

Opec+ decision a positive step

The Omani government has greeted the decision by the Opec+ alliance to maintain production cuts through April as a "positive step" that helped propel international oil prices to their highest levels in nearly 15 months. A high-level official of the Ministry of Energy and Minerals reaffirmed non-Opec Oman's continued support for the alliance's efforts to stabilise global oil markets and help aid a recovery in crude oil demand, which had collapsed in the wake of the pandemic last year. **P 13**



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OMAN OBSERVER

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INDIA TAME ENGLAND, REACH WTC FINAL



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VENEZUELA TO INTRODUCE ONE MILLION BOLIVAR BILL



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BUILDING WORLD'S FIRST PLATYPUS SANCTUARY



MUSCAT

RO 98M GAS SUPPLY PROJECT COMPLETED

OQ Gas Networks (formerly known as Oman Gas Company), a subsidiary of OQ — the Sultanate's integrated energy group — has announced the successful operationalisation of the natural gas pipeline project that feeds natural gas from Saih Nihayda in central Oman to the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) at Duqm.

The 221 km long pipeline project, constructed at a cost of RO 98 million, will supply gas at the rate of 25 million cubic metres per day at full capacity, Mansour bin Ali al Abdali, General Manager — OQ Gas Networks, said in a statement to ONA. Among the first consumers of the gas is Duqm Power Company, which is investing in a major integrated power and water project at Duqm. Duqm Power Company is a joint venture between the Central Utilities Company (Marafiq), which forms part of OQ Group and Gulf Pacific Holding Company.

MOH: NO DEATH DUE TO COVID VACCINE

The Ministry of Health has denied social media rumours about the death of a vaccinated person in the Sultanate. The ministry confirmed that no side effects were recorded in the national campaign for immunization against Covid-19. The ministry called on everyone not to pay attention to rumours, and to obtain information from its official sources, stressing that it will take legal measures in this regard.



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A GREEN OASIS AMONG MOUNTAINS



Hail Al Qadhqadhi area in the Wilayat of Yanqul is known for its oases of seasonal crops such as lemon, mango, wheat, date palm and several vegetable varieties. The area boasts rock formations and running water along the mountains of the wilayat. **SEE P3**

Boeing 737 MAX shuts off engine in flight, lands safely

NEW YORK: Just months after Boeing's 737 MAX jet was given the green light to fly again, one of the jets experienced apparent mechanical problems shortly before landing on Friday.

Pilots switched off an engine on a flight from Miami to Newark, the US Federal Aviation Administration said in a statement.

American Airlines said the plane experienced a possible mechanical issue.

The plane landed safely and taxied to the gate under its own power on Friday afternoon, with no injuries to passengers or crew reported, the airline said.

Boeing said only that the firm was aware of the incident and that American

Airlines could give further information. The 737 MAX was grounded following two crashes that killed 346 people.

NEW SOFTWARE

In both crashes, a sensor provided incorrect data to the software, prompting the nose to dive. Pilots were unable to override the automatic settings. The new version of the software is to be fed data from two sensors.

There is no indication that the incident on Friday was linked to the same issue.

The model was certified to fly again in the US in November, with the requirement planes be fitted with new software for their flight control computer. — **dpa**

Sultanate five steps up on economic freedom index

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Oman's economic freedom score is 64.6, making its economy the 71st freest in the 2021 Index, said the 2021 Economic Freedom Index of Heritage Foundation. Last year it was ranked 76th.

Its overall score has increased by one point, primarily because of an increase in monetary freedom. Oman is ranked 7th among 14 countries in the Middle East and North Africa region, and its overall score is above the regional and world averages.

Oman's economy is in the moderately free category this year as it has been since 1996. Greater economic freedom would help the government to diversify the economy away from dependence on oil. To achieve this goal, the government would have to cut government spending sharply

Oman is ranked 7th among 14 countries in the Middle East and North Africa region, and its overall score is above the regional and world averages



and make a concentrated effort to reduce debt. Increased use of pre-paid meters and more punctual service delivery have made obtaining electricity easier and less time-consuming. Starting a busi-

ness and dealing with construction permits have become less costly. Labour force participation has increased. Electricity and fuel subsidies consumed more than one-quarter of the government's budget in 2019.

TRADE AGREEMENTS

Oman has four preferential trade agreements in force. The trade-weighted average tariff rate is 5.7 per cent, and 19 nontariff measures are in effect.

As per the government's Mid-term Fiscal Balance Plan, improving and developing the business environment is one of the most important factors supporting the empowerment of the private sector, which in turn helps to stimulate economic growth and increases job opportunities.

The plan aims to support economic growth to achieve the following initiatives. **TURN TO P9**

Perseverance rover takes 6.5-metre test drive on Mars

WASHINGTON: The Mars rover Perseverance has successfully conducted its first test drive on the Red Planet, the US space agency Nasa said.

The six-wheeled rover travelled about 6.5 metres (21.3 feet) in 33 minutes, Nasa said.

It drove four metres forward, turned in place 150 degrees to

the left, and then backed up 2.5 metres, leaving tyre tracks in the Martian dust.

"This was our first chance to 'kick the tyres' and take Perseverance out for a spin", said Anais Zarifian, Perseverance mobility test bed engineer at Nasa's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California.



Zarifian said the test drive went "incredibly well" and represented a "huge milestone for the mission and the mobility team." "We're going to do some longer drives", she added. "This is just the beginning." Nasa engineers said they were studying possible routes for longer rover voyages on the surface of Mars. A slightly longer trip

was planned for Friday, and perhaps another Saturday if all goes well, Nasa said.

The rover can cover 200 metres per Martian day, which is slightly longer than a day on Earth.

And it goes five times faster than Curiosity, its predecessor, which is still functioning eight years after landing on Mars. — **AFP**

WEATHER

MUSCAT: Max 32°C Min 19°C SALALAH: Max 31°C Min 20°C NIZWA: Max 36°C Min 20°C

PRAYER TIMINGS

SUNRISE: 06:24 FAJR: 05:09 DHUHR: 12:23 ASR: 15:46 MAGHRIB: 18:17 ISHA: 19:27

Avoid last-minute rush, finish shopping on time



A view of Ruwi High Street after the closure of shops at 8pm. PHOTO BY MOHAMMED IQBAL



Authorities have advised to avoid crowding at the eleventh hour.

KABEER YOUSUF

@kabeeryousef

With the ban on commercial activities at night coming into force on Thursday, people have been advised to avoid crowding at shops towards the closing time but to finish their shopping early enough to abide by the Supreme

Committee regulations on the preventive measures against Covid-19.

Crowds are seen in front of commercial outlets, shopping malls, small retail outlets, restaurants, barbershops and beauty parlours, to get things done at the eleventh hour.

“All commercial outlets are

supposed to close from 8pm to 5am. Any non-compliance to this would amount to a violation of Covid-19 rules and will attract punitive actions including fines,” said ROP sources.

The nine-hour closure of all commercial establishments was decided by the Supreme Committee on Monday under the

chairmanship of Sayyid Hamoud bin Faisal al Busaidy, Minister of Interior, as part of the measures against the spread of Covid-19. The 17-day ban on commercial activities will end on March 20.

Several customers have found it difficult to get things done during the stipulated time-frame.

Establishments and

individuals engaged in home delivery services too have been urged to follow the night suspension of business activities. However, pharmacies, health establishments, and fuel filling stations are exempted from the purview of the ban at night.

Meanwhile, Muscat Municipality has warned that

anyone found violating the Supreme Committee decision on a ban on commercial activities will be fined RO300, and RO1,000 if the same offence is repeated.

The inspection departments of Muscat Municipality are continuing their visits to ensure implementation of the Supreme Committee’s decision.

RO 300 fine for violations

STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT, MARCH 6

Muscat Municipality has warned that anyone violating the provisions of the Supreme Committee decision on closure of commercial establishments will be fined RO 300 and RO 1,000 if the same offence is repeated, apart from the closure of the activity.

The inspection departments of the municipality meanwhile continue their visits to follow up on the commitment of the commercial establishments to the decisions of the Supreme Committee on Covid-19.

All commercial establishments will be closed between 8 pm and 5 am until the morning of Saturday, March 20, and the closure includes restaurants and cafes inside the tourist facilities in addition to home delivery services. Gas stations, health institutions, and private pharmacies are excluded from the closure.

Any violations made by the shopkeepers in the Governorate of Muscat can be reported to the Muscat Communications Center (at 1111) or the official social media accounts of Muscat Municipality.



Omani trucks can enter Qatar via Saudi Arabia’s Al Salwa land border

STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT, MARCH 6

Omani commercial trucks will be allowed to enter Qatar via Saudi Arabia’s Al Salwa land border, said the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) on Thursday.

OCCI said that the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology has received a letter which says the Salwa port land border between

Qatar and Saudi Arabia are ready to receive Omani commercial trucks travelling to and from the Sultanate.

In January, Saudi Customs at the Salwa border crossing with Qatar resumed operations, with the port receiving a number of arrivals the moment it opened.

Travellers arriving through the port completed standard customs and health-related procedures that are customary at all entry points into the

kingdom.

Saudi customs said they began cooperating with all government agencies operating at the port immediately after both countries announced they would open their air, land and sea borders following the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) decision.

The breakthrough agreement aimed at ending a three-year diplomatic dispute between the Kingdom, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt with Doha.

Consumer Confidence Survey begins

MUSCAT: The National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) on Sunday conducts the 29th cycle of Consumer Confidence Survey for the first quarter of 2021 which runs till March 18. The survey is considered a significant economic indicator and targets citizens aged 18 and above.

It measures the developments that occurred to the financial condition of Omani families between the years 2020 and 2021. It also seeks to identify the factors that affect the economy as well as the national economic outlook and the Omani families’ ability to purchase electric appliances, commodities and cars and the availability of job opportunities at the present time and their future expectations.

The survey’s target group comprises 1,500 Omani citizens residing in the Sultanate and distributed in different governorates taking into account balanced representation of male and female and various society segments and educational levels. The data will be collected through phone calls. — ONA

Philippine Embassy to remain closed today

STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT, MARCH 6

The Philippine Embassy in Oman has announced the temporary closure of the mission on Sunday, for the disinfection of the premises after one of its members tested positive for Covid-19.

The precautionary measure has been taken in the interest of the safety of the general public and Philippine Embassy personnel, and to allow them to

undergo PCR tests.

No frontline services will be provided by the Consular Section and the Philippine Overseas Labour Office (POLO) on Sunday. Affected applicants of both sections with appointments for Sunday will be rescheduled by the respective frontline units.

The Philippine Embassy (Consular Section) will resume normal operations on Monday. POLO, however, will remain closed until Monday.

Cure8, Amin galleries set to boost art scene in Sultanate

STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT, MARCH 6

Cure8 and Amin art galleries are all set to offer a new experience to art lovers in Oman very soon by bringing a programme on contemporary art and culture.

Both the galleries have joined hands to showcase the works of professional artists in the Sultanate and the Middle East sometime in March at the Grand Hyatt Hotel in Muscat. The programme is also aimed at supporting emerging Omani artists nationally and internationally by setting up a new gallery.

Both the art galleries have played important role in promoting art and artists, nationally and internationally. In the past four years, Cure8 has emerged as a modern cultural and artistic centre, offering an ideal environment for the growth of artistic ideas. Based originally in Tehran, Iran, Amin Gallery is serving the art and artists for the last 27 years.

The brains behind the show are Sarah Ahmed Farid al Aulaqi and Farideh Zariv, directors of Cure8 and Amin art galleries respectively.

“It is going to be a very exciting and eventful place for the artists. It will add value to the already vibrant



Sarah Ahmed Farid al Aulaqi



Farideh Zariv

art scene in Oman,” said Sarah Farid.

In the beginning, there would be 40 paintings and sculptures by a group of Omani and international artists. They are original and modern artists, and their works are different in style, technique, and content.

Sarah Farid, the founder, and director of the Cure8 Art Gallery, began her career in the art world by printing photographs on ‘abaya’ and embroidering photographs of Oman’s old buildings on silk fabrics.

She will start her first artistic collaboration with Amin Gallery

with the works of artists from Oman, Iran, Australia, and Hungary.

With a strong interest in art and natural instincts for its market, Sarah opened her first gallery in 2016 and in the same year dedicated space for emerging artists.

Farideh Zariv, who is also an Iranian/Australian artist, said, “The new gallery will try to increase visual literacy and artistic information and increase investment in works of art by designing art workshops, especially in the growth of small investments in works of art by the younger generation and art enthusiasts in Oman.”



HAIL AL QADHQADHI, AN OASIS AMONG MOUNTAINS



YANQUL: Hail Al Qadhqadhi in the Wilayat of Yanqul in Al Dhahirah Governorate is located 30 km from the wilayat's centre and is known for its oases of seasonal crops such as lemon, mango, wheat, date palm and several vegetable varieties.

The weather in Hail Al Qadhqadhi is cold in winter and moderate in summer. The area boasts rock formations and running water along the mountains of the Wilayat of Yanqul.

Masoud bin Salim al Manei says the residents of Hail Al Qadhqadhi cultivate seasonal crops due to the availability of water that pours down from hilltops and runs into small streams that irrigates farms. The farmers grow tomatoes and various garlic varieties in separate farms.

Vegetables like lettuce and lemon have been cultivated in Hail Al Qadhqadhi since ancient times with some new varieties being introduced recently. Mango trees grow here which get special attention

from farmers. Clover and wheat are also cultivated in the area. Date palm trees are among the traditional crops that have been cultivated in Hail Al Qadhqadhi since old times, Al Manei said.

Livestock breeding exists in the area, which helps local people meet their needs for meat, milk and margarine.

Long time ago the residents of Hail Al Qadhqadhi built traditional water channels (afaj) using conventional methods, but some of these afaj that are primarily used for farm

irrigation are unfit for human water consumption owing to the increased salinity. Afaj are traditional narrow water channels built from plaster but have, since ages, withstood the vagaries of nature.

Drinking water is collected from falaj upstream through a pipe and into a reservoir and then distributed automatically to all houses in Hail Al Qadhqadhi.

The area is teeming with wild trees and plants such as Ghaf and Samar. — ONA



Dust storm may hit visibility in some parts of Sultanate

MUSCAT: Oman Meteorology has said that the latest satellite images show a dust storm moving in the Empty Quarter desert which is likely to affect visibility in areas of Al Buraimi, Al Dhahirah and Al Wusta governorates. There is a possibility of a decrease in horizontal visibility on Friday and Saturday.



Ajial System allows submission of birth, death info online

STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT, MARCH 6

The Ministry of Health (MoH) has said it is making tireless efforts to flow information and data between various authorities and concerned sectors to complete Ajial System.

