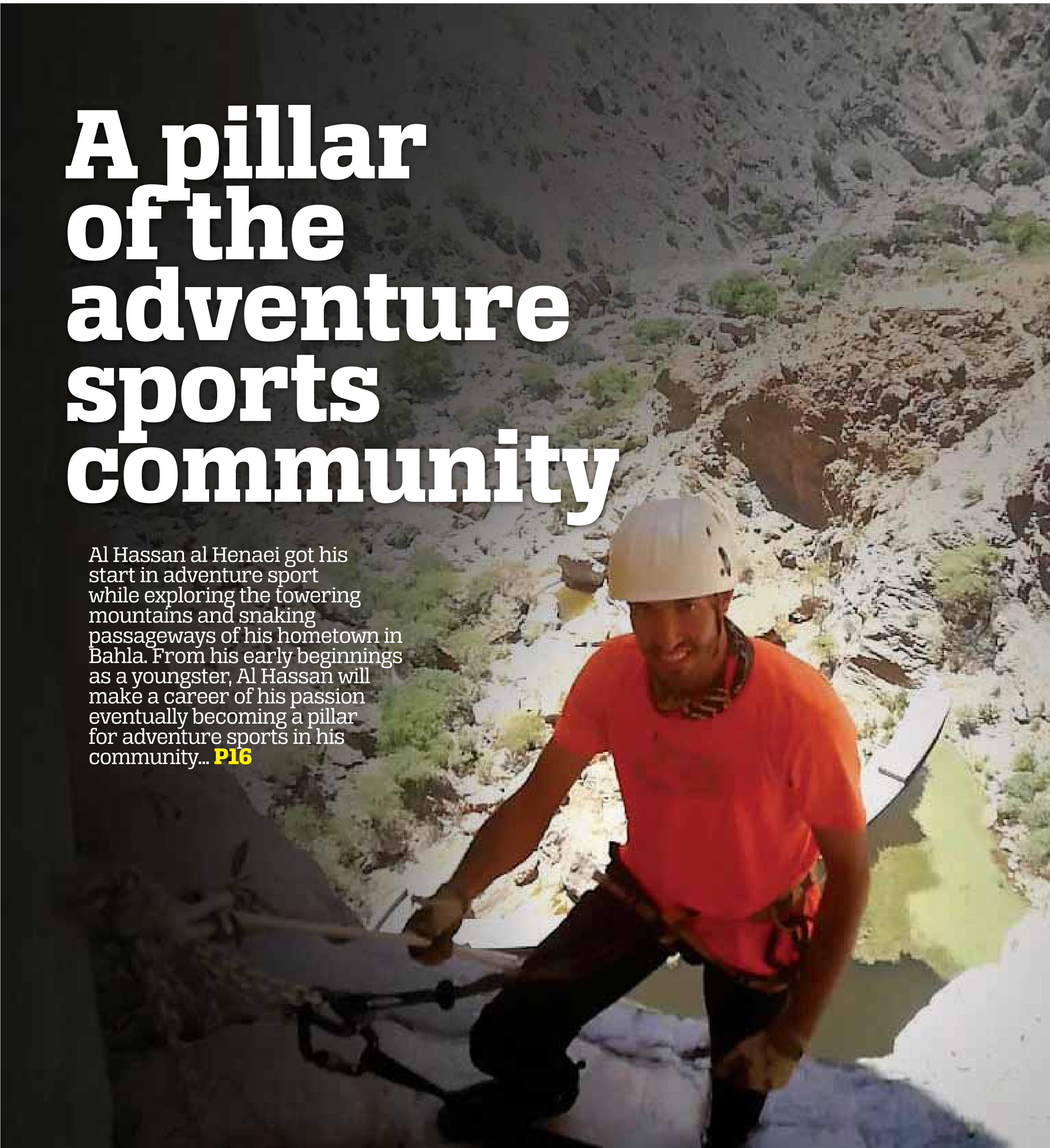
Hurkacz, who already has one victory this season in Delray Beach in January, advanced to the first Masters 1000 final of his career. "After winning a title at the beginning of the year I had a couple of rough matches," Hurkacz said. "I have just been trying to improve my game."

Hurkacz hammered eight aces and broke Rublev's serve three times while being broken just once in their one hour, 27 minute match.

Besides dominating on the serve, Hurkacz struck more backhand winners than the Russian.

"He played a couple of amazing shots," Hurkacz said of Rublev. — AFP

features



A pillar of the adventure sports community

Al Hassan al Henaei got his start in adventure sport while exploring the towering mountains and snaking passageways of his hometown in Bahla. From his early beginnings as a youngster, Al Hassan will make a career of his passion eventually becoming a pillar for adventure sports in his community... **P16**

INSIDE STORIES

LOCAL SCENE



IBRI OLD NEIGHBOURHOODS SHOWCASE SIMPLICITY OF ANCIENT LIFE

The old neighbourhoods in the Wilayat of Ibri in the Al Dhahirah Governorate, along with its old souk, are among the oldest villages and markets in the Sultanate... **Story on P15**

DISCOVERY



CARNIVOROUS DINOSAUR WITH SHORT SNOUT AND STRONG BITE MENACED PATAGONIA

Scientists in Argentina have unearthed the well-preserved skull of a meat-eating dinosaur that roamed northern Patagonia about 85 million years ago – a beast with a short snout, keen hearing and stout bite strength that made it a daunting predator... **Story on P15**

READ



PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

BY JANE AUSTEN

The book follows the turbulent relationship between Elizabeth Bennet, the daughter of a country gentleman, and Fitzwilliam Darcy, a rich aristocratic landowner. They must overcome the titular sins of pride and prejudice in order to fall in love and marry.

REMEMBERING PANDEMIC



BRITISH ROYAL KATE LAUNCHES BOOK OF PORTRAITS TO REMEMBER PANDEMIC

Kate, the Duchess of Cambridge, on Sunday launched a book of photographic portraits taken during Britain's Covid-19 lockdowns that she said would provide a lasting record of the pandemic... **Story on P14**

COMMUNITY



TRACING OMAN'S JOURNEY THROUGH MEDIA EVENTS

Ashok Suvarna, the erstwhile Executive Director of NPA GROUP (Oxygen, MediaOne, NPA Events) speaks to Kabeer Yousuf on how eventful the journey of Oman has been in his nearly 4 decades of stay in the country. He was closely connected to the local media, event management and Public Relations scenario... **Story on P15**



Tracing Oman's journey through media events

BY KABEER YOUSUF

Ashok Suvarna, the erstwhile Executive Director of NPA GROUP (Oxygen, MediaOne, NPA Events) speaks to Kabeer Yousuf on how eventful the journey of Oman has been in his nearly 4 decades of stay in the country. He was closely connected to the local media, event management and Public Relations scenario.