The technical team on the follow-up to completion of births and mortality report convened a meeting to review the mechanism of developing and completing the birth & death reporting programme (Ajial).

The meeting was attended by Dr Halima al Hinai, Director General of Planning and Studies, along with Bader bin Suliman Awlad Thani, Director General of Information Technology, as well as some technicians in the related sectors.

The role of the Directorate General of Civil Status of Royal Oman Police (ROP) and the National Centre for Statistical Information (NCSI) was commended during the meeting.

Moreover, the meeting discussed the most important challenges faced by the incidents reporting system and agreed to improve the procedures and flow of incidents data of birth and death from the health institution reporting the incident to the issuance of birth or death certificate.

The meeting touched upon the significant role of the concerned citizens and residents to complete the registration, which is reflected in the service level and completing the national statistics and data to support the developmental plans. The statistics of births and mortality are a key component in calculating the vital indicators of the Sultanate, based on which the NCSI is updating the statistical and demographic data and indicators annually.

The Ministry of Health represented by the Directorate General of Planning and Studies is following up the process of completing these statistics. The incidents reporting system of birth and death (Ajial) is an electronic system designated for improving and facilitating procedures for citizens and residents to complete the reporting process.

Ajial system is provided at all health institutions that reporting incidents including MoH's institutions, Sultan Qaboos University Hospital, ROP Hospital, Armed Forces Hospital and private health institutions.

The concerned person is only required to contact the health institutions to complete the procedures and issue the required certificate.

Economic freedom index

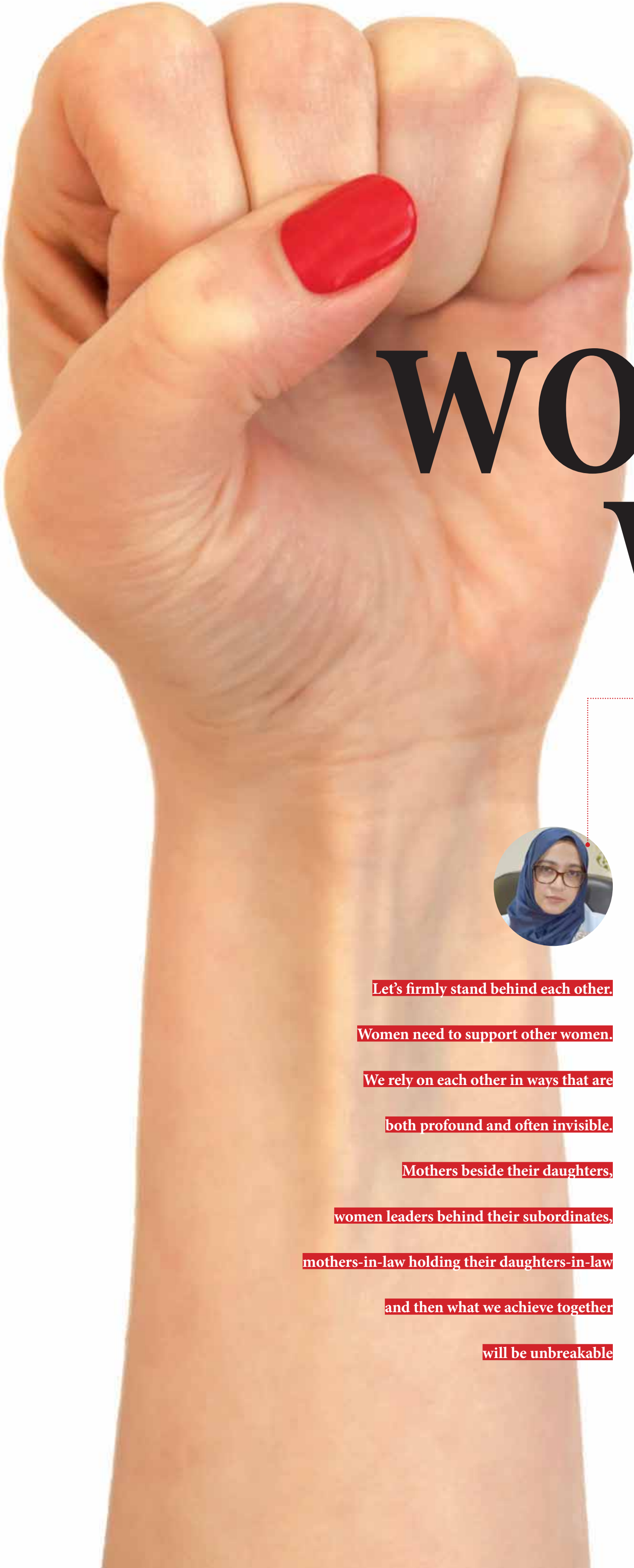
FROM PAGE 1

It lays emphasis on achieving a comprehensive electronic transformation in the procedures for registering companies and issuing commercial licences through the "Invest Easy" initiative, so that the initiative represents for the business community in the Sultanate a single access point to all electronic government services. An integrated framework was created for the investment system in the Sultanate through a set of laws that were issued in June 2019, which included foreign capital investment laws, privatisation, a partnership between the public and private sectors and bankruptcy.

Six persons get jail sentence, fine for SC rule violations



MUSCAT: Primary courts in North Al Batinah and Al Buraimi convicted six citizens for violating the institutional quarantine procedures and gathering as instructed by the Supreme Committee on Covid-19. They were sentenced to six months in prison and a fine of RO 500.



WE WOMEN WILL

MASSRAT SHAIKH

International Women's Day this week spotlights women on how they have been coping over the last year. Several studies show that the pandemic affected women more profoundly in several areas, including the workplace and home. It increased the workload more on women due to lockdown and quarantine measures. More women became unemployed, more women gave up their jobs to support their children's education from home, and more women suffered domestic violence and household stress.

The worldwide health workforce comprises most women, and more women are frontline health workers, putting them in the high-risk zone. Mental health surveys collected over the last year show that more women experienced social isolation and loneliness and had a higher level of depression and anxiety during this time. Recent surveys also show that Covid-19-related stress has negatively impacted women's mental health more.

However, most of our hope for a safe and secure future lies in the people who are most affected by the pandemic, and that is women. It takes courage, strength, and gentle yet steady persistence to get up again and keep going, and this is something we women need right now.

Research shows us that women are more mentally tough and perform better under pressure. Women are also more emotionally expressive, making them more emotionally stronger and resilient.

So dear fellow women, let us call on the same resilience and emotional strength to cope with our current situation. Let us all work together and emerge stronger from this situation than ever before. Let us take care of ourselves and resource ourselves first before extending that care and support for others. Situations and relationships come and go, but we

should prioritise counting on what endures in ourselves.

Women are generally more emotionally available for others; it is time now to come to ourselves with the same kindness, warmth and compassion. Let us choose the friend in us over the inner-critic and let care go both ways so that we are not only givers but also receivers of that same love we offer to others. Remember that better relationships begin with YOU.

Instead of adding more, the key to coping is found in subtracting. Remove what is not necessary to reduce the stress. Working smarter is more important than working harder sometimes. We all have seeds inside us — the helpful seeds and unhelpful seeds. The seeds we choose to water will grow. So, let's water seeds of positivity in ourselves.

OUR STRENGTHS

Women have better management skills, a higher threshold of pain, and women tend to cope better with stress. Let us sustain our attention on our strengths; what we rest our attention on will get stronger. Let's firmly stand behind each other. Women need to support other women. We rely on each other in ways that are both profound and often invisible. Mothers beside their daughters, women leaders behind their subordinates, mothers-in-law holding their daughters-in-law and then what we achieve together will be unbreakable.

Women build the fabric of the community by caring for their families; they build the future of a nation by investing their time and effort in raising children. Women's well-being stands at the forefront of our current situation, so let us start advocating for it.

(Massrat Shaikh, Educational Psychologist & Mindfulness Educator, is currently offering a free mindfulness course to support the well-being of women.

Connect with Massrat at www.massratshaikh.com)

Let's firmly stand behind each other.

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We rely on each other in ways that are

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Pakistani Prime Minister wins vote of confidence

ISLAMABAD: Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan won a vote of confidence in parliament on Saturday, the speaker announced after the vote, backed by 178 lawmakers in the 342-member National Assembly.

All 160 members of the opposition had boycotted the vote.

PTI has 157 MPs in the lower house. Khan was backed by 176 members when elected prime minister in 2018.

"I thank my allied parties, who have always stood behind me during every test," Khan said in his address to the parliamentarians.

He said lawmakers from his party were perturbed after what had happened in the recent Senate elections but had emerged as a strong team for Saturday's vote.

Khan volunteered to face the confidence vote after his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party's candidate was defeated in a Senate election by a former prime minister earlier this week.

The opposition candidate secured 169 votes compared to 164 for the candidate from Khan's party, who is the incumbent finance minister.

The defeat means the



A policeman stops an opposition party activist as supporters and activists of the ruling Pakistan Tehreek party shout slogans as they gather outside the National Assembly during a vote of confidence session for Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan in Islamabad. — AFP

government no longer has a majority in the parliamentary chamber that elects the prime minister.

Khan, who is midway through his five-year term, came to power in national elections since tainted by allegations that the country's powerful military supported him.

Khan held a meeting with army Chief General Qamar

The defeat means the government no longer has a majority in the parliamentary chamber that elects the prime minister

Javed Bajwa and the head of the country's spy agency on Thursday, which many believe

was linked to the confidence vote.

Khan is now the second Pakistani prime minister who has volunteered to face a confidence vote after former premier Nawaz Sharif in 1993.

The special session of the parliament was attended by provincial chief ministers, governors and other senior government officials. — dpa

French Gendarmes check on cars during the second local weekend lockdown imposed to slow the rate of the coronavirus disease contagion in Nice. — Reuters



France extends lockdown to northern region

PARIS: Hundreds of thousands of people in northern France went back into lockdown on Saturday, while health officials stepped up their nationwide vaccination campaign to make up ground after a slow start.

The residents of Pas-de-Calais on the north coast joined those in the region's port of Dunkirk — and the Mediterranean resort of Nice — already shut down on Saturdays and Sundays.

That puts more than two million people across France under the weekend restrictions, required to stay at home unless they can provide a written exemption.

With hospital capacity at 90 per cent in Pas-de-Calais, the region's prefect insisted the new restrictions were necessary to prevent local health services from being overwhelmed.

Two thirds of the cases recorded there recently have been the more contagious variant first detected in England, said local officials.

But with a 6 pm-6 am curfew already in place and non-essential shops closed there, the new restrictions will hurt already hard-pressed businesses.

Covid-19 has killed 88,300 people across France, according to the latest figures on Saturday.

The government is trying to step up its vaccination campaign to give a first jab to 10 million people by mid-April, 20 million by mid-May and 30 million by summer.

So far however, fewer than 3.4 million people in France have received at least one dose of the vaccine — compared with more than 22 million in Britain.

New vaccination centres opened in Pas-de-Calais this weekend, and around a hundred across the Paris region also got up and running.

The government has opted for targeted measures in the worst-hit regions rather than another nationwide lockdown. — AFP

OPRAH INTERVIEW

Meghan Markle's friends go public with support



Britain's Prince Harry and Meghan, Duchess of Sussex, are interviewed by Oprah Winfrey. — Reuters

LOS ANGELES: Who wouldn't want a friend like Meghan Markle?

At least that's the vibe being conveyed by her close friends, who over the last 24 hours have gone public with personal testimonies to the former actress' bona fides.

In the run-up to this weekend's sit-down interview with Oprah Winfrey, Prince Harry and Markle have been caught up in a public row over the reasons behind their dramatic 2020 exit from the British royal family.

On one side, the palace took up an investigation into allegations of workplace bullying by Markle. On the other, in teasers released from the interview, the duchess claims

the royal family perpetuated falsehoods about the couple.

Overnight, several friends of the biracial royal, who some believe has been unfairly maligned by the British media, shared personal accounts attesting to the duchess' good character.

Lindsay Roth, a Northwestern alumna (as is Markle) who was a producer for the late Larry King, shared a post on Thursday on Instagram stating she has been friends with the 39-year-old duchess for 22 years and spoke of her kindness.

"Meg's M.O. has always been kindness; goodwill runs in her bones," Roth wrote. "I have seen firsthand how she treats her friends and their

families, and her colleagues."

The narratives counters a report in Britain's *Times* newspaper that the duchess left female aides shaken and crying after alleged bullying.

These anonymous sources reportedly wanted the public to see their side of the story before watching the much publicised interview. A spokeswoman for the Sussexes called it a "calculated smear campaign."

Silver Tree, an executive producer on USA's "Suits" and Netflix's "You," described the duchess as her "nearest and dearest" in a string of tweets that at first included a picture of Markle and Harry's son Archie. That photo was later deleted. — dpa

Ivory Coast votes in test of stability

ABIDJAN: The Ivory Coast went to the polls on Saturday in a parliamentary election that is a key test of stability four months after a presidential vote marked by deadly violence.

Grappling with a deep political crisis, President Alassane Ouattara has offered an olive branch to his former rival, Laurent Gbagbo, whose party has now lifted a decade-long boycott.

More than 1,500 candidates are vying for the votes of roughly seven million people in a contest for the 255-seat National Assembly in the world's top cocoa grower, a former haven of peace and prosperity in troubled West Africa.

A masked Ouattara voted in the plush Cocody neighbourhood of Abidjan, Ivory Coast's main city and economic hub.

"I hope that the unfortunate events of the presidential elections of 2010 and 2020 are past us," he said, referring to poll-linked violence that claimed thousands of lives. Micheline Irielou, a 43-year-old who lives in Abidjan's central Plateau district where all government offices are located, called for change.

"We're tired. We don't have much to eat. In my neighbourhood we don't have water and that's why I came to vote. So that it changes," she said. — AFP

JOB VACANCY

The Embassy of Japan in Muscat is seeking to recruit

Assistant to Head of Economic Section

Candidates should meet the following conditions:

- Age: Below 40 years
- Education: University Degree or Diploma (Preferably in Economics)
- Excellent command of English and Arabic
- Computer skills in Word, Excel, Power Point and Outlook
- Minimum 4 years of experience in a similar position related to Economics
- Interested in Japanese culture

Interested candidates are requested to forward their CV to the Embassy, Not later than 13th March, 2021, by e-mail: recruitment@mc.mofa.go.jp

ATTENTION: EMBASSY DOES NOT ACCEPT ANY INQUIRIES BY PHONE



MINISTRY OF INFORMATION

TENDER ANNOUNCEMENT

The Ministry of Information Invites Specialized Companies to participate in the following Tender:

Tender No.	Description	Class & Grade	Last Date For Collection	Submission Date	Purchase Fees (R.O.)
01/2021	GENERAL CLEANING SERVICES AND LANDSCAPE MAINTENANCE WORK FOR MINISTRY OF INFORMATION PROPERTIES.	Local Excellent	13/3/2021	14/4/2021	25/-

- All specialized and interested companies that are registered with the tender board participate and get the specifications and conditions of the tender from the website: <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>
- Tenderers should submit their bids online on the given website signed and sealed. The Tenderer should enclose a scanned copy of temporary insurance in the form of a bank guarantee or a check certified by a bank operating in the Sultanate of Oman of not less than (1%) of the tender value valid for (90) days from the offers submission date addressed to Ministry of Information.
- The original bank guarantee should be submitted to the General Directorate of Administrative And Financial Affairs, Project Department building at Ministry of information at Al Qurum, during the office hours from 8.00 am to 1.00 pm on day before submission date.