He arrived in Oman on September 25, 1983 at 5 pm. The sun was setting throwing crimson around as he was transported from the then Seeb International Airport to Hamriya by the time. The first thing that his eyes stuck upon as his car moved past several roundabouts was that there were hardly any flyovers and the Hamriya flyover work was just beginning.

"In my first 5 years as an Assistant Financial Controller with Nasser Lashko Group of Companies in their construction division, I was witnessing Oman growing by leaps and bounds. In 1983, a very prestigious Palace was getting ready, Al Bustan Palace, where the first GCC meeting was supposed to be held. All GCC heads of states were to attend the meeting. I still remember we used to sneak into the construction area to see the palace. That was the new landmark of Oman then. Eventually, it got converted to the InterContinental Hotel. That was the time when construction was at its peak, but gradually this reduced and in 1987-88, it has come down drastically. My tenure was getting over by that time with Nasser Lashko Group."

While he was looking for a new opening he happened to meet Anis Essa Mohammed al Zedjali of National Publishing and Advertising LLC (NPA). That was the beginning of his pretty long career in media. In 1989, he joined NPA and recently in 2021, he retired at the age of 63 after 32 years of service with the NPA Group.

In an emotional tone, he said he was privileged to get an opportunity to venture out from advertising agency to event management company to media buying agency — viz, MediaOne. "We have created 4 different verticals out of NPA. In 2004, we got the responsibility of publishing and handling the "Wings of Oman" National Airline Oman Air's inflight Magazine. Till to date we are continuing to produce under the guidance of Oman Air's

Communication and Marketing team. Also, feel proud to say we have won "Best Inflight Magazine" award for the same in the year 2015. During my tenure, I was lucky to have met great personalities like the late Indian President Shankar Dayal Sharma, late President Pranab Mukherjee, late Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and the list is endless."

Many prestigious events were organised under his expertise which include theatres shows, plays like *Dear Liar* with Naseeruddin Shah, Shabana Azmi and Javed Akhtar — poetic gazal and songs evenings, entertainment eEvents like Ustad late Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Rahat Fateh Ali Khan, Sunidhi Chauhan show, Johnny Lever show, Ghulam Ali, Abida Parveen and the like. Exhibitions like MF Hussain's paintings and many other painting exhibitions at various venues. We have also handled the corporate events launch of prestigious brands like Rolls Royce, Lamborghini, BMW, Infiniti, Mercedes and Bentley Bentayga apart from most of the launch of power plants in Oman.

"I will never forget one of the most prestigious and a landmark exhibition of Rembrandt's work — "Rembrandt in Oman" at Grand Hyatt for a month. It was highly appreciated for which we have won two prestigious awards from USA as well as UAE as best Exhibition Display Award. That would have not been possible without the support of Abdullah al Salmi and his entire team of Al Salmi Library. I will cherish the memory for a long time. Feeling proud to say that Grand Hyatt Ballroom converted to museum."

He was also the head of Marketing and Advertising of newspapers under the principal company and he feels he was privileged to have had an opportunity to work under late Shaikh Essa bin Mohammed al Zedjali which helped him learn a lot from him that he considers him as his Guru (mentor).

"I will cherish my memories with the Zedjali family for their support and it would not have been possible without the unstinted support, encouragement and appreciation of Anis Essa Zedjali and Said bin Mohammed bin Rashid al Juma", avers Ashok.

Oman is a very peaceful place to live for all expats. It has its own beauty and texture well blended



with culture and heritage. It's people are it's greatest ambassadors. I am sure, once you live here, it is very difficult to forget Oman. I have made many friends here and consider them as my asset.

"For me, Oman is my Karma Bhoomi (work place) and India is my Janma bhoomi (birth place). I have spent more of my life here than I have in India. Nearly 4 decades is a long time compared to 26 years in India. This has been a blessed place for me and my wife. I can comfortably say that I've had a remarkable and memorable journey. It was a rich and fulfilling professional life in NPA Group. I am leaving Oman with a heavy heart. I have got love, affection and support across Omanis as well as my business associates and my colleagues and my friends."

"My great salute to late Sultan Qaboos and His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik. I wish him good

health and great success. I am confident that he will carry the legacy of HM Qaboos and will do the best for Oman and people of Oman. Also, I want to wish this land and its people all the very best. This is a place that is very welcoming to all, and it's peaceful and tolerant nature has compelled many who came to work here and have retired, to harbor fond memories. My good wishes are always there for Oman and Omani people."

"This has been my memorable journey in this wonderful land of Oman. I definitely will cherish the memories of association with several organisations, many CEOs, marketing stalwarts, publishing houses, newspapers, radio and TV stations. All my business associates, our clients, "Ashok pauses adding that "for me, retiring at 63 feels appropriate! Though I have retired from 9 to 5 job. I will be shutting in and out of Oman."

REMEMBERING PANDEMIC

British royal Kate launches book of portraits to remember pandemic



KATE, THE DUCHESS of Cambridge, on Sunday launched a book of photographic portraits taken during Britain's Covid-19 lockdowns that she said would provide a lasting record of the pandemic.

Kate, who is married to Prince William, the Queen's grandson and second in line to the throne, began the project with the National Portrait Gallery last year, inviting people to submit photos taken during Britain's first coronavirus lockdown.



A panel of judges including Kate chose 100 portraits from over 31,000 entries, which were shown in digital and community exhibitions before the book was announced.

"Through 'Hold Still', I wanted to use the power of photography to create a lasting record of what we were all experiencing — to capture individu-



als' stories and document significant moments for families and communities as we lived through the pandemic", Kate wrote in the introduction to the book.