For clarifications you may contact via:
Telephone : 24943093, 24943150
Email id: projects@part.gov.om

The Ministry of Information is not bound to accept the lowest Tender or any Tender.

Pope holds interfaith meeting

BAGHDAD: Pope Francis on Saturday held an interfaith meeting in the ancient city of Ur and urged the believers to work together for peace and unity and denounce hatred.

“From this place, where faith was born, from the land of our father Abraham, let us affirm that God is merciful and that the greatest blasphemy is to profane his name by hating our brothers and sisters”, the 84-year-old pontiff said in a speech.

Ur is mentioned in the Bible as the home of the prophet Abraham, the father of the three monolithic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

“Hostility, extremism and violence are not born of a religious heart: They are betrayals of religion”, he said.

“We believers cannot be silent when terrorism abuses religion; indeed, we are called unambiguously to dispel all misunderstandings. Let us not allow the light of heaven to be overshadowed by the clouds of hatred!” he added.

“It is up to us, today’s humanity, especially those of us, believers of all religions, to turn instruments of hatred into instruments of peace.”

He denounced terrorism in Iraq for causing suffering of religious



Pope Francis speaks to Iraqi religious figures during an interfaith service at the House of Abraham in the southern Iraq’s Dhi Qar province. — AFP

minorities in the country.

“When terrorism invaded the north of this beloved country, it wantonly destroyed part of its magnificent religious heritage, including the churches, monasteries and places of worship of various communities”, he said.

“Today, let us pray for those who have endured these

The meeting with Pope at Al Sistani’s home in Najaf delivers a message of peaceful coexistence

sufferings, for those who are still dispersed and abducted, that they may soon return home”, he said.

He pointed to the suffering of

Iraq’s Yazidi community, “which has mourned the deaths of many men and witnessed thousands of women, girls and children kidnapped, sold as slaves, subjected to physical violence and forced conversions.”

Earlier, the pope met influential cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali al Sistani, on the second day of his historic visit. — dpa

Charities blast British aid cut for war-torn Yemen

LONDON: Over 100 charities including Oxfam and Save the Children hit out Saturday at UK’s plans to slash by half humanitarian aid to war-torn Yemen, saying it would “destroy” London’s image abroad.

Britain pledged £87 million for Yemen at an international donors’ conference this week, about half the amount it offered last year.

The move, which has been condemned across Britain’s political spectrum, follows the government’s decision last year to cut foreign aid commitment from 0.5 per cent of GDP to 0.7 per cent.

“History will not judge this nation kindly if the Government chooses to step away from the people in Yemen and thus destroy the UK’s global reputation as a country that steps up to help those most in need”, the 101 signatories wrote in an open letter.

The charities called on the government to reinstate the 0.7 per cent commitment to international aid, saying cuts

were being made with “no transparency, consultation or meaningful strategy”.

Danny Srisikandarajah, Oxfam Chief Executive highlighted Britain’s decision to continue international arms sales despite criticism from humanitarian organisations and campaigners. “The UK’s refusal to halt arms sales that are fuelling the conflict is immoral”, he said.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson has defended his government’s decision to continue selling arms to sell Saudi Arabia, which leads the coalition fighting the Ansar Allah fighters in Yemen, despite a US freeze on its weapons’ exports.

A letter leaked to the Open Democracy website has shown Britain will cut foreign aid programmes by more than a half in some of the nations worst-hit by conflict.

The internal discussions show Syria faces a 67 per cent cut in UK aid, Somalia 60 per cent and Sudan 59 per cent. — AFP

TikTok domestic worker shows the positives of life in Lebanon

BEIRUT: There is almost nothing Raquel Barrion doesn’t know about the two Lebanese children she has looked after since they were babies. But one day, the Filipina domestic worker decided to find out how much they knew about her.

Barrion, 39, was pleasantly surprised when — by means of a light-hearted quiz game — one of them got her birthday right and both knew her favourite colour as well as her best-loved food.

Many families across the Middle East and beyond might struggle to answer such questions about the live-in workers who cook for them, clean and care for their children.

The quiz game is one of many upbeat experiences recounted by Barrion on video sharing app TikTok as a way to tell the rarely heard stories of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon. By posting daily videos, which have gar-



Raquel Barrion, a Filipina domestic worker in Lebanon offers a candid, upbeat glimpse into a line of work often relegated to the shadows. — Reuters

nered more than 600,000 likes in a year, Barrion said she hoped to give a voice to Lebanon’s often-neglected domestic workers and a humanising glimpse into their hidden lives.

“It’s a simple message, we’re domestic workers and work at home, but we’re also human. We need

our freedom”, she said in a phone interview.

Several hundred thousand migrant domestic workers from countries including the Philippines, Ethiopian, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh live in Lebanon, where the coronavirus pandemic has compounded financial woes.

As the crisis intensified last year, scores of employers dumped live-in domestic workers on the streets, saying they could no longer afford monthly wages often as low as \$200. Reports of inhumane treatment and horrific abuse under the country’s kafala employment system, likened by rights groups to modern-day slavery, spread across the world.

Barrion, however, said her 11 happy years in Lebanon showed domestic work could benefit both the worker and their employees, and bring positives for the host country too.

She gets paid what she considers a fair wage, \$700, gets regular time off, and said her employers treat her “like family”.

It was the start of Lebanon’s first lockdown last March when Barrion started posting videos to TikTok because she was forced to spend her days off at home.

— Thomson Reuters Foundation



Missile strikes on Syria oil refineries kill 4

BEIRUT: Missile strikes on makeshift oil refineries in northern Syria killed four people and injured more than 20 others, a war monitor.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said a series of strikes launched from Russian warships and by allied Syrian government forces hit the makeshift refineries in Aleppo province on Friday night, causing a massive blaze in the area controlled by Turkey and its Syrian rebel proxies.

The Britain-based monitor “documented the deaths of four people, while 24 others sustained

various injuries and burns” in the attacks near the town of Jarablus.

At least one Syrian rebel was among the dead, said Observatory head Rami Abdul Rahman.

Rescue workers spent hours trying to extinguish the fire which spread to about 30 oil tankers, according to the war monitor.

Oil installations in Turkey-controlled parts of Aleppo have come under repeated attack in recent months although Moscow and the Syrian regime have not claimed responsibility. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

TRIPOLI

Libya’s PM designate names large unity Cabinet

Libya’s designated Prime Minister Abdelhamid Dbeibeh has proposed a large unity cabinet with 35 members, his office said, ahead of a planned parliament meeting on Monday to debate ratifying his government.

The Cabinet list has been subject to intense negotiation among Libya’s warring factions and powerful regional and political leaders, but an official said talks continued over whether to reduce the number of ministers.



Two slightly different versions of the list shown by Libyan officials named a former culture minister, Lamia Bosidera, as Foreign Minister and Khaled Mazen as Interior Minister. — Reuters

CAIRO

Egypt starts Covid-19 jabs for the elderly

Egypt launched its long-awaited mass vaccinations against Covid-19 starting with the elderly, weeks after the populous country started inoculating medical workers. Nearly 153,000 people have applied to receive the vaccines since Sunday, when the government allowed registration online for the elderly and patients with chronic diseases, Health Minister Hala Zayed said.

Egypt has set up 40 inoculation centres nationwide for the public, the government



said in a Thursday statement.

The number of such facilities will increase as Egypt receives more batches of vaccines, Zayed said, according to the statement. — dpa

ISTANBUL

Turkey’s military heads join naval drills

Turkey’s Defence Minister Hulusi Akar and top military officials joined naval drills on an exploration vessel at the heart of a dispute with Greece over contested natural gas reserves. Akar and the air force, army and navy chiefs landed by helicopter on the Oruc Reis off the Aegean Sea, the defence ministry said in a statement, without specifying the exact location.

Turkey deployed the Oruc Reis and warships to the disputed waters last year and has extended



its mission several times despite repeated calls to stop by Greece and the European Union.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan vowed that Turkey would not give up on its rights in the eastern Mediterranean, in a live video conference. — AFP



Protesters set up a makeshift shield formation in preparation for potential clashes in Yangon. — Reuters

UN envoy calls for action on Myanmar

YANGON: Myanmar security forces used tear gas and stun grenades to break up a protest in Yangon on Saturday, just hours after a United Nations special envoy called on the Security Council to take action against the ruling junta for the killings of protesters.

The Southeast Asian country has been plunged into turmoil since the military overthrew and detained elected leader Aung San Suu Kyi on February 1, with daily protests and strikes that have choked business and paralysed administration.

Sporadic protests were staged across Myanmar on Saturday and local media reported that police fired tear gas shells and stun grenades to break up a protest in the Sanchaung district of Yangon, the country's biggest city. There were no reports of casualties.

More than 50 protesters have been killed according to the United Nations

More than 50 protesters have been killed according to the United Nations — at least 38 on Wednesday alone. Protesters demand the release of Suu Kyi and the respect of November's election, which her party won in landslide, but which the army rejected.

"How much more can we allow the Myanmar military to get away with?" Special Envoy Christine Schraner Burgener told a closed meeting of the 15-member UN Security Council on Friday, according to a copy of her remarks.

"It is critical that this council is resolute and coherent in putting the security forces on

notice and standing with the people of Myanmar firmly, in support of the clear November election results."

A junta spokesman did not answer calls requesting comment.

The army says it has been restrained in stopping the protests, but has said it will not allow them to threaten stability.

On Saturday, in the southern town of Dawei, protesters chanted "Democracy is our cause" and "The revolution must prevail". Protesters were also gathering in the biggest city, Yangon.

People have taken to the streets in their hundreds of thousands at times, vowing to continue action in a country that spent nearly half a century under military rule until democratic reforms in 2011 that were cut short by the coup. — Reuters

Giant portrait of Mujibur heightens anniversary fervour

BHABANIPUR: A giant portrait of Bangladesh's founding leader made from rice paddies has drawn hundreds of visitors as the country gears up to celebrate its 50th anniversary of independence this month.

The 400 metre-long portrait of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman — the father of Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina — was created from planting purple and green rice over the 13 hectares of land.

Sheikh Mujib, as he is known, was born a century ago, and was a central figure in Bangladesh's war for independence from Pakistan that ended 50 years ago. He became the country's first leader but was assassinated during a military coup in 1975.

Last year, the prime minister unveiled plans for mass celebrations to mark the centenary birthday of Sheikh Mujib and 50 years since the founding of Bangladesh.

Since then, hundreds of sculptures and murals of Sheikh Mujib have been appearing across the country.

"People come from all over the country. Since the portrait became visible last month, every day we have got hundreds of visitors," Mohammad Asaduzzaman, a manager of National AgriCare, the company behind the giant portrait, said.

The firm imported Chinese purple seeds to add to the local green variety and recruited fine arts students, hundreds of volunteers and rural workers to make the portrait. — AFP

South African variant found in residents of Manila



A military health worker shows a Sinovac Covid-19 vaccine during the vaccination of military personnel at the army headquarters in Manila. — AFP

MANILA: The Philippines has recorded 52 more cases of a highly contagious coronavirus variant first identified in South Africa, the health ministry said on Friday, presenting new challenges for a country battling one of Asia's worst outbreaks.

Out of the new cases of the variant, known as B.1.351, the health ministry said 41 were detected in Manila, while the origin of the others was still being verified. The Philippines first reported six cases of the variant on Tuesday.

The Southeast Asian country started its inoculation drive on Monday, but health experts worry the discovery of new variants could complicate its effort.

Health authorities also reported on Friday 31 more infections of a variant first identified in Britain, raising the total to 118.

In addition to the two variants,

the health ministry said it had detected 42 more cases of "mutations of potential clinical significance" in samples collected from Filipinos returning from overseas and residents in Manila and the central Philippines.

The Philippines' health ministry on Friday reported 3,045 new Covid-19 cases, the highest daily increase in more than four months.

President Rodrigo Duterte on Thursday vouched for the safety of Covid-19 shots as he appealed to the public to get vaccinated as soon as possible, saying this was key to reopening an economy that posted its sharpest contraction in 2020.

The Philippines stock of 600,000 vaccines made by China's Sinovac Biotech got a boost with the arrival on Thursday of more than 480,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine secured through the Covax facility.

— Reuters

Indian farmers block highway to mark 100th day of protest

NEW DELHI: Indian farmers began gathering on Saturday to block a six-lane expressway outside New Delhi to mark the 100th day of protests against deregulation of agriculture markets, to add pressure on Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government.

Farmers young and old headed in cars, trucks and tractors to the highway for a five-hour roadblock to oppose three farm laws enacted in September 2020 they say hurt them by opening up the agriculture sector to private players.

Modi has called the laws much-needed reforms for the country's vast and antiquated agriculture sector, and painted the protests as politically motivated.

"The Modi government has turned this protest movement into an ego issue. They are unable to see the pain of the farmers," said Amarjeet Singh, a 68-year-old farmer from Punjab state. "They have left us no option but to protest."

Tens of thousands of farmers from several north Indian states have been camped out on the outskirts of the capital in bitter



Protesters block the KMP Expressway during a roadblock protest called by farmers as a part of their continuing demonstration against the central government's recent agricultural reforms at Kundli in Haryana. — AFP

cold since December demanding that the laws be repealed.

Their movement has gained international attention and support, including from celebrities such as climate activist Greta Thunberg and US singer Rihanna, but several rounds of negotiations between farmer leaders and the government have failed.

Modi's government has lashed out at supporters of the protests and stands accused by

Modi has called the laws much-needed reforms for the country's antiquated agriculture sector

rights activists of using heavy-handed tactics to curb the protests.

While the protests have been mostly peaceful, a brief spate

of violence on January 26 led to the death of a protester, and the police have filed criminal charges against eight journalists over alleged misreporting on the events of the day.