The book, called "Hold Still: A Portrait of Our Nation in 2020", will be available from May 7, exactly a year after the project began. Net proceeds will be split between the National Portrait Gallery and the British mental health charity Mind. — **Reuters**



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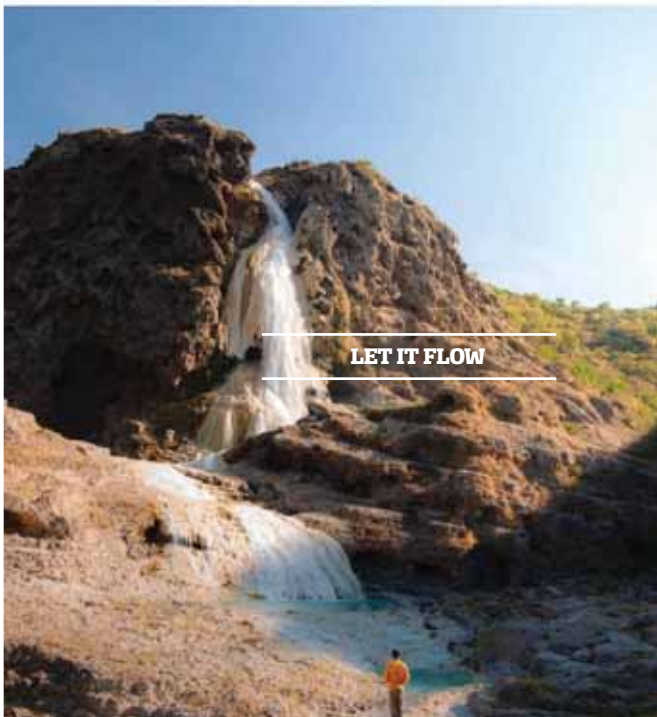
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DISCOVERY

Carnivorous dinosaur with short snout and strong bite menaced Patagonia



WASHINGTON: Scientists in Argentina have unearthed the well-preserved skull of a meat-eating dinosaur that roamed northern Patagonia about 85 million years ago — a beast with a short snout, keen hearing and stout bite strength that made it a daunting predator. The dinosaur, named *Llukalkan aliocranianus*, measured roughly 16 feet (5 metres) long and was a member of a carnivorous group called abelisaurids that prospered in South America and other parts of Earth's Southern Hemisphere during the Cretaceous Period, researchers said on Tuesday.

Llukalkan, meaning "one who causes fear" in the local native Mapuche language, may have competed directly against a cousin that was equally impressive and slightly larger. Only about 700 yards (metres) away from where *Llukalkan*'s fossilised skull was found, scientists previously had dug up the remains of another meat-eating dinosaur called *Viavenator* exxoni.

Both were abelisaurids, a group of two-legged predators with short skulls, sharp and serrated teeth, extremely short arms with tiny fingers and heads sometimes featuring unusual ridges and small horns. Abelisaurids generally were medium-sized compared to huge carnivorous dinosaurs such as *Tyrannosaurus rex*, which lived in North America approximately 15 million years after *Llukalkan*, and *Giganotosaurus*, which lived in Patagonia about 15 million years before *Llukalkan*.

"Yes, it is very unusual to find two abelisaurids that lived in the same locality and at approximately the same time," said paleontologist Federico Gianechini of Argentina's National Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET) and the National University

of San Luis, lead author of the study published in the *Journal of Vertebrate Paleontology*.

"*Llukalkan* was a little smaller than *Viavenator*, although, if they lived together, they surely shared the same ecological niche and fed on the same prey, so they would have competed with each other and — why not — even eaten each other," Gianechini added. "Today, predators of different species but from the same family co-exist in the same ecosystem, such as lions, leopards and cheetahs."

Llukalkan's skull measured about 20 inches (50 cm) long. A large percentage of the cranial bones were found, including a nicely preserved braincase.

"A peculiarity of this dinosaur is that it has cavities in the ear area that other abelisaurids did not have, which could have given this species different auditory capacities, possibly a greater hearing range," Gianechini said.

"The good preservation allowed us to make studies of the internal part of the braincase through tomography and thus infer the shape of the brain," Gianechini added.

Llukalkan had a powerful bite, based on the musculature of its jaws, and its teeth could tear flesh from its prey. Unlike some abelisaurids, its skull was not bumpy.

No bones from the rest of its body were found, though the researchers have a good idea of its body plan based on other abelisaurids. They estimate *Llukalkan* weighed between one and five tonnes.

Patagonia has produced important dinosaur finds in recent decades. *Llukalkan*'s discovery allows for a deeper understanding of northern Patagonia's ecosystems during the Cretaceous, the final chapter of the dinosaur age. *Llukalkan* inhabited a semi-arid environment with a seasonal climate, hunting a variety of plant-eating dinosaurs. — **Reuters**

Ibri old neighbourhoods showcase simplicity of ancient life

The old neighbourhoods in the Wilayat of Ibri in the Al Dhahirah Governorate, along with its old souq, are among the oldest villages and markets in the Sultanate. This historical heritage and buildings date back to more than 500 years and had served as gateways for travellers and merchants, and have enjoyed wide fame and economic popularity throughout the ages.

Some of the famous neighbourhoods in Ibri are Al Ramel village that was a witness to the persistence of ancestors who struggled and defied the difficulties to live a decent life. They worked hard for years to guarantee that they and the future generations will have a stable life.

There is also Al Janor neighbourhood which is considered as one of the old villages which contains ancient homes and paths that bear witness to ancient history. The houses that are built with a high standards of safety and antiquity reveals the ingenuity of



Omani architecture in building and construction as the arches and columns of these houses boast both solidity and durability.

The Al Atsh neighbourhood still preserves the beauty of its ancient homes built of stucco and palm trunks decorated with carvings, columns and arches, and its large doors

tell the beauty of Omani architecture.

Among the most famous neighbourhoods is Al Shanadid neighbourhood near Ibri Fort, with only a few houses left, includes the Oad House, which is a symbol of this neighbourhood, as well as the Al Shuja'a Mosque and the Ali bin Said Mosque, which are two adjacent

mosques with the same design. The two mosques are decorated with some carvings dating back more than 400 years, record historical events about that era in Omani history.

Likewise, there is the Ziyada neighbourhood and Zainab neighbourhood, which are two ancient villages telling a long-standing past and a testament to the ingenuity of the Omani man in architectural construction, thus forming a cultural, civilisational heritage and a landmark in the Sultanate.

The visitor to these ancient historical neighbourhoods will feel the ingenuity of the Omani civilisation in terms of its unique construction method in that era, which suggests the strength, solidity, homogeneity, coherence and familiarity among its inhabitants despite the simplicity of life. This is embodied in the interconnectedness and convergence of the houses with each other as if they were one house, with the presence of narrow lanes and small roads among those decorated houses.



A pillar of the adventure sports community

By Azza al Henaei

He grew up amidst the wild mountains of Al Dakhiliyah specifically in Ghafat in the Wilayat of Bahla. His first steps towards becoming a full-fledged adventurer had been fostered not only by his village's towering peaks but of the lush and rich neighbouring wilayats of Al Hamra and Nizwa. As someone who came from Bahla, Al Hassan al Henaei has always been fascinated with his town particularly because of Bahla's long history most known for its modern and ancient mysteries. Al Hassan has explored the many nooks and crannies of his town said to be at one point, the centre of civilisations. This town

"Even back travellers as always supported by the people around me and I wouldn't have enjoyed the success I enjoy now if not for that support and encouragement of these people", he said.