"The Indian authorities' response to protests has focused on discrediting peaceful protesters, harassing critics of the government, and prosecuting those reporting on the events," Human Rights Watch said in a statement last month. — AFP

TENDER ANNOUNCEMENT

Nama Holding invites the specialized companies to participate and submit their best offers for the tender below;

Tender Number	Tender Name	Last Date for Collection of Tender Documents	Time & Last Date for Proposal Submission	Tender Fee (OMR) Not included the Transfer Charges
EHC/2021/05Re	Accounting Services for NSS (Nama Shared Services Company) and NICD (Nuno Institute for Competency Development)	11-Mar-2021	21-Mar-2021	25/-
EHC/2021/08	Financial advisor for water and wastewater restructuring project	11-Mar-2021	21-Mar-2021	100/-
EHC/2021/12	VAT Tax Advisory Services for Nama Group	11-Mar-2021	21-Mar-2021	25/-

- 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 Nama Holding reception before 12.00 pm, time of the Sultanate, on 21-Mar-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 Nama Holding". Tenders that do not include the required temporary insurance will not be considered.
- NH is not obliged to accept the lowest or any other bid.
- Interested party to deposit Tender Fee (Non-Refundable) on: Account Name: Electricity Holding Company, Bank Muscat: 0423-010776440-018 Corporate Branch (Bidder name and Tender Number to be clearly mentioned). Tender Documents will be received by email.
- Bidders to send the deposit slip to: Yasmeen.allawati@holding.nama.om; Fatma.alajmi@holding.nama.om
- The deposit at the last day of purchasing should be before 12.00 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
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Biden aid relief bill heads to final vote

WASHINGTON: The US Senate on Saturday inched towards passage of President Joe Biden’s \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief plan in an around-the-clock session that began on Friday involving nearly two dozen votes and hours of closed-door negotiations.

Democrats, who narrowly control the chamber, agreed to scale back aid to the millions who have lost their jobs in the crisis. As Friday night turned to Saturday morning, they stuck together to turn back Republican attempts to modify the bill, which according to the Congressional Budget Office would be the largest stimulus package ever.

If the Democratic bill becomes law, Washington will have provided about \$6 trillion in emergency assistance over the past year to battle the coronavirus pandemic and help stabilise the American economy.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, during morning debate, said lawmakers were nearing the end of the long amendment process before a vote on the overall bill.

With Republicans united in opposition, Democrats must keep all 50 of their caucus on board in the 100-seat chamber in order to pass the package, with Vice-President



US Capitol on the day the House of Representatives is expected to vote on legislation to provide \$1.9 trillion in new coronavirus relief in Washington. — Reuters

Kamala Harris able to cast a tie-breaking vote.

The Senate set a record for its longest single vote in the modern era — 11 hours and 50 minutes — as Democrats negotiated a compromise on unemployment benefits to satisfy centrists like Senator Joe Manchin, who worried the massive package might overheat the economy.

With that resolved, senators began working through a stack of

proposals to modify the bill.

Democrats voted down Republican amendments to modify how money would be distributed to schools, state governments, transit systems and farmers.

Early on Saturday, Democrats repelled Republican Senator Tom Cotton’s attempt to send the hemoth bill back to a committee to rework part of US immigration policy unrelated to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Republicans were one vote down after Senator Dan Sullivan left Washington to go to Alaska for a family funeral.

The largest public health crisis in a century has killed more than 521,000 people in the United States, thrown millions out of work and upended most aspects of American life.

The relief legislation includes funding for vaccines and medical supplies, extends jobless assistance



Senator Lindsey Graham speaks during a news conference as the Senate continues to debate the latest Covid-19 relief bill in Washington, DC. — AFP

and provides a new round of emergency financial aid to households, small businesses and state and local governments.

Opinion polls indicate broad public support for the package. Democrats hope to get it to Biden to sign into law before some current benefits expire on March 14.

Unemployment aid is just one of many friction points in the legislation. Democrats had earlier modified it to steer more aid to smaller states and cities.

The version passed by the House of Representatives last Saturday calls for \$400 per week in federal jobless benefits through August 29, on top of state benefits, to help Americans who have lost jobs amid the pandemic. — AFP

EU looks to secure vaccine materials from US

BRUSSELS: The EU will open talks with Washington on Monday to ensure its supply of US-made materials for coronavirus vaccines, a European source said on Saturday, items currently under tough export restrictions.

Internal Market Commissioner Thierry Breton — Brussels’ pointman on vaccine production — will confer with White House Covid-19 coordinator Jeffrey Zients, the source familiar with the talks said.

The EU and US want to “work together in a coordinated way to avoid bottlenecks” for European vaccine producers, the source said.

Among the restricted goods under discussion are bags fitted to the manufacturers’ vats — often either made in the EU by American firms or in the US by European companies — as well as vials, syringes and so-called “nanolipid particles” used to encapsulate some messenger RNA vaccines. All vaccine materials require specific authorisations from Washington to export. — AFP

Flamingos poisoned by illegal lead pellets in Greek lagoon

AGIOS MAMAS, Greece: On a country road that the locals have dubbed ‘Flamingo Street’ Stavros Kalpakis walks alongside the tall reeds of Agios Mamas, a small northern Greek lagoon, peering through binoculars.

The grizzled environmentalist puts on his waterproof waders and boots and steps into knee-deep water. When he returns moments later, he is holding a dead pink flamingo — one of dozens found in the area in recent weeks, killed by lead poisoning.

Around 50 of the majestic pink birds are known to have died so far in the small lagoon in Greece’s northern Halkidiki peninsula some 580 kilometres north of Athens, Kalpakis, head of the Action for Wildlife organisation, tells.

Of nearly a dozen flamingos retrieved by the group for medical attention, none could be saved.

“Flamingos eat small pebbles to help with digestion, and they are eating the shrapnel from bullets... it’s giving them lead poisoning,” says Ellie Bridgeman, a 20-year-old volunteer working with the group.

Tests confirmed that the cause of death was lead poisoning, which



A flock of flamingos flying over the water in the Agios Mamas lagoon in Halkidiki peninsula. — AFP

also threatens humans, said Sofia Prousali, one of the organisation’s volunteer vets.

“We ran tests for avian flu and the West Nile virus and they all came back negative,” Prousali said.

“All the birds that had these symptoms were found to have pellets in their stomachs,” she said, adding that there were likely other dead birds hidden in the lush vegetation that have not been recovered.

Tests confirmed that the cause of death was lead poisoning, which also threatens humans

ered.

Agios Mamas is one of Europe’s Natura 2000 wildlife diversity regions, and is home to nearly 60 different bird species.

Even more importantly, flamingos

were recorded breeding here last year, the first time this has ever happened in Greece.

“Prior efforts failed, mainly because of human interference with flamingo colonies,” says Anna Panagiotou, head of the management authority for protected areas in the broader Thermaic Gulf.

“It would be truly disappointing if such a positive development was thwarted by the insistence of some of our fellow citizens in flouting environmental regulations,” she adds.

The use of lead shot in wetlands has been illegal in Greece since 2013, and the EU in November said it would ban its use in all wetlands under its framework regulation for chemicals.

But Greek hunters still use pellets containing lead, wildlife groups say. According to the European Commission, every year 4,000 to 5,000 tonnes of lead are released into wetlands around the bloc from lead gunshot.

For their part, the local Greek hunting association says the issue is being unfairly exploited in order to justify restrictions against them. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

WARSAW

Five people killed in Ukrainian bus crash

Five people were killed and about 40 injured when a Ukrainian bus careered off the road into a ditch in southeastern Poland during the night, local authorities and rescue workers said.

Earlier, local media and medical services said six people had died in the accident, but the death toll was later revised.

“After checking in all hospitals, where the injured were taken, it turned out that there are five casualties,” a spokesman for the Podkarpackie region was



quoted as saying.

“A life-rescuing surgery was conducted and we hope that this life will be saved,” the region’s governor, Ewa Leniart, told a news conference. — AFP

ROME

Italy extends Covid-19 curbs in more regions

Italy will further tighten coronavirus restrictions in three of its 20 regions, the government said, after health officials warned of the growing spread of new, highly contagious variants. Earlier, the health ministry announced 24,036 new daily cases of coronavirus, up from 22,865 the day before.

Over the last five days, new infections have increased by 23 per cent by comparison with the same period last week.

“The virus is spreading



rapidly across Italy,” said Silvio Brusaferro, chief of the Superior Health Institute (ISS). He said a highly contagious variant first discovered in Britain was now prevalent. — AFP

KABUL

Afghan president ready to discuss elections

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani said, in a bid to push forward peace talks with the Taliban, that his government was ready to discuss holding fresh elections, insisting that any new government should emerge through the democratic process.

“Transfer of power through elections is a non-negotiable principle for us,” Ghani told lawmakers at the opening of parliament session in Kabul.

“We stand ready to discuss holding free, fair and inclusive



elections under the auspices of international community.

“We can also talk about the date of the elections and reach a conclusion.”

— AFP

Choosing what you oppose is rarely a matter of good sense

The Sultanate is navigating its way through a tumultuous 2021 with all the uncertainty of a small boat on a tempestuous, storm-tossed sea, and while survival is the immediate objective, the inhabitant's well-being is probably the thing that is taking all their strength and energy as they are at the mercy of the waves.

Of course, the literary metaphor is of little comfort to the population, but they can take some reassurance that everyone is 'in the same boat.' The world is barely hanging onto all it has, has had, and treasures in the face of a pandemic that is making the oil price crash look like 'small potatoes.' So much has happened in such a short time with the 2014/16 oil price crash the first sour note, then came the demise of the late Sultan Qaboos bin Said in early January 2020, and then, on March 25 the same year the global pandemic, Covid-19, became a harsh reality for us here in the Sultanate, as Muscat International Airport was closed, and enforced lockdowns became a reality.

Certainly, this is no national, social and economic climate into which one steps willingly, however His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik appears to have embraced the challenges willingly, sought and made changes as any new government will do, established the line of succession, and instigated national policies with the objective of creating employment



Ray Petersen
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SURVIVAL
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opportunities for young, especially graduate, Omanis. The expatriate population is generally understanding, even empathetic and understanding of the situation, and probably recognise that in a similar situation they would find it difficult to respond, or do things, any differently.

It is disappointing that more Omanis have not embraced the control measures instituted by the Supreme Committee appointed to oversee pandemic responses, as the sooner the country can emerge from its restrictions, the sooner economic well-being, or at least stability, can be a factor in the national recovery. There is no doubt that too many Omani patriarchs have determined that Covid-19 is "no threat," "not real," or "finished," when it suits their own narrative, rather than demonstrating obedience and compliance. Traditional and cultural norms have assumed precedence for too many, with weekly family visits, parties, birthdays, even weddings, and other social events allowed to continue under the umbrella of the "we know what's best," when actually... you don't!

I could be blunt here about the effect of these sector and community closures on the national economy, however it would serve no good purpose to harangue those in societal and national leadership, if those at the pointy end of community and family

decision-making, will not put aside their opinions, and their need to be strong, not intimidated by anyone or anything, and comply with the various national directives.

I understand... you want to be strong... you want to be decisive... you want to make this 'thing' go away... and you think that by your force of personality, your determination, and willpower, that you will make it happen... but the sorry statistics that continue to emerge from the nations where the people knew better, where liberty offended when restriction was needed, where Covid-19 responses were seen as an erosion of freedom, tell a very different story.

Come, you gentle, inoffensive, respectful family patriarchs and leaders, it is not too late to salvage dignity, not only in doing as the authorities ask, but spreading the word, spreading the need, saving lives, saving jobs, guarding prospects, and ensuring futures, because otherwise, the outlook for all those aboard that small boat is grim. Yes, they will survive their unpleasant experience, but the scars will linger...

Survival should not be our objective! We should be of sufficient acuity to go to shelter, but with dignity, not begging for salvation, but strong in the knowledge that if we 'do the right thing...' all will be well. Choose your arguments wisely because some you will never win!

WRITE FOR US

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

KEEP THE MASK

Don't waste the hope of vaccines

ROBIN MILLARD

Covax will distribute 14.4 million Covid-19 vaccine doses to 31 more countries next week, the WHO said on Friday as it warned people not to waste, through complacency, the hope that vaccines bring.

The Covax global vaccine-sharing facility shipped more than 20 million doses to 20 countries as the scheme aimed at ensuring poorer nations get access to jabs took off this week.

But the World Health Organization voiced fears that further waves of the coronavirus pandemic could be on the way if people think the roll-out of vaccines around the globe means the crisis is over.

"The arrival of vaccine is a moment of great hope. But it potentially also is a moment where we lose concentration," WHO emergencies director Michael Ryan told a press conference.

"I really am very concerned that... we think we're through this. We're not.



The arrival of vaccine is a moment of great hope. But it potentially also is a moment where we lose concentration,

MICHAEL RYAN
WHO emergencies director

"And countries are going to lurch back into third and fourth surges if we're not careful.

"We should not waste the hope that vaccines bring... by dropping our guard in other areas."

W H O Director-General Tedros Adhanom G h e b r e y e s u s praised the first full week of the Covax roll-out,

but said wealthy countries were nonetheless still leaving others behind in the vaccination rush.

Within Africa, Angola, the DR Congo, The Gambia, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mali, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Sudan and Uganda have now received their first doses through Covax.

Elsewhere, Cambodia, Colombia, India, Moldova, the Philippines and South Korea have also taken deliveries.

'MASS TRAUMA'

"In the next week, Covax will deliver 14.4 million doses to a further 31 countries. That brings the total number of countries to 51," said Tedros. "This is encouraging progress, but the volume of doses being distributed through Covax is still relatively small."

He said the first round of allocations, running until the end of May, only covered between two and three per cent of the population in recipient states, "even as other countries make rapid progress towards vaccinating their entire population within the next few months".

He called for vaccine production to be urgently ramped up, including through linking manufacturers with rival companies that have spare capacity. Tedros also said the planet would be feeling the mental scars from the pandemic for years to come and said the scale of its impact would be worse than during the recovery from World War II. — AFP

REDUCING SPENDING AMID PANDEMIC

Wealthy Americans are saving more

DELPHINE TOUITOU

The coronavirus pandemic has wiped out millions of jobs in the United States, but it's had the unexpected effect of increasing savings rates among Americans, especially wealthy people stuck at home and forced to give up travel and entertainment.

Along with the dramatic reduction in leisure spending, things like government stimulus checks, unemployment benefits and the suspension of monthly loan repayments for more modest earners have swelled the bank accounts of Americans who are usually known to be crumbling under debt.

Americans have accumulated \$1.8 trillion in excess savings in the 11 months since the start of the pandemic, according to figures released this week by Barclays and Oxford Economics.