He added, "The strongest support was from our government that encourages young travellers and adventurers to blossom and grow up to realise their dreams".

Hassan was fortunate to take part in a specialised training conducted by an adventure institute. He described the experience as a short-term course that falls under "a week of interest".

He was then selected by the centre for an advanced course in Oman, and then another set of learnings in the United Kingdom.

"I have continued to develop my skills and work to refine and upgrade them to the present day. My fellow coaches and I have set up our own team", he said.

"We were created to overcome difficulties, but there are challenges that we must overcome and deal with to continue towards achieving the goals and ambitions," he said.

For Al Hassan, he described an adventure sports instructor as doing more than just the sporting skills.

"My job title involves guiding groups through group initiatives, teach proper sporting techniques, teach proper care and maintenance of ropes, teach how to deal with other life-supporting equipment as they are very important for performing any kind of action properly," he said.

From his challenging beginning, Al Hassan has now become a pillar for his community and became a consultant for different activities within places that he has explored and venture to.

He hopes to continue this career trajectory.

As for his future ambitions, Al Hassan believes that adventure sport is in a great spot as many young people are beginning to do more of the activities they offer. Oman's picturesque geographical nature is a pleasure to irrigate the adventurers, satisfy their inclinations and needs and encourage them to practice their hobbies freely but within safe limits and under the supervision of competent trainers.

Al Hassan believes that many people would feel enthused to go adventuring, but unfortunately, they lack the essential awareness on the safety measures.

"For any would-be adventurers, here are some tips. You have to be fully prepared for adventure by wearing the right shoes for hiking and the right helmet and the appropriate outfit. You need to know how to follow the paths, be patient and upgrade your endurance skills. They also have to take the necessary precautions such as a first aid kit, water and proper nutrition," he said.

Al Hassan knows that any outdoor adventure has risks but they help eliminate those by ensuring that they keep innovating.

Al Hassan said that having grown in the beautiful village of Al Ghafat, surrounded by wadis and mountains, the fascination for the outdoor and the passion to explore became a logical next step

has been visited by great Sultans and figures in the past as it is protected by towering mountains that served as its walls. Furthermore, it is said that the fortification of Bahla the second-longest wall in the world after the Great Wall of China. Knowing this, Al Hassan felt that this ancient history should be introduced to all people in and outside the Sultanate.

Al Hassan is a certified adventure coach in both mountaineering and mountain biking, an adventure Instructor in canoeing, hiking, swimming, running races, cave exploration, and ice skating.

He said that having grown in the beautiful village of Al Ghafat, surrounded by wadis and mountains, the fascination for the outdoor and the passion to explore became a logical next step.

"From a young age, I loved travelling and I had this spirit of adventure. I used to walk in the valleys, swim and climb mountains in my village with my friends," he shared.



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Sohar Port
deploys ‘Light
on-Demand’
technology



BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 3

Aligned with its vision to support sustainable and innovative initiatives, Sohar Port and Freezone is one of the first ports in the region and in the world to have installed a “Light on-Demand” system.

The implementation of this project, positions Sohar Port as pioneers in the sector. Apart from promoting a low carbon footprint, the LED luminaires have successfully reduced energy consumption by 80 per cent.

Mark Geilenkirchen, CEO of Sohar Port, said, “At Sohar, we envision ourselves to be green front runners, by enabling and supporting sustainable development through energy efficiency projects and transitioning to cleaner fuels.

Our overall objective is the need to develop a world-class complex and high-level of operations with state-of-the-art infrastructure that is safe, environmentally sustainable and legally compliant to attract investment and enhance industry diversification.”

Khalid al Alawi, Manager of Assets Management at Sohar stated, “The Assets Management Department has explored the recent development in the field of innovative technologies. The roads within the Port and Freezone area are not frequently used during the night, resulting in energy loss from the illuminated lights overnight. This is why we have identified a solution for real-time control of street lights within the respective areas.”

“Light on Demand” is a revolutionary integrated wireless motion sensor for presence-based monitoring and control of outdoor lighting. It ensures the reduction of energy consumption without compromising on public safety and driving comfort.

The technology consists of precise sensors for about 200 street lights and hosts a cloud-based control and energy monitoring system dashboard, commissioned by experts from the Netherlands. “We continue to proactively seek and invest in alternative energy sources, such as green hydrogen, as part of our strategy to diversify energy sources and become a greener Port and Freezone”, Mark added.

Revised power tariffs driving efficient
energy use in Oman: Regulator

KEY MOVES: Regulations
being formulated on
bilaterals and energy
wheeling, says APSR
Chairman

CONRAD PRABHU
@conradprabhu

Tariff revisions that recently came into effect for the first time for residential consumers in the Sultanate are beginning to yield results chiefly in terms of driving energy efficiency in the electricity sector, a top official of the Authority for Public Services Regulation (APSR) — the sector regulator — revealed here on Wednesday.

Shaikh Dr Mansoor bin Talib al Hinai, Chairman, said the upward revisions — part of a “price signalling” initiative by Oman’s authorities to reduce the hefty financial burden that the government has long shouldered in subsidising the electricity sector — is pushing consumers to curb their consumption and thereby contribute to efficient energy use.

While subsidy-free Cost Reflective Tariffs (CRT) came into effect for major customers nearly four years ago, electricity consumption by residential customers became subject to a tariff increase for the first time in several decades starting from January 1, 2021.

It has already come into effect for non-Omanis, but for citizens, the subsidy will be gradually phased out over a five-year timeframe.



Price signalling is a
very strong tool — this
will definitely affect
how industrial and
commercial customers
think about their
consumption behaviour
and how to embrace
efficiency

SHAIKH DR
MANSOOR BIN TALIB
AL HINAI
Chairman, Authority for Public
Services Regulation

Speaking at a ‘majlis’ on energy efficiency hosted by Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) last week, Dr Al Hinai said the price signalling initiated by the government has begun to pay dividends. “In the last three years in Oman, we are seeing for the first time that tariffs are changing”, the Chairman said.

“Price signalling is a very strong tool — this will definitely affect how industrial and commercial



customers think about their consumption behaviour and how to embrace efficiency.”

Equally noteworthy are the results emerging from the residential sector, he pointed out.