"And, we estimate that this number could rise to \$2.5 trillion by this summer," Gregory Daco, chief US economist at Oxford Economics, said.

The savings rate of Americans, which averaged seven to eight per cent before the crisis, spiked to a record 33 per cent in April 2020, thanks to a massive \$2.2 trillion Covid relief package for households and businesses, according to Bureau of Economic Analysis data.

The savings rate was holding at 13.7 per cent at the end of December, though decreasing as various forms of aid expired.



The pandemic has crippled millions of jobs in the United States but it has had the unexpected effect of increasing the level of savings of Americans, especially that of wealthy households assigned to home and forced to give up travel and entertainment. — AFP

AMERICANS HAVE
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It jumped in January to 20.5 per cent after \$600 stimulus checks were included in a \$900-billion plan adopted by Congress at the end of December.

And, it could rise again this spring, as lawmakers consider the Biden administration's \$1.9-trillion relief package.

Overall, the savings trend has highlighted the disparities between rich and poor in the United States,

with wealthy households saving much more than families of modest means who have been hardest-hit by job losses and have used stimulus money mostly to pay bills.

The richest Americans were generally able to maintain their jobs through teleworking — their income has remained constant while spending has plunged, resulting in excess savings. — AFP

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Dhofar coach Rasheed Jaber (left) and Suwaiq coach Hakeem Shaker pose with the HM Cup trophy. – Mohammed Mahjoub

Dhofar clash with Suwaiq in HM Cup final

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, MARCH 6

Salalah giants Dhofar who are aiming for their tenth title, will clash with Al Suwaiq, who are chasing their fourth crown, in the summit clash of the prestigious 2020/2021 His Majesty's Cup Football Championship on Sunday. The summit clash kicks off at 6.45 pm at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex.

The Salalah powerhouse, Dhofar, are looking to register a new record and go beyond the ninth title as they equalised with Fanja, who are currently on nine titles for each team. The title holders, had lifted their last title on November 29, 2020, and are also eyeing to make it two in a row.

They had won two titles respectively in 1980 and 1981. The Salalah giant's nine victories in HM Cup were in 1976, 1980, 1981, 1990, 1999, 2004, 2006, 2011

and 2020 editions.

The Northern Batinah team, Al Suwaiq, are aiming to recall the memories of the last title in 2016/2017 against Dhofar besides the team's triumph in 2012/2013 and 2008/2009. Coach Hakeem Shaker's men are equipped with youth energy and enthusiasm to face Dhofar in a new assignment.

The summit clash of the prestigious championship will be held without attendance of the crowd in accordance with the instructions of the Supreme Committee dealing with Covid-19.

The last edition's final match was attended by 100 fans from each team while the restrictions changed in this season due to the high positive cases in the past few weeks.

The Oman Football Association in direct coordination with the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth will organise the match under full implementation of the



FAYEZ AL RUSHAIDI
Dhofar goalkeeper



ESSAM AL SUBHI
Al Suwaiq player

VS

medical protocol and measures to avoid spreading of the Covid-19.

The experienced national coach Rasheed Jaber voiced confidently during the press meet on Saturday at Seeb Stadium that the team planned to defend the title since the beginning of the season and we are one step to accomplish this target.

"Since the commencement of the season, our plans were very clear on the goal which was reach-

ing the finals of all the domestic events. In the semis round, we could manage to beat one of the top nominees to the final match, Seeb. The final step is pending as we meet a tough and organised Al Suwaiq team," he added.

Dhofar booked a slot in the final after edging Seeb in the semis round. The first leg match ended in a goalless draw while Dhofar won 2-1 in the return match. In the quarterfinal, the Salalah giants

knocked out Musannah 2-0 in the first leg match and 3-0 in the second leg match. In the last 16 stage, Dhofar won Al Rustaq 2-0.

The head coach of Dhofar team said small technical details during the game may identify the winner of the match. "In the previous edition of the HM Cup against Al Oruba, despite Dhofar were the best side but the opponent Al Oruba could return back if they succeeded to benefit from some mistakes. The team who will be in better focus and with high concentration from players will be the champions," he clarified.

Responding on a query of team's missing the scoring attempts, coach Rasheed Jaber answered that this is not concern for the technical staff. "This is good indication that the team can arrive to the operation box and near to score. Goals will be scored with more focus and at-

tention from players," he concluded.

The goalkeeper of Salalah powerhouse, Fayez al Rushaidi, sounded confident that the team is in full readiness and shape to meet Al Suwaiq. "Our aim is to play a top final match which can reflect the development of Oman's football. It is expected that some nervousness could be experienced in the finals but we are assured to play high technical game," he said.

On the other hand, Iraq's Hakeem Shaker, head coach of Al Suwaiq club, affirmed that Batinah team have good chances in the final of the prestigious championship.

"Despite huge technical differences between Dhofar and Al Suwaiq, I am fully confident that Al Suwaiq will star to deliver a high technical class match and reach the target. It is my third presence in the Sultanate and I hope to be a positive face on my team Al Suwaiq," he added.



Ibrahimovic poised for Sweden comeback

Zlatan Ibrahimovic will return to international football at the age of 39, Swedish media reported on Saturday. Sweden, coached by Janne Andersson, have qualified for the Euros and kick off their campaign against Spain in Bilbao on June 14.



'United must rediscover spark in derby'

Manager Ole Gunnar Solskjaer knows Manchester United need to rediscover their spark if they are to stop relentless Premier League leaders Manchester City extending their eye-watering advantage in Sunday's derby.

All set for the HM Cup final



ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, MARCH 6

Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth and Oman Football Association (OFA) are all set to kick off the 2020-21 His Majesty's Cup Football Championship final which will take place on Sunday between the defending champions,

Dhofar, and three times winner, Al Suwaiq, at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex.

The main organising committee of the coveted Cup had a site visit to the venue on Thursday in presence of all members from different government and private sector entities.

The members stand on the final

logistics and technical preparations for the prestigious championship. On the other hand, the organising committee announced that inline to the instructions of the Supreme Committee tasked with dealing with Covid-19 pandemic, this edition of HM Cup will not feature attendance of the crowds due to the ongoing pandemic.

The exceptional categories who can present the final match are: the officials from Dhofar and Al Suwaiq clubs, invitees and media representatives.

The Dhofar team arrived in Muscat to have a short camp prior the final match while Al Suwaiq are underway in their technical shape for the much-awaited final clash.

Both teams had met in 2017 and the match ended for Al Suwaiq 2-0.

OFA announced earlier the refereeing list who will officiate the final match. The referee Yaqoob Abdul Baqi will be the main umpire of the match while Abdullah al Jardani is his first assistant, Mohammed al Ghazali as the second assistant and Salim al Abri

as the fourth referee.

Also, the final match of the coveted Cup will feature more umpires including referee Jamal al Obaidani as the first additional umpire and Ali al Harthi as the second additional referee.

Referee Khalid al Hinai will evaluate the referee team.

Spinners lead Lanka to series-levelling win

ST. JOHN'S, ANTIGUA AND BARBUDA: Sri Lanka's spinners bamboozled world champions West Indies to claim a 43-run win in the second Twenty20 International at Coolidge Cricket Ground on Friday.

Having lost by four wickets in the opening game on Wednesday, in a game where West Indies skipper Kieron Pollard launched six sixes in an over, the tourists successfully defended 160 on Friday to level the three-match series.

West Indies were all out for 117 in the 19th over as Sri Lanka ended an eight-game losing streak in T20.

The final match is at the same venue on Sunday.

Leg-spinner Wanindu Hasaranga finished with 3-17, off-break bowler Akila Dananjaya, who was the victim of Pollard's midweek assault but also claimed a hat-rick, had 1-13.

Wrist spinner Lakshan Sandakan took 3-10, including Pollard who made just 13.

"The wicket was a bit slow.



I tried not to give away any boundaries. That's why I was able to bowl well," man-of-the-match Hasaranga told the post-match presentation.

West Indies were 45-1 before five wickets fell for just 21 runs.

Chris Gayle, who was out for a first ball duck on Wednesday in his first appearance in two years, made a patchy 16 when he fell to a catch by Ashen Bandara off Hasaranga.

Opener Lendl Simmons (21)

was next out, lbw failing to pick a Hasaranga googly.

Nicholas Pooran, Jason Holder and Dwayne Bravo all followed quickly for single figure scores.

Dananjaya had earlier dismissed opener Evin Lewis for

"The wicket was a bit slow. I tried not to give away any boundaries. That's why I was able to bowl well"

WANINDU HASARANGA

Sri Lankan spinner

six. His impressive figures of 1-13 were in stark contrast to his 3-62 on Wednesday.

Hasaranga, just 23, added Fabian Allan to his list of victims with the West Indies then struggling on 89-7 in the 16th over. With more than 22 an over required, Sandakan then got the big prize of Pollard, caught in the deep for just 13 having surprisingly opted to bat at number seven.

Sandakan then halted Obed McCoy's late cameo of 23 from seven deliveries with the tail-ender proving to be his team's top scorer.

— AFP

SCOREBOARD

SRI LANKA	
D Gunathilaka c Sinclair b Bravo.....	56
P Nissanka (run out)	37
D Chandimal c Simmons b Bravo	3
A Mathews c Holder b McCoy	13
A Bandara c Simmons b Holder.....	21
T Perera (run out)	2
W Hasaranga (not out).....	19
N Dickwella (not out).....	0
Extras (B-1, LB-2, W-6)	9
Total (For 6 wkts, 20 overs).....	160
Fall of wickets: 1-95, 2-96, 3-104, 4-119, 5-129, 6-154.	
Bowling: Edwards 2-0-19-0, Sinclair 4-0-32-0, Holder 4-0-36-1, McCoy 4-0-34-1, Bravo 4-0-25-2, Allen 2-0-11-0.	
WEST INDIES	
L Simmons lbw Hasaranga	21
E Lewis b Dananjaya	6
C Gayle c Bandara b Hasaranga	16
N Pooran b Chameera	8
J Holder c Dananjaya b Gunathilaka	9
D Bravo c Mathews b Chameera	2
K Pollard c Chandimal b Sandakan.....	13
F Allen lbw Hasaranga.....	12
K Sinclair c Nissanka b Sandakan	3
O McCoy b Sandakan	23
F Edwards (not out).....	1
Extras (LB-1, NB-2)	3
Total (all out, 18.4 overs)	117
Fall of wickets: 1-9, 2-45, 3-48, 4-60, 5-65, 6-66, 7-89, 8-93, 9-116	
Bowling: Dananjaya 4-0-13-1, Chameera 4-0-26-2, Perera 2-0-42-0, Hasaranga 4-0-17-3, Sandakan 3.4-0-10-3, Gunathilaka 1-0-8-1	



Indian players pose with the trophy. – Reuters

India tame England, reach WTC final

AHMEDABAD, INDIA: Virat Kohli's India burnished their formidable home record with a 3-1 series victory over England on Saturday, the tourists flunking another trial-by-spin inside three days in the fourth and final test.

India's 13th consecutive test series victory at home also secured their place in the June final of the World Test Championship against New Zealand.

In a sign of India's strength, they won the last two matches in a total of five days — the usual duration of one test match — at Ahmedabad's Narendra Modi Stadium.

Once again, Ravichandran Ashwin and Axar Patel were the architects of their victory by an innings and 25 runs in the final match.

The spinners took all 10 wickets in England's second innings. They finished the series with a combined haul of 59 wickets, even though Patel did not play the opening test which England won.

"The first game was a bit of an aberration, just a hiccup, when England outplayed us," Kohli said.

"You're obviously happy when you're winning so many series but there are always things to improve, like after the first game in Chennai we had to pick up our body language."

After a below-par 205 in the first innings, England needed a vastly-improved batting performance in the second to stay alive, but their frontline batsmen let them down again.

Barring Dan Lawrence, who scored 46 and 50, the rest looked

SCOREBOARD			
England first innings: 205			
India first innings (0/n: 294/7):			
S Gill lbw Anderson	0	Z Crawley c Rahane b Ashwin	5
R Sharma lbw Stokes	49	D Sibley c Pant b Patel	3
C Pujara lbw Leach	17	J Bairstow c R Sharma b Ashwin	0
V Kohli c Foakes b Stokes	0	J Root lbw Ashwin	30
A Rahane c Stokes b Anderson	27	B Stokes c Kohli b Patel	2
R Pant c Root b Anderson	101	O Pope st Pant b Patel	15
R Ashwin c Pope b Leach	13	D Lawrence b Ashwin	50
W Sundar (not out)	96	B Foakes c Rahane b Patel	13
A Patel (run out)	43	D Bess c Pant b Patel	2
I Sharma lbw Stokes	0	J Leach c Rahane b Ashwin	2
M Siraj b Stokes	0	J Anderson (not out)	1
Extras (B-10, LB-6, NB-3)	19	Extras (B-4, LB-8)	12
Total (all out, 114.4 overs)	365	Total (all out, 54.5 overs)	135
Fall of wickets: 1-0, 2-40, 3-41, 4-80, 5-121, 6-146, 7-259, 8-365, 9-365			
Bowling: Anderson 25-14-44-3, Stokes 27-4-6-89-4, Leach 27-5-89-2, Bess 17-1-71-0, Root 18-1-56-0			
Fall of wickets: 1-10, 2-10, 3-20, 4-30, 5-65, 6-65, 7-109, 8-111, 9-134			
Bowling: Siraj 4-0-12-0, Patel 24-6-48-5, Ashwin 22-5-4-47-5, Sundar 4-0-16-0			

scarred from their struggles against spin in the previous match at the same venue.

Jonny Bairstow registered his third duck in four innings, which may render his place in England's test squad untenable.

Root finished as the top-scorer in the series following his 218 in the first test, but it was otherwise a miserable batting display by his side.

ROTATION POLICY

England crossed the 200-mark only twice in eight innings and repeatedly rejigged their combination in line with their policy to rest multi-format players.

They failed to read the third-test track, fielding a four-pronged seam attack on a spinners' paradise.

By contrast, India's spinners sowed seeds of doubt in the mind of the English batsmen, most of whom played for spin and then fell to deliveries that did not turn.

"The last three games have been testing for us and we haven't been able to match India," said Root, backing their rotation policy.

"The world we are living in now is not going to go away, it's really important we understand that and look after our players.

"It's a big year of cricket, there's three formats to consider and we can't keep playing guys until they fall over."

India exploited their home advantage to win three matches in a row.

Ashwin's all-round brilliance helped level the series in Chennai and Patel bowled them to victory inside two days in the third match in Ahmedabad.

Rishabh Pant turned the final test with a match-winning century before the spinners completed the rout. The white-ball leg of the series begins on March 12 with a five-match Twenty20 series followed by three one-day internationals.

— Reuters



India's captain Virat Kohli celebrates with his team-mates Cheteshwar Pujara and Ajinkya Rahane (not seen). – Reuters



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OPEC+ DECISION A POSITIVE STEP: OMAN

KEY TRENDS: Sultanate's output capped at 732k bpd through April 2021; Oman's crude benchmark soars to \$66.41/b

CONRAD PRABHU
@conradprabhu

The Omani government has greeted Thursday's decision by the Opec+ alliance to maintain production cuts through April as a "positive step" that helped propel international oil prices to their highest levels in nearly 15 months.

A high-level official of the Ministry of Energy and Minerals reaffirmed non-Opec Oman's continued support for the alliance's efforts to stabilise global oil markets and help aid a recovery in crude oil demand, which had collapsed in the wake of the pandemic last year.

"We are happy with the outcome of the Opec+ alliance meeting on Thursday and its decision to roll over the production cuts to cover April as well," said Ali bin Abdullah al Riyami, Director-General of Oil Marketing at the Ministry.

"Oman is committed to fully complying with these latest cuts, as it indeed has with the agreements reached by the alliance in the past."

The official accompanied Dr Mohammed bin Hamad al Rumhy, Minister of Energy and Minerals, at Thursday's virtual meeting of the 23-member Opec+ alliance where the grouping resolved to

extend globally agreed production curbs into April as well.

The alliance also decided to meet on April 1 to weigh the need for a relaxation in output cuts or to maintain the status quo based on market conditions. Following the announcement, the market price of the Oman Crude Oil Futures Contract (OQD) soared to \$66.41/barrel on the Dubai Mercantile Exchange on Thursday (for May 2021 delivery) for the first time in nearly 14 months.

The Omani benchmark gained \$3.37/b in trading on Thursday, rising from the previous session's figure of \$63.04/b.

Thursday's high was last seen in January 2020.

As a result of the Opec+

Dr Mohammed bin Hamad al Rumhy, Minister of Energy and Minerals

alliance's latest decision, Oman's production will remain capped at 732k barrels per day (bpd) for April 2021, similar to levels agreed for the months of January, February and March this year, said Al Riyami.

This represents a production

cut of 151k bpd from the October 2018 baseline levels of 883k bpd, he noted. In remarks to the *Observer*, the official credited this week's strong oil price rally to, among other factors, the alliance's weekend decision.

"It's clear that prices began to rise as soon as Opec+ announced its decision to roll-over production cuts. So any positive decision from the alliance will have a positive impact on prices — something we have seen in the past as well," he said.

Also buoying oil prices, Al Riyami pointed out, were positive outlooks from a number of international agencies about a global economic recovery beginning to gain traction.

Compliance by producers is 105 per cent, demonstrating that the majority of countries are in conformity with their targets. In fact, there are some countries that exceed their targets by more than 100 per cent, thus compensating for the tiny minority who did not meet their commitments. But the great majority of countries are in full compliance, which is a very good development

ALI BIN ABDULLAH AL RIYAMI
Director-General of Oil Marketing,
Ministry of Energy and Minerals

"Multilateral institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank have said they believe the global economy is gradually improving. Asian economies are showing growth as well, particularly as the rollout of Covid-19 vaccines is becoming a full-fledged exercise in many countries around the world. While there are worries about new Covid-19 strains, there are positive indications that the vaccines may be effective against them."

Underpinning the effectiveness of the production cuts in shoring up international oil prices is the high degree of compliance achieved by producers, according to the official.

"Compliance by producers is 105 per cent, demonstrating that the majority of countries are in conformity with their targets. In fact, there are some countries that exceed their targets by more than 100 per cent, thus compensating for the tiny minority who did not meet their commitments. But the great majority of countries are in full compliance, which is a very good development."

Al Riyami also commended the roles played by leading producers Saudi Arabia and Russia in contributing to Thursday's collective decision by the Opec+ alliance. "With these positive indications coming from the two key players, the future for the global energy industry and the wider economy promises to be brighter. Let's only hope that Covid-19 begins to recede in order for the world economy to recover soon enough, he added.

1,241 home business activities registered during 2020

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 6

The number of household business activities registered at the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) during 2020 reached 1,241, the ministry said.

Household businesses, which can be practiced by citizens in their homes as a new livelihood source, are considered as small projects that can be expanded and upgrade into SME enterprises which can contribute to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

RO 98m Duqm gas pipeline project completed

ENERGY LIFELINE: 221km pipeline to supply natural gas as fuel source and feedstock to various projects at Duqm SEZ

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 6

OQ Gas Networks (formerly known as Oman Gas Company), a subsidiary of OQ — the Sultanate's integrated energy group — has announced the successful operationalisation of the natural gas pipeline project that feeds natural gas from Saih Nihayda in central Oman to the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) at Duqm.

The 221-km long pipeline project, constructed at a cost of RO 98 million, will supply gas at the rate of 25 million cubic metres per day at full capacity, Mansour bin Ali al Abdali, General Manager — OQ Gas Networks, said in a statement to ONA.

In October 2016, Egyptian

construction contractor Petrojet revealed that it had been selected by Oman Gas Company, the predecessor of OQ Gas Networks, to build the strategic gas pipeline.

Among the first consumers of the gas is Duqm Power Company, which is investing in a major

integrated power and water project at Duqm.

Duqm Power Company is a joint venture between the Central Utilities Company (Marafiq), which forms part of OQ Group, and Gulf Pacific Holding Company.

As part of the \$480 million investment in the project, Duqm Power is setting up a 326 MW combined cycle and gas-fuelled electricity generation plant alongside a 36,000 cubic metres per day reverse osmosis desalination plant, in addition

As part of the \$480 million investment in the project, Duqm Power is setting up a 326 MW combined cycle and gas-fuelled electricity generation plant alongside a 36,000 cubic metres per day reverse osmosis desalination plant, in addition to seawater supply and discharge facilities.

to seawater supply and discharge facilities.

Electricity from the plant will initially cater to the needs of Duqm Refinery (OQ8).

A Gas Supply Station (GSS), with a current capacity to provide 15 million cubic metres of gas per day, has been commissioned as well. This will regulate supply to the integrated power and water plant of Duqm Power.

OQ Gas Networks is the sole operator and owner of Oman's national gas 4,000 km long high-pressure gas transmission system, transporting natural gas to 59 end-users across the Sultanate.

The struggle of F&B business during the pandemic

Do you remember the time when opening a restaurant or any F&B related activity was the safest business investment for any small entrepreneur?

Well, that seems to have become a memory of the past for many countries. Just browse your favourite online marketplace under the "Business for Sale" category and you will find countless eateries for sale.

It is hard to find specific data in the GCC, but taking the UK and the US numbers as a reference, could bring us closer to appreciate how restaurants were really impacted by the pandemic.

In the UK, about 6,000 outlets have shut down operations in 2020. The number might look small, but it represents a 195 per cent increment in businesses misfortune compared to 2019.

When we include other F&B operators to the casualties — such as bars, pubs etc. — all in all more than 10,000 of them have closed ship in 2020.

According to Kate Nicholls, CEO of UK Hospitality: "The loss of 6,000 premises is a dreadful blow to this country's hospitality sector, but it is going to be the tip of the iceberg if we continue on our current course. The sector's outlet numbers have contracted 5 per cent and one in five businesses say they do not have enough cash to last beyond



STEFANO VIRGILLI
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IN THE UK, ABOUT 6,000 OUTLETS HAVE SHUT DOWN OPERATIONS IN 2020. THE NUMBER MIGHT LOOK SMALL, BUT IT REPRESENTS A 195 PER CENT INCREMENT IN BUSINESSES MISFORTUNE COMPARED TO 2019

February (2021)."

When it comes to the USA, in an article published by Bloomberg, we find out that more than 110 thousand restaurants have closed in 2020. This number represents a sixth of the entire market. In many cases it meant a family business gone burst.

However, the US is a unique case since the decision on how food and beverage businesses are allowed to operate is often decided at State level with some guidelines from Federal Government. But let us look at numbers on average in order to grasp the big picture.

Restaurants that were not allowed to operate indoor dining might have managed to survive

when they had outdoor options, or take away service. In that case such outlets have experience an average loss of business of 36 per cent.

This represent more than a third in revenue decline, which often was more than enough to transform the business profit into a loss. Of those unable to offer alternative services to mere dine in, their revenues went from 100 per cent to 25 per cent.

A spectacular drop that represented end of the road for many eateries. Overall, 90 per cent of F&B businesses have reported a decline in 2020. This resulted — in the US — in half a million restaurants experiencing less revenues in 2020 than in

2019.

But 2021 seems to be a more encouraging year for food related business. For those looking for a bargain, this could be the best time to take over a restaurant at the lowest price of the decade.

However, it is a risky bet. If lockdown restrictions will remain in place, then F&B might take another year to recover.

As always, every economic crisis or downturn offers investment opportunities. Some of them have a high ceiling for stellar profits, while others contain risks that the investor need to consider before jumping into a new venture. Especially when the crisis is still ongoing.

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



MSM WEEKLY REVIEW

Financial, industrial sector scrips buoy MSM Index

The MSM30 Index ended the week up by 1.41 per cent, supported by the Financial & Industrial index, which rose by 2.38 per cent and 2.04 per cent, respectively. The Services Index, however, declined by 0.35 per cent. The MSM Shariah Index was higher by 0.29 per cent.

ONEIC, in line with its strategic approach to enhance the electronic collection channels, has entered into an agreement with a government entity pertaining to the collection of some of its fees via electronic payment channels.

National Gas disclosed net loss of RO 130k for 2020 compared to profit of RO 114k earlier. 4Q20 net loss got revised to RO 363k compared to loss of RO 119k earlier. The loss was largely because of expected credit losses amounting to RO 167k in parent and RO 485.5k at group level, which were not considered during initial disclosures.

Oman Ceramic in its annual report announced that emerging market



opportunities available in Qatar on account of Fifa 2022 are most likely to provide the Company with much needed impetus to both top and bottom line of the Company.

The company also announced that it is all set to increase its presence in the Pakistan market by expanding its presence in all geographical and market segments across the country during the year.

Al Maha Marketing announced that it has received a letter of intent for the supply of aviation fuel to Oman Air SAOC to the extent of 50 per cent of their total fuel requirement at Muscat International Airport for two

stations across the Sultanate.

Oman's government is transferring its stake in one of the Middle East's largest oil blocks to a newly-established energy firm as the cash-strapped Sultanate looks to use the asset to raise debt.

State-controlled Energy Development Oman will hold the country's 60 per cent ownership of Block 6, according to a royal decree published last week. The stake is being moved from another government company, Petroleum Development Oman.

Oman recorded nearly 8 per cent year-on-year increase in the country's budget deficit in January 2021, mainly due to reduced oil production and lower oil prices during the month. The Sultanate's budget deficit widened to RO 370.8 million in the first month of this year against RO 344.4 million recorded in January 2020, an increase of 7.7 per cent, the Ministry of Finance said last week.

In January 2021, the state's general budget recorded a decline in public spending and revenue, with an increase in deficit as compared to the same period of 2020, the MoF said. (Courtesy: U-Capital)

years starting from March 1, 2021 to February 28, 2023.

Oman Oil Marketing disclosed that it has received a letter of intent to supply jet fuel to Oman Air at Muscat International Airport with a volumes of 50 per cent commencing March 1, 2021 for a period of 2 years.

The company further announced that it has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Otaxi, Oman's on demand transportation service, to provide more than 1800 Otaxi drivers with access to a range of exclusive benefits and features when refuelling and shopping at OOMCO service

Oman-Nepal webinar focuses on waste management trends



BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 6

The Embassy of Nepal recently organised a webinar between six metropolitan cities of Nepal and Oman Environmental Services Holding Company (be'ah) on the theme, 'Scientific Waste Management: Practices in Nepal and Oman'.

Welcoming the guests and participants, Sarmila Parajuli Dhakal (pictured), Ambassador of Nepal, highlighted the significant of the virtual programme, and also commended the successful efforts of Oman in the waste management sector.

Speaking during the opening session, the Mayor of Lalitpur Metropolitan City, Chiribabu Maharjan, reflected on the role of such initiatives in contributing to knowledge enhancement and capacity development.

He thanked the Embassy of Nepal for hosting the webinar. Also taking part was the Mayor of Birgunj Metropolitan City, Bijaya Kumar Sarawagi, who stressed the importance of modern waste management methodologies.

He also noted that the webinar was the first collaborative effort in advancing knowledge sharing in the waste management arena.

Shaikh Mohammed bin Sulaiman al Harthy, Vice President — Strategic Development, be'ah, noted that waste management is a combined effort involving the government and local community.

For waste to be effectively managed, efforts should be made in minimizing waste at the source and properly handled until it is disposed of in designated landfills. Also from the Omani side, Khamis al Siyabi, Department Head — Municipal Solid Waste Operations,



highlighted the overall aspects of waste management in Oman.

A number of officials from the Nepali side took turns to present their perspectives on waste management practices in their respective municipalities.

They included: Hari Kumar Shrestha, Chief — Environment Management Department, Kathmandu Metropolitan City; Pradip Kumar Amatya, Environment Division, Lalitpur Metropolitan City; Ghanashyam Kafley, Environment Section, Biratnagar Metropolitan City; Rajeeb Singh, Environment Division, Birgunj Metropolitan City; Birat Ghimire, Bharatpur Metropolitan City and Sabina Gautam, Section Officer, Pokhara Metropolitan City.

The presentations were followed by constructive interactions. In concluding remarks, Sarmila Parajuli Dhakal, Ambassador of Nepal, thanked the participants for their enthusiastic participation and encouraged all the municipalities to embrace best practices in waste management practices, while exhorting all to commence their march towards zero waste.

Conducted by Somesh Thapa, Second Secretary at the Embassy, the webinar was also attended by Fatma al Mujaini, MSW Strategies Manager, Planning Department; Ahmed bin Mubarak al Araimi, Regional Operations Manager — be'ah; Mishal al Riyami also of be'ah, engineers/heads of Environment and Waste Management Departments in various municipalities and other officials from Nepal and Oman.

Al Mazunah Free Zone signs six investment pacts

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 6

Al Mazunah Free Zone Committee held its second meeting this year, chaired by Hilal bin Hamad al Hasani, Chief Executive Officer of the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn). The meeting reviewed several topics related to the ongoing projects that are being implemented by Madayn including the Facility Building.

The construction of this project has commenced lately, and while the ground and first floors have been completed, work is under way on the second floor. Valued at more than RO 3 million, the



project will comprise office space, exhibition space and commercial stores.