“When it comes to residential homes, what started a couple of months ago is something remarkable. It was the first time ever that we are seeing the prices of electricity in Oman starting to move.

From the numbers we are seeing from the distribution companies, price signalling is starting to bear some fruits from the energy efficiency perspective in residential households. This is a very good starting point and this is where energy conservation and energy efficiency will start to gain more momentum here in Oman.”

The ‘majlis’ featured a keynote address by Abdulamir al Ajmi, External Affairs and Value Creation Director at PDO, and a panel discussion on the theme, “Towards a National Energy Efficiency Action Plan”.

Taking part in the discussions, moderated by Dr Syham Bentouati, Managing Director — NAFAS International, were Eng Hilal al Ghaithi, Director of Customer Affairs — APSR; Omar al Mahrizi, CEO — Sohar Freezone and Deputy CEO — Sohar Port and Aiman al Shukaili, Head of Renewables Energy — PDO.

Aside from the price-signalling initiatives of the government, the Authority is working on a number of regulations that will help further enhance energy efficiency in the Sultanate, said Dr Al Hinai. It includes a plan to legalise direct power purchase agreements between major consumers and electricity producers — a process dubbed as ‘bilaterals’.

Also on the anvil is the concept of energy wheeling — the transportation of electrical power via a utility’s transmission or distribution system between different grids or network service areas.

Both initiatives were unveiled by Eng Salim bin Nasser al Aufi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Energy and Minerals, during a conference hosted by OQ — the Sultanate’s integrated energy group — earlier this year.

“Price signalling, coupled with a number of regulations that the regulator is currently working on, will definitely help in improving overall energy efficiency here in Oman”, said the Chairman.

“Some of these are related to investors here in Oman — and the private sector is looking forward too — wheeling, bilaterals and several other aspects that Eng Salim al Aufi spoke about in January. On all of these we are working closely with the Ministry of Energy and Minerals to get them done and approved. This will be another important milestone in the electricity sector here in Oman”, he added.

OQ completes sale of stake in Indian refinery

DEAL FINALISED: Sale
Purchase Agreement
to help create better
value from local and
international investment
portfolio, says OQ

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 3

OQ, the Sultanate’s integrated global energy group, announced on Thursday that it had inked a key agreement effectively formalising the sale of its minority stake in Bharat Oman Refineries Limited (BORL), a major refinery located at Bina in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh.

The buyer is Bharat Petroleum Corporation Limited (BPCL), the second largest oil marketing company in India. “To help drive our businesses



Since March 2020, BPCL and OQ have been holding 63.4 per cent and OQ 36.6 per cent equity stakes respectively in the company owning the 7.8 million tonnes per annum capacity refinery. A minor stake was also held by the local government of Madhya Pradesh through compulsorily convertible warrants

towards creating better value from our local and international investment portfolio, we signed a Share Purchase Agreement #SPA with Bharat Petroleum Corporation Limited @ BPCLimited to sell our 36.62 per cent share in Bharat Oman Refineries Limited (BORL)”, OQ stated in a tweet on Thursday.

In a regulatory filing in February, BPCL had revealed the deal was worth Rs 2,399.26 crore (approx. RO 125 million). BORL was incorporated in 1994 as a public limited company with equal equity participation of Bharat Petroleum Corporation Limited and OQ (formerly known as Oman Oil Company).

Since March 2020, BPCL and OQ have been holding 63.4 per cent and OQ 36.6 per cent equity stakes respectively in the company owning the 7.8 million tonnes per annum capacity refinery. A minor stake was also held by the local

government of Madhya Pradesh through compulsorily convertible warrants.

Following the transaction, BORL has become a wholly owned subsidiary of BPCL. N Vijayagopal, Director (Finance) of BPCL, commented: “With the acquisition of OQ’s entire stake in BORL, BPCL will establish control over BORL. This is expected to bring immense advantages to both the companies in terms of synergies and optimisation of returns and will facilitate any future expansion or diversification in Bina.”

The stake acquisition comes as part of a consolidation exercise ahead of the Indian government’s plans to privatise BPCL by selling its stake to a strategic player. Local Indian media cited the government as affirming that it is hopeful about completing the privatisation of BPCL in the first half of the next financial year.

The costs of scaling up a marketplace

Scaling up an online marketplace is a challenge that many startups and investors have faced. Before Covid-19 it was certainly more difficult, but in the post pandemic era we could safely say that nowadays it is much easier to break through barriers.

But still, most hurdles to be overcome lie in the early stage adoption. The fine balance between supply and demand could spell doom for those who are unable to on-board players from the very beginning. It is known that Facebook gained the first 1,000 users in the first day, given the college community proximity.

However, many have tried to replicate the same results only to realise that on-boarding has a cost that protracts over time. In fact, I would classify in 3 components the cost of having

each client and each supplier on our marketplace.

COST OF ACQUISITION

The first cost is of course the cost of acquisition, which answer to the question: is our target client/supplier already engaged on a similar platform/marketplace? If yes, what do I need to offer in order to poach the client/supplier away from the current setup to my own? If not, what do I need to promise so that i can on-board someone who has never experienced the services that I am offering?

These 2 answers to the same question carry a heavy duty planning and investment. The typical answers are as follow. If the supplier is already involved in a marketplace, I need to offer more revenues. If the client is already buying from a competitor of mine, I need to promise more choice in terms of products or faster delivery



STEFANO VIRGILLI
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THE FINE BALANCE BETWEEN SUPPLY AND DEMAND COULD SPELL DOOM FOR THOSE WHO ARE UNABLE TO ON-BOARD PLAYERS FROM THE VERY BEGINNING

service (which frankly nowadays is hard to beat).

It sounds like a great promise, but can we really offer that? If we can indeed generate more revenues for suppliers while providing more options for our clients, then the next investment is to ensure that the clients and suppliers stay on board and continue transacting with us.

COST OF RETENTION

This cost is associated to the longevity of our users, but also with the regular and recurrent activity on our marketplace. For instance, until 2012, Facebook generated only an average of \$4.7 per user, although the user base was already in the billions.

Many startups that manage to on-board a large base of users in the first stage, find this part quite stressful. A friend of mine has set up a marketplace in the USA with over 600 thousand registered users.

However, they do not have enough suppliers, and so the clients have reduced drastically their interest in participating the activities that the platform offers.

COST OF LOCALISATION

I faced a situation around localisation when I was involved in a marketplace project originated in Russia, based in Singapore and expanding in Indonesia. Or cost of acquisition was very low, so we had thousands of users on board, and the cost of retention was relatively low as our products were sold at a very competitive price. But when it came to Indonesia we realised that we had to speak in Bahasa Indonesia, else users would have stopped at registration. That meant to translate every single piece of communication we had.