The Facility Building is expected to be completed by mid-2022. The meeting also highlighted the major indicators and commercial movement witnessed by Al Mazunah Free Zone since the

beginning of the current year.

During January this year, the volume of goods in the free zone touched 35,481 tonnes, and the number of vehicles entering the free zone amounted to 962.

The free zone has also signed investment agreements with six companies, and an area of 6,569

sqm have been leased by the investors and businessmen.

A number of incentives are offered to investors in the free zone, including customs' exemptions, 100 per cent foreign ownership, no minimum capital requirements, 10 per cent Omaniisation stipulation, and simplification of procedures for non-GCC investors to obtain residency in Oman.

Other incentives include easy access of individuals and investors to the free zone without entry visas being required for Yemenis, facilitation of employing Yemeni workforce without work visa being required, in addition to other incentives.



Venezuela to introduce one million bolivar bill as inflation persists



President Nicolas Maduro holds a sample of hundred bolivars note at Miraflores Palace in Caracas, in this file photo. — Reuters

CARACAS: Venezuela's central bank said on Friday that it would introduce a banknote worth 1 million bolivars beginning next week, as years of incessant hyperinflation continue to batter the value of the crisis-stricken South American country's currency.

The new banknote will be worth just 52 US cents at the current official exchange rate. Interannual inflation was running at 2,665 per cent as of January.

The once-prosperous Opec nation's economy has been in a tailspin for the past seven years, spurred by a collapse in oil prices that led to a drop in imports and a gaping fiscal deficit, prompting the central bank to print more bolivars.

"These new bills will complement and optimize the current denominations, to meet the requirements of the national economy", the central bank said. The central bank said it will introduce 200,000- and 500,000-bolivar banknotes to circulate alongside the 10,000, 20,000 and 50,000-bolivar bills currently in circulation. — Reuters

US labour market roars back; full recovery still years away

WASHINGTON: The US economy created more jobs than expected in February as falling new Covid-19 infections and additional pandemic relief money from the government boosted hiring at restaurants and other services businesses, firmly putting the labour market recovery back on track.

Though job growth momentum is expected to build in the months ahead amid an acceleration in the pace of vaccinations and more fiscal stimulus, it will probably take several years for the labour market to heal from the deep scars inflicted by the coronavirus pandemic, which is now in its second year.

The Labour Department's closely watched employment report on Friday showed at least 4.1 million Americans have been out of work for more than six months, accounting for 41.5 per cent of the unemployed population in February. Another 3.5 million have permanently lost their jobs.

"There remains easy fuel for strong payroll gains in coming months as the reopening gains momentum", said Robert Rosener, an economist at Morgan Stanley in New York.

"But there is much further to go before conditions are consistent with maximum employment." Nonfarm payrolls surged by 379,000 jobs last month after rising 166,000 in January.

Payrolls fell in December for the first time in eight months.



Construction workers wait in line to do a temperature test to return to the job site in the Manhattan, New York. — Reuters

The economy has recouped 12.7 million of the 22.2 million jobs lost in the pandemic recession.

Economists polled by Reuters had forecast February payrolls increasing by 182,000 jobs. Restaurants and bars hired 286,000 workers, accounting for 75 per cent of the payrolls gain.

There were also increases in employment at hotels and motels and at amusements, gambling and recreation establishments.

Altogether, leisure and hospitality employment jumped by 355,000 jobs, making up 94 per cent of all jobs created last month. Temporary help, a harbinger for future hiring, increased further.

Healthcare and social assistance also added jobs, and retailers hired 41,000 workers.

Manufacturing payrolls increased by 21,000 jobs.

About half of the factory job gains were in transportation equipment, despite a global semiconductor chip shortage, which has forced some automakers to cut production.

But construction employment decreased by 61,000 jobs because of bitter cold across the country. Government payrolls dropped by 86,000 jobs, with losses concentrated at state and local governments.

The diffusion index, or measure of private industries expanding, jumped to 57.0 from 48.4 in January. Unseasonably cold weather shortened the average workweek to 34.6 hours from 34.9 hours.

The surge in hiring follows on the heels of a strong rebound in consumer spending in January, which prompted economists to

sharply upgrade their growth estimates for the first quarter.

A decrease in daily coronavirus cases and hospitalisations, and nearly \$900 billion in stimulus provided by the government at the end of December are driving the revival in activity.

That has raised concerns that President Joe Biden's \$1.9 trillion recovery plan under consideration by Congress, combined with the Federal Reserve's near zero interest rates and bond purchases, could cause the economy to overheat.

US Treasury yields have spiked as investors anticipate higher inflation. Biden is not backing down. "Without a rescue plan, these gains are going to slow", Biden said at a White House economic briefing. — Reuters

Oil surges after Opec+ holds cuts, strong US jobs growth

NEW YORK: Oil prices jumped about 3 per cent on Friday, hitting their highest levels in more than a year, following a stronger-than-expected US jobs report and a decision by Opec and its allies not to increase supply in April.

Brent futures rose \$2.62, or 3.9 per cent, to settle at \$69.36 a barrel. The session high for the global benchmark was its highest since January 2020.

US West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude rose \$2.26, For the week, Brent gains 5.2 per cent gain, WTI up 7.4 per cent or 3.5 per cent to settle at \$66.09 a barrel. For the week, Brent was up 5.2 per cent, rising for a seventh week in a row for the first time since December, while WTI was up about 7.4 per cent after gaining almost 4 per cent last week.

Both contracts surged more than 4 per cent on Thursday after the Opec+, extended oil output curbs into April, granting small exemptions to Russia and Kazakhstan. — Reuters



A worker walks at Rumaila oil field in Basra, Iraq, in this file photo. — Reuters

More than 20,000 US organisations compromised through Microsoft flaw

WASHINGTON: More than 20,000 US organisations have been compromised through a back door installed via recently patched flaws in Microsoft Corp's email software, a person familiar with the US government's response said on Friday.

The hacking has already reached more places than all of the tainted code downloaded from SolarWinds Corp, the company at the heart of another massive hacking spree uncovered in December.

The latest hack has left channels for remote access spread among credit unions, town governments and small businesses, according to records from the US investigation.

Tens of thousands of organisations in Asia and Europe are also affected, the records show. The hacks are continuing despite emergency patches issued by Microsoft on Tuesday.

Microsoft, which had initially said the hacks consisted of "limited and targeted attacks", declined to comment on the scale of the problem on Friday but said it was working with government agencies and security companies to provide help to customers.

It added, "impacted customers should contact our support teams for additional help and resources."



A man in a hood works using his laptop and mobile phone. — AFP

The latest hack has left channels for remote access spread among credit unions, town governments and small businesses

One scan of connected devices showed only 10 per cent of those vulnerable had installed the patches by Friday, though the number was rising. Because installing the patch does not get rid of the back doors, US officials are racing to figure out how to notify all the victims and guide them in their hunt.

All of those affected appear to run Web versions of email client Outlook and host them on their

own machines, instead of relying on cloud providers.

That may have spared many of the biggest companies and federal government agencies.

Earlier on Friday, White House press secretary Jen Psaki told reporters that the vulnerabilities found in Microsoft's widely used Exchange servers were "significant," and "could have far-reaching impacts." "We're concerned that there are a large

number of victims", Psaki said.

Microsoft and the person working with the US response blamed the initial wave of attacks on a Chinese government-backed actor. A Chinese government spokesman said the country was not behind the intrusions.

What started as a controlled attack late last year against a few classic espionage targets grew last month to a widespread campaign. Security officials said that implied that unless China had changed tactics, a second group may have become involved.

More attacks are expected from other hackers as the code used to take control of the mail servers spreads. The hackers have only used the back doors to re-enter and move around the infected networks in a small percentage of cases, probably less than 1 in 10, the person working with the government said.

"A couple hundred guys are exploiting them as fast as they can", stealing data and installing other ways to return later, he said. The initial avenue of attack was discovered by prominent Taiwanese cyber researcher Cheng-Da Tsai, who said he reported the flaw to Microsoft in January. — Reuters

Philippine CPI hits 26-month high



A vendor arranges her products at a local market in Manila. — Reuters

MANILA: Philippine inflation picked up pace in February to the fastest rate in 26 months, but the central bank said the spike should be viewed as temporary, signalling it would not be in a rush to reverse its accommodative monetary policy stance.

The Consumer Price Index rose 4.7 per cent from a year earlier, against January's 4.2 per cent increase, marking the second straight month that the headline figure was outside the official target of 2-4 per cent. It matched the median forecast in a Reuters' poll and was within the central bank's 4.3-5.1 per cent forecast for the month. Core inflation, which excludes

volatile food and fuel prices, picked up to 3.5 per cent versus January's 3.4 per cent, the statistics agency said.

The inflation number reflects the impact of weather-related supply disruptions and African Swine Fever outbreaks on food prices, as well as base effects and costlier oil, the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP) said.

"The overall balance of risks to future inflation continues to lean towards the downside owing mainly to the continued uncertainty caused by the pandemic on domestic and global economic activity", BSP Governor Benjamin Diokno told reporters.

— Reuters

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Renewing interest in Zukait's beehive tombs

They are not as popular as their counterparts located in Bat and Al-Ain but the beehive tombs of Zukait in the Wilayat of Izki have their own charm and mystery. While the pandemic is one of the factors that visit to this site slowed down, this young Omani wants his peers to appreciate archaeological sites in their own country... **P20**

INSIDE STORIES

HUMAN INTEREST



EGYPT'S 'SCORPION KING' TURNS VENOM INTO MONEY

Surrounded by thousands of live scorpions in a laboratory deep in Egypt's Western Desert, Ahmed Abu al Seoud carefully handles one of the curved-tailed arachnids before extracting a drop of its venom... **Story on P18**

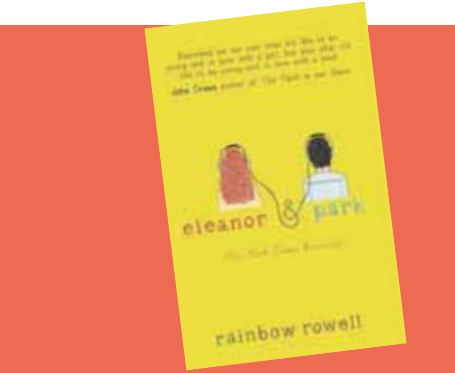
CHANGING WORLD



FORBIDDEN FRUIT: TAIWAN URGES PEOPLE TO EAT MORE PINEAPPLES AFTER CHINA BAN

Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen called on people to eat more pineapples to help farmers on Friday, saying Taiwan had been "ambushed" by a ban on the fruit by neighbouring long-time rival China which claims the island as its own... **Story on P19**

READ



ELEANOR AND PARK

BY RAINBOW ROWELL

Eleanor and Park meet on a school bus on Eleanor's first day at the school and gradually connect through comic books and mix tapes of '60s music, sparking a love story. Park grows to love Eleanor and Eleanor learns to understand Park.

FASHION



STUDENTS LAUNCH CHAOTIC PARIS FASHION WEEK

Paris fashion week opened in unique style on Monday, with students cutting the virtual ribbon for women's ready-to-wear collections at a time of unprecedented chaos in the fashion calendar... **Story on P19**

ART



FOR MANGA'S STRIVING ARTISTS, SUCCESS LURKS ONLINE

Manga artist Kamentotsu didn't expect much when he uploaded a four-panel strip about an anthropomorphic bear who runs a cake shop to his Twitter account three years ago... **Story on P19**



TRAVEL TALES

Australia building world's first platypus sanctuary



AUSTRALIAN CONSERVATIONISTS on Wednesday unveiled plans to build the world's first refuge for the platypus, to promote breeding and rehabilitation as the duck-billed mammal faces extinction due to climate change.

The Taronga Conservation Society Australia and the New South Wales State government said they would build the specialist facility, mostly ponds and burrows for the semiaquatic creatures, at a zoo 391 km (243 miles) from Sydney, by 2022, which could house up to 65 platypuses.

"There is so much to learn about the platypus and we know so little," Taronga CEO Cameron Kerr told reporters.

"These facilities will be critical in building our knowledge so that we don't let this iconic creature slip off the earth."

Concerns about the platypus going extinct have been heightened since once-in-a-generation wild-fires devastated 12.6 million hectares (31 million acres) of bush, nearly the size of Greece, in late



2019 and early 2020.

Scientists estimate nearly three billion animals died in what the prime minister called the country's "black summer". A government inquiry found bush-fires would likely occur more often because of warming temperatures.

Unlike other famous Australian animals such as the koala or kangaroo, the beaver-like platypus is rarely seen in the wild due to its reclusive nature and highly specific habitat needs.

The furry, web-footed animal, along with the echidna, is one of just two egg-laying mammals, and generally lives around small streams and slow-moving rivers in cooler temperatures.

"The refuge... will give us a chance to really learn about what sort of environments they like, and what is most likely to encourage them to breed," said Kerr.

The 2019-20 bushfires followed several years of drought, and Taronga had noted beforehand an increased number of platypuses with "climate-related injuries and illnesses", it said in a statement.

Last year, a separate inquiry found that koalas would be extinct in New South Wales by 2050, due to deforestation for farming and urban development.

The platypus is classified as a protected species in Australia, and Taronga said that without intervention, the animal may follow a few decades later. — **Reuters**



DAKHLA OASIS, Egypt: Surrounded by thousands of live scorpions in a laboratory deep in Egypt's Western Desert, Ahmed Abu al Seoud carefully handles one of the curved-tailed arachnids before extracting a drop of its venom.

A mechanical engineer who worked in the oil sector for almost two decades, Abu al Seoud decided in 2018 to strike a different path — producing scorpion venom for pharmaceutical research purposes.

"I was surfing the Internet and saw scorpion venom was one of the most expensive on the market," said the 44-year-old, clad in a white lab coat.

"So I thought to myself: Why not take advantage of this desert environment where they roam around?"

Biomedical researchers are studying the pharmaceutical properties of scorpion venom, making the rare and potent neurotoxin a highly sought-after commodity now produced in several Middle Eastern countries.

"Dozens of scorpion-derived bioactive molecules have been shown to possess promising pharmacological properties," said a review published last May in the journal *Biomedicines*.

It said labs are now studying its potential anti-microbial, immuno-suppressive and anti-cancer effects, among others, hoping to one day use or synthesise them for medicines.

Abu al Seoud is from the Dakhla oasis, located in Egypt's vast New Valley province and around 800 kilometres (500 miles) southwest of the capital Cairo.

Sand dunes and towering palms surround his laboratory, which he affectionately calls the "Scorpion Kingdom".