Thousands of dollars and months allocated to it. *[The columnist is a member of the International Press Association]*

PRESS RELEASE

MOE SIGNS MOU WITH KR ESHRAQA



Sultanate of Oman's Ministry of Education (MoE) has entered a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Eshraqa, Corporate Social Responsibility Arm of Khimji Ramdas, to support the StemaZone initiative.

Dr Abdullah bin Khamis Ambusaidi, Under-Secretary of Ministry of Education, and Nailesh Khimji, Director, the Khimji Ramdas (KR) Group, signed the MoU at a ceremony held in the Ministry of Education on March 23.

The signing comes under the guidance and vision of the wise leadership of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik in building more scientific capabilities for Omani youth.

The agreement signifies an innovative strategy aimed towards inspiring young Omanis to enter STEAM fields and set them on the pathway from an early age. Putting a renewed focus on StemaZone, the MoU highlights the country's commitment to guiding students to gain the skills they need to prepare for the demands of the global economy and jobs of the future.

Condensate output jumps 53 per cent



MUSCAT: Total crude production (including condensate) dipped 1.9 per cent to 56,301 million barrels for the January-February 2021 period versus output of 57,415 million barrels during the same period last year.

According to figures published by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI), oil production including condensate declined to 954k barrels per day bpd this year, down from 956.9k bpd for the same period in 2020. The average price per barrel slumped 26.9 per cent to \$46.99 this year, down from \$64.2 last year.

Black oil production fell 11.7

per cent to 43,070 million barrels this year, down from 48,769 million last year. Condensate production on the other hand soared 53 per cent to 13,230 million barrels this year, up from 8,646,600 barrels for the same period of last year.

China was the biggest market for Omani crude exports, lifting a total of 38,374 million barrels this year, followed by India (5.690 million barrels), among other countries (1.59 million barrels).

Natural gas production, including Dolphin imports, climbed 4.7 per cent to 7.772 billion cubic metres (bcm) for the first two months of this year, up from 7.420 bcm last year.

HSBC fuels Oman's transition to a low carbon economy

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 3

HSBC Bank Oman SAOG recently hosted a Sustainable Finance Summit for Omani corporates focusing on Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) issues in the Sultanate of Oman and the opportunities to accelerate the efforts to build a healthier, more resilient and more sustainable future for the country. Hosted by Melika Betley (pictured), CEO of HSBC Oman, the event was attended by a number of HSBC's corporate clients from Oman.

Delegates heard from a broad range of thought leaders in the



sustainability space from HSBC, OQ Group, Sohar Port and Muscat Livestock Company, who gave insights into translating climate ambition to on-the-ground thematic actions, and stressed the importance of transitioning to a low carbon economy.

"We at HSBC aim to play a leading role in helping our customers achieve their sustainability and ESG goals. The impact of climate change is real and we have set out an ambitious plan to unlock climate solutions that can support our customers in their energy transition and on their journey towards net zero," said Melika Betley, CEO of HSBC Oman.

MSM WEEKLY REVIEW

MSM retreat continues on companies going ex-dividend

Oman GDB Issues							
	Issue Date	Term (Years)	Coupon (%)	Avg. Yield (%)	Amount Applied (OMR mn)	Amount Allotted (OMR mn)	Subscribed (x)
GDB 52	15.02.17	7	5.00%	5.08%	259.67	150.0	1.73
GDB 55	20.11.17	7	5.25%	4.91%	287.98	150.0	1.92
GDP 58	25.09.18	7	5.75%	5.49%	232.82	150.0	1.55
GDB 60	28.04.19	7	5.75%	5.52%	187.38	100.0	1.87
GDB 63	20.02.20	7	5.25%	5.10%	218.05	150.0	1.45
GDB 65	18.08.20	7	5.50%	5.43%	239.02	200.0	1.20
GDB 67	22.04.21	7	5.50%				

Source: CBO

The MSM30 Index ended the week down by 0.31 per cent on many companies going ex-dividend during the week as the AGM season wraps up. The Financial Index receded 0.12 per cent, Services Index was up 0.07 per cent and Industrial index was higher by 0.46 per cent.

The MSM Shariah Index was lower by 0.87 per cent. Oman Cables announced that a court verdict has been issued in its favour by the first-degree court in Qatar, obligating a company (Imperial Trading & Contracting Co) to pay an amount of QAR 14.274m amounting to approximately RO 1.5m as outstanding amounts, in addition to QAR 1m (RO 105k) as compensation for damages.

Court verdict is subject to appeal by any parties within a period of thirty days.

During last week, Ubhar Capital SAOC updated its 'Ubhar Capital Oman20 Index'.

The index witnessed the addition of Sembcorp Salalah, Oman United Insurance and Al Jazeera Steel and the deletion of Al Batinah Power, Galfar Engineering and Raysut Cement, the market cap of this index is about RO

4.2 bn (representing 59.21 per cent of the total market capitalisation at the end of 2020).

United Power announced that it has received CMA preliminary approval for conversion of the legal form of the Company from SAOG to SAOC.

The company on completion of the remaining procedures will call an EGM to approve the conversion.

Oman Arab Bank AGM approves the issuance of Basel III compliant additional Tier 1 Capital Securities of up to RO 97m.

Fitch Ratings has affirmed Oman Electricity Transmission Company SAOC's (OETC) Long-Term Foreign and Local Currency Issuer Default Rating (IDR) at 'BB-'. The Outlook is Negative. The senior unsecured rating of the bonds issued by its subsidiaries has also been affirmed at 'BB-'. The rating affirmation is supported by its stable earnings profile and its dominant share of EBITDA from regulated electricity transmission over price-control period five (PC5: 2019-2022), ending in December 2022. This is despite its expected negative free cash flow (FCF) over the next three years, due to higher capex and dividends.

The ratings and Outlook remain constrained by that of Oman (BB-/Negative).

The Central Bank of Oman (CBO) announced the new issue of government development bonds number 67. The size of the new issue is at RO 100m (with an option to increase the size) with a maturity period of 7 years and will carry a coupon rate of 5.50 p.a.

The issue will be open for subscription from April 4 to 19 while the auction will be held on April 20.

The issue settlement date will be on April 22. Interest on the new bonds will be paid semi-annually on October 22 and April 22 every year until the maturity date on April 22, 2028.

Value of traded property in Oman went down by 30 per cent in 2M/2021 to RO 439.2m compared to RO 629.2m in 2M/2020.

Traded value of mortgage contracts during the same period went down by 50 per cent to RO 229m compared to RO 458m in same period last year.

However, traded value of sale contracts rose by 23.5 per cent to RO 204.6m compared to RO 165.6m in 2M/2020. Number of properties issued during 2M/2021 also rose by 37.1 per cent to 50.0k compared to 36.5k in 2M/2020.

[Courtesy: U-Capital]

BANK MUSCAT LAUNCHES SAYYARATI AUTO FINANCE WITH NEW FINANCE OPTIONS



Bank Muscat has launched an attractive Sayyarati vehicle finance offer with the best rates in the market on the occasion of the Holy Month of Ramadhan. The offer features some of the lowest rates for auto finance in the country and will prove to be of great advantage to customers looking forward to buying a new or pre-owned vehicle during the Holy Month.

Highly competitive short term rates starting at an amazing 3.5 per cent for 12 months are available for customers who need only short term loans. Sayyarati has some of the best interest rates in the country including 3.75 per cent for up to 2 years, 4 per cent for up to 3 years, 4.25 per cent for up to 4 years and 5 per cent for a loan term of up to 8 years.

Speaking about the promotional offers currently available, Abdullah al Mashaani, Deputy General Manager — Institutional Sales and Product Development, Bank Muscat, said: "Sayyarati is a preferred vehicle financing option for people in Oman and we are happy to launch this special Ramadhan offer with the best possible terms in Oman after listening to feedback from our customers."

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Contact: 71029290 - 99606116

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AN apartment for rent in Al Ghubrah Ash'shamaliyah. It's separated in second floor and overlooking the sea. It has two bedrooms, a living room, two toilets and a kitchen. Contact: 99773958.

FLAT for rent in Maabela 3 master rooms. 96088926.

WAREHOUSE for rent in Ghala, area 540sqm. 93205690.

1BHK & 2 bhk flats for rent at Ruwi and Al Khoudh. 93994402, 93994403, 24834644.

2 BEDROOM flat Al Khuwair. 99322344.

3 BHK Flat & studio flat in central Ruwi & 2 BHK in Medinat Al Ilam. Call 99238012/ 24704994.

SIT. WANTED

INDIAN male B.Com, 33 years experience in Oman, worked as an office manager, executive personal assistant, accountant, steno-secretary, seeks job, NOC & D/L available. Contact: 92558734.

INDIAN male, 24, B.E. computer science, masters in GIS from UK. Seeking placement in GIS field. Having Oman driving licence. Contact: 99738614.

CIVIL engineer/QS engineer, 11 years in UAE, freelance & Oman driving licence available, looking for full-time or part-time job 97299165.

FINANCE Manager/ CFO. Indian Chartered Accountant and Cost Accountant with 25 years of experience in Trade Finance, MIS, Budget, Planning, Strategy, Projects, Procurement, Admin, seeks suitable placement. Contact. 99884291 / 99741875 Email vipul70@gmail.com

MANAGER Sales and Distribution seeks suitable placement. Sales Professional with 25 years' experience in Oman, includes 12 years in Sales Management, with LEADING FMCG, Consumer Durables Companies. Currently working with a leading group as Branch Manager for Retail and Distribution. Accountable for the total business and P&L. NOC available. 99369127.

MECHANICAL

engineer, 21, Indian male currently in Oman looking to work at any engineering field. Contact 96511338. Email: rkdhanush11@gmail.com

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YOUNG experienced Pakistani driver with Omani light vehicle driving licence seeks suitable opening. Speaks Arabic, Hindi, English and familiar with interior and Muscat areas. Contact GSM 95856719.

SALES ENGINEER (PEB) B.Tech Mechanical with minimum 7 years of experience in Pre Engineered Steel Building (PEB) sales and marketing. Responsibility involves Technical discussion with the customers, preparing proposals, cost estimation and quotation. Valid GCC driving licence is a must. Contact: hrjob191@yahoo.com.

SALES/Marketing/ retail executive BMS in Marketing. 6 years experience. Contact 93920174. Rehankadri91@hotmail.com

SMART Indian, excellent English, Arabic speaker, 17 years Oman experience in Airport, Hospital, Media EPC seeks Admin/ Hr/ Project coordinator/ Operations. 99283938.

THREE years experienced in administration / sales and marketing seeking placement. Omani D/L, and NOC available. Gsm- 98270993

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

OMANI male, 17 years experience as driver. Looking for transporting job for nurses, office goers, sight seeing. Contact: 97947900.

INDIAN, male, Master Degree in Accounting, 15+ years of experience in Oman, UAE & India as Finance / Accounts Manager / Chief Accountant. looking for a job and have noc on visit. contact: 79007124 / 78039524. email: kadercok@outlook.com

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LOOKING for an IT Sales/Service Engineer with 2-3 years of experience with GCC Licence. Please send CV to smartsys@omantel.net.om

URGENTLY required **assistant HR & Admin manager** (only Omani national), oil & gas experience must. Contact: hrrecruit2828@gmail.com

FOR SALE/RENT

COLD store in Al Seeb for lease or sale. Contact: 94272979, 96252664.

NEW 3 storey villas for sale/rents Wadi Kabir/Al Khuwair), (Shops/offices for rent/ Al Khuwair) (Flats for rent/Wadi Kabir). 96596348.

FOR SALE

INSTITUTION Licence contact 95595512.

DIESEL Tanker, 1,600 gallon Volvo, 1987. 92836774

3BHK flat for sale in Al Khoud Commerical Road with an allocated parking space. Call: 99411330.

FOR sale in SFZ, near port — 4-storey factory for Guar Gum powder, total 3,7000 square metres, warehouse 1,700 Square metres, with or without machines. Write to guargulf@gmail.com or call +968 94615439 (www.gulfguargum.com)

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UK firms expect long-term post-Brexit disruption



Shoppers are seen in Oxford Street in central London. — Reuters

LONDON: The majority of British firms have faced disruption with trade with the European Union since Brexit, with many expecting the problem to last for some time, according to a survey published on Saturday.

A trade agreement between London and Brussels which came into force on January 1 has meant some companies have had to deal with new bureaucracy and rules.

The Survation survey for London First/EY, conducted in February, found 75 per cent had experienced some disruption, even though 71 per cent said they had felt prepared for the changes.

Almost half, 49 per cent, said they expected that to continue in the long-term while nearly a third said they had stopped trading with the EU and countries not covered by rollover agreements.