"Here, every family has a story about a scorpion sting," Abu al Seoud said.



To get the animals to secrete venom in the controlled conditions of the lab, the scorpions are given a slight electric shock.

Workers wait 20-30 days between extractions to obtain the highest quality venom.

"What matters is the level of purity," Abu al Seoud said, adding that one gram requires the venom of 3,000-3,500 scorpions.

DEATHSTALKER

The liquid is refrigerated and transported to Cairo, where it is dried and packaged for sale as powder.

The laboratory "is certified (by the government) and has the ability to export this unique product", said 25-year-old Nahla Abdel-Hameed, a pharmacist who works at the centre.

Abdel-Hameed referred to some scientific studies that explored the healing benefits of the venom in curing certain diseases.

Mohey Hafez, a member of the pharmaceutical chamber at the Federation of Egyptian Industries, was more cautious in his assessment of its current uses.

"Scorpion and snake venoms can be used in making antiserum," he explained to AFP.

"There is no ready-made medication that entirely depends on the venom as a direct ingredient, but there has been promising research into its uses".

New Valley province boasts around five different species of scorpions, including the sought-after deathstalker (*Leiurus quinquestriatus*), whose venom sells for up to \$7,500 per gram, according to Abu al Seoud.

While he himself also catches the creatures, he employs residents of nearby villages for the risky activity, equipping them with gloves, tweezers, boots, UV lights — and antivenom.

The scorpion hunters earn one to 1.5 Egyptian pounds (around six to 10 cents) per animal.

Pharmacist Abdel-Hameed said the arachnids are caught in residential areas so as not to harm "the ecological balance".

"I classify them according to the area where they were caught, the species and size," she said.

Her colleague Iman Abdel-Malik said that although the scorpions could go without eating for long periods, they were given "food and protein to increase the toxin excretion" — comprised of cockroaches and worms twice a month in the summer, and less during the winter hibernation.

'BAD REPUTATION'

There are plans to breed the scorpions in the future rather than catching them, the veterinarian aged in her 20s added.

About 20,000 of the animals have been collected so far, according to business partner Alaa Sabaa, while the lab has a maximum capacity of 80,000.

He said the first scorpion venom extractions took place in December and January after two years of preparations, and yielded "three grams of venom".

The self-financed project has so far cost about five million pounds, or around \$320,000, he said, and has also attracted government support.

They also extract bee venom and sell agricultural products, including aromatic plants.

While Egypt has been producing various types of venom for years, Abu al Seoud said, it was often done illegally or was of poor quality.

He said he hoped his operation would one day be an antidote to the country's "bad reputation" in the sector.

"We are trying to show off the country's capabilities... through a high-quality product that has been studied scientifically as well as produced and exported legally," he said. — **AFP**

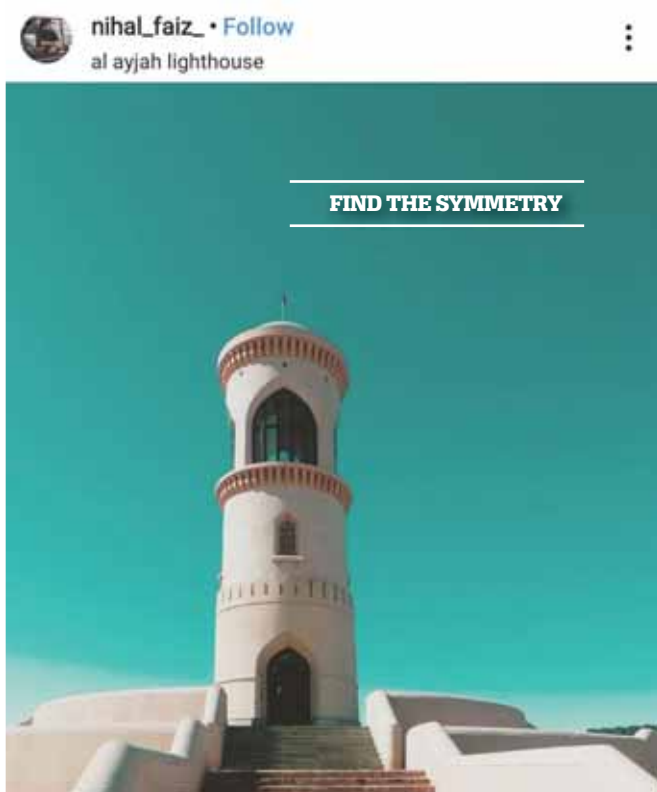


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AROUND THE WORLD

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Forbidden fruit: Taiwan urges people to eat more pineapples after China ban

TAIPEI: Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen called on people to eat more pineapples to help farmers on Friday, saying Taiwan had been “ambushed” by a ban on the fruit by neighbouring long-time rival China which claims the island as its own.

China said on Friday that starting in March it would suspend imports of pineapples from sub-tropical Taiwan, citing “harmful creatures” it said could come with the fruit, threatening China’s own agriculture.

The move prompted condemnation from Taiwan’s ruling party and Tsai said in a Facebook post that the island’s agricultural exports met international standards.

“China sent an ambush-like notice, unilaterally suspending the imports of Taiwan pineapples. This obviously was not a normal trade decision,” Tsai wrote without elaboration.

“To support the farmers, let’s eat pineapples all together!”

Taiwan’s ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) said on top of ongoing “military intimidation”, Beijing is also using the import ban to exert economic pressure on Taiwan, which counts China among its top trading partners despite political tensions.

“This is not the first time China has used agricultural exports to other countries as political threats,” the DPP said in a statement.

Beijing, which has never renounced the use of force to bring Taiwan under its control, has carried out repeated air missions in the southwestern corner of Taiwan’s air defence identification zone in recent months.

Taiwan’s air force scrambled for a second straight day last weekend after a dozen Chinese fighter aircraft and bombers carried out drills close to Taiwan-controlled islands in the disputed South China Sea.

Taiwan exported about 46,000 metric tonnes of pineapples last year, and more than 90 per cent of them were sold to China, the DPP said. — **Reuters**

Students launch chaotic Paris fashion week



PARIS FASHION week opened in unique style on Monday, with students cutting the virtual ribbon for women’s ready-to-wear collections at a time of unprecedented chaos in the fashion calendar.

Deserted by several heavyweight designers, and still imprisoned online by the pandemic, organisers turned to students from the French Institute of Fashion for a dose of hope and renewal.

“People have been much more open. They want to keep fashion alive and give as many opportunities as possible to young designers,” said one of those presenting in the opening video, Clement Picot.

He drew inspiration from horror films such as “The Shining” and “American Psycho” for his contribution, full of oversized comic-book shoulders that he said were a mix of his dreams and nightmares.

For youngsters like Picot, the need to stay virtual is no problem: “I will be able to watch this video all my life. It’s maybe even more personal this way.”

But this fashion week, the fourth in Paris since the start of the pandemic, looks as disorganised as ever.

Dior and Louis Vuitton, part of the LVMH luxury group, pushed back their video broadcasts at the last minute, with organisers adding an extra day on March 10 to accommodate production delays.

Rival holding Kering (which includes Saint Laurent, Balenciaga) is not presenting at all. Anthony Vaccarello, Saint Laurent’s Belgian designer announced his withdrawal from the official calendar during the first lockdown a year ago.

Others are setting their own time-tables, reflecting the fact that many designers were tired of the relentless pace of the fashion calendar even before the coronavirus created a new world of logistical headaches.

Hedi Slimane, artistic director of Celine, unveiled his men’s collection in early February, bypassing the calendar entirely, with a video showing modern knights in leather jackets parading on the ramparts of the Chateau de Chambord on the Loire.

ADAPT TO THE UNEXPECTED

“Everything is being called into question,” Kris Van Assche, Belgian creator of the historic French house Berluti (LVMH), said, adding that he had never seen such “radical” changes in his 20-year career.

He himself skipped January’s menswear week in Paris in favour of presenting in Shanghai in April.

Asked what the young students should focus on, Assche said: “The main talent that’s needed on a CV today is flexibility, the ability to adapt to the unexpected.”

For up-and-coming talents, these are rare opportunities, however.

Originally from Taiwan, Meng Che Chiang’s contribution to the opening video was “a love letter to Paris” while also playing with the appetite for upcycling, with exaggerated outfits made from faded and repainted towels or jeans, “juxtaposing the ugly and the beautiful, the old and the new”.

If the epidemic has “limited his research”, he at least has more time to study mundane goings-on such as Parisian garbage cans, and dream of the day when the streets will be full of colour and life again.

Another student, Lucie Favreau, focused on clothes for the moment — garments to make you “feel comfortable, de-stressed” — with over-size sweaters, and a “shaman suit” printed with healing hands.

She, too, sees no problem with the new digital iteration. “It’s not as if we don’t have an audience,” she said. “It’s just a different way of relating to the audience.” — **AFP**



For manga's striving artists, success lurks online

MANGA ARTIST Kamentotsu didn’t expect much when he uploaded a four-panel strip about an anthropomorphic bear who runs a cake shop to his Twitter account three years ago.

But the first instalment of “Koguma’s Cake Shop”, drawn as consolation for a tired friend, attracted tens of thousands of likes. Within a week, 40 companies had approached him with offers.

“Publishing company editors have gone from bringing up manga artists, like they are farming, to hunting for them,” said Kamentotsu, who goes by his pen name and wears a mask in media appearances.

By searching for talent online, publishers squeezed by the rise of the Internet can see an artist’s audience potential out in the open.

For Japan’s striving manga artists, many of whom toil in obscurity for low pay, that means going viral can be life changing.

Kamentotsu’s strip, which is published by Shogakukan, has gone on to sell more than half a million books. The titular bear, who wears a chef’s hat, has become a popular soft toy and its image was used to promote frozen dumplings.

Japanese pop culture is piled with such cute, memorable characters.

Industry observers say that a feel-good style — known as the “iyashikei” or “soothing” genre in Japanese — is particularly fitting online audiences.

But other recent hits are quite a bit darker, such as “Jujutsu Kaisen” and “Demon Slayer”.

HIGH CONCEPT

Kousuke Oono’s “The Way of the Househusband” has a high concept idea: a feared yakuza gangster — tattooed, clad all in black but wearing an apron — quits crime to take care of the home while his wife works.

“A comedic story with easy-to-understand characters and title is suited to the Internet... we thought about that from the planning stage,” said Arimasa Nishikawa, an editor at manga site Kurage Bunch, which first published the strip.

“Househusband”, popular on manga apps and in print, plays with gender stereotypes at a time of social change in Japan. A line of aprons has been a hit with fans.

The strip has been made into a TV drama, with an animated version set to stream on Netflix this year. — **Reuters**



Renewing interest in Zukait's beehive tomb

BY YERU EBUEEN

He noticed them from afar — an anomaly in a landscape of barren mountains. He thought they were old houses but were far too many and spread across the top of mountains that it doesn't connect well with how villages in Oman are built.

It piqued his interest that one weekend, he decided to check them out.

He lives in Manah and Izki is but a few minutes away from his home. It was only upon closer inspection that he discovered what they were — dozens of beehive tombs that were about 3000 years old.

It was a surprise for Almutasim al Mahmoodi to discover that such beehive tombs and more than three dozens of them also exist in this area. He is aware of the beehive tombs in the more popular and Unesco heritage sites of Al-Ain and Bat but for them to spread over to Zukait — the small farming village dominated by well-maintained farms, it was a discovery he said was both good and sad news.

NEEDED REPAIRS

The beehive tombs of Zukait in the Wilayat of Izki has seen better days. In fact, in the middle of the 2000s, efforts were made to build interest in the tombs and turn them into a tourist attraction.

In some videos buried in the

archives of Youtube, hundreds of travellers used to flock in the area as these tombs are more accessible than the ones found in Bat and Al-Ain.

Today, however, residents reported that the tombs is lucky to even get visited at least twice a week.

At the entrance of the site was a coffee shop, now abandoned with most of the concrete stairs leading to the top in some form of disarray.

A welcome mark stone gives a brief background about the area: That Archaeological excavations in Oman provide evidence of its rich past with diverse civilisations whose cultures mixed together from as early as 3000 BC; that the Zukait tombs, located atop the hills overlooking the eponymous village, is a testament to the richness of the bygone era; and that these tombs were an indication of the expansion of Oman's civilisations over time.

Like the ones found in Bat and Al-Ain, the ancient tombs of Zukait also take a beehive-form built by using flat stones put on top of each other. There is a small hole on the front side that served as its entrance.

Government effort to protect the tomb is still evident through the fence built surrounding some of the tombs. While some are still standing, others have crumbled to the ground that only the base remains.

"I'm noticing that not a lot of the Omani youth are interested in archaeological discoveries in the country. It's a bit disappointing as we have one of the most historic countries in the world and we can actually see history before our eyes", Al

Mahmoodi said.

Different studies were already made in the area. Relevant Oman authorities have worked with different experts in the archaeological field from other countries to discover the extent of Oman's growth over the years.

In a preliminary report made by Juergen Schreiber of German Archaeological Institute, Orient Department in Berlin, he noted "In every respect, Izki is an important place in Omani history. So is Izki the only place in Oman, which is mentioned in sources of the neo-Assyrian period. According to an inscription of the so-called "Ishtar-slab" in Ninive (c. 640 BC), a king named Padê came from a land called Qadê after half a year's journey to the royal court of Ninive, to pay tribute to Ashurbanipal, King of Assyria. The name of Padê's town can be transcribed as Is/1/z-ki/qi-e, which fits very well with the modern name Izki."

Even then, Schreiber observed that the tombs all "appear to be heavily disturbed and normally just the lowest stone layer is preserved" with an average dimension of 5 x 3 metres. His initial report puts the date in the Late Iron Age and noted that the tradition using the same sites as burial places.

For Schreiber and his colleagues, "Zukait is a vast necropolis of beehive-tombs" together with those in Hafit tomb and other nearby areas, "All in all there must have been hundreds of them."

RENEWING INTEREST ON THE SITE

For Al Mahmoodi, he said that putting more effort to promote the Izki/Zukait tomb would also help create footfall in the area.

He said that other than the tombs, Zukait has amazing forts and ruins that although smaller than those found in other villages or wilayats, are still as historic and beautiful.

"One of the local towers is still being used today. From the top, you can see the rest of the village and you will also have a good vantage view of the tomb from the hills", he said.

Mostly a farming village, Zukait has but a few commercial centres with most of the residents buying their supplies from Nizwa and other bigger towns.

They also have a good falaj system that supplies ample water to the many farms in the area.

"My worry is that the tombs will be vandalised as I can see some damages in many of them. Oman's heritage is only as good as the effort we put into preserving them", he said.