— Reuters

Vaccines, fiscal stimulus power US employment; economy blooming

WASHINGTON: The US economy created the most jobs in seven months in March as more Americans got vaccinated and the government doled out additional pandemic relief money, marking the start of what could be the strongest economic performance this year in nearly four decades.

The Labour Department's closely watched employment report on Friday also showed job gains in February were larger than initially estimated. The best first two months of employment growth of any administration in history suggested the labour market has finally turned the corner. All industries added jobs and many people rejoined the labour force. A measure of the economy's ability to create employment also improved. But the road to full recovery remains long.

The jobs deficit is still huge and more than four million Americans have been unemployed for over six months.

"The first two months of our administration has seen more new jobs created than the first two months of any administration in history", Biden told reporters.

"It's a reflection of two things going on here, a new economic



People line up outside a career centre to find assistance with their unemployment claim in Frankfort, Kentucky. — Reuters

strategy focused on building from the bottom to the middle up, and one that puts government on the side of working people."

Nonfarm payrolls surged by 916,000 jobs last month, the biggest gain since last August. Data for February was revised higher to show 468,000 jobs created instead of the previously reported 379,000. Still, employment remains 8.4 million jobs below its peak in February 2020.

Economists had forecast payrolls increasing by 647,000 jobs in March. At the current pace, many believe the more than 22 million jobs lost during the pandemic could be recouped by the end of next year.

The economy added 1.6 million jobs in the first quarter. The strong gains could play into fears of the economy over heating, even as ample slack remains. The Federal Reserve has signalled it would maintain

its ultra easy monetary policy stance for a while to allow complete healing.

"The economy is booming", said Chris Low, Chief Economist at FHN Financial in New York. "If vaccines result in low enough Covid numbers to allow significant further service-sector reopening, the Fed will have to start discussing a taper, and update its guidance, before the end of this year."

Manufacturers hired 53,000

employees. Public and private education payrolls also rose as more schools resumed in-person learning and other school-related activities.

Retailers also added jobs, while mining employment increased by the most since 1981. As of Friday morning, the United States had administered 157.6 million doses of Covid-19 vaccines in the country and distributed 204.7 million doses, according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. On Friday, the CDC said fully vaccinated people could safely travel at "low risk", which could help accelerate the services industry recovery.

The Biden administration's massive \$1.9 trillion pandemic relief package approved in March is sending additional \$1,400 checks to qualified households and fresh funding for businesses.

Economists expect job growth will average about 700,000 per month in the second and third quarters. That, combined with the fiscal stimulus and about \$19 trillion in excess savings accumulated by households during the pandemic, is expected to unleash a powerful wave of pent-up demand.

— Reuters

China tells H&M to change the 'problematic map'

STOCKHOLM: Chinese authorities have asked H&M to change a map on its website in the latest clash between the clothing giant and officialdom there, media reported on Friday.

The company, based in Sweden, has faced a backlash in China in recent days after it voiced concerns last year about alleged human rights abuses in Xinjiang province. ABC News reported that the city government of Shanghai had asked H&M to correct a 'problematic map of China'.

H&M did not respond to emailed request for a comment.

Citing a statement by the Shanghai government, ABC



A man carrying an umbrella walks past an H&M clothing store at a shopping mall in Beijing. — Reuters

said Internet users reported the problem to the management of

H&M's website and the Shanghai municipal bureau of planning

and natural resources ordered it to be changed.

The Wall Street Journal cited the Shanghai arm of the Cyberspace Administration of China as saying that H&M's website operator had taken actions to address the issue.

Last week, H&M said it would work to win back trust in China after a statement it had made in 2020 about sourcing cotton there resurfaced on social media.

In the statement, the world's second-biggest fashion retailer expressed concern about the allegations of forced labour in Xinjiang province and said it would no longer source cotton from there. — Reuters

Japanese household spending dropped

TOKYO: Japanese household spending dropped in February from a year earlier, falling for a third straight month, suggesting emergency steps to contain the coronavirus infection kept a lid on consumer expenditure.

A state of emergency declared in the Tokyo area to curb the spread of Covid-19 hurt service sector spending such as restaurants and bars, while demand for home appliances and food and beverage was likely to stand firm, analysts said.

Household spending is forecast to have fallen 5.3 per cent in February from a year



Shoppers wearing protective face masks are seen at a supermarket in Tokyo. — Reuters

earlier after a 6.1 per cent decline in January, the poll of 16 economists showed.

But compared with the previous month, household spending likely grew 2.8 per cent in February, rebounding from a 7.3 per cent drop in January.

— Reuters

US oil production to start rising in second quarter

LONDON: US crude oil production has stabilised and is set to start rising again, after the massive shock last year caused by the coronavirus epidemic and a volume war in the oil market between Saudi Arabia and Russia.

US production was 11.1 million barrels per day (bpd) in January, essentially unchanged from December, according to data published by the US Energy Information Administration.

Output was still down 1.7 million bpd compared with the same month a year earlier, and 1.8 million bpd from the cyclical peak in November 2019.

But production is no longer declining month on month as the industry has adapted and prices have rebounded after the crisis,



Crude oil storage tanks are seen in an aerial photograph at the Cushing oil hub in Cushing, Oklahoma. — Reuters

creating a floor from which output is likely to start increasing by the middle of this year.

In the short-term, output is likely to have declined again sharply in February because of

Output was still down 1.7 million bpd compared with the same month a year earlier, and 1.8 million bpd from the cyclical peak in November 2019

the extreme cold that disrupted the Texas oilfields, and the interruption probably bled into the first part of March.

But these are short-term interruptions driven by adverse weather rather than prices and market conditions so they should reverse rapidly.

By April and certainly by May, US production should start rising, slowly at first, then accelerating into the second half of the year.

Experience shows there is a lag of around four or five months between changes in the price of WTI futures and drilling rates,

and then another lag of up to six months between changes in drilling and changes in output.

Front-month WTI futures prices hit a low of less than \$20 per barrel in April 2020, and the number of rigs drilling for oil hit a cyclical low four months later in August.

Based on previous experience, output should hit a cyclical low roughly six months later, putting the trough sometime in the first quarter of 2021. Since April 2020, front-month futures prices have roughly tripled to \$60 per barrel, while the

number of active rigs has nearly doubled since August.

The drilling recovery is broadly following the same trajectory as after the two previous slumps ending in May 2016 and May 2009. Once the weather-related production problems in February and March are out of the way, the earlier increase in prices and drilling should filter through to higher production in the second quarter.

US production is likely to remain below its previous peak of almost 13 million bpd throughout 2021 and 2022, but as output starts to turn upward, the extra barrels will start competing for market share with Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries.

— Reuters